

Knowing Our God

Advanced Exegetical Theology

The Knowledge of God Series

Book 3

Biblical Authority

Is Scripture Our Final Authority?

Kurt Jurgensmeier

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ISBN: 978-1-300-11068-2

Dedication

This book is dedicated to God the Holy Spirit who by His gift of grace enabled me to pursue the hard work of researching and writing it. And He made it a joy!
May it serve His purposes of protecting God's people from the devil's lies.

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- ◆ **Best:** The most helpful, interesting and/or important chapters.
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Preface

Helping the next generation of Bible Teachers

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Tim 2:15)

These words were written to a young Teacher of God's word. They are a reminder of the awesome privilege, responsibility, and accountability that comes with such a divine calling. Being a Teacher is God's gift to a man, but what kind of Teacher he becomes is his gift to God. And God tells all Teachers something of what He is expecting in the verse above.

First, the Teacher is to "**present**" himself "**to God**" when he teaches. When we teach it is not only humans that are listening, but Heaven as well, and God is our most important audience. We can be concerned with what people will think of our teaching, but we need to be much, much more concerned with what God will think.

And God's expectations can significantly differ from those of humans. People often expect eloquence and entertainment, God expects accuracy, "**correctly**" interpreting, teaching, and applying God's word for God's people. There is nothing in all the world more important than this because to do otherwise is to misunderstand, misrepresent, and eventually disobey the Author.

As in all human endeavors, not even God expects perfection, but He certainly demands that we do our "**best**." We need to remember that we do all of this under the watchful eye of the Author Himself, and will one Day be either "**approved**" or "**ashamed**" regarding how careful and diligent we were in working to understand, teach, and apply His word "**correctly**."

This book is offered as a help in obeying the Apostle's command for those who have, or desire to have, the great responsibility of teaching God's word to His people. It is part of a series of books written under the title of ***Knowing Our God: Advanced Exegetical Theology***.

These books are *advanced* in that they are an in-depth, scholarly study of very specific and often difficult theological topics.

They are uniquely *exegetical* in that there is a special emphasis on interpreting the Scriptures applicable to the topic. While many

systematic theologies would not require much of a Scripture index, a large percentage of the current 5000 pages of *Knowing Our God* is commentary on Scripture.

Finally, these books are *theology*, because it is in such an endeavor that we bring the pieces of God's word into a harmonious whole in order to produce the full truth of Scripture. We believe *Advanced Exegetical Theology* is a great need in equipping Pastors today to defend the faith for this and future generations.

Ezra the priest, of course, is our example, of whom it is written: **"the gracious hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel"** (Ezra 7:9-10). Obeying God's word was obviously important to Ezra, but so was being **"devoted . . . to the study"** of God's word, all so that he could be **"teaching"** it to God's people. It is our hope that this book will help you do just that.

Finally, a few practical points. First, while we are not aware of anything in it that would be contrary to the historical, Evangelical Christian faith, if you encounter something that differs from the beliefs of your Pastor(s), please discuss it with them if it causes serious questions for you. We desire to respect the pastoral authority God has in your life as much as possible.

Secondly, studying God's word is best pursued in community with spiritual peers, and we encourage you to read this with others and discuss the ***Gauging Your Grasp*** questions usually at the end of a chapter.

Thirdly, we make an effort to make an organized study of God's word not just theological but practical as well. So prayerfully consider the sections entitled ***Pastoral Practices*** along the way.

Fourth, as you read you will notice several references to other writings. This reflects the fact that this book is an excerpt from a larger production entitled *Knowing Our God*. The entire collection of books on systematic theology that are currently available can be found at www.trainingtimothys.com.

Finally, we would appreciate the reader visiting the site and emailing us any feedback on this book, including concerns, comments, and any proposed corrections. We too wish to study God's word in community, and that community includes you.

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Book 3

Biblical Authority

Part I

***Foundations of a Biblical
View of Authority***

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Chapter 3.1

Born Again Authority

The Human Authentication of Beliefs

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Extras & Endnotes

Primary Points

- Authority is the granted or enforced power to control our life.
- God is the ultimate *objective authority* in our life.
- God has delegated His authoritative words to Christ, the Apostles and Prophets, and now Scripture.
- Scripture does not directly exercise authority in our life, but must be accepted and interpreted by our *private judgment*.
- *Private judgment* is the God-given authority delegated to human reason to ultimately decide what we will believe and do.
- Our *private judgment* exercises authority over the recognition and interpretation of Scripture and is the final *subjective authority* in our life, despite various Roman Catholic and Protestant doctrines.
- *Objective authority* (i.e. God, Scripture) is what in reality has authority over us and will rightfully judge our life.
- *Subjective authority* is what we accept as our authority and which practically controls our life.
- Because God has delegated final *subjective authority* to human reason, He remains the ultimate *objective authority*.
- Because God is the ultimate *objective authority*, He will judge us for how we used the *subjective authority* He delegated to our reason.
- Biblical support for human *private judgment* can especially be found in Romans 14.
- Historical support for the doctrine can be found particularly in the Reformers.
- God always authenticates God-like authority with God-like deeds.
- A Christian's *private judgment* transcends other forms of foundational authentication and authority such as the Papacy in Roman Catholicism, a "testimony of the Spirit" in Calvinism, and mere Scripture in Evangelicalism.

A) Introduction: The Concept of Authority

Authority is obviously a very important concept. The popular British theologian, J. I. Packer, rightfully remarks:

The problem of authority is the most fundamental problem that the Christian Church ever faces. This is because Christianity is built on truth: that is to say, on the content of a divine revelation.¹

Not surprisingly, the topic of authority is also fairly complex and controversial; earning the description that one respected theologian gave it when he called it "difficult terrain."²

Webster's defines authority as: "power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior."³ The Baptist theologian Millard Erickson says: "By authority we mean the right to command belief and/or action."⁴ The Presbyterian scholar Donald Bloesch adds: "Authority in the biblical sense means the power and right to determine what is true or valid. Authority carries the connotation of . . . binding force."⁵ Dr. Packer writes:

To have authority is to have a right to rule and a claim to exercise control. Authority is expressed in directives and acknowledged by compliance and conformity. . . . the thought of rightful dominance remains central.⁶

Dr. Packer also adds several important and additional perspectives on authority. First, he differentiates between *authority* and *authoritarianism* and says:

Authoritarianism is authority corrupted, gone to seed. Authoritarianism appears when the submission that is demanded cannot be justified in terms of truth or morality, and actually harms those who submit. Nazism, Communism,

¹ J. I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* (Eerdmans, 1958), 42.

² Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Authority* (Eerdmans, 1957), 10.

³ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, Frederick C. Mish, ed. (Merriam-Webster, 1986), 117.

⁴ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., (Baker, 1998) 268.

⁵ Donald Bloesch, *A Theology of Word & Spirit* (Intervarsity Press, 1992), 185.

⁶ J. I. Packer in "The Reconstitution of Authority," in *Crux*, Vol. 18, no. 4 (Dec 1982), p. 2.

Jim Jones's cult in Guyana, and David Koresh's Branch Davidians in Waco are examples. . . . Authoritarianism is evil, anti-social, anti-human, and ultimately anti-God (for self-deifying pride is at its heart), and I have nothing to say in its favor. . . .

God's law corresponds to created human nature, so that in fulfilling his requirements we fulfill ourselves. The gospel of Christ answers to actual human need, as glove fits hand, so that all our responses to God work for our good, and no touch of authoritarianism enters into his exercise of authority over us.⁷

Dr. Packer also notes the importance of authority in our lives when he comments:

The one who knows no obligation to do anything lives the saddest, most aimless, most distracted life of all. So the anti-authority syndrome now current in the West, leading as it does to lives of haphazard hedonism in which my feelings of like and dislike are the only authority I recognize, is a major human tragedy. We could hardly get further from the way we were meant to live.⁸

Our discussion here will concern what might be called "earned authority" where we have a choice, instead of "imposed authority" which is simply forced on us like a dictatorship. Essentially, earned authority is trust, and what we trust, we give power to. Such power, rights, and authority are usually connected with a person. For the Christian, the ultimate source of all authority, over all the Universe, is God the Father. However, He has delegated His authority down through a "God-ordained Chain of Authority."

B) The God-Ordained Chain of Authority

B.1) The Foundational Authority of God the Father

The authority of Almighty God is vividly and tragically illustrated in the first few pages of the Bible. The Creator had forbidden only *one thing* in His whole Creation, and the first humans saw to it that that *one thing* was violated. The consequences of this first human

⁷ J. I. Packer, *Truth & Power* (Harold Shaw, 1996), 14- 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

3.1: God's Chain of Authority

disobedience to the law of God are horrific, and subsequently demonstrate the immense authority of God. Today we might sin against our local authorities and receive a fine, or some sort of probation. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, they brought a curse on themselves and all of humanity that only the death of God the Son could heal.

That God is objectively the ultimate authority of all existence is the Christian view.⁹ Accordingly, the great Evangelical scholar Carl

⁹ Donald McKim gives a good overview of biblical references to the divine chain of authority:

In the New Testament the term *exousia* is used most significantly in relation to God, who is completely free to act and is the only true source of all other authority and power (Luke 12:5; Jude 25). God is both creator and ruler of the universe. God controls the forces of both nature and history in order to carry out the divine plan and purpose (Luke 1:35; Rom. 9:21; Rev. 19:1).

The New Testament also recognizes subservient powers and authorities (1 Cor. 15:24; 1 Peter 3:22; Eph. 1:21). Civil authority may be exercised through kings, magistrates, priests, and stewards (Luke 7:8; Mark 13:34; Acts 9:14; Rom. 13:1-3; Titus 3:1). Yet all secondary powers-including evil 'principalities and powers' (Rom. 8:38; cf. John 19:10-11)-have only the power permitted them by God (cf. Rev. 2:10; 1 John 4:1-6). Ultimate authority always belongs to God (Rom. 13:1).

In Jesus Christ, however, the disclosure of God's authority becomes clear. Jesus taught as one with authority (Mark 1:22). His authority came from himself (Matt. 5) and extended to forgiving sins (Mark 2:10), casting out demons (Mark 3:15), teaching (Matt. 7:29), and judging (John 5:27). This authority was granted by God (John 5:30) to be used by Jesus (John 10:18; Rev. 12:10ff.). In the defeat of Satan, Christ's power and authority is acknowledged (Luke 4:1-13, esp. vs. 6; 1 John 5:19). Christ's kingdom is universal and eternal (2 Peter 1:11; cf. Matt. 28:18).

In some respects Jesus transferred his authority to his disciples, including the authority to forgive sins (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23), to heal diseases (Luke 9:1), and to cast out demons (Mark 6:7). They are also authorized to proclaim the kingdom of God that is to come (Matt. 10:7-8; Mark 3:15; 6:7). Those who hear his disciples hear Jesus (Luke 10:16; cf. Matt. 10:40; John 17:18; 20:21).

Later the Apostles believe their own authority to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as 'witnesses' (Acts 1:8) comes from Jesus himself (2 Cor. 10:8; cf. Matt. 10:1; Mark 11:5; 2 Thess. 3:9). This apostolic authority is a derivative authority that is not absolute or inherent; it has its origin in Christ rather than in the Apostles themselves. Apostolic authority, including the right to preach and teach, is based on God's revelation in Jesus Christ (see Gal. 1:11-16).

The Apostle Paul recognizes the function of teaching and the teacher as one of the gifts given to the church (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28) and thus one of the ways in which, through the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3; John 15:26-27), the continuing presence and authority of Jesus Christ is experienced in the Christian churches.' (*Theological Turning Points* [Knox, 1988], 97-8)

Henry (1913-2003) wrote:

There is, to be sure, but one absolute priority: the sovereign Creator and Lord of all. In principle, the evangelical believer acknowledges no ultimate authority but the authority of the living God-authoritative even above human reasoning, scientific and theological opinion, ecclesiastical tradition, cultural consensus, empirical observation, and all else.¹⁰

One of many reasons that God has the right to exercise authority over humanity is that He is our Creator. God tells Jeremiah, **"With My great power and outstretched arm I made the Earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please"** (Jer 27:5). He is simply called The Almighty (Job 37:23) who **"can do all things"** (Job 42:2) and for whom **"Nothing is too hard"** (Jer 32:17). What God the Father wants, He ultimately gets. **"In Him [God the Son] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him [God the Father] Who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will."** (Eph 1:11).

He is the Potter, and His Creation is His clay (Rom. 9:21). He is the only rightful Judge of all humankind (Rom. 12:19) and, **"He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice"** (Acts 17:31), and on that day, **"As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before Me; every tongue will confess to God'"** (Rom 14:11). More than this, God the Father is the ultimate Punisher. God the Son said of His Father, **"I will show you Whom you should fear: Fear Him Who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into Hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him"** (Luke 12:5). God the Father is **"the great King above all gods"** (Ps 95:3), He **"is enthroned as King forever"** (Ps 29:10), and, **"The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all"** (Ps. 103:19).

King Nebuchadnezzar was given a personal lesson on the authority of God the Father and wrote:

I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward Heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified Him Who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the Earth are regarded as nothing. He does as He pleases with the powers of Heaven and the peoples of the Earth.

¹⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, "The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible", *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 1, (Zondervan, 1979), 9.

No one can hold back His hand or say to Him: "What have you done?" . . . And those who walk in pride He is able to humble. (Dan 4:34-35, 37)

Obviously much more could be said. The point is that God the Father is the ultimate source of all power, dominion, and authority that exists anywhere in all of Creation. More specifically, the Scriptures are clear and consistent concerning the consequences of anyone ignoring, subverting, or otherwise disrespecting that authority. Doing so can land you in Hell forever.

Therefore, the all-important question becomes how do we know what He wants us to know and do in order to please Him? How does God exercise His authority over us? There is no question that can be asked that is more important for a human to have the correct answer to. The first thing to say is that He does so in a rather indirect way, through what we will call "The Divine Chain of Command." In other words, God the Father does not exercise His authority over us directly. No human has even seen, or can see, His face, let alone have personal/physical contact with Him (cf. Exod 33:20; John 1:18; 6:46; 1 Tim 6:16; 1 John 4:12). He has therefore delegated His authority, and the communication of it, through various persons and means through which He communicates His will for our life. If these people and means are disobeyed, we are disobeying God the Father Almighty Himself.

Pastoral Practices

- It is easy in our teaching to emphasize the practical aspects of Scripture, including the commands, what people are to do and how to do it (e.g. the Christian life, marriage, parenting, etc.). But we must always be sure to give God's people a healthy diet of doctrines such as the character of God. What could be more important to teach than what God is like, including His all-encompassing authority?

B.2) The Delegated Authority of God the Son

The first "link" in God the Father's divine chain of command is obviously God the Son. When Christ said, "**All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Me**" (Matt 28:18), He was speaking of authority that had been delegated to Him by God the Father, not an authority that automatically and intrinsically

resided in Himself. God the Son came to do God the Father's will, even when it wasn't completely the Son's will, as demonstrated in the Garden of Gethsemane (cf. Matt 26:39-42; John 10:18). It is God the Father Who:

raised Him [Christ] from the dead and seated Him at His [God the Father's] right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God [the Father] placed all things under His [God the Son's] feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the Church (Eph 1:20-22; cf. 1 Cor 15:24-28; Rev. 2:27)

Christ is indeed the Lord of the Church, even calling it "**My church**" (Matt 16:18). By giving Christ "**all authority in Heaven and on Earth**" (Matt 28:18), God the Father has made God the Son our rightful Lord. Accordingly, Christ said:

There is a Judge for the one who rejects Me and does not accept My words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of My own accord, but the Father Who sent Me commanded Me what to say and how to say it. I know that His command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told Me to say. (John 12:48-49)

Disobeying Christ's commands is disobeying God the Father (cf. John 7:16-17; 10:30), and the divine expectation of all humanity is to become, and to make, disciples of Jesus Christ who "**obey everything**" He has commanded us to do (cf. Matt 28:20).¹¹

The fact that God the Son is fully under the authority of God the Father should instruct those who think being under authority is automatically evil or undesirable. Being under authority is even how God lives and it is how He has created things. If being under the God-given authority of someone was so bad, it would not be true of God the Son. He lives and exists in the best and happiest way there is.

Pastoral Practices

- It is a good thing to remind God's people of the authority of Christ the King. Yet it is important to evaluate how well that

¹¹ For further discussion of the authority of Jesus Christ see section 8.4.A.1.

authority is being exercised in our church, family, and personal life. So many American Christians live as if they are only in the free, democratic country of the United States of America. Americans have a lot of freedom, have no king, and need only to comply with a relatively small set of laws to stay out of trouble. The Christian is in a different country. It is not even a country, but a Kingdom, with a King who demands absolute allegiance in everything.

Americans are not use to having a King, but Christians need to learn how to live with one because they have one, unlike most Americans. Is Jesus the King of our church, or do we lead it? Is Jesus the King of our family, or do we decide what it does? Are we our own king, living like a typical American with no king? Does our financial budget and weekly schedule reflect the fact that Jesus is our King? We have a King and we should be living like it!

B.3) The God-Ordained Authority of the Prophets & Apostles

However, to say that Christ is our authority is not enough, for even He does not exercise His authority directly today. Therefore, we see the divine chain of command from God the Father through Christ to the Apostles when Christ says to them: **"He who receives you [Apostles] receives Me [Christ], and he who receives Me receives the One who sent Me [God the Father]"** (Matt 10:40; cf. John 13:20; 15:20; 17:18; 20:21; Acts 1:8; 2 Cor 5:20). The Apostles' commission from the King was just as authoritative as the Father's commission of His Son. Accordingly, Christ told the Father, **"As you sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world"** (John 17:18). Here we see the divine chain of command from God the Father, to God the Son, to the Apostles of Christ.

The Apostle reminds the Galatians of this God-ordained and God-authenticated chain of command when he opens his letter to them with: **"Paul, an Apostle--sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, Who raised Him from the dead"** (Gal 1:1; cf. 2:8). The God-like authority of Apostles of the King is clearly communicated when the Apostle told the Thessalonians, **"you know what instructions we [Apostles] gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus . . . Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God"** (1 Thess 4:2, 8; cf. 2 Cor 10:8; 1 Cor 14:37; 2 Peter 3:15-16).¹²

¹² For further discussion of the authority of biblical Apostles section 8.4.A.

We see then that the Apostles claimed to speak directly for God. All of this is true as well of God's Prophets. God had communicated concerning them: **"I will put My words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to My words that the Prophet speaks in My name, I Myself will call him to account"** (Deut. 18:18-19).¹³ The fulfillment of this promise is demonstrated in how the Prophets repeatedly preface their divine statements with **"This is what the Lord says,"** (over 80 times in Jeremiah alone), or as the NT Prophet Agabus said, **"This is what the Holy Spirit says"** (Acts 21:11).¹⁴

B.4) The God-Ordained Authority of Scripture

But again, we need to ask how the authority of Jesus Christ is practically exercised in our lives? How do we gain access to this supernatural revelation that has come through Prophets and Apostles? Neither Christ, nor Apostles or Prophets are living today.¹⁵ The obvious answer is Scripture. While God does not personally rule over our lives as He will in Heaven, He now exercises His authority through Scripture which can be considered our *direct* authority.¹⁶

God's spokesmen were commanded to record their divine revelations so that they could be preserved and distributed for others. God's precedence for this process was initiated with Moses. We read in Exodus:

Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said . . . Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you

¹³ It is probable that this is a veiled prediction of Christ, however, this same authority resided in all biblical Prophets.

¹⁴ For further discussion of the authority of biblical Prophets see chapters 9.4 and 9.6.

¹⁵ For a biblical evaluation of the claim in modern *prophetism* to the gift of prophecy see chapters 9.1-3.

¹⁶ For further discussion regarding the fact that Christ does not exercise authority over us directly, but indirectly through Scripture, see section 7.7.C.

in accordance with all these [written] words." (Exod. 24:4, 7-8; cf. Deut 31:24-26; Jer. 30:22)

What Moses wrote became God's word and therefore possessed God-like authority.¹⁷

God's words were recorded in the writing of the Apostles as well. For example, the Apostle Paul says to the Thessalonians, **"Therefore, he who rejects this instruction [in my letter] does not reject man but God, Who gives you His Holy Spirit"** (1 Thess 4:8).

The Scriptures have a divine authority that is derived from the God-sent messengers who authored them. This is why the Apostle Paul can write: **"the holy Scriptures . . . are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"** (2 Tim 3:15-17). The **"Scriptures"** (i.e. writings) are not just any writings, but **"holy,"** sanctified, set-apart, perfect writings. They are the foundational source of the most important truths for humankind including **"salvation."** All Scripture was ultimately created by God, and **"breathed out"** by Him. There is no divine authority anywhere on Earth except that sanctioned by Scripture. Therefore, all **"teaching, rebuking, correcting and training"** in God's will and ways (i.e. **"righteousness"**) must fully and ultimately depend on it. Nobody and nothing speaks for God apart from Scripture. Scripture is in essence, **"God talking."**¹⁸

B.5) The God-ordained Authority of Human Authorities

Thus far then we have seen that God the Father's divine chain of command consists of Christ, human Prophets and Apostles, and then written Scripture, in that order. However, this objective divine chain of command is not quite complete without adding the God-ordained place of human authorities such as parents, politicians, policemen, and pastors. God has delegated His

¹⁷ For further discussion of the writing of divine revelation in Scripture see section 7.7.A.

¹⁸ For further discussion of the supreme authority of Scripture see chapter 7.8.

authority to these institutions as well, and as we discuss elsewhere, to disobey them is to disobey God the Father.¹⁹

God has commanded in Scripture that qualified leaders be appointed in the Church (cf. 1 Tim 3:1-10; Tit 1:5-9; 1 Pet 5:1-2; Heb 13:17; Deut 17:8-13), that wives respect and follow husbands and children do the same with parents (cf. Eph 5:22-6:4), and that governmental authorities have delegated power from God (cf. Rom 13:1-7). Accordingly, these human authorities speak with the authority of God because He has given them their authority, and to ignore, disrespect, or disobey them is to do the same to God.

Obviously, however, the same Scripture that grants these human authorities divine authority over Christians, is the same Scripture that limits that authority. Accordingly, Dr. Packer makes an important point on this issue when he writes:

If conforming to ecclesiastical, governmental, marital, or parental demands involves action contrary to Scripture, God can only be served by nonconformity at that point. This may put us out of step with others and prove costly to us, but nothing less will please God.²⁰

Therefore, the divine authority of respectable human authorities must be recognized, but the authority of Scripture is even greater in God's divine chain of command, illustrating its immense authority indeed.

Pastoral Practices

- As Pastors we must recognize the awesome spiritual authority we have (cf. Heb 13:17), along with its purpose to build up God's people, not puff up ourselves (cf. 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10). We must also recognize it is limited by Scripture and that a Pastor who makes his own *extra-biblical* opinions, sound like divine commands, has gone beyond the authority God has given him.

¹⁹ For further discussion regarding the place of human authorities in our lives as a source of the divine revelation of God's will see chapter 7.14.

²⁰ Packer, *Truth & Power*, 44.

C) The God-Ordained Authority of *Private Judgment*: *Is Scripture our final authority?*

C.1) Defining *Private Judgment*: Our *final subjective authority*

Many discussions regarding authority in the Christian life end here with Scripture, asserting that it is the ultimate authority over our lives.²¹ However, it needs to be recognized that Scripture must first be accepted as having divine authority, and then convincingly interpreted before it exercises authority in our lives. Accordingly, we suggest that God has delegated final authority in our lives to our *private judgment*. In other words, no Scripture practically exercises authority in our life until we *decide* it is Scripture, then what it means to us, then whether or not we are going to obey it.

Therefore, we would define the God-ordained role of *private judgment* as: *the God-given authority delegated to human reason to ultimately decide what we will believe and do*. Whether or not to believe or obey a divine revelation is a human *decision* and these are made by human reason.

In saying that our *private judgment* is our final authority, several points must be made. First of all, when discussing who or what possesses ultimate authority for what is true, it must be admitted that all such discussions will be circular in nature. As Reformed theologian John Frame has written: "argument is always circular when it is an argument for an ultimate criterion of truth."²² Without God there would be no truth, and without reason there would be no knowledge or acceptance of truth.²³

²¹ A good example of this is John Frame from Westminster, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), in which the author as a *presuppositionalist*, presupposes, and skips directly to the fact that Scripture is our ultimate authority. Another example is the Adventist theologian Norman Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Andrews University, 2003). For further discussion see chapter 3.3.

²² John Frame in *Five Views on Apologetics*, 197.

²³ William Abraham remarks that, "One way to envisage the [Karl] Barthian [neo-orthodox] project is to see it as a search for that criterion of truth which is internal to theology itself." (*Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* [Clarendon Press, 1998], 367). That is a good description of what we are attempting in these chapters as well, but instead of that criterion being subjective feelings as it was for Barth and Reformed theologians, we believe it to be subjective *Spirit-liberated* reasoning upon objective data.

Secondly, the God-ordained function of human *private judgment* was designed to work in conjunction with the *Spirit-liberated reason* of regenerated humans, not the *devil-darkened reason* of spiritually dead humans. By *Spirit-liberated reason* we refer to the fact that through spiritual regeneration, our sinful nature has been replaced by our New Nature as the controlling principle, thereby allowing our mind to process truth without a God-hating nature automatically suppressing it.²⁴ *Private judgment* concerning *divine revelation* was never intended to work properly by unregenerated, God-hating people, all of whom the Bible describes as being mentally insane.²⁵

Thirdly, we must recognize in such a discussion that there is a difference between *objective authority* and *subjective authority*. Traffic laws, for example, possess *objective authority* in that they have the *right* to exercise control over how we drive. However, such laws, or any authority for that matter, do not *practically* or *subjectively* exercise any authority in our lives until we choose to recognize their authority. All beliefs, whether in certain authorities, or otherwise, are subject to the acceptance of our God-given faculties of conscience and reasoning.²⁶

For further discussion on the God-ordained place of human reason for processing divine revelation see chapter 3.3; section 2.4.F.

²⁴ The term *devil-darkened reason* reflects the Apostle's description of unregenerated humans as "**darkened in their understanding**" (Eph 4:18) by "**the god of this age [who] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, Who is the image of God**" (2 Cor 4:4). Christians however have been "**made new in the spirit of [our] mind**" (Eph 4:20), giving us alone the ability to receive and understand spiritual truth (cf. 1 Cor 2:12-14). For further discussion of the epistemological differences between these human states see chapters 4.12-16.

²⁵ For further on the mental insanity of unregenerated humanity see chapters 4.12-15.

²⁶ Some will understandably suggest that by recognizing the *subjective authority* of reason, we are dethroning God. In response, Christian philosopher Gordon H. Clark (1902-1985) wrote:

Systematic theologians are wary of any proposal that would make an abstract principle superior to God. . . . The law of contradiction is not to be taken as an axiom prior to or independent of God. The law is God thinking. (*Religion, Reason, and Revelation* [Presbyterian & Reformed, 1961], 67)

Likewise, E. J. Carnell addresses the claim that, "If we rest only in the reasonable, reason replaces God." Carnell rightly responds, "Not so. Reason is the test for truth. It detects truth; it does not manufacture it. Truth is always superior to the logic which establishes it." (*An*

No real belief or authority can bypass our moral or logical reasoning, not even our belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. No human will believe something that their reason concludes is impossible,²⁷ nor will we willingly or sincerely succumb to authority that our reason deems illegitimate.²⁸ This is not to say that there are not obvious consequences to ignoring a legitimate *objective authority*, as God Himself is certainly such an authority, and those who refuse to recognize it will surely suffer the consequences.

If someone asks which aspect of authority is more important, we would answer both. While it is our *subjective authority* that we *live* by (i.e. *private judgment*), it will be our *objective authority* that we will be *judged* by (i.e. God). *Subjective authority* is what we accept as our authority and which practically controls our life. *Objective authority* is what in reality has authority over us and will rightfully judge our life.

For example, we would suggest that Scripture is an *objective authority* instituted by God, but that it is really our personal acceptance and interpretation of it that operates as our *subjective authority*. In a sense then, we would suggest that God can be said to be our *ultimate objective authority*, *private judgment* our *final subjective authority*, and Scripture our *direct objective authority*.

Accordingly, when the choice is ours, each person decides for themselves what *objective authorities* will become their *subjective authorities*. And they had better choose correctly.²⁹ Our case for

Introduction to Christian Apologetics [Eerdmans, 1956] , 86). And God is always superior to logic as well because He established it.

Finally, David Basinger remarks as well, "To view things this way [the importance of reason] is not to give human reason preeminence over revelation or faith. It is simply to take a certain position on the essential categories of thought with which God made us." ("Biblical Paradox: Does Revelation Challenge Logic?" *JETS* 30:2 (June 1987), 213.)

For further defense of the God-ordained authority of *private judgment* and human reason see chapters 3.2-3.

²⁷ Saying that reason will not accept the impossible is related to saying that God did not make us to believe the contradictory. For example, if we deem the Trinity as a contradictory concept as *rationalists* do, then we should not and cannot believe it. For further discussion of this see chapter 2.9.

²⁸ Accordingly, we make the case elsewhere that *biblical faith* is founded on objective evidence, although not the direct kind, but evidence nonetheless. For further discussion see chapters 6.12-14.

²⁹ Two common, but illegitimate claims can be dealt with here. First, even those who would claim that they themselves are their own authority, have chosen an objective authority. In other words, while someone

the God-given authority of *private judgment* applies only to decisions in which we have a real choice. If we choose to jump off of a ten story building to our death, our own judgment (however dysfunctional) determined such a decision and therefore exercised authority over our life. Such is not the case if a bunch of guys pick us up and throw us off the building to our death. In such a matter we have no choice, and our judgment is therefore not our final authority.

Likewise, there are some things in our life that God not only foreknows, but *foreordains*, and subsequently ensures they happen. For example, the Scriptures suggest that not we, but God decided when, where, and to whom we would be born (cf. Acts 17:26).³⁰

However, there are many more areas of life in which God does allow us to choose by our own free will, and it is in these that God *delegates* His authority to our *private judgment*. What car we buy, what we have for dinner, what spiritual authorities we will be under, how accurately we interpret Scripture, and how consistently we obey Scripture, are normally not issues in which God supernaturally intervenes, controls, and guarantees, but rather are matters in which we have free will and therefore our moral and logical reasoning exercises *final subjective authority* in them.

Obviously, the question of what decisions are dictated directly by God, and which ones He delegates to human choice is an ongoing theological debate. Notice, however, that because our *private judgment* exercises decision-making authority *only in areas in which God allows*, that God remains the *ultimate objective authority* over every aspect of every human life.³¹

might claim that they have not accepted *any* authority outside of themselves, in reality they have. This is because they have been persuaded by some objective evidence outside of themselves to "trust themselves" rather than someone or something else. They have their reasons, and the source of those reasons has operated as an objective authority in their life. On the other hand, those who would claim that their authority is uniquely objective, cannot dismiss the subjectivity of their decision of what or who will exercise authority in their life.

³⁰ For further discussion of the *predestined will* of God see section 7.15.B.1.

³¹ This is not the place to suggest where the line should be drawn regarding what choices God makes for us and what choices we make ourselves. The issue is really a matter of determining what is under what we call God's *controlling sovereignty* and His *consenting sovereignty*. The former are things which God directly dictates, causes, controls, and guarantees, the latter are things that He simply allows because they do not alter His ultimate plans.

Against popular opinion then, we suggest that in a great number of even critical areas, God has delegated *final subjective authority* to *private judgment*, not to the Spirit or Scripture. Neither the Spirit, nor the Scriptures bypass the gate of our *private judgment*, and there are many, even critical things, for which God has not granted a definitive *divine revelation*.

Still, this is more of a philosophical distinction, rather than a practical one because: 1) God gave us the ability to use *private judgment*, 2) It is the Spirit that liberates our reason in the first place, making it capable of, and attracted to, God-pleasing decisions, and 3) One of those God-pleasing decisions that any truly regenerated and reasonable person will make is to place their lives under the direct authority of Scripture.

Perhaps the proper relationship between the enormous authority God has delegated to our *private judgment*, and our need to exercise it with virtue, was best expressed by Martin Luther (1483-1546), a champion of *private judgment*, who famously wrote in his tract, *Concerning Christian Liberty*:

A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.³²

This is an apt description of both the authority of our own reason, and the right use of that authority.³³

C.2) Biblical Support for *Private Judgment*

For example, Acts 17:26 indicates that God dictated, caused, controlled, and guaranteed when, where, and to whom we would be born, all of which would be under His *controlling sovereignty*. However, God gives us the freedom to sin against His perfect will, coming under His *consenting sovereignty*. Even so, God will not allow our freedom, or something occurring under His *consenting sovereignty*, to thwart His ultimate purposes. Not only is He big enough to know and plan for the choices we make, He is big enough to alter our choices so that while we may not act according to His perfect will, we will act according to His perfect plan.

Similar concepts are discussed under the topics of what we call God's *predestined*, *prescribed*, and *permissive wills* in section 7.15.B.

³² Martin Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, Part 2. (online at <http://www.iclnet.com>)

³³ For further discussion of the critical distinction between *objective* and *subjective authority* and examples in modern theology of confusing the two, see chapter 3.3.

Admittedly, biblical support for the God-given right and responsibility of *private judgment* is more implied in many Scriptures, rather than explicitly stated. For example, the eminent Church historian Luke writes: **"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true"** (Acts 17:11). There is an implicit recognition and even praise here for **"the Bereans"** using their right and responsibility of *private judgment* even when listening to a foremost Apostle of Jesus Christ. Note as well the implicit rebuke of the **"Thessalonians"** for evidently not using their *private judgment* to evaluate apostolic revelation.

Other biblical statements imply the God-given authority of *private judgment* as well. For example, the Apostle Paul says, **"The spiritual man makes judgments [*anakrinei*] about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment [*anakrinetai*]"** (1 Cor 2:15). Of course, **"all things"** does not imply perfect judgment in every area of human life, and the Apostle recognizes elsewhere that his personal subjective judgments will be ultimately and accurately judged by God (cf. 1 Cor 4:3-5). Nonetheless, the Apostle is certainly implying that God has given the person with **"the Spirit"** (cf. v. 14) the ability and therefore responsibility to make judgments on important matters regarding the Christian life, including properly recognizing and interpreting, or to **"accept"** or **"understand"** **"the things that come from the Spirit of God"** (v. 14). While many attempt to limit what the Apostle is saying, his support of the authority of *private judgment* is

clear.³⁴ The Apostle is not only saying that we have the *ability* to “**make judgments about all things**” but that this is precisely what we do, because this is how God made us.

The God-ordained place of *private judgment* is more explicit in Romans 12:2 where the Apostle writes:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then [with your mind] you will be able to test and approve [dokimazein] what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.

³⁴ Concerning 1 Corinthians 2:15, several commentators suggest that the Apostle is merely saying that a believer cannot be properly judged by an *unbeliever* in spiritual matters (cf. John MacArthur, *Commentary*, in. loc.), but the Greek text reflects the idea that a believer cannot be judged by *anyone* in spiritual matters (cf. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Hendricksen, 2000), 78).

Most commentators are so busy limiting and disclaiming what Paul's statement means, that they ignore the full ramifications of what he *is* saying (cf. Fee, 118-19; Robertson and Plummer, 50). Anthony Thiselton even suggests that 1 Corinthians 2:15 should be understood as something the arrogant Corinthians were saying instead of accepting that Paul actually said it (cf. p. 272)

Older, Reformed commentators did better. Calvin wrote:

Away with all the discernment of the flesh as to this matter! It is *the spiritual man* alone that has such a firm and solid acquaintance with the mysteries of God, as to distinguish without fail between truth and falsehood — between the doctrine of God and the contrivances of man, so as not to fall into mistake. . . . Observe, that this prerogative is not ascribed to the man as an individual, but to the word of God, which *the spiritual* follow in judging, and which is truly dictated to them by God with true discernment. (*Commentaries*, online at www.ccel.com)

Calvin is reminding us that the context of 1 Cor 2:15 is the reception and recognition of the word of God, and he makes the good point that this is why the spiritual man has such good judgment.

Likewise, Charles Hodge rightly related this verse to the *right of private judgment*:

To judge here means to discern, to appreciate, and thus pass judgment upon. . . . It is not of the officers of the church only, nor of the church collectively, but of each and every man in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, that the apostle affirms this ability to discern the truth, excellence and beauty of divine things. It is as impossible that one man should discern for another what is true and good, as that one man should see for another. We must see for ourselves or not at all. The right of private judgment in matters of religion, is inseparable from the indwelling of the Spirit. (*First Corinthians*, online at www.ccel.com)

The Apostle clearly teaches here that knowing God's will is not merely a matter of *divine revelation*, but also *human research* as the person uses their spiritually renewed mind to "**test and approve what God's will is**" (cf. Phil 1:10). It is specifically the need for the mind to "**approve**" God's will that is important to our discussion. Of course, the objective will of God is certain and not affected by the opinion of humans in any way. But the *subjective* will of God for us, the one we will obey, must go through our human reasoning processes, or *private judgment*.

While Douglas Moo does not directly address the issue of *private judgment* here at Romans 12:2, he is at least more honest about what the Apostle is saying concerning the delegated authority of the Christian's mind:

Paul's teaching about the Christian's source for finding the moral will of God in this verse deserves attention. Paul has made clear earlier in the letter that the Christian no longer is to look to the OT law as a complete and authoritative guide for conduct (see Rom. 5:20; 6:14, 15; 7:4). What, Paul's first readers and we ourselves today might ask, is to be put in its place? Paul answers: the renewed mind of the believer. Paul's confidence in the mind of the Christian is the result of his understanding of the work of the Spirit, who is actively working to effect the renewal in thinking that Paul here assumes (cf. Rom. 8:4-9).³⁵

³⁵ *The Epistle to the Romans (NICNT)* (Eerdmans, 1996), 757. Contrary to Dr. Moo, it would not seem that commentators notice the epistemological implications of Romans 12:2. Barnes, Barrett, Schreiner, and Stott seem completely uninterested in their comments on the passage.

John Murray seems to want to avoid the delegated authority of *private judgment* communicated in this passage when he writes:

To 'prove' in this instance is not to test so as to find out whether the will of God is good or bad; it is not to examine. It is to approve. But it is this meaning with a distinct shade of thought, namely, to discover [how about *decide*], to find out [how about *determine*] or learn by experience what the will of God is and therefore to learn how approved the will of God is. (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. [Eerdmans, 1959, 1965; reprint 1997], 115)

There seems to be a disregard for the subjective authority to approve the claims of another authority reflected in *dokimazō*.

Calvin appeared to have the same distaste for recognizing the subjective but critical place of the mind in what the Apostle is saying:

Here you have the purpose for which we must put on a new mind, — that bidding adieu to our own counsels and desires, and those of all men, we may be attentive to the only will of God, the knowledge of which is true wisdom. . . . Paul exclaims, that what is good and right

Unfortunately, neither conservative Evangelicals, nor postmoderns share "Paul's confidence in the [Spirit-liberated] mind of the Christian."

Along these lines, it is instructive to note that the Apostle did not choose the normal words for mere testing or investigation (e.g. *peirazō*), but a word that includes the idea of the reasoned acceptance of the one evaluating something. Accordingly, the Greek scholar William Mounce notes that the *dokimazō* word group, "carries the idea of a critical examination of something to determine its genuineness."³⁶

W. E. Vine is more helpful, writing:

dokimazō . . . signifies "to prove," e.g., I John 4:1, more frequently to prove with a view to approval, e.g., Rom. 1:28, KJV, "they did not like to retain God in their knowledge"; RV, "they refused"; marg., "did not approve," the true meaning. Their refusal was not the outcome of ignorance; they had the power to make a deliberate choice; they willfully disapproved of having God in their knowledge.

In the next chapter, the Apostle speaks of the Jew as "approving things that are excellent;" 2:18. The Jew knew God's will, and mentally "approved" of the things in which God had instructed him out of the Law.

In Rom. 14:22, he is said to be happy who "Judgeth not himself in that which he approveth"; that is to say, in that which he "approves" of after having put the matter to the test.

. . .

In Phil. 1:10 the Apostle prays that the saints may "approve the things that are excellent" or "things that differ," i.e., "approve" after distinguishing and discerning.³⁷

must be ascertained from God's commandments. (*Calvin's Bible Commentaries* [online at www.ccel.com])

On the contrary, for the Christian with a renewed mind the Apostle does indeed see a place for "our own counsels" and ascertaining "what is good and right . . . from God's commandments" and is not as direct and objective as Calvin implies.

³⁶ William Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Zondervan, 2006), 719.

³⁷ W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Thomas Nelson, 1996), 35.

Better descriptions of the operation and place of *private judgment* could hardly be found, which again, makes the Apostle's use of this word in Romans 12:2 an instance of clear biblical support for it.

Perhaps the clearest example of biblical support for our view of *private judgment* concerns instructions regarding our subjective moral reasoning or conscience. This topic is thoroughly discussed in the next chapter, but here we will summarize some important thoughts on this issue.³⁸

First, the Apostle Paul recognized that people's consciences may legitimately differ on certain issues. The principle of *private judgment* is clearly expressed when the Apostle writes: "**One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind**" (Rom 14:5). The respected Reformed theologian A. W. Pink (1886-1952) remarked regarding this verse:

[This] is the charter of Christian liberty; let none allow himself to be deprived of it. Those words cannot mean less than that every Christian has the God-given right to think for himself, to form his own opinion of what Scripture teaches, and to decide what he considers is most pleasing and honouring unto God.

Note well how emphatic and sweeping are the words of Romans 14:5. "Let every man"; not only the preacher, but the private member too. "Be fully persuaded"; not coerced, nor uncertain, as he will be if, instead of forming his own opinion, he heeds the confusion of tongues now abounding on every side. "In his own mind"; neither blindly following the popular custom nor yielding to the *ipse dixit* [unproved assertion] of others.³⁹

It should be noticed that in the passage above, there is no objectively right or wrong answer regarding the "**disputable matters**" (14:1), and it is up to the individual person to decide. The specific issue that the Apostle is addressing here is probably the Sabbath, and this is the clearest verse in the NT that indicates we are no longer obligated to obey the fourth commandment (cf. Exod 20:8-11). In other words, under the New Covenant, the OT revelation concerning the Sabbath has been set aside and has been

³⁸ For further discussion of the biblical view of the human conscience see chapter 3.2.

³⁹ Arthur W. Pink, *Practical Christianity* (Baker, 1974), 175.

delegated to the *private judgment* of individuals as to whether or not they wish to practice it.

While in this example there really is no right or wrong answer, the Apostle goes on to discuss issues where there is, and yet he still upholds the authority of *private judgment*. For example, he says, **"As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean [with their *private judgment*], then for him it is unclean"** (Rom 14:14). The Apostle recognized that a more informed person will understand that **"no food is unclean in itself,"** because, **"Jesus declared all foods 'clean'"** (Mark 7:19).

Nonetheless, he insists that in any such **"disputable matters"** (14:1), such as food, it is wrong for a person to go against their reason, conscience, and *private judgment*. Along these lines he writes: **"But the man who has doubts [in his own mind] is condemned if he eats [against his own *private judgment*], because his eating is not from faith [what he has really decided with his *private judgment*]; and everything that does not come from faith [and goes against our reason and conscience] is sin"** (Rom 14:23). God expects us to live according to our *private judgment* on such issues, even if we are ill-informed, and if we do not, it is sin.

Obviously the Apostle's teaching here needs to be qualified and does not apply to what we define elsewhere as *doctrinal matters* that are both clearly taught in Scripture and would bring harm to someone if not obeyed.⁴⁰ In other words, the freedom the Apostle is encouraging does not apply to things that would clearly be sin, but rather, in areas where there is room for disagreement, or are harmless.

It is interesting to note again, however, that unlike the issue of the Sabbath, there was a real right and wrong answer to the issue of foods. Even though **"the weak"** had the right to use their *private judgment*, the truth was that they were being unnecessarily legalistic and not acting in accordance with the teaching of Christ concerning foods (cf. Mark 7:19). There was *divine revelation* available on the matter of eating foods that **"the weak"** should have allowed to instruct their convictions and decisions.

Such a context for the Apostle's remarks serves to highlight the personal authority of our *private judgment* all the more. In other words, one notices that even if a person is actually *wrong* in their conclusions on a *debatable* or *acceptable matter*, that they are

⁴⁰ For further discussion on the important distinction between disputable and doctrinal matters see section 3.2.C.

expected to obey their own *private judgment* on the matter (cf. Rom 14:14).⁴¹

The Apostle upholds the sanctity of a person's *private judgment* even when they are not acting in line with the truth, and points out that even **"God has accepted him"** (Rom 14:3). This is because God has delegated *final subjective authority* to our moral and logical reasoning, and there are grave consequences to violating that authority. In fact, the Apostle makes it clear that while it may not be a sin to reason wrongly, it is an automatic sin to go against one's *private judgment* (cf. Rom 14:23) in such *debatable* or *acceptable matters*. The sanctity of *private judgment* is demonstrated as well in the fact that it is sin for anyone to persuade someone to act against their own conscience (cf. Rom 14:13, 15, 20-22) in *debatable* or *acceptable* issues.⁴²

While Romans 14 specifically concerns the moral reasoning of our conscience, the Scriptures also support the authority of the logical reason of our mind in other *disputable matters* in which we have no specific, authenticated revelation from God. For example, concerning even as important a decision as marriage, the Apostle says:

If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin--this man also does the right thing (1 Cor 7:36-7).

The Apostle does not imply here that God will somehow grant a *divine revelation* to guide the person in their decision of whether to marry, but rather, he recognizes that the person's *private judgment* is to exercise authority over them.⁴³

Likewise, when the Apostle gave instructions regarding "free will" offerings he said, **"Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver"** (2 Cor 9:7). In

⁴¹ See endnote above.

⁴² For further discussion of the conscience see chapter 3.2.

⁴³ For further discussion of the use of reason in the decision to marry see section 4.4.A and 7.15.D.1.

other words, in such matters there is no objectively right or wrong answer, but only a subjective one in which the individual decides what is right or wrong. Here God has clearly delegated *final subjective authority* to the person's *private judgment*.

The responsibility and necessity of *private judgment* in the vital task of interpreting and teaching Scripture is clearly reflected when the Apostle tells Timothy: **"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth"** (2 Tim 2:15). It is clear that the minister of God must **"correctly"** handle God's word.⁴⁴

The thing to notice is that the Apostle did not assume that **"correctly"** interpreting, teaching, and applying God's revelation in Scripture would be automatic. He commands Timothy to work very hard at these things because they all require the diligent, careful, God-fearing use of human reason. The Apostle does not imply that God will somehow supernaturally make up for sloppy thinking with additional *divine revelation* when it comes to properly handling God's word, but rather, having our handling of God's word **"approved"** by the Author requires one doing **"your best"** at *human research* with human reason.⁴⁵ Accordingly, we have written elsewhere:

While God has supernaturally revealed Scripture, He has not revealed a divinely authoritative interpretation of Scripture. Rather, we *read* it with our God-given physical faculties, and each statement is a fact that is interpreted by our God-given reason based on common sense principles of interpretation. . .

⁴⁴ NT scholar Gordon Fee seems wrong when he comments on 2 Tim 2:15: Paul is not urging that he correctly interpret Scripture but that he truly preach and teach the gospel, **the word of truth**, in contrast to the "word battles" (v. 14) and "godless chatter" (v. 16) of the others. (*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus (NIBC)* [Hendrickson, 1988], 255)

Of course the Apostle includes the Gospel in **"the word of truth,"** but he certainly did not completely *exclude* the OT Scriptures Timothy knew (cf. 2 Tim 3:15), and **"the [NT] things [Timothy had] heard [Paul] say in the presence of many witnesses [that he was to] entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others"** (2 Tim 2:2). Accordingly, even the "godless chatter" that Dr. Fee alludes to includes not just the Gospel, but, for example, the proper timing of our resurrection (cf. v. 18).

⁴⁵ No commentaries we are aware of properly apply the Apostle's command in 2 Timothy 2:15 to the issue of *private judgment*, or even the important place that good reasoning plays in interpreting, communicating, and applying God's word in a God-pleasing way.

This, of course, partly explains why equally Spirit-filled Christians have a wide variety of interpretations of the one revelation of Scripture, instead of a more universal and unanimous interpretation a direct revelation from the Holy Spirit would provide. It is because the Holy Spirit has revealed Scripture that we have only one Gospel of Matthew; it is because the correct understanding of Scripture is a matter of *private judgment* that we have many different and often conflicting interpretations of the Gospel of Matthew exercising authority over Christians' lives.⁴⁶

Along the same lines, commenting on 2 Timothy 2:15, John MacArthur writes:

That familiar text is a mandate for working hard to make sure we have the true sense of what the Bible means. In the words of B.B. Warfield, "The sense of Scripture is Scripture." In other words, without the true meaning of Scripture, you don't really have Scripture at all. There is no magic in the words themselves that gives them power apart from their true meaning. So proper interpretation is crucial especially for those who preach.⁴⁷

Accordingly, the Apostle makes it clear that God Himself will hold people accountable for how they interpreted, taught, and applied Scripture, because such things are our choice and a matter of *private judgment*.

Another biblical concept that implicitly supports the God-given authority and responsibility of *private judgment* is the "priesthood of all believers."⁴⁸ The noted Bible scholar J. B. Lightfoot (1828-1889), described this biblical concept as the idea that:

Each individual member holds personal communion with the Divine Head. To Him immediately he is responsible, and from Him directly he obtains pardon and strength.⁴⁹

This concept is best understood in light of how the priesthood worked in the OT. Under the Old Covenant, only certain appointed

⁴⁶ Quoted from section 2.5.E.

⁴⁷ John MacArthur, *The Truth War* (Nelson, 2007), 203.

⁴⁸ For further discussion of this concept see Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers* (Augsburg, 1962).

⁴⁹ Quoted by P. E. Hughes, "Priesthood" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (EDT) ed. Walter Elwell (Baker, 1984), 876.

individuals (i.e. priests) could have “direct” access to God. These individuals were to provide an intermediary role between God and the people. God was not expected to relate directly to anyone other than priests. While some traditions within Christendom have maintained a similar understanding, the NT is very clear that Christ, the eternal High Priest, has opened the way for each child of God to have equal access to their Father in Heaven (cf. 1 Tim 2:5; Heb 4:14-6; 1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; Isa 61:6). Accordingly, we stand before God as individuals, ultimately responsible for our actions, including our interpretation of, and obedience to God’s word.

Accordingly, the Apostles had a habit of not simply directing their divinely revealed thoughts to the hierarchical leadership of a church. Rather, the Apostle addresses Romans: **“To all [Christians] in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints”** (1:7; cf. 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1). The Apostle Paul assumed that all the Christians in Rome had both the ability and responsibility to understand, evaluate, and apply what he wrote.⁵⁰ This was because they too understood the God-given right and responsibility of *private judgment*.

C.3) Historical Support for *Private Judgment*

Several statements from early Church Fathers demonstrate their own belief in the God-ordained authority of *private judgment*. For example, in a letter *To Scapula*, Tertullian (c. 160–225) writes:

[I]t is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions. . . . It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion—to which free-will and not force should lead us.⁵¹

While similar statements can be found in the early history of the Church, it is clear that few men in Church history have promoted and demonstrated the God-given authority of *private judgment* more clearly and consistently than Martin Luther.⁵² His famous

⁵⁰ It can be noted here that 2 Peter 1:20 does not provide biblical evidence against the *right of private judgment* as it does not mean that Scripture cannot be interpreted by the individual. The context makes it clear that it is speaking of the “**origin**” of prophecy (cf. v. 21)- not its interpretation.

⁵¹ Tertullian, *To Scapula*, 2, available online at www.ccel.com.

⁵² Which brings into question Michael Horton’s statement that, “The last thing on the mind of the Reformers was what we now call “the right to

private interpretation" of the Bible." ("Recovering the Plumb Line" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong, ed. [Moody, 1996], 247). Dr. Horton goes on to rightly defend the value of historical theology, creeds, and confessions, but in the process unnecessarily demeans the God-given place of *private judgment*. For example, he laments that:

David Wells reports [from] research on a sampling of seven evangelical seminaries. . . . "Longstanding church doctrines are the surest guide for knowing ultimate religious truth" is a statement with which only 3.7 percent could strongly agree, while 55.1 percent disagreed and strongly disagreed. (258)

While Dr. Horton interprets this as a travesty, we would suggest it only reflects the way God has made us and that most Christians would rightly choose their own interpretation of Scripture as "the surest guide" over "longstanding church doctrines."

Jack B. Rogers and Donald McKim more accurately describe Luther's view on reason:

Reason did have a legitimate place in the life of the believer when it came after faith and was regenerated by the Holy Spirit [i.e. *Spirit-liberated reason*]. Luther knew that although the Gospel is a higher gift and wisdom than human reason, it does not alter or tear up man's understanding: "for it was God Himself who implanted reason in man." But, to be useful, reason had to be transformed. Thus, for Luther, reason's "presumptuousness" could be tamed by the Holy Spirit and then reason could become a servant of faith. It is in this light that his famous statement at Worms (1521) must be understood: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture or plain reason . . ."

Luther was not setting up reason as an independent source of knowledge apart from Scripture. He was affirming rather that he must be persuaded either by scriptural citations themselves, or from the inferences a regenerated reason could draw from Scripture.

Luther's views regarding reason were therefore based on three careful distinctions: (1) Natural reason had as its proper realm philosophical inquiries about this world; (2) arrogant reason was reason that misguidedly attempted to invade the realm of faith; and (3) regenerate reason served to heighten Christian understanding that proceeded from faith.

For Luther, the epistemological issue of "How do I know God?" was subordinated to the soteriological issue of "What must I do to be saved?" Human reason became identified, for him, with human autonomy and with the desire to elevate the religious and moral abilities of the human will for salvation. Luther thus attacked reason in true nominalist style, not only to refute Thomism [i.e. *natural theology*], but also to destroy nominalism's optimism about the power of the human will. (*The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* [Harper & Row, 1979], 81-2).

The important distinction between *Spirit-liberated* and *devil-darkened reason* reflected here is discussed further in chapters 4.12-16.

response to his accusers at the Diet of Worms flows out of this very doctrine:

Since then your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason -- I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other -- my conscience is captive to [my interpretation of] the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience [i.e. *private judgment*] is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.⁵³

In this very statement, Luther gave one of his reasons for denying the authority of "popes and councils": "they have contradicted each other." As discussed elsewhere in *KOG*, God has made our minds such that real contradictions reveal falsehood,⁵⁴ and here Luther was legitimately acting according to his own reasoning. Luther also made it clear in both this brief statement and his whole life, that he had accepted "Scripture" and "the Word of God" as an *objective authority* in his life. Yet, as we shall discuss further elsewhere in *KOG*, that reverence did not deter him from making critical judgments on both the biblical canon⁵⁵ and the interpretation of the Bible.

Along the same lines, Luther wrote:

Everyone must take care to be certain and be sure of [a] doctrine by himself and must not found his certainty on what other people have determined and concluded.⁵⁶

To ascertain and judge about doctrine pertains to all and to every Christian; and in such a way that let him be anathema who injures their right by a single hair.⁵⁷

⁵³ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Abingdon, 1978), 144.

⁵⁴ For further discussion regarding the nature of truth see sections 2.3.A; and chapters 2.9-11.

⁵⁵ For further discussion of Luther's views of the canon of Scripture see section forthcoming Book 16.

⁵⁶ Quoted by William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology : From the Fathers to Feminism* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 138.

⁵⁷ Quoted by Frederick Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, Reprint, (Baker), 331.

Let me say once and for all that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these [Schwabach doctrinal] articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again in the light thereof, and have wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I have now defended the sacrament of the altar. I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the Last Judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let no one make this out to be a joke or idle talk; I am in dead earnest.⁵⁸

Luther said this in reference to his teaching others that the bread and wine in communion mysteriously, but rather literally, becomes (through *sacramental union*) the actual body and blood of Christ (*real presence*). For practical purposes, this is obviously rather identical with the Roman Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation* and differs considerably from the understanding of many Evangelical Christians today. Nonetheless, Luther taught it with conviction, used his *private judgment* to arrive at it, and understood he was accountable to God for it.

Indeed, the Reformation did a great deal to restore the God-ordained authority of *private judgment* against the oppression of the Roman Church at that time who kept the Scriptures in an obscure language, and did not trust the Christian's God-given reason for the authentication, interpretation, and application of Scripture. The traditional view of Roman Catholicism may be best summed up by one of its most influential leaders, Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), a contemporary of Luther's and founder of the Jesuits, whose rules included:

Always to be ready to obey with mind and heart, setting aside all judgment of one's own, the true spouse of Jesus Christ, our holy mother, our infallible and orthodox mistress, the Catholic Church, whose authority is exercised over us by the hierarchy. . . . I will believe that the white that I see is black, if the hierarchical Church says so.⁵⁹

Even today, the Roman Church denies the God-given authority of *private judgment* in many ways. Specifically concerning the interpretation of Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

⁵⁸ Martin Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* Timothy F. Lull ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 62-3.

⁵⁹ Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, quoted by Henry Bettenson, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford Press, 1963), 364.

published in 1994 states: "the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome."⁶⁰

Against all of this was Roman Catholicism's greatest theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), who wrote:

No one should decidedly adhere to an exposition of Scripture that with sure [human] reason is ascertained to be false . . . in order that, from this, Scripture not be derided by the infidels.⁶¹

One of the Protestant Reformers was Richard Hooker (1554-1600), the foremost theologian of the early Anglican Church. In the sixteenth century he wrote a great deal about the importance and authority of reason, as he felt it was being neglected even among Protestant Christians then. We see his epistemological honesty reflected when he remarked concerning the theologians of his own day, "They [actually] ground themselves on human authority [i.e. *private judgment*], even when they most pretend divine."⁶² The same is true of many theologians today who suggest that they begin with Scripture as their authority and somehow bypass human reason.⁶³

Around the same time in America, the Pilgrims were known for their respect for the God-ordained place of *private judgment* and it was this conviction that enabled them to be who they were. Accordingly, the historian Cedric Cowing remarks: "The Pilgrims and English dissenters" possessed "a vigorous re-assertion of 'soul liberty,' namely the importance of individual consent to an idea or program."⁶⁴

When the influential Tennent brothers were being attacked for training Pastors in the "Log College," Gilbert Tennent (1704-1764) responded:

⁶⁰ Quoted by Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), 87.

⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas quoted in Donald G. Bloesch, *The Ground of Certainty* (Eerdmans, 1971), 35.

⁶² Richard Hooker, *Laws* in *The Works of Richard Hooker* (J. Vincent, 1843), II:vii.

⁶³ For examples of theologians who, in our opinion, are not honest enough about the God-ordained place of *private judgment* see section 3.3.B.

⁶⁴ Cedric B. Cowing, *The Great Awakening and the American Revolution* (Rand McNally, 1971), 6.

We are resolved, by the Grace of God, that no gingle or cant of Order and Government shall gull us out of our Reason and Conscience, or rob us of our Priviledges, as Men, as Christians, as Protestants, and as Presbyterians.⁶⁵

In the nineteenth century, the eminent theologian Charles Hodge (1797-1878) wrote the following in his *Systematic Theology* under the title, "The Right of Private Judgment":

Protestants deny . . . that Christ has appointed any officer, or class of officers, in His Church to whose interpretations of the Scriptures the people are bound to submit as of final authority. What they affirm is that He has made it obligatory upon every man to search the Scriptures for himself and determine on his own discretion what they require him to believe and to do. . . .

The obligations to faith and obedience are personal. Every man is responsible for his religious faith and his moral conduct. He cannot transfer that responsibility to others, nor can others assume it in his stead. He must answer for himself; and if he must answer for himself, he must judge for himself. It will not avail him in the day of judgment to say that his parents or his Church taught him wrong. He should have listened to God and obeyed Him rather than men.⁶⁶

Along the same lines, the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) wrote:

[Christian truth] still has but one external [objective] foundation (*principium externum*), i.e., Holy Scripture, and similarly only one internal [subjective] foundation (*principium internum*), i.e., believing reason. . . .

The Roman Church binds the human conscience. By contrast, the Reformation asserted that a church, however venerable, can still err. . . . It [the Church] can bind a person in conscience only to the degree that a person recognizes it as divine and infallible. Whether it indeed agrees with God's Word no earthly power can decide, but it is for everyone to judge solely for himself or herself. The church can then cast

⁶⁵ Gilbert Tennant, "Remarks Upon a Protestation Presented to the Synod of Philadelphia, June 1, 1741" in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and its Consequences*, Alan Heimert and Perry Miller eds., (Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 174.

⁶⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Edward N. Gross ed., abridged version, (Presbyterians & Reformed Publishing, 1992), 93.

someone out as a heretic, but ultimately that person stands or falls before his or her own master.⁶⁷

Few theologians in the history of the Church have thought as hard, and wrote as extensively, on how humans think than another influential Roman Catholic theologian, John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Even though he denied the God-given authority of *private judgment* at one point in order to affirm the authority of the Roman Catholic Pope, Cardinal Newman admitted elsewhere that:

There is no ultimate test of truth besides the testimony born to truth by the mind itself . . . [Reasoning] is a normal and inevitable characteristic of the mental constitution of a being like man on a stage such as the world . . . The authoritative oracle which is to decide our path . . . is seated in the mind of the individual . . . [When making decisions] whither can we go but to the living intellect.⁶⁸

Likewise, contrary to Roman Catholic dogma, Cardinal Newman wrote concerning the authority of the writings of the Church Fathers:

We take them as honest informants, but not as a sufficient authority in themselves, though they are an authority too. If they were to state these very same doctrines, but say, "These are our opinions; we deduced them from Scripture, and they are true," we might well doubt about receiving them at their hands. We might fairly say, that we had as much right to deduce from Scripture as they had; that deductions of Scripture were mere opinions; that if our deductions agreed with theirs, that would be a happy coincidence, and increase our confidence in them; but if they did not, it could not be helped—we must follow our own light.

Doubtless no man has any right to impose his own deductions upon another, in matters of faith. There is an obvious obligation, indeed, upon the ignorant to submit to those who are better informed; and there is a fitness in the young submitting implicitly for a time to the teaching of their

⁶⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena, Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (Baker, 2003), 88, 481. We hesitate to use Dr. Bavinck because he often appears to be inconsistent and contradictory on this issue. However, some of his statements seem to communicate clearly the point we are making.

⁶⁸ Quoted by William R. Fey, *Faith and Doubt: The Unfolding of Newman's Thought on Certainty*, (Patmos Press, 1976), 113.

elders; but beyond this, one man's opinion is not better than another's.⁶⁹

We have already mentioned the Reformed teacher A. W. Pink, who has written one of the best studies of *private judgment* to be found. He begins his study of the topic by saying:

It is our present design to treat of the right, the necessity, and the duty of each person freely to exercise his reason, conscience and will, especially in matters pertaining to his soul. Every man has the right to think for himself and express or aver his thoughts on political, moral and spiritual matters, without being subject to any civil or ecclesiastical penalty or inconvenience on that account. Conversely, no man is entitled to force his ideas upon others and demand that they subscribe thereto. . . .

Under no conceivable circumstances should any man relinquish the right to think and decide for himself. His reason, will and conscience are Divine gifts, and God holds him responsible for the right use of them. . . .

Not only is private judgment a right which God has conferred upon each of His children, but it is their bounden duty to exercise the same. The Lord requires us to make full use of this privilege, and to employ all lawful and peaceful means for its maintenance.⁷⁰

Likewise, Mr. Pink wrote:

There are three basic truths which the battle of the Reformation recovered for Christendom: the sufficiency and supremacy of the Scriptures, the right of private judgment, and justification by faith without the deeds of the law. Each of those was flatly denied by the Papacy, which taught, and still insists, that human "traditions" are of equal authority with God's Word, that the Romish church alone is qualified to explain the Bible or interpret its contents, and that human merits are necessary in order to [obtain] our acceptance with God.⁷¹

⁶⁹ John Henry Newman, "The Times of Antichrist"

(online at <http://anglicanhistory.com/tracts/tract83.html>)

⁷⁰ Pink, 169-170, 177.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

While more recent support for the doctrine of *private judgment* is more difficult to find, the influential Missionary Alliance preacher A. W. Tozer (1897-1963) said:

The world is for all of us not only what it is; it is what we believe it to be. And a tremendous load of woe or weal rides on the soundness of our interpretation.⁷²

More recently, Christian philosopher James Sire is honest and right when he comments regarding *private judgment*:

Is it not the only way any person can act? When one submits to the judgment of another, one is making a private judgment that submitting is right. When one refuses to accede to another--be it parent, friend, spouse, teacher or pope [even Scripture]--one exercises "private judgment."⁷³

Likewise, the well known contemporary theologian Thomas Oden has written:

If reasons appear that make it clear that the church's judgment has become untrustworthy, or its consensual judgment misguided, then the believer has a duty to question that authority. Such a predisposition toward ecclesial trust does not imply an abandonment of reason; rather, it assumes that the community is merely providing the believer with evidence for consideration, reflection, and testing against other forms of knowing.⁷⁴

Along the same lines, the Christian apologist Norm Geisler describes our perspective on the relationship between reason and Scripture when he writes:

There is a difference between the way we know reality (epistemology) and what we know about reality (ontology). The "revelation [i.e. Scripture] only" proponents appear to be ontologically correct that God is the ground of all truth. If God exists and is the source of all truth, then of course all truths come from "the top down." [i.e. *objective authority*].

However, epistemologically we must start from "the bottom up" [*subjective authority*] and discover whether or not [God has provided revelation]. In the epistemological sense, then,

⁷² A. W. Tozer comp. by Warren Wiersbe, *The Best of A. W. Tozer*, (Baker, 1978), 84.

⁷³ James Sire, *Habits of the Mind* (InterVarsity, 2000), 44.

⁷⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God : Systematic Theology: Volume One* (Harper, 1994), 402

reason is prior to revelation, since reason must be used to evaluate whether or not the Bible is indeed a revelation. Once this question is settled, then reason cannot be legitimately used to reject any of that revelation.⁷⁵

C.4) Defending *Private Judgment*

While Christians have always believed that God is the *ultimate objective authority* in life, many different alternatives have been claimed throughout Church history as to how that authority is applied to our lives. The Presbyterian theologian Donald McKim gives a succinct description of some of these:

Broadly speaking, three major approaches to authority have emerged in the church's history. The first, as represented by Roman Catholicism, appeals to the church as the living custodian of the gospel and the continuing historical manifestation of Christ's authority on earth. The second, represented by Protestantism, is *sola Scriptura*; it appeals to the Bible, the written record of the gospel, as the basic authority for the church. A third approach has emerged prominently at various stages in church history and is represented by the Quakers as well as the contemporary charismatic movement, among others; it appeals to the Spirit and [direct] individual revelation as the ultimate form of authority.⁷⁶

All of these alternative sources of authority are discussed more fully elsewhere in *KOG* and, for the most part, rejected.

C.4.a) Against Popes

Roman Catholic Christians believe that God has revealed the correct canon and interpretation of Scripture through the authority of popes and councils, and has provided further authoritative revelation through popes. As discussed elsewhere in *Knowing Our God*, the primary problems with this approach is the questionable evidence for the acceptance of their Apocrypha (extra books of the

⁷⁵ Norm Geisler, *Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (Baker, 1980), 38, 269-70.

⁷⁶ McKim, 113.

Bible) into the canon of Scripture, ⁷⁷ their questionable interpretations of many Scriptures, the immoral lives of many of its popes, and the unbiblical nature of many papal decrees. Therefore, we do not believe the Roman Catholic pope uniquely possesses the authority of Christ on Earth, nor are Roman Catholic traditions equal to Scripture in authority. ⁷⁸

C.4.b) Against mysticism

Dr. McKim's mention of the Quakers' belief in direct extra-biblical *divine revelation* is, of course, similar to movements particularly within modern *Charismaticism*. As we discuss at length elsewhere, we believe that Scripture is the all-sufficient *divine revelation* available to God's people today and that its divine teachings actually expose many of the modern human teachings concerning extra-biblical revelations to be unbiblical, arrogant, and dangerous. ⁷⁹

In addition, however, is the ever growing popularity of *mega mysticism* which expects divine guidance on extra-biblical matters. Precisely because *mega mystics* do not recognize the God-ordained authority of *private judgment* with regenerated reason, they mistakenly seek for signs and impressions from God to make amoral decisions such as what job to choose, where to go to school, or who to marry. All of this is not only unbiblical and incredibly common in American Christianity, but damaging to Christians who are put in spiritual bondage because of it. Accordingly, we devote a whole book in *KOG* to this topic. ⁸⁰

C.4.c) Against *sola Scriptura*

Not surprisingly, we are very supportive of Protestantism's promotion of the authority of Scripture, reflected in its motto: *sola Scriptura*. Unfortunately, however, such a slogan does not reflect

⁷⁷ For further discussion of the Roman Catholic Apocrypha (extra biblical books in the OT) see Book 16.

⁷⁸ For further discussion of Roman Catholic tradition and authority see chapters 13.5-8.

⁷⁹ For an introduction to alternative sources of divine revelation see chapter 7.8.

⁸⁰ For further discussion on *mega mysticism* see Book 14.

the whole truth. In essence, traditional supporters of *sola Scriptura* forget that the Bible is not the only thing involved in divine communication, but the process also includes *human beings*. Forgetting the human element in divine communication, and presuming it to be more direct, leads to the rather foolish, and it would seem, even arrogant statement by the influential Lutheran theologian, and former President and Professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, Francis Pieper (1852-1931) who wrote in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

Luther and his conscience stood on the bare text of Scripture, excluding all human interpretation. The talk common in our day that all church bodies stand on Scripture and differ only in their interpretation of it is not in accordance with the facts. The Roman Catholic Church does not stand on Scripture, but on the papal interpretation of Scripture. The Reformed Churches, as far as they differ from the Lutheran Church, do not stand on Scripture, but on Zwingli's, Calvin's, etc., interpretation of Scripture. The Lutheran Church, however, does not stand on an interpretation of Scripture, but on Scripture itself. This is not a mere assertion. It can be proved by induction in the face of universal contradiction.⁸¹

Contrary to Dr. Peiper, not even Martin Luther "stood on the bare text of Scripture," nor would Luther himself have said so, as noted above in his admission to the preface of the Schwabach Articles. There is a presumption here that reception of the *divine revelation* in Scripture is rather direct, infallible, and apparently especially so for Lutherans. Dr. Peiper forgot that there is a human being between us and the Bible.

Dr. Peiper is not alone, however, in his effort to remove the human component from our reception of *divine revelation*. For example, the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy states:

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God.

We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition, or any other human source.⁸²

⁸¹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (Concordia, 1950), 367.

⁸² 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, Article I; online at <http://www.reformed.com/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.com/documents/icbi.html>.

This reflects only half the truth and, again, ignores that there is a human being between us and God. In fact, Scripture *does* receive its *final subjective authority* from a human source.

The *subjectivity* of our beliefs, resulting from our own reasoning, is often ignored or denied in the hope of making the belief process more supernatural or objective than it really is. Conservative Evangelicals want an epistemological world where there is no risk. God decided differently in that only very few Christians have been gifted as infallible Prophets and Apostles. The rest of us have been expected to use our God-given reason and *private judgment* to interpret and apply their infallible revelation.⁸³

⁸³ Another good example of a very good theologian ignoring the fact that there is a human being between us and Scripture is Robert Reymond of Knox Seminary. Dr. Reymond claims that in order to know anything truly, we must know everything completely. Therefore, since humans do not have such omniscience, "the only way to escape the force of this fact is to avoid the entire question of epistemology" (112).

In our opinion, this is borderline skepticism. It implies that God intended to deceive us by putting us in a world that requires omniscience about everything in order not to be deceived about anything. This skepticism is reflected when Dr. Reymond claims:

[B]ecause the mind's innate ideas and categories of thought impose a structure on the sensory data brought to it, one can never know the objective facts of the world as they really are but only as the mind itself has "created" them. (114)

Dr. Reymond's solution is as follows:

All this the Christian eschews in favor of the epistemology graciously given in the fact and propositional content of Holy Scripture. . . . In short, [the Christian] makes the Word of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture the epistemic basis for all reasoning and knowledge—even when reasoning about reason or about God's revelation" (115-116).

Several responses are in order. First, Dr. Reymond is not honest enough about how we process the "propositional content of Holy Scripture." In fact, he later admits that he, "affirms the legitimate necessity of . . . the reasoning process in the activity of learning" but he does not recognize this includes his understanding that "the legitimacy of [reasoning is] authenticated by the Scriptures themselves" (116). Therefore, despite Dr. Reymond's claim otherwise, even he must start with reasoning, and not Scripture. In fact, we do precisely what Dr. Reymond suggests—we use Scripture "even when reasoning about reason" but we are more honest about the fact that we reasoned to giving Scripture that authority, and so did Dr. Reymond.

Dr. Reymond makes the same mistake as all epistemologically dishonest theologians when he claims that "the Word of the self-attested Christ of Scripture" is his "epistemic basis." We contend that God did not intend for anything to be "self-attested," not even Christ, and that Dr.

In our opinion, it would seem that even the rightly respected Bible teacher John MacArthur overlooks this reality when he writes:

A biblical perspective of truth also necessarily entails the recognition that ultimate truth is an objective reality. Truth exists outside of us and remains the same regardless of how we may perceive it. Truth by definition is as fixed and constant as God is immutable. That is because real truth (what Francis Schaeffer called "true truth") is the unchanged and unchanging expression of who God is; it is not our own personal and arbitrary interpretation of reality.

Amazingly, Christians in our generation need to be reminded of these things. Truth is never determined by looking at God's Word and asking, "What does this mean to me?" Whenever I hear someone talk like that, I'm inclined to ask, "What did the Bible mean before you existed? What does God mean by what He says?" Those are the proper questions to be asking. Truth and meaning are not determined by our intuition, experience, or desire. The true meaning of Scripture--or anything else, for that matter--has already been determined and fixed by the mind of God. The task of an interpreter is to discern that meaning. And proper interpretation must precede application.

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There is much good truth here, but Dr. MacArthur is perhaps unintentionally imprecise about the difference between *objective* and *subjective authority*. By the end of his statement, however, he recognizes that "an interpreter" must "discern" the "meaning" of Scripture. Therefore, Dr. MacArthur would seem wrong to state a few sentences earlier: "Truth is never determined by looking at God's Word and asking, 'What does this mean to me?'" On the contrary, that is the only way any Christian *can* determine what the truth is. We understand Dr. MacArthur's desire to guard the Church against the unbiblical and dangerous extremes of postmodernism,

Reymond himself has reasons for believing in Christ and His word, and if he did not have those reasons he would not believe in them.

Dr. Reymond ignores how God created things. While he can accept that God gave us Scripture to give us knowledge, he will not admit that God also gave us reason in order to evaluate and process the data of Scripture. Where else did our reason come from?

Finally, if the contents of Scripture are the only source of reliable data, then how can we know anything about construction, computers, or corneas? God wants us to process more data than what we find in Scripture and it is through our God-given reason that we do so.

⁸⁴ MacArthur, *Wars*, xx-xxi.

but it will not help to deny the God-ordained function of *private judgment* in the name of *sola Scriptura*.

As discussed further in chapter 3.B, most proponents of *sola Scriptura* insist that the canonical limits of Scripture are "self-authenticating." We would humbly suggest that nothing in all of Creation is subjectively "self-attested" without objective evidence evaluated by our *private judgment*. Not even God is self-authenticating without objective evidence, but rather provides an abundance of such evidence for His existence (cf. Rom 1:18-20). Likewise, Jesus Christ Himself said, "**If I testify about Myself** [i.e. self-authentication without objective evidence], **My testimony is not valid**" (John 5:31; cf. vs. 32-37). For the Apostle John, not even God the Holy Spirit was self-authenticating (cf. 1 John 4:1-3).

What else in all Creation would theologians claim is self-authenticating without objective evidence that needs to be evaluated and accepted by our *private judgment* in order to be properly believed? In the end, a merely subjective self-authentication becomes no authentication at all, which is a fairly scary position to put the Word of God in. Accordingly, John Locke ridiculed those who maintained that a proposition "is a revelation [simply] because they firmly believe it" and "believe it because it is a revelation."⁸⁵

More specifically, anything that we are to believe, or will believe, possesses evidence and reason for that belief. Not even the fact that $1+1=2$ is self-authenticating without objective evidence, but rather can be demonstrated. Likewise, no one merely accepts by some "leap of faith" that bypasses reason, that the Bible is the word of God. Rather, anyone who has any confidence that the Bible is from God has objective *reasons* and evidence, evaluated and accepted by their *private judgment*, on which their conviction is based.

Theologians can debate all they want to as to whether or not our reason is our *final subjective authority*, but the fact remains that in practice it is, and God intended it to be so. There is a need to admit as James Sire wrote above: "Is it not the only way any person can act?" Human *private judgment* reflects both reality on Earth (i.e. this is how it really is), and in Heaven (i.e. we will be judged this way), because as the Apostle says, "**For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one [individually] may receive what is due him for the things done**

⁸⁵ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, A. S. Pringle-Pattison ed. (Clarendon Press, 1967, online at www.ilt.columbia.edu.), Book IV, chap. 19, no. 10.

[and therefore decided] **while in the body, whether good or bad**" (2 Cor 5:10).

Both conservative Evangelicals and postmoderns are far too skeptical of the ability of Christians to sufficiently process *divine revelation*. What they seem to forget is that God created us with this ability and we are therefore accountable to do so. Like flowers which have been divinely designed to reliably receive the sun's rays and properly process it for nourishment through photosynthesis, we were re-created to receive God's word, and properly process it for our enlightenment and encouragement through *Spirit-liberated reason*. God re-created us for a relationship with Him which requires accurate and trustworthy communication and understanding, and we have therefore been given such abilities. While many proponents of *sola Scriptura* want to leave humans and their God-given reason and right of *private judgment* out of the process of *divine revelation*, God simply did not create things to be so.

Of course, as we discuss at length elsewhere, the *devil-darkened reason* of unregenerate humanity is quite unreliable concerning especially spiritual matters. But we are wrong to have the same skepticism concerning the regenerated Christian's *Spirit-liberated reason*, which was given to us precisely so that we may properly interpret Scripture. And we should not forget that God knows that even *devil-darkened reason* has correctly interpreted the revelation of Creation, even if satan has not allowed its proper application.⁸⁶

C.4.d) Against the "testimony" & "illumination" of the Spirit

Historically, when Protestants are more careful concerning epistemological issues surrounding *divine revelation* they have recognized that *sola Scriptura* is inadequate in itself, and that the human element must be explained. Accordingly, the brilliant John Calvin (1509-1564) introduced the idea of a "testimony" or "illumination" of the Spirit, in which He is personally and continually guiding us in properly recognizing and interpreting Scripture. The Presbyterian theologian Donald Bloesch reflects this view when he writes: "The Bible is the Word of God in all that it teaches, though this teaching is not immediately self-evident but must be unveiled

⁸⁶ For further discussion of the relationship between *devil-darkened reason* and *Spirit-liberated reason*, see chapters 4.12-16.

by the Spirit.”⁸⁷ The impression here is that our *Spirit-liberated reason* is not adequate to understand the full meaning of Scripture, but that a separate, additional *revelation* from the Spirit is necessary.

To the contrary, we would like to emphasize that *Spirit-liberated reason* is the most important tool for accurately interpreting and applying God's revelation in Scripture. We suggest that some supposed “illumination of the Sprit” should better be understood as *Spirit-liberated reason*.⁸⁸ In other words, the Spirit is not in the business of constantly telling us how to interpret Scripture, but rather, God has delegated such authority to a Christian's *Spirit-liberated reason* which has *already* been “fixed” by the Holy Spirit in spiritual regeneration enabling it to now properly interpret, apply, adore, and obey Scripture.⁸⁹

Unfortunately, the approach of John Calvin intentionally bypasses the God-ordained place and God-given ability of *Spirit-liberated reason*, and essentially bases the ultimate foundation of our certainty concerning *divine revelation* in some sort of subjective feeling that is nowhere supported by Scripture.⁹⁰ Practically speaking, proponents of such an approach have great difficulty in explaining why equally sincere and Spirit-filled Christians differ so widely in their interpretations of Scripture, if we are indeed being guided by the Spirit in them. Nonetheless, this remains a primary epistemological approach to *divine revelation*, and all apparently to deny the place of human reason and *private judgment*.

Obviously, these issues are important and debated topics, and while we cannot discuss them further here, we devote a considerable amount of discussion to them in the following

⁸⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Harper & Row, 1978), 2:273.

⁸⁸ For further discussion regarding a supposed “illumination of the Spirit” for the interpretation of Scripture see chapter 3.5.

⁸⁹ For further discussion of what we mean by *Spirit-liberated reason* see chapter 4.15-16.

⁹⁰ For a more detailed critique of the “testimony” and “illumination” of the Spirit see chapters 3.4-5.

chapters.⁹¹ Nonetheless, in our discussion of the "God-ordained chain of authority" in our lives, we contend that our God-given right and responsibility of *private judgment* exercises *final subjective authority* in our lives.⁹²

C.4.e) Against *Liberalism*

It is understandable that the many *unreasonable* conclusions of unregenerated rationalists who have practiced and promoted the various kinds of literary criticism on the Bible have led many to disparage the God-given place of reason. But again, there needs to be a distinction made between those who engage in such criticism with God-honoring *Spirit-liberated reason*, and those who do not.

First of all, let it be clear that any "Bible scholar" who claims that miracles are impossible, has obviously not had the greatest miracle of spiritual rebirth occur in their own life. It should not surprise us then that such spiritually blind men, who only possess *devil-darkened reason*, will arrive at the foolish, arrogant, and pagan conclusions they are infamous for. Therefore, we must not let the "Bad B's" of liberal biblical criticism (i.e. F. C. Baur [1792-1860], F. C. Burkitt [1864-1935], Rudolph Bultmann [1884-1976], Emil Brunner [1889-1986], G. Bornkamm [1905-1990], James Barr [1924-2006], and to some extent Karl Barth [1886-1968]) keep us from approaching the Bible with reason. If it truly is *divine revelation* then it can withstand the humble, reverent evaluation of *Spirit-liberated reason*, and will be better understood in the process.

The influential Presbyterian theologian Henry B. Smith described both the right and wrong use of reason in this context when he wrote:

Human reason may indeed inquire whether the voice which speaks be delusive or divine; it may test the truth of revelation on historical grounds; it may ask whether its

⁹¹ For further discussion of the place of *private judgment* and its relation to the interpretation and determination of Scripture see section 2.5.E and chapter 3.3. For critiques of the Protestant doctrines of the "testimony" and "illumination" of the Holy Spirit see chapters 3.4-5. For a full discussion of the process by which the canon of Scripture is to be recognized see Volume 3.

⁹² For an important defense of *private judgment* against charges of subjectivism and the nature of what we call our *ultimate subjective authority*, see section 3.3.B.

doctrines be in harmony with, or contradictory to moral truth . . . but having answered such preliminary inquiries, it has no shadow of a right to go to this revelation and dictate to it what it shall tell us of God's nature, or what shall be the method of the revelation or of the redemption, any more than it has a right to go to that other reality, nature, and prescribe its laws and limit its elements. In both cases man is to study and to learn.⁹³

While we do not condone unregenerated *rationalism*, we do want to recognize the God-given place of *Spirit-liberated reason* and *private judgment*. These things were intended to go together. As stated above, *private judgment* concerning *divine revelation* was never intended to work properly for unregenerated people, which describes theological *Liberalism* to a greater extent than they would admit.⁹⁴

C.4.f) Against Postmodernism

Some may be wary of promoting the God-given authority of *private judgment* because of its apparent similarities to postmodern philosophy. Obviously, we would affirm the postmodern reminder that there is a human being between us and God (and the Bible) and no one is perfectly objective this side of Heaven. Nonetheless, postmodern philosophers promote an atheistic religion and are aptly described as “**the fool [who] says in his heart ‘there is no God’**” (Ps 14:1), by denying the existence of any objective truth. Dr. MacArthur describes the epistemological skepticism of this philosophy when he writes:

Postmodernism suggests that if objective truth exists, it cannot be known objectively or with any degree of certainty. That is because (according to postmodernists), the subjectivity of the human mind makes knowledge of objective truth impossible. So it is useless to think of truth in objective terms. Objectivity is an illusion. Nothing is certain, and the thoughtful person will never speak with too much conviction

⁹³ Quoted in *The Bible, the Church and the Reason*, C. A. Briggs (T. & T. Clark, 1892), 70. Smith is actually describing the difference between the proper use of reason and *rationalism*, a distinction we discuss further in chapter 2.8.

⁹⁴ For further discussion of the difference between *Spirit-liberated reason* and pagan *rationalism* see chapter 2.8.

about anything. Strong convictions about any point of truth are judged supremely arrogant and hopelessly naive. Everyone is entitled to his own truth.⁹⁵

While we admit that, for example, the proper interpretation of Scripture is not as direct and automatic as many Evangelicals claim, neither is it as precarious as postmoderns claim. The proper balance between these two extremes is a proper understanding of the God-ordained place of *private judgment* through *Spirit-liberated reason*.

First, postmoderns ignore the epistemological environment that God has created. They act as if God does not want a relationship with us, but rather wants to trick us, and make it difficult to understand Him. Or they deny that relationships require reliable communication at all. Or they speak as if all Christians have unregenerated *devil-darkened reason*, and seem to deny the difference that *Spirit-liberated reason* makes in understanding *divine revelation*. We know differently, and we know that God has created Scripture with a level of clarity, and *Spirit-liberated reason* with a level of ability, all to ensure sufficient communication in order to have a relationship with His children based on truth and certainty. God's design of both *divine revelation* and human reason deny the epistemological uncertainty that postmoderns desire.

Secondly, postmoderns assume that all human bias is bad, and automatically prohibits us from properly and confidently communicating with others including God. On the contrary, as we discuss further elsewhere, there is nothing automatically wrong with bias. What matters is having the right bias, and by virtue of spiritual conversion, the Christian is in a significantly superior position when it comes to properly assessing data, whether it comes by revelation (i.e. Scripture) or research (i.e. science).⁹⁶

Thirdly, postmoderns deny their God-given responsibility to sufficiently understand God's revelation, acting as if their assumed impossibility of doing so exonerates them from God's expectations. God, like any father, intended His word to be correctly understood by His children and expects us to do so. There is an implicit divine command to understand it correctly, or else He would never provide it. And we will not follow the postmodern nonsense that God the

⁹⁵ Wars, 11.

⁹⁶ For further discussion of the superior epistemological environment and "bias" that regenerated Christians possess see chapter 2.2. Regarding the fact that our *Spirit-liberated reason* provides us with a correct bias, see section 4.15.A.3.

Father has multiple meanings for everything He says. On the contrary, He does not make up for our mistaken multiple understandings by intending multiple meanings in what He said.

This is not to say that God expects perfection in our understanding of His revelation. But postmoderns take advantage of God's gracious attitude and provision for our human limitations, and treat them as a license to deny any responsibility to properly interpret Scripture. On the contrary, the inability of constant God-like perfection in our understanding of Scripture does not mean God does not intend for us to pursue it with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We are commanded to love God in this very way, and our inability to consistently do so should not lead us to abandon our best efforts to do so.

This is why the Apostle Paul instructed Timothy to **"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly ["accurately" NASB] handles the word of truth"** (2 Tim 2:15). But postmoderns seem to claim they need not do even this, which unfortunately will result in them being **"ashamed"** at the lackadaisical effort they condone when it comes to interpreting Scripture. It is not automatically sinful to be wrong about your interpretation of Scripture. It is automatically sinful not to do your diligent, humble, God-fearing best to interpret Scripture. Accordingly, postmodern "Christianity" is quite sinful.

Finally, perhaps the most important truth that separates our view of *private judgment* from postmodern philosophy is that God will indeed objectively and accurately judge our use of this God-given right and responsibility. In other words, against the postmoderns, we and the Bible insist that there is an ultimate *objective authority* that we will be judged by. Accordingly, Erwin Lutzer, longtime Bible teacher at Moody Bible Church, rightly criticizes postmodern thinking when he says, "We have gone from the belief that everyone has a right to his own opinion (i.e. *private judgment*), to the absurd notion that every opinion is equally right (postmodernism)." ⁹⁷ No, not every opinion is right, and God will one day reveal that it was important that we were right.

Accordingly, in Romans 1:18-22, the Apostle makes it clear that unregenerate humans will be held accountable for their faulty judgment concerning Creation. In the end, *it does not matter whether we think our reasons for our decisions are adequate, but whether God thinks our reasons are adequate!*

⁹⁷ Erwin Lutzer, *Who Are You To Judge?* (Moody, 2002), 10-11.

This is particularly illustrated in Romans 14. As discussed above, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that God has delegated *final subjective authority* to human *private judgment* in matters in which we have a choice, even as to how we would interpret the NT teaching on unclean foods. Nonetheless, he makes it equally clear we will be held accountable by God for those choices. He writes what postmoderns apparently would like to forget: **"We will all stand before God's judgment seat . . . each of us will give an account of himself to God"** for how we used the authority delegated to our *private judgment*. (Rom 14:10, 12). There are moral and eternal consequences to how faithfully, diligently, humbly, and accurately we use our *private judgment*.

This is why a few verses later, the Apostle writes:

The faith [convictions] that you have, have as your own conviction before [enōpion: lit. "in sight of"] God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn [krinōn ⁹⁸] themselves [i.e. sin] because of what they approve [with their *private judgment*]. But those who have doubts [because they are going against their *private judgment*] are condemned [katakekritai] if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith

⁹⁸ While the Apostle's use of *katakekritai* in v. 23 certainly conveys condemnation, even the softer *krinōn* in v. 22 does as well. There is more than mere evaluation going on here. Accordingly, Dr. Vine noted concerning the verb *krinō* that it usually means, "to distinguish, choose, give an opinion upon, judge," it "sometimes denotes 'to condemn,' e.g., Acts 13:27; Rom. 2:27; Jas. 5:9." (119), all of which contain an idea that goes beyond mere discerning. Accordingly, see lexicons on the related noun *krima*.

This is an important point, as we would then claim that *krinō* in v. 22 is relatively synonymous with *katakekritai* in verse 23, both meaning more than simply to "judge" oneself, but to bring condemnation on oneself, or to **"sin"** which the Apostle applies to the meaning of the latter.

[or in accordance with their legitimate *private judgment*] **is sin.** (Rom 14:22-23 NRSV ⁹⁹) ¹⁰⁰

The Apostle reminds us again of the tremendous *subjective authority* he has granted our *private judgment*, such that to go against it in an acceptable matter **"is sin."** But whenever God delegates any of His authority (as He does in *private judgment*), He holds its recipient accountable for the proper use of it (cf. Heb 13:17). Therefore, the Apostle is warning the Roman Christians that they must be careful **"of what they approve"** with the *private judgment* of their own conscience because we will all eventually give an account to God for what we decided.

Therefore, subjective reasoning in the light of God's certain and objective judgment not only maintains God as the ultimate authority, but distinguishes the Christian doctrine of the God-given

⁹⁹ We chose the NRSV (cf. NASB, KJV, NKJV, NET) translation because it stresses the fact that an individual's "convictions" is "before God," literally "in His sight [*enōpion*]," and therefore accountable to Him, not just "between" us and God and therefore merely known by Him as suggested in other translations (RSV, ESV, NLT, NCV, NIV). Both Moo and Schreiner translates "before," but do not comment further, nor do they or others recognize the significance of this.

In our opinion, the thought here is not only (if at all) that we are to keep our convictions secret from other people, as claimed by most commentators. Rather, the Apostle's concern here is vertical ("in the sight of God"), not merely horizontal.

¹⁰⁰ In our opinion, most commentators misinterpret v. 22 such that the Apostle is speaking of some self-condemnation of conscience that has nothing to do with God. It would seem that generally they 1) do not recognize the nuance of condemnation in the use of *krinō* as noted in the endnote above, 2) do not apply the context of our convictions being *enōpion* "in the sight of God" as also noted in the endnote above, 3) do not consider the context of divine judgment stated in 14:10-12, 4) do not consider strongly enough that the condemnation of the "weaker" brother in v. 23 is certainly divine in nature, because it involves **"sin,"** and there would then be reason to believe the condemnation in v. 22 of the "strong" is of the same nature (cf. Barrett, 245, Moo, Murray, 196), 5) fail to recognize the divine condemnation occurring in v. 23 (cf. Stott, 368, Barnes and MacArthur, *in loc.*), or 6) fail to recognize that self-condemnation of the conscience essentially does involve divine condemnation, especially in Romans 14. Therefore, it is not necessary to choose between the two (cf. Moo, 862-3).

The Apostle may be alluding to the self-condemnation of conscience in Romans 14:22-23, but he certainly does not then exclude the main idea here that God is judging us for our convictions.

authority of *private judgment* from pagan *postmodernism*. The *Spirit-liberated reason* of a Christian acknowledges that there is both a logical and moral right and wrong and that the omniscient and perfect God is the arbiter of both. The Apostle essentially says the same thing when he writes:

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust [like *private judgment*] must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience [moral *private judgment*] is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord Who [ultimately, objectively, accurately] judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. (1 Cor 4:2-5)

The Apostle recognized his dependence on his subjective authority of “**conscience**” but knew he was accountable ultimately to God.

Therefore, not all human opinions are equal in value, but rather, must be evaluated based on adequately authenticated *divine revelation*, which the Christian knows he has in Scripture. As the writer of Ecclesiastes says: “**Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment**” (Eccl 11:9). This includes how we use our *private judgment*, a fact that would sober and humble postmodern philosophers if they understood it.

The popularity of postmodern philosophy among pagans is no reason to deny the God-given place of human reason or the God-ordained foundational *subjective authority* of human *private judgment*. In *private judgment* God desired to give humanity a great gift, to have the freedom to make God-pleasing choices instead of be robots. The use of our *private judgment* was something that was to enable us to be spiritual adults instead of infants.¹⁰¹ It was designed to be something we could be rewarded for the proper use of.

In return for this divine gift, postmoderns have perverted it, taking license to approve any opinion they wish. In response to this responsibility, postmoderns have rebelled, claiming they are not able to faithfully fulfill its purposes. The *Ultimate Objective Authority* will hold them accountable for all of this.

¹⁰¹ For further discussion regarding the metaphor of spiritual adulthood as it pertains to the *divine revelation* given in the Old Covenant as opposed to the new see section 2.1.3.E.

In the end then, we affirm that God has granted *foundational subjective authority* to our reason, and that ultimately it is our guide in life, through which the Scriptures and the Spirit must work in order to lead us. We believe as well that such an emphasis on the authority of our God-given reason will help God's people take more responsibility for using it as God intended. Rather than resulting in indifferent arrogance, promoting the right and responsibility and eventual accountability of our *private judgment* will encourage sincere humility. We would finally affirm that there may be a greater number of salvations and spiritual revival in "Christian" cults, Roman Catholicism, and mainline Protestantism if *private judgment* were valued and exercised more. It was a foundation of the first Reformation, and will be of any subsequent one as well.¹⁰²

¹⁰² In *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics*, the French theologian Auguste Lucerf (1872-1943) provides perhaps the best summary of the Protestant position, priority, and perspective on *private judgment*. Especially in light of the difficulty of finding a good discussion on the topic, Lucerf is worth the following rather lengthy excerpt. Although it emphasizes the debate with Roman Catholicism, the principles shared here apply to many other "authorities" as well:

The fact is that whether we are Catholics or Protestants or Modernists, we are all confronted by a problem far more complicated than our Roman brethren would appear to think. The problem which calls for a solution is how to safeguard order in the Church under the authority of God, and at the same time the liberty of the individual Christian conscience, of which God alone is Master.

Catholicism . . . thinks only of the rights of the religious society. It desires, above all things, to maintain order in the Church. It has a very clear conscience concerning one side of the truth, and for this it deserves commendation. It does not intend that an arbitrary individual shall impose his tyranny on the faithful or that they shall be left to the mercy of his caprice.

Meanwhile, it altogether loses sight of the other element of the truth: the right of the individual conscience. Thus, it falls into the opposite extreme to that which attracts neo-Protestantism. The latter, in principle, though not always in practice, has scarcely any thought except for the rights of the individual, and, in its efforts to safeguard them, it loses sight of the essential conditions of religious social life [i.e. falling into independence, and forsaking community].

When Catholicism makes the spiritual relations of the believer with Christ to depend on his submission to the prelates of the representative Church, in order to maintain the element of truth it desires to preserve, it applies a method fatal alike to the life of the Church and to the peace of the individual conscience.

Further, the Catholic system which has been conceived in order to maintain absolute doctrinal unity, cannot even realize that, except in

an administrative and external manner, and by dint of a ruinous tolerance in favor of the *ecclesia discens* [Church's skill in acquiring knowledge].

This system of guaranteeing the faith has ended by itself taking precedence over the faith which it is a question of guaranteeing. There are scarcely any Catholics, apart from professional theologians, who are really interested in doctrine. For the great majority of the faithful, and for many of the clergy also, dogmas are hardly more than abstract formulas to be accepted with the eyes shut, without troubling about their spiritual import. There is little danger, today, that ordinary Catholics will divide on such questions as the Trinity, the . . . procession of the divine Persons, the hypostatic union and transubstantiation.

But let them study questions truly vital for them, like the rights and limits of pontifical authority in political matters, and also, for the most cultured among them, matters of science and Biblical criticism, and you will hear on all sides of mental reservations . . . even upon revolts to the point of schism. . . . This is how the system affects private individuals.

The intransigence, the apparent immutability and external unity which Rome presents, may indeed impress many souls who are weary, with good reason, of the instability, the laxity, and the divisions of a certain type of Protestantism. But many of those who have been thus attracted, and who have then had a closer view of the system, seeing it no longer as a mirage created by imagination or ignorance, have been sadly disillusioned. The doubts which seize the minds of so many "born Catholics" cause them sometimes to give up all theological study, and sometimes to apostatize.

In opposition to the tyranny of Rome, neo-Protestantism loudly vindicates the rights and the duties of the individual conscience. This vindication also constitutes an important, and even essential, element of evangelical truth. But, in the intoxication at the recovery of individual liberty, too often the rights and duties of the Church have been disregarded or denied. Some have gone so far as to demand that the Church should acknowledge the principle that each individual . . . should hold what opinion he pleased and say all that it pleased him to think.

But, too often, it refuses to the Church the right of controlling the teaching of her ministers, whose individual convictions it seeks to safeguard. Regarding the idea of a confession of faith, a rule of instruction, and an authoritative synod as "tyrannical", it imagines that the formation of sects may be avoided by total and uncontrolled liberty. It fails to realize, however, that to do this is tantamount to giving over the Church to complete doctrinal anarchy and abandoning the faithful to the tyranny of the pastoral will, more arbitrary and intolerable than that of the pope.

"There must be also heresies among you," says the Apostle (I Corinthians 11:19). They are bitter fruits of sin; too often, sin of the

individual, obstinately attached to his own private opinion; sin also of ecclesiastical courts and tribunals, at least as often jealous of their own prerogatives.

The power of the keys in the Reformed Church implies pedagogic [educational] tact and Christian love rather than juridical virtuosity [judgmental skill].

Again, there is the misery of the Christian man. He realizes that the representative Church often represents quite another spirit than the true spirit of the Church and that she is fallible. Therefore, he has both a right and a duty to examine, by the aid of the light vouchsafed to him, whether what she teaches is in accordance with the Word of God, or not. It will not suffice to tell him that the Word is respected; he must see whether the affirmation corresponds with the reality. Cases may even occur in which he has to choose between the alternatives: -Christ or the representative Church.

But, if the believer knows that even he himself is infallible as to the substance of the Gospel, in so far as he is absolutely subject to the Word of God, he must know also that he is fallible in his theology. In so far as his Church remains firmly established on the foundation which has been divinely laid, he will be aware that there is greater possibility of error in regard to secondary points on his part than on the part of men to whose faith he knows that he must render homage and who fulfill the office of their vocation in declaring that which has been given them to understand of the Word of God. As long as he is not compelled to say or to do something which his conscience, based upon the Word of God, would forbid, he ought to remain in the Church and obey her discipline.

Practice of the communion of saints by the individual implies, on Reformed principles, humility and filial love, rather than the servile sentiment of juridical obligation. It follows that unity in [necessary things] will be less the result of the exercise of a blind discipline than the fruit of a Christian life renewed by faith, in the Church and in the individual. For Calvinism, the solution of the problem of reconciling the rights of the Church with the duties of the individual lies in the humility shown by both. As firm convictions are not invariably associated with a sufficient degree of humility and brotherly love, the empirical Church appears, even when she is faithful to Reformed principles, under the aspect of pluriformity. This is a result of sin and also of the limited character of our religious knowledge, especially when we have to pass from theory to practice.

Thus, there will be separations; but, however regrettable and humiliating these may be, they will not have the gravity nor the final character of the schisms caused by the application of the Catholic principle. In empirical reality, the methods and the applications differ, but, the goal aimed at remaining the same, the spiritual unity of the Church is not irrevocably compromised.

But the Reformers go further than this. They consider that a Church, even if she is faithful and, in this sense, fundamentally

indefectible, may be mistaken in theological matters distinct from the basic principles and articles of faith common to the Church universal. But, as the individual knows that he is himself liable to this regrettable eventuality, he will esteem the order and unity of the Church of sufficient importance not to embitter the dispute, even if he thinks himself to be right in these secondary matters. In this way, he will show that he remains faithful to the spirit of the Reformers; that he is to be distinguished from the sectaries.

Bossuet asked how an appeal could be made from an ecclesiastical tribunal of the lowest rank to one of a higher order, and finally to the national synod, when, in regard to all these degrees, the matter had, all the time, been judged by the Word of God. It is astonishing that so able a theologian was not able to see that, all other things being equal, one may normally expect to find more light and less personal bias at a general synod than at a local council like a consistory or a colloquy. . . .

The Calvinistic synthesis of the authority of the Church in matters of controversy and of individual liberty of conscience in these same matters supposes a mutual toleration in secondary articles of religion and even in the disciplinary formula of the fundamental articles. That is to say, this synthesis has for its theoretical basis the famous distinction, proposed by Calvin, between the articles of faith which constitute the sum of Christianity and those which have not sufficient importance to justify a rupture of external communion.

This distinction, which common sense itself demands, is made already in Scripture, where the Apostle compares theological systems to constructions of gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay and straw, erected on the foundation apart from which nothing can be built, namely, Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 3: 10-15). We may consider the Apostles' Creed, that of Nicaea-Constantinople and the Athanasian Symbol as the faithful expression of this Gospel. Every particular Church which preaches the Gospel forms part of Christianity and builds on the foundation which cannot be removed.

This is the condemnation of the narrow and legalistic Biblicism which characterized many of the Anglo-Saxon sects of the 18th and 19th centuries. The severe judgment that we have passed on sects must not be interpreted as implying their exclusion from the universal Church, nor even from historic Protestantism. That which is carnal, and even demoniac, in them, must not make us forget that, in other respects, however irregular their methods, they work for the conquest of souls by Jesus Christ. The majority of them firmly maintain the fundamental articles of the Christian faith, rejecting their formulation and ecclesiastical terminology only that they may cling to them with greater tenacity; moreover, as a rule, they are strongly attached to the essential doctrines of the Reformation. Even when they anathematize the Church, the latter must not cease to place the ideal unity of the mystical body of Christ above the narrowness and inconsistencies of certain of its living members.

From what has been said it will be seen that we were right in maintaining that the Protestant sects and the ecclesiastical divisions of Reformed Christianity do not necessarily proceed from a faithful and intelligent application of the formal principle of the authority of Scripture. More often than not, they spring from lack of a sense of proportion, which leads men to raise to the rank of . . . a dogma necessary to the very existence of the Church, some exegetical interpretation having no vital quality at all.

In this way Protestant separatism links up with Catholic separatism. Both are united in denying, here in practice, there in theory, the legitimacy of the distinction laid down by Calvin, between the fundamental and secondary articles of the faith.

But the imperfect application of the formal principle of the authority of Scripture does not prevent this principle, in the expression given to it by Calvinism, from presenting an undeniable superiority to the Catholic and neo-Protestant principles. Catholicism and neo-Protestantism stand opposed one to another in a sterile and irreducible opposition. The one has no place except for the authority of the representative Church; the other takes into account only the liberty of the individual conscience. This superiority arises, therefore, from the fact that Calvinism integrates the elements of truth contained in the two others. As it is the most general expression and synthesis of these truths, it places us on a higher spiritual plane.

The principle of radical subjectivism cannot be a principle of theology, for it would leave us only a choice between two impossibilities: either to maintain, with the moderates, that there is such a thing as a religious verity, while declaring that one cannot be certain of having ever encountered it; or to deny that there can be any question of truth in spiritual matters, and to attempt, as it were, to cultivate the spiritual life in vacuo.

At the opposite pole to radical subjectivism stands Catholicism, which would set up a not less absolute objectivism in the shape of the infallible Church or the Pope speaking *ex cathedra*, whose authority guarantees to us that God has spoken in the Scriptures, that the list of writings which compose it is correct, and that the sense attached to the divine Word is the true interpretation. Every precaution is taken against the vagaries of a private judgment let loose by subjectivism.

The difficulty is that this objectivism is a *pium desiderium* [pious desire] rather than an accomplished fact. We must still take into account the subject who believes in the Church's teaching, because God has revealed it to this concrete entity which calls itself the Catholic Church. "An authority", says Claude, "can decide nothing until it is accepted". Now, it is the subject who accepts, and he can only do so by virtue of a decision of his own private judgment—unless, with the Reformers, we are prepared to deny that the subject who gives his assent on the faith of the divine authority is acting on his

Pastoral Practices

- We are again struck with the tremendous responsibility we have to correctly interpret and teach Scripture. If, in fact, God's people in the New Covenant were to primarily, individually, and privately get their spiritual instruction directly from Scripture, as is emphasized in American Christianity, why did He give the Church Teachers (cf. Eph 4:11-16)? In discussions of the God-ordained place of *private judgment*, we must not exclude the God-ordained place of Teachers in the Church.

D) The God-given Authentication of Authority:

God-like deeds before God-like demands

Thankfully, God does not expect humans to recognize or respect *divine revelation* without divine authentication. One is reminded of Gideon who after receiving a divine mandate from an Angel, repeatedly asked for confirmation of the source of the message (cf. Judg 6). And as we demonstrate elsewhere, God was *never* offended in the least with Gideon's requests, and even provided an additional miraculous authentication of the revelation that Gideon didn't ask for (cf. Judg 7:9-16).¹⁰³ Like Gideon, we are not questioning God's authority, but simply where that authority can be found. In other words, the suggestion that our reason must be used to recognize and interpret revelation from God does not usurp the authority of God.

For example, one may think of a captain in the army who receives written orders that claim to be from his General, commanding him to advance against the enemy and risk the lives of his men. No one would question the captain's right and even responsibility to authenticate such a message, especially in a time of war when the enemy is constantly working to deceive (cf. 2 Cor 11:14). Far from showing disrespect for the authentic commands of his superior, the captain's inquiry would actually show a great regard for that authority.

own private judgment. (Auguste Lucerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* [London, Lutterworth, 1949], 348-357, 360-2, 366).

¹⁰³ For further discussion of Gideon's "fleece" and the relationship between biblical faith and objective evidence see chapters 6.12-14, esp. section 6.13.E.

If God does in fact ultimately leave the decision to us as to whom or what will exercise authority in our lives, then it is important to ask what credentials do the above authorities in the "divine chain of command" possess in order to rightfully demand and expect our obedience? Briefly stated, God has ordained that *God-like deeds* are the required authentication of anyone or anything claiming *God-like authority*.¹⁰⁴

For example, we read in Romans:

What may be known about God [from Creation] is plain . . . because God has made it plain . . . For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--His eternal power and divine nature [and right of authority]--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse [for not recognizing that authority]. (Rom 1:19-20)

The reason that the Creator rightfully demands our obedience is that He has clearly demonstrated His superiority over us through the God-like things He has done and that we, "**have . . . clearly seen.**" In other words, not even the Creator expects us to grant Him God-like authority over our lives, unless He has demonstrated God-like deeds. The Creator has clearly done so, and we are therefore, "**without excuse**" to not grant Him God-like authority over our lives. Because God has made our *private judgment* our *final subjective authority*, He abundantly authenticates His *ultimate objective authority* to our *Spirit-liberated reason* through His Creation.

Such is the case with Jesus Christ as well. He did not expect someone to grant Him God-like authority without believing He had done God-like deeds. Christ plainly described His divine credentials when He said:

Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in Me? The words I say to you are not just My own. Rather, it is the Father, living in Me, Who is doing His work. Believe Me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me [and that He possessed the Father's authority]; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves (John 14:10-11; cf. 5:36).

¹⁰⁴ For further discussion on the need for authentication of divine revelation see chapters 6.12-14 and an introduction in section 7.1.B.5. We would suggest the only exception to this kind of objective authentication may be the supernatural gift of "**distinguishing between spirits**" (1 Cor 12:10) which apparently gave a person the ability to subjectively and supernaturally discern the moral source of a deed or communication.

The first Christians believed that Christ's God-like deeds authenticated His God-like authority, as demonstrated when the Apostle Peter says, **"Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited ["publicly endorsed" NLT] by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know"** (Acts 2:22). Christ's miraculous abilities were specifically to authenticate His divine authority to God's people. Nicodemus told Christ, **"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).

When the King was asked if He was the Christ, and worthy of God-like authority, He said, **"The miracles I do in My Father's name speak for Me"** (John 10:25). When the Pharisees questioned the magnitude and source of Christ's authority He replied, **"so that you may know that the Son of Man has [God-like] authority on Earth to forgive sins . . ."** Then He **said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home"** (Matt 9:6). This God-like deed proved His God-like authority.

Christ told the Pharisees that the ultimate authentication of His authority would be His resurrection (cf. John 2:19; Matt 12:38-40). Likewise, the Apostle Paul, in the context of an evangelistic message, said to the Athenians: **"For He [God] has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man [Christ] He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him [Christ] from the dead"** (Acts 17:31).

It should be remembered that God does not deem it necessary to actually personally observe a divine messenger performing a miracle in order for them to exercise authority over our life. The Apostle John recorded the miracles of the King so that His authority could be authenticated to future generations through *testimony*.¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, the Apostle writes:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31).

In addition, all born again Christians have a personal miracle from Jesus Christ that undeniably authenticates the authority of

¹⁰⁵ For further discussion of the important God-ordained authority of *human testimony* see section 2.5.D.

Him and His Gospel over us. This is, of course, the miracle of **"rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit"** (Tit 3:5). Therefore, it is the certainty we have of both Christ's past physical resurrection and our present spiritual resurrection that have authenticated Christ's God-like authority beyond doubt.¹⁰⁶

How then do we know that this same authority was passed on to the Apostles and Prophets as they claim? Once again, God authenticated their God-like authority by giving them the ability to perform God-like deeds. Accordingly, the King told His disciples, **"As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of Heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons"** (Matt 10:7-8; cf. Mark 6:12; Luke 9:1, 6; 10:8). Contrary to *charismaticism*, providing new divine revelation that is to be believed and obeyed will always be accompanied by miraculous deeds so that people will judge and recognize the revelation is from God.¹⁰⁷

From the very beginning of God's communication with His people, God made it clear that *private judgment*, through human reason, was to dictate and discern whether or not something was divine revelation. We read of both the authority of Prophets and their recognition when God says:

[A] Prophet who presumes to speak in My name anything I have not commanded him to say . . . must be put to death. You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" If [a prediction] a Prophet proclaims in the name [and authority] of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That Prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him [or believe his words or writings represent the word of God]. (Deut 18:20-22; cf. 13:1-3)

Again, it is clear that God did not expect His people to grant God-like authority to someone unless they could miraculously authenticate themselves. In the case of His Prophets, they were given the ability to predict the future with perfect accuracy in ways

¹⁰⁶ For further discussion of the authenticating miracle of supernatural regeneration and its miraculous affects, see Book 5: *Biblical Apologetics*.

¹⁰⁷ The miraculous authentication that accompanied the Gospel when it was first introduced to the world should be distinguished from its need to be authenticated today. Advocates of "Power Evangelism" ignore this difference and insist that evangelists need the same powers today. For further discussion see chapter 11.6.

that normally only God could do. This was not only true of OT Prophets, but NT Prophets as well, such as Agabus, who is recorded twice as having miraculously predicted the future in order to authenticate himself as a God-sent Prophet (cf. Acts 11:28; 21:10-11, 27ff).¹⁰⁸ Therefore we see again that God grants God-like abilities to someone who is to exercise God-like authority over our lives.

The same was obviously true of Christ's Apostles. They exercise Christ-like authority over us and God gave them Christ-like abilities in order to authenticate them. For example, Luke records that, **"Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there [in Iconium], speaking boldly for the Lord, Who confirmed the message of His grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders"** (Acts 14:3; cf. 15:12; 19:10-12).

When Paul is defending His right to exercise apostolic authority over the Corinthian Christians he tells them:

Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. The signs of a true Apostle [and someone with Christ-like authority] were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. (2 Cor 12:11-12 NASB; cf. Rom 15:18-19)

The writer to the Hebrews summarizes our view when we read:

This [authoritative revelation of the New Covenant] 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. (Heb 2:3-4)

It is the God-like authentication of the Prophets and Apostles that grants their writings in the Scriptures God-like authority. We are not expected to give such authority to documents written merely by good men.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ For further discussion of the divine authority and authentication of those with the biblical gift of prophecy see Book 9.

¹⁰⁹ Contrary to popular Charismatic theology, no one since the Apostles have been able to match their supernatural deeds, and we are therefore warranted in believing that no one can match the authority of their words. One recognizes here some of the dangers when some insist that "healers" today can claim the ability to do God-like deeds, and modern day "prophets" have words from God. There would seem to be a lack of respect here for the absolutely unique and critically important process by

In fact, contrary to *charismaticism*, *no one in Scripture had God-given miracle working abilities apart from the need to be authenticated as a source of new extra-biblical divine revelation for all to believe and obey*. The biblical record is clear: God does not grant a person a divine *healing* ministry unless they also have a divine “*revealing*” ministry. We have dealt with objections to this view elsewhere.¹¹⁰

which God has produced and authenticated the Scriptures. Charismatic theology, without scriptural warrant, dangerously blurs God-ordained lines that were intended. For further discussion regarding Charismatic teaching on divine revelation and miracles see much of Books 7-12.

¹¹⁰ For further discussion of the biblical purpose of miracle working see section 11.1.F. and referenced material there.

Extras & Endnotes

A Devotion to Dad

Our Father, we thank you that Someone as wonderful as You, is the ultimate authority in the Universe. We desire no other god, and pray that your rightful authority over our lives would invade every area of our life. We want to live as if we have a King, not as if we are our own king. Amen.

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) How would you define authority?
- 2) What does the "God-ordained chain of authority" suggested here consist of?
- 3) What are verses of Scripture given to support these sources of authority?
- 4) What is the difference between *objective* authority and *subjective* authority? How does this relate to the relationship between God and our *private judgment*?
- 5) Why is God our *ultimate objective authority*?
- 6) Why do we suggest that the Scriptures, rather than God, is our *direct objective authority*?
- 7) How do we define the God-ordained authority of *private judgment*?
- 8) Why are we suggesting that human *private judgment* is our *final subjective authority*?
- 9) What are some exceptions to the suggestion that our *private judgment* exercises final authority over our life?
- 10) How has God authenticated each link in His "chain of authority"?

- 11) Why does God authenticate each link in His "chain of authority"?
- 12) Are there parts of the "God-ordained chain of authority" that you particularly have questions about? What are they?

Recommended Reading

- The remainder of Book 3 of *Knowing Our God: Biblical Authority*.
- Arthur W. Pink, "Private Judgment," in *Practical Christianity* (Baker, 1974), 169-170.

Publications & Particulars

Primary Points

- The conscience can be defined as the "inner moral referee that pronounces on the rightness or wrongness of one's actions."
- Scripture is clear on the vital importance of the conscience, making its neglect in Christian theology lamentable.
- The conscience is not infallible.
- A clear conscience is one of the most important guides God has given us.
- Dividing various issues into "doctrinal," "debatable," and "acceptable" helps us better understand how we are to deal with the conscience of others.
- "Doctrinal" issues are those that are clearly taught in the Scriptures and which would bring harm to others if not practiced.
- "Debatable" issues are those that are not clearly addressed in Scripture.
- "Acceptable" issues involve things that are clearly taught in Scripture, but is not something necessarily harmful to others.
- Paul strongly warns "freedomists" with a "strong" conscience not to "strengthen" the "weak" conscience of a "legalist."
- It is not a sin to have a "weak" conscience, but it is sin for either the "freedomist" or the "legalist" to judge the other.
- It is sin for a person with a "weak" conscience to act against their conscience, even if their action is not supported by Scripture.
- God desires those with a "weak" conscience to mature, but such "rewriting" of a person's conscience is only for God to do. Christian leaders need to be especially careful of this.
- Christians should not flaunt their freedom before unbelievers if they sense it might offend.
- As always, love is our guide.

The Bible Inside

The Moral Reasoning of Conscience

Table of Topics

A) An Introduction to Conscience: *A very neglected topic*

A) Introduction to the Conscience

A.1) The Importance of the Conscience

Elsewhere in *Knowing Our God (KOG)* we have written:

Another helpful way to understand human reason is to distinguish between *moral* and *logical* reasoning. A part of the mind known as the conscience engages in *moral reasoning* in order to determine ethics and distinguish between right and wrong. . . . On the other hand, the mind also engages in what may be termed as *logical reasoning* determining facts and distinguishing between true and false.

To illustrate both their differences and interaction we could say *logical reasoning* will decide how much tax you owe. *Moral reasoning* conducted by the conscience will decide whether or not you will pay your taxes. . . .

The conscience is a very important concept in Scripture and an integral part of human life.¹¹¹

Accordingly, we think it would be helpful to single out the conscience for further discussion because 1) It is such a vital God-given faculty, and 2) It is a very neglected topic in Christian theology in general. What James Stalker said c. 1915 would seem to be still true today: "There is abundance of room for a great

¹¹¹ Quoted from 4.3.B.3.

monograph on the subject.”¹¹² This is despite the fact that the conscience is a very significant subject in the Scriptures.

On this, something from Bible teacher John MacArthur is worth the following rather lengthy quote:

The conscience may be the most underappreciated and least understood attribute of humanity. Psychology, as we have noted, is usually less concerned with understanding the conscience than with attempting to silence it. The influx of popular psychology into evangelicalism has had the disastrous effect of undermining a biblical appreciation of the role of the conscience. It is bad enough that secular society's collective conscience has been vanishing for years. But now the don't-blame-yourself philosophy is having a similar effect in the church.

The church as a whole seems to have forgotten the spiritual importance of a sound conscience. I am convinced that is one of the chief reasons so many Christians seem to live in sorrow and defeat. They are not taught to respond correctly to their consciences. They treat their consciences flippantly. They have not learned the importance of keeping the conscience clear and healthy.

Instead they dispute what their own conscience tells them. They treat any sense of guilt or self-blame as a liability or a threat. They expend too much of their spiritual energy in a

¹¹² James Stalker, "Conscience," in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr ed. Electronic Edition STEP Files (Parsons, 1998).

Thus, we have no items for *Recommended Reading* above. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* and the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (EDT) both list C. A. Pierce's study, *Conscience in the New Testament* (A. R. Allenson, 1955). However, we think the reader will find it rather shallow, and several scholars today are somewhat critical of it.

A. M. Rehwinkle, the contributor to the article on "Conscience" in the EDT (Baker, 1984, 267-8) lists only two rather old books, including Pierce's, and his own book, *The Voice of Conscience*, which we could not locate.

Current Christian theologies do not cover the topic very well either, although Ladd at least devotes a page to it and lists some books of Christian anthropology that may be helpful (*A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. [Eerdmans, 1993], 519). Even MacArthur's book, *The Vanishing Conscience* (Word, 1994) is more of an apologetic for morality and a recognition of sin rather than a theological study regarding the conscience. The most helpful resource by far was Raymond Opperwall's entry to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ISBE), Geoffrey W. Bromiley ed., 4 vols., (Eerdmans, 1988), I:761-65.

vain attempt to deal with feelings spawned by an accusing conscience -without a corresponding willingness to deal with the sin that offended the conscience in the first place.

That is spiritual suicide. Paul wrote of those who by rejecting their consciences "suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith" (I Tim. 1:19). They are like a pilot who turns off his warning system.

We must pay attention to our consciences. The cost of switching them off is frightfully high. It will inevitably result in a devastating spiritual catastrophe. Of all people, we who are committed to the truth of Scripture cannot relinquish the importance of a sound conscience. We must recover and apply the biblical truth about the conscience, or we will be left with nothing whatsoever to say to a sinful world.¹¹³

It is particularly surprising how the conscience is neglected in discussions specifically regarding epistemological issues. Adding a chapter here on this topic is just another way in which we are attempting to make this a *practical* Christian epistemology instead of merely a *philosophical* one.

While below under section B we discuss the importance of the conscience for the Christian, here we will note some additional reasons.

Human beings are uniquely created with a conscience, which is one of our attributes that obviously reflects the image of God. Animals, for instance, do not have a conscience, neither in the sense of self awareness nor morality. Conscience is something God has uniquely given to humans.

There are many obvious reasons why God created us with a conscience. In the context of the Apostle's discourse in Romans 2, it fulfills a similar function as Creation: leaving humanity with no excuse for not repenting of their sin. The Apostle makes it clear that the Gentiles are just as guilty as unrepentant Jews who have special divine revelation (the Law), and just as liable for judgment because **"the requirements of the law [God's moral standards] are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness"** (Rom 2:15). Therefore, like those who view Creation, those created with a conscience **"are without excuse"** (Rom 1:20).

Perhaps the most astonishing purpose of the conscience is its authority to monitor our morality. Not only does the Scripture tell us right from wrong, but we have essentially a "Bible inside" us

¹¹³ MacArthur, 50, 53.

performing the same function. So much so, that while there may be incorrect things currently written in our "personal Bible" that may not match what is written in God's perfect Bible, God may allow, and even expect us to adhere to that "personal Bible. This amazing illustration of the authority of our conscience will be discussed further below in section C.

A third purpose of our conscience is for the preservation of society. Here we see one of the greatest blessings God has provided humanity with, and why many categorize the conscience as an aspect of "common grace," or blessings from God that are provided to all of humanity.¹¹⁴ Remarkably, because of the conscience, spiritually dead humanity has an innate sense that God's ways are the right ways. The Apostle says that even those who have reached the depths of depravity, still, **"know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death"** (Rom 1:32). While different cultures have varying moral standards, it is astonishing to note a significant resemblance to the moral laws of Scripture in the laws of essentially every people group on earth.¹¹⁵ This blessing is the basis for all the legislative bodies, judicial systems, and law enforcement that keeps sin in check throughout our planet.

Just imagine a world with no conscience. Human history has witnessed the horrors that occur when we squelch it. Although many reject that inner voice of morality, can we imagine living in a world where no one listened to that voice? It is the conscience that restrains the sinful nature of humans and keeps them from becoming their very worst, for without it we are no more civil than **"brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed"** (2 Pet 2:12). There are good men and women who don't know God, and they are good because they hate the guilt that comes from their conscience when they are bad. While it is through Creation that God provides for us, it is through conscience that He does a great deal to protect us.

In addition to the conscience being another method for God making sin inexcusable and for society's protection, the conscience also provides humanity with moral guidance. The conscience not only convicts of wrong, but encourages us to do right. For the unbeliever, the conscience is the only "Bible" they have. Accordingly, NT scholar James R. Edwards notes that in Romans

¹¹⁴ For a discussion of "common grace" see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 660-61.

¹¹⁵ For further discussion of the universality of morality in humanity see section 5.15.A.

2:15, "Paul is contending for an innate moral sense in humanity, to whose voice Gentiles are as bound as are Jews to the Torah [OT Law]." ¹¹⁶ For the Apostle, the conscience was equal to the OT Scriptures in terms of communicating morality. It truly was "a Bible within."

But even for the Christian who has the Scriptures, the conscience is an invaluable guide in areas to which the Bible does not specifically speak. While we may not have a specific verse for all the "right" decisions we make, our conscience provides the confidence that we are indeed doing the right thing. Accordingly, the Apostle writes: **"I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit"** (Rom 9:1). And also: **"Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God"** (2 Cor 1:12). The Apostle relied on his conscience as a witness of his morality.

It is interesting to note that the conscience became a much more important concept in the New Covenant as compared with the Old. This is because under the Old, God minutely dictated in writing virtually everything the Israelites were to do. They hardly needed another "witness" as to whether they were doing right or wrong. However, in the NT the specificity of commands is greatly reduced. God no longer tells us what to eat, what to wear, or a myriad of other things He specified for the Old Covenant people. This is because He has indwelt us with the Holy Spirit and a New Nature which, along with our understanding of Scripture, retrains our conscience to guide us in specific ways. ¹¹⁷

Along these lines, theologian W. D. Stacey wrote:

While the idea of conscience was obviously present in the Old Testament, Hebrew had no special word to describe it. Greek supplied the word *syneidēsis* and in the inter-testamental period it occurs where previously only the general term *lēb* ["heart"] could have been used. The term is therefore an innovation, but the idea was implicit in *lēb*. The use of *syneidēsis* was not common in Judaism. Paul, who uses the word twenty times, probably understood it better than any of his race. It is very likely that he introduced the term to Christianity.

¹¹⁶ James R. Edwards, *Romans (NIBC)* (Hendrickson, 1992), 70.

¹¹⁷ For further discussion of the difference in the commands for OT and NT people see section 7.3.E.

It has been suggested that, after the eclipse of the Law in Christianity, conscience became more important than ever, and there is more than a grain of truth in the idea. One of the most important passages for *syneidēsis* is I Cor. 10, concerning the eating of idol meat. The Christian has to be guided by his conscience. The Jew, however, had a tradition, attributed to Moses, which gave precise details on how food was to be slaughtered, and who should slaughter it. For the pious Jew, the problem of I Cor. 10 was no problem at all. It may well be that the replacement of the Law by a religion of personal relationship made it necessary for Paul to enlarge on a word that previously had little currency in Judaism.¹¹⁸

One of the reasons that the issue of our conscience is neglected today is the current emphasis by modern mystics and "charismatics" on the supposed need and availability of direct revelation from God. When we notice in the Scriptures, as discussed below in section B, how often and how much the Apostle relied on his conscience to guide him, rather than "voices," visions, impulses, signs, "words of knowledge" and dreams, it becomes evident that these modern movements regarding divine guidance are out of whack.¹¹⁹ Like the Scriptures, God gave us a conscience to guide us more specifically than the modern mystics want to admit, and this source of revelation should be relied upon and valued more, and modern mystical practices relied on and valued less.

A.2) The Nature of the Conscience

The most descriptive passage in Scripture on the human conscience is Romans 2:14-15 where the Apostle writes:

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are

¹¹⁸ W. D. Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man* (MacMillan, 1956), 206.

¹¹⁹ *Mega mysticism* is the belief that God regularly communicates to us regarding extrabiblical matters (e.g. what job to choose) through more direct and miraculous means of divine revelation such as inspired intuitions, and miraculous "signs." For further discussion see Book 14.

written on their hearts, their consciences [*syneidēsis*] ¹²⁰
bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now
even defending them. (Rom 2:14-15)

Several things about the conscience become apparent in the Apostle's words. First of all, the Apostle clearly indicates that a conscience is a universal possession of all adult humans when he says that it is part of human "**nature**" and "**written on their hearts.**" It is not only those who experience spiritual conversion that possess a conscience, even the spiritually dead possess one as well. ¹²¹ Secondly, the fact that even the conscience of the spiritually dead can both accuse or defend, counters the common notion that the conscience only condemns and never commends us. ¹²²

¹²⁰ The NIV rendering may be misleading as it states: "**the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness.**" The addition of "**also,**" which is not in the original Greek text, may imply that the Apostle is speaking of two different faculties, but actually the "**heart**" and the "**conscience**" are synonymous here.

¹²¹ Opperwall writes:

Conversion should not be construed in such a way that the awareness of conscience appears as a product of conversion, as if apart from conversion the conscience is necessarily dull, or seared, or silent. In Rom. 2:15 the Apostle speaks of the witness of conscience in the Gentiles, reflecting his awareness that the testimony of conscience is a broadly human experience. (I:765).

¹²² Opperwall responds to the view that the, "conscience is always and only a negative or disapproving voice":

That analysis appears to fail to do justice to the "excusing" conscience of Rom. 2:15 and to the positive testimony of the good conscience (e.g. 2 Cor. 1:12), which is more than mere silence. However, more than the interpretation of a few passages is at stake. At stake is the nature of conscience itself. If the voice of conscience is, as observed above, the internalized voice of all the authorities that we recognize, the question is whether those authorities speak only negatively in people's lives. While it is undeniable that both external authorities and the internalized voice of conscience speak more negatively than positively, this is not because that is the only way. (I:763)

Opperwall adds that the Greeks, from whom the Apostle may have borrowed the idea of conscience, certainly did not view it as only a source of negative or condemning thoughts:

In a passage sometimes attributed to the Stoic philosopher Epictetus there is a striking insight into the Greek view of conscience.

How would we define the conscience then? In the NIV, the word "**conscience**" appears six times in the OT and twenty-five times in the NT. The OT simply uses the general Hebrew word *lēb* ("heart") to indicate the faculty of conscience, while the Greeks used the specific term *syneidēsis*. This term literally means: "the self that knows with itself" and Raymond Oppewall adds:

Syneidēsis is not merely another action performed by the self; it is an agent within the self . . . an alter ego, another self within the self that observes the self and then testifies as to what it sees.¹²³

Along the same lines, NT scholar C. K. Barrett writes:

By the Stoics, and Philo, the conscience is often described as an accuser, or convictor; in Romans it is a witness (so here, also ix. 1; cf. 2 Cor. i. 12). This is in accord with the etymology of the word, which in ancient use is a backward-looking and judging agent rather than forward-looking and directing. It implies man's ability to detach himself from himself and to view his character and actions independently. He is thus able to act as a witness for or against himself. His conscience is not so much the bar at which his conduct is tried, as a major witness, who can be called on either side as the case may be.¹²⁴

Likewise, NT scholar John Murray (1898-1975) wrote regarding Romans 2:15:

This expression should not be understood in the sense of popular current use when we say that a man is a law to himself. It means almost the opposite, that they themselves,

When we were children our parents handed us over to a nursery slave who should watch over us everywhere lest harm befall us. But when we were grown up, God hands us over to the conscience implanted in us, to protect us. Let us not in any way despise its protection for should we do so we shall be both ill-pleasing to God and have our own conscience as an enemy.

The conscience, like the nursery slave, is a kind of substitute parent. Its inner voice is not by nature the voice of an enemy, not just an instrument producing pain. The conscience, until alienated, is seen as having a positive and protective purpose. It is advisable and possible to stay on good terms with this inner voice. (Ibid.)

¹²³ Oppewall, I:764.

¹²⁴ C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (BNTC) rev. ed. (Hendrickson, 1991), 50.

by reason of what is implanted in their nature, confront themselves with the law of God. They themselves reveal the law of God to themselves-their persons is the medium of revelation.¹²⁵

In defining *syneidēsis* as "the self that knows itself" it is obvious that the conscience is involved in reasoning. In fact, the Apostle Paul often uses the word "**mind**" (*nous*) to refer to the conscience as well. For example, he would seem to be describing his conscience when he writes that his flesh is "**waging war against the [moral] law of my mind** [*nous*]" (Rom 7:23; cf. Rom 11:34; 12:2; 14:5; 1 Cor 1:10; 2:16; 14:14, 15, 19; Eph 4:17-19, 23; Phil 4:7; Col 2:18; 2 Thess 2:2; 1 Tim 6:5; 2 Tim 3:8; Tit. 1:15).

While the operation of the conscience could certainly be referred to as reasoning, it is specifically moral reasoning. Accordingly, we have written elsewhere:

A part of the mind known as the conscience engages in *moral reasoning* in order to determine ethics and distinguish between right and wrong. The Apostle uses the word *syneidesis* to refer to the moral reasoning of the conscience when he refers to the "**consciences**" of the "**Gentiles**" in Romans 2:14-15 (cf. Rom 13:5; 1 Cor 8:7). Accordingly, the NT scholar Gordon Fee defines *syneidesis* as: "a kind of inner moral referee that pronounces on the rightness or wrongness of one's actions (as in, "Let your conscience be your guide")."

¹²⁶

A.3) Limitations of Conscience

While the God-given authority of conscience is considerable, it must be pointed out that it is neither all-sufficient nor infallible. Its insufficiency is demonstrated by the fact that, while the conscience convicts us of sin, it does not reveal the solution to sin in the Gospel.

The fallibility of the conscience is particularly demonstrated below in our discussion of what the Apostle called a "weak" conscience. In this case, a person's conscience is not fully or rightly

¹²⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1959, 1965; reprint 1997), 73.

¹²⁶ 4.3.B.3.

informed and therefore does not reflect God's perspective on an issue. For example, the Apostle writes:

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. . . . But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do (1 Cor 8:4, 7-8).

Accordingly, someone's conscience can be "wrong" due to incorrect training. This limitation of conscience is due to the fact that its contents are a matter of human experience rather than direct divine revelation. We have discussed this further elsewhere and written:

What God gives us in our conscience is the *capacity* to recognize and reason what is morally right from what is morally wrong. We gain a knowledge of these things through our exposure to the moral authorities we accept in our lives including parents, governments, Scripture, and the Church. Because God uses various means to write moral laws on individual consciences, not everyone's internal "law" is the same. . . .

Accordingly, we read in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*:

Conscience is the internalized voice of those whose judgment of a person counts with him. It is the inner voice that testifies for the moral authorities that we recognize. Some voice of conscience speaks to all (Rom 2:15), but the content of that voice varies according to the authorities and values that we consciously or unconsciously recognize.

¹²⁷ . . .

[W]hile all humans are born with a conscience, it would seem they differ, not because of a different, innate, divine *revelation* granted to them, but rather because of differences in their life experiences, or human reasoning. The sense of right and wrong is only intrinsic (and perfect) with God. Humans need to be trained (even wrongly) in *moral knowledge*. Different experiences, including punishment and

¹²⁷ Oppewall, I:764.

reward, provide data to our conscience which is then trained regarding what is morally right and wrong.¹²⁸

The fact that the contents of our conscience is not a matter of *divine revelation* means that even the Christian must admit that their conscience is not perfect (cf. 1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12; 1 Tim 4:2; Tit 1:15). Such a perspective helps us understand the Apostle's rather enigmatic statement:

I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord Who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. (1 Cor 4:3-5).

While the Apostle affirms that his conscience is the filter through which he interprets criticism, he also recognizes that like anything human, his conscience is not infallible. The first reason for this is that our conscience is only aware of what we are conscious of. The Apostle's conscience was clear because according to everything he was conscious of, he had done nothing wrong. However, he may have done wrong that he was not conscious of. Accordingly, the Apostle distinguishes the verdict of his human conscience from God's own judgment.

The conscience is also limited by the fact that it operates only on the basis of learned norms, and those norms may not match the standard of divine judgment.¹²⁹ Indeed, they can be wrong (e.g., because of lack of knowledge, or because of social pressure or custom, cf. 1 Cor 8:7). The judgments of the conscience tell whether behavior is truly right in God's eyes only insofar as they are based on norms corresponding to God's will as communicated in Scripture.

There may be another important point to make here. It would seem that the Apostle recognizes the same limitation that the Psalmist did when he said, **"Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults"** (Ps 19:12). The fact of the matter is that we might sin fairly frequently without knowing it, and without

¹²⁸ Quoted from section 2.5.C.1.

¹²⁹ For further discussion on how the conscience is formed see section 2.5.C.

affecting our conscience. This is not necessarily because of a hardened conscience, but rather, because of an uninformed conscience. Training the conscience to perfectly align with Scripture and the New Nature takes time, and God is patient in the process. The Apostle recognized this same aspect of God's grace in his life, and therefore knew, that even though his conscience was clear, that did not mean that he was sinless, or that even God did not know of some need in his life.

B) The Clear Conscience of the Christian: *From Guilt to Peace*

A very important theme concerning the conscience in the NT is the contrast between a conscience that is guilty and one that is clear. Such a contrast does not only involve believers, as the Apostle points out that even the spiritually dead, **"demonstrate that God's law is written within them, for their own consciences either accuse them or tell them they are doing what is right"** (Rom 2:15 NLT). In one sense, then, even unbelievers may enjoy a clear conscience, but it will not be based on truth, but rather an acceptance of substandard morals.

However, the epistle to the Hebrews emphasizes that one of the many blessings that comes with salvation is a clear conscience:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (9:14; cf. 1 Pet 3:21).

While an essential part of our salvation is initially providing us with a clear conscience, an equally essential part of our sanctification is maintaining a clear conscience. The Apostle could have hardly stressed this anymore when he writes of his own life: **"I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man"** (Acts 24:16; cp. Job 27:6). The Apostle was constantly sensitive to his conscience, and did whatever was necessary to gain peace with man or God when his conscience alerted him to a need.

The importance of a clear conscience is also demonstrated in the Apostle's requirement that a deacon, **"must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience"** (1 Tim 3:9). Maintaining a clear conscience was so critical to first-century Christian leadership, that the writer of Hebrews and his companions

had obviously monitored it such that they could say, **"We are sure that we have a clear conscience"** (Heb 13:18).

The Bible gives us several good reasons to monitor the condition of our conscience. First of all, while it is obviously a moral guide for unbelievers, it is an even more important one for believers. Our conscience is the instrument through which the Holy Spirit speaks to us, as the Apostle says, **"I speak the truth in Christ--I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in [en: through] the Holy Spirit"** (Rom 9:1; cf. Acts 23:1; 2 Tim 1:3).

The Apostle's reliance on his conscience is evident when he says:

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God." (2 Cor 1:12).

The context here was the Corinthian's criticism of the Apostle. For the Apostle, his conscience served as a filter for such criticism, separating the false from the true. The Apostle was confident that if correction was needed in his life, God would communicate such a need by the Holy Spirit through his conscience. While correction and reproof from others is often valuable, it is only through our conscience that we ultimately know whether such reproof is legitimate. In spite of all the potentially paralyzing criticism that the Apostle incurred throughout his ministry, it was God, through his conscience, Who comforted him, and shielded him from the mental and emotional harm that groundless criticism is intended for.

The Apostle Peter had experienced the same protection from harmful and unwarranted criticism and encouraged his readers:

Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak evil against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ (1 Pet 3:16 NLT).

There may be times that a clear conscience from God will be our only defense against such criticism.

Similarly, Job trusted his own clear conscience in the face of condemning circumstances and counselors and proclaimed:

I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live. (Job 27:5-6).

As Raymond Oppewall puts it so well: "Battles without can be handled if there is no battle within."¹³⁰

All of this, of course, relates to the crippling effects of guilt in the Christian's life. The Apostle John says that, "**if our hearts** [including consciences] **do not condemn us, we have confidence before God**" (1 John 3:21), a confidence that creates an intimacy with Him that is essential in truly serving Him. No doubt Solomon was talking about the same kind of confidence before God that a good conscience can provide when he remarked: "**The wicked man** [with a guilty conscience] **flees though no one pursues, but the righteous** [with a clear conscience] **are as bold as a lion**" (Prov 28:1). Guilty people are constantly and anxiously looking over their shoulder, wondering when their sin will catch up to them. Those with a clear conscience have no such worries.

Although sin no longer separates us positionally from God, it can practically, and our conscience lets us know when we need to get something right with God and our fellow man. This is the reason the King said:

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember [through your conscience] **that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.** (Matt 5:23-24).

God knows that we cannot properly worship or serve Him with a guilty conscience and we must do whatever it takes to gain a clear conscience, including reconciliation with someone.

Reconciliation of offenses is not only essential to our relationship with God, but to maintaining peace of mind and a clear conscience. Therefore, the King likewise instructed us:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. (Matt 18:15)

Often times we can simply overlook an offense against us and quickly forget about it. However, there are other times that an offense "sticks" in our mind and we cannot "shake" it. Immediately we begin to notice a certain coldness that enters into our relationship with the one who offended us. We may ask at this point why someone sinning against us would bear on our conscience? It is because sin separates, and even if the separation is the fault of someone else, God wants us to "**live in harmony with one another**" (1 Pet 3:8) and to "**Make every effort to**

¹³⁰ Oppewall, I:173.

keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:31; cp. Rom 12:18; 14:19; Heb 12:14).

When we are offended beyond the point of simply forgetting about it, the Spirit yearns for the relationship to be reconciled and works on our conscience to encourage us to **"make every effort"** to do what is necessary. If we don't, the Spirit through our conscience will not give us peace. While it may be difficult to humble ourselves and risk receiving a prideful response from the offender, the King knew that we will never gain a clear conscience in the matter unless we love that person enough to, **"go and show him his fault, just between the two of you."** While Christ's instruction may not be easy, it is less painful than just continuing to "stew" on the offense, and less destructive than gossiping to others about it. In these instances we must obey our conscience and trust that God is guiding us through it.

Not only is a clear conscience critical in our relationship with God and others, it is obviously important to our service for God. Hebrews tells us that a cleansed conscience is essential if we are to **"serve the living God!"** (Heb 9:14). Guilty people don't do much for God. One reason for this is that both our love for God and people is dependent on a clear conscience because, **"love . . . comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith"** (1 Tim 1:5). If we do not have a good conscience toward God, believing that He has something against us, we can only serve Him out of fear and guilt, not love. This is why **"a good conscience"** which is experiencing God's love and forgiveness is necessary for us to love others. People who are not experiencing grace are not able to give it to others.

Guilt can be so debilitating that the Apostle said, **"it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience"** (Rom 13:5). Guilt can be a spiritual jail that is just as confining, painful, and gloomy as a physical jail.

In fact, a carelessness with our conscience can allow it to harden, resulting in spiritual devastation. Accordingly, NT scholar Colin Kruse writes, "Kruse: "to reject the voice of conscience is to court spiritual disaster."¹³¹ Such a potential danger prompted the Apostle to tell young Timothy:

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction . . . so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected

¹³¹ Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1999), 2 Cor 1:12.

these and so have shipwrecked their faith." (1 Tim 1:18-19).

Guilt is one of the most destructive forces to the human psyche, as demonstrated by Judas Iscariot:

When Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. (Matt 27:3-5)

Both the burden of a guilty conscience and the release that comes from confession are expressed by David when he writes:

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and You forgave the guilt of my sin. (Ps 32:3-5).

Obviously personal righteousness allows us to maintain a clear conscience, but when we stumble, it is confession and repentance that help us to regain it.

David's example, however, also illustrates what divine discipline normally looks like for God's children. Here it would seem to be an internal and painful struggle with his conscience.¹³² Contrary to many, it is not usually through punishing circumstances that our Father disciplines His already forgiven children, but rather, the painful "voice" of our conscience. Accordingly, we read in Proverbs:

My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline [*musar*: "instruction"; from *yasar*: "admonish"] **or be weary of His reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom He loves, as a father the son in whom He delights** (Prov 3:11-12 ESV)

¹³² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch in their highly regarded *Commentary on the Old Testament*, note here at Psalm 32:3-5 that it is describing:

[T]he tortures which his accusing conscience prepared for him. The more he strove against confessing, the louder did conscience speak; and while it was not in his power to silence this inward voice, in which the wrath of God found utterance, he cried the whole day. (Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM [Findex.com, 2000])

Notice there is no hint of physical discipline here, but merely verbal **"reproof."**¹³³ How does this occur? Through our conscience. So many think that divine discipline comes in the form of God-manipulated difficulties that make our life painful, and therefore, gets our attention. Such a perspective forgets the place and power of merely a guilty conscience for bringing us to confession and repentance. For a great many Christians and situations, the pain of conscience is sufficient for divine discipline and we get into a great deal of trouble when we start interpreting difficult circumstances as divine discipline for our sins.

This is precisely the error that Job's friends made about his difficulties, and God Himself reproved them for their misinterpretation when He said to Eliphaz, **"I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has"** (Job 42:7). And what had Job said, particularly when he was being accused of sin?:

I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live (Job 27:5-6).

And Job was able to say such things precisely because his **"conscience"** did **"not reproach"** him then either.

However, while a "reactive" perspective to our conscience that prompts confession is important, a proactive approach to our conscience is important as well. David also demonstrates this when he prays:

Search me, O God, and know my heart [and conscience]; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Ps 139:23-24).

David was not only sensitive to convictions of his conscience if and when they occurred, but he at times allowed God to reveal things in his conscience that he may not even know are there.

Thus, for the Christian, the moral reasoning of our conscience is a "Bible inside."

Pastoral Practices

¹³³ Granted, the discipline described in Hebrews 12:7 includes **"hardship."**

- The Apostle Paul was obviously very concerned about maintaining a clear conscience (see Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 1:12; Acts 23:1; 24:16; 2 Tim 1:3). Commit yourself to the same, and make it a habit to seek God on this, giving Him opportunity to reveal your "hidden" sins and offenses to you. David's prayer in Psalm 139 is a good start.

C) The Weak & Strong Conscience of the Christian: *From Legalism to Freedom*

C.1) The Conscience of the Romans & Corinthians

The issue of the conscience is a major one in Scripture, illustrated by the great deal of ink the Apostle spent writing about it in both Romans and 1 Corinthians:

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. ² One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. ⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷

¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. . . . Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. ¹⁴ As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.

¹⁵ If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. . . .

²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin. We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. (Rom 14:1-15:2)

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. . . . But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹² When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. (1 Cor 8:4-13)

Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, ²⁶ for, "The Earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience.

²⁸ But if anyone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience' sake— ²⁹ the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours.

For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience? ³⁰ If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Cor 10:25-31)

The Apostle begins his discussion of this issue in the Roman church by writing: **"Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters** [*dialogismos*: opinions]" (Rom 14:1). The reason that the Apostle writes at length to both the Roman and Corinthian churches concerning this issue is that it was causing considerable strife. The Apostle's audience in Romans is no doubt both Gentile and Jewish Christians. ¹³⁴ Considering the significant cultural differences that existed

¹³⁴ There is some debate regarding the cultural audience of Romans, as some suggest that in 1:5-6, 13 the Apostle indicates his audience is only Gentile. We agree with Dr. Moo, however, that:

Paul claims in 1:7 that he is addressing "all those beloved by God in Rome," and it is clear that there were Jewish Christians in Rome. Moreover, Paul's exhortation to the "strong" and the "weak" makes best sense if both groups—roughly equivalent to Gentile and Jewish Christians respectively—were in his audience. . . . Along with the

between these two groups, it should not surprise us that there was friction. In fact, American Christians can readily testify that even being from the same culture does not eliminate the myriad of differences that exist between us!

It is not surprising then to find in the NT, considerable instruction on how we as Christians are to get along with one another. The King said that what will really convince the world that we believe in Him is not our words, but our supernatural, uncommon, spectacular love, respect, and acceptance of one another (cf. John 13:35). Thus, there is a multitude of biblical mandates to accept, forgive, bear with, and be patient with one another. Not only are these the most consistent commands in the Bible, they are the most challenging as well, and the issue of varying consciences among Christians presents a particular challenge to love.

In order to best understand what kinds of issues may cause unnecessary divisions among Christians, it will be helpful to make some distinctions between various categories of convictions that may divide Christians and to define what the Apostle means by “**disputable matters**.” For our purposes, we will divide such convictions into three: 1) doctrinal, 2) debatable, and 3) acceptable. The table on the following page summarizes these convictions.

majority of commentators, then, we think that Paul addresses a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Romans. (*The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT), [Eerdmans, 1996], 12).

Table 3.2: Categories of Convictions

Convictions & Issues	Relationship to specific teaching of the Bible	Has automatic potential to harm people if practiced	Example
Doctrinal	Violates specific and clear direction in Scripture	Probable	Murder
Debatable	Possibly some general, biblical principles	Possible	Music style for worship
Acceptable	Violates specific and clear direction in Scripture	Improbable	Jewish dietary laws

C.2) “Doctrinal” Convictions

First of all, it is necessary to define what we mean by “doctrinal” convictions. These involve issues in which 1) God has made His opinion clear, and 2) result in automatic harm if God’s opinion is not heeded. Some may suggest this latter point is too pragmatic and human-centered. Perhaps, but there is not a single doctrine or command in Scripture, that was not given to benefit God’s people in some way. We suffer in some way if we disbelieve or disobey any of them.

For example, “**You shall not murder**” (Exod 20:13) is divine instruction that is both clear and automatically harmful to people if not strictly obeyed. While categorizing a conviction on murder as doctrinal is rather easy and uncontroversial, other issues are not. For example, some wish to make homosexual lifestyles acceptable in the Church. While categorizing its prohibition as doctrinal may be controversial, the Bible makes God’s conviction clear on this issue (cf. Lev 18:22; Rom 1:18, 22, 24, 26-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11), and its allowance is harmful to not only its practitioners, but society in general.

Dealing with differing doctrinal convictions has been one of the most painful and difficult struggles of the Church throughout its history. Unity over precisely what the Bible teaches simply will not

happen until we all get to sit at the feet of the Teacher. How then are we to know where to draw the line in allowing doctrinal differences to affect our working relationships?

First of all, humility needs to be exercised in recognizing that there is some heresy in all of us, and not just in those we would label heretics. If there is one thing that a person should learn from studying the history of Christian theology, it is that there has never been a theologian who did not have a blind spot, no matter how intelligent, devoted, or gifted they may have been, nor how accurate they may have interpreted all other aspects of theology. Anyone who has seriously studied the Scriptures to determine their own doctrinal convictions will soon find that there are few, if any others, presently or of the past, that they completely agree with. Somebody is wrong, and no doubt on some points it is us.

The King no doubt had this very thing in mind when He said:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you [by the Bible and its true interpretation]. **Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.** (Matt 7:1-5)

The issue of whether or not a person's doctrinal conviction will automatically harm others gives us at least one guideline for determining our relationship with those whom we do not agree with doctrinally. Do we think the potential harm that we or others could incur from what we perceive as their "false" doctrine, outweighs the potential benefits that we or others would enjoy by our fellowshiping or ministering together? Make no mistake about it, God does not want anyone harmed by false teaching no matter what the potential benefit may be. That's where God Himself draws the line.

This is particularly important to remember in efforts to team up with others to more effectively evangelize a community. God does not expect us to allow some harm to come to Christians in order to reach the lost and He is big enough to get the job done without doing so. Still, if the doctrinal issue is more of a theoretical one [i.e. whether or not God created the Universe in six literal 24 hour days], rather than a practical one [i.e. what must a person do to be

saved] then there may be more opportunity for a relationship, in spite of important doctrinal differences.

Obviously, the best thing would be if the doctrinal issue could be discussed and the two parties would come to agreement on what the Scriptures teach. And indeed, such an effort should be made. But if an agreement cannot be reached and our conscience tells us that this doctrinal difference poses a spiritual threat to them or others, then it is legitimate to keep our distance even if they are fellow Christians. While we are expected by God to respect all Christians, He does not expect us to pursue an equal level of relationships with all Christians, and in terms of doctrinal differences, he allows our conscience to be our guide.¹³⁵

An additional principle is that there needs to be some effort to not offend others regarding their doctrinal convictions. If there is an agreement between two parties that certain potentially offensive doctrinal convictions will neither be discussed nor practiced, then there can be a considerable amount of interaction between the parties without fear of harm, or the need to raise questions of conscience. To “agree to disagree” and to not promote or practice particularly divisive doctrinal positions in the presence of others may be one of the most helpful principles in assisting even those with a “weak” conscience in such matters, to be more united with others.

Pastoral Practices

- It may be important for your church leadership team to discuss what popular false teachings they consider to be harmful to the faith and growth of a Christian. Some controversial issues in which such convictions may come from include the *Charismaticism*, women's roles in church teaching/leadership, and the substance and sequence of End Time events. First, determine your united convictions on these areas, and secondly, decide what differences in these doctrines would be harmful. If there are some, then “**careful instruction**” to the church on these areas would be called for. Also, it might be honest and helpful to add them to your statement of faith.

C.3) “Debatable” Convictions

¹³⁵ Dealing with differences among Christians is dealt with further in the next chapter (3.3) concerning *private judgment*.

What we will label here as “debatable” convictions, differ from doctrinal convictions in that: *there is no clear or specific teaching on the issue in the Scriptures*. Of course, we must be extremely careful in concluding that Scripture is not clear on an issue. Elsewhere, we have pointed out the fact that far too many Scriptures are being put in this “trash can” labeled “not intended to be clear” by too many people as an excuse to not study, understand, teach, or obey them.

Nonetheless, there are several legitimate topics in this category of “debatable” convictions which include: the best style of teaching the Bible (expositorally or topically), the best method of educating our children (home, private, public schools), political affiliations (Republican or Democratic), and a number of others. While the Scriptures may provide helpful principles to apply to these positions, it does not dictate that a Christian consistently adhere to any one of them. Contrary to the conviction of some, a Christian can be in the center of God’s will and teach topically through the Bible, send their kids to public school, and vote for a Democrat.

C.3.a) Women’s dress

Other issues are more difficult to label “debatable.” For example, when the Apostle commands women to “**dress modestly, with decency and propriety**” (1 Tim 2:9), the specific application of this instruction is not clear, as different Christians may have a different interpretation of what these terms mean. For some, a woman wearing a full length dress is the only acceptable application of this instruction. For others, a woman can wear pants, and even shorts, and still meet the biblical requirements. Therefore, it is difficult to make any particular dress code or style a “doctrinal” issue.

In the above instruction God specifies the *result* of a Christian’s dress code (e. g. decent and modest), therefore making the *effect* of our dress code on others a doctrinal issue, and one that needs to be seriously considered. However, the verse does not specify the *mode* of dress (e. g. legs covered completely, etc.), therefore making a conviction in this area a “debatable” one, and suggesting that God desires some freedom in this area.

At the same time, it should be admitted that too many Christian women in America do not take this instruction seriously enough. Many are more concerned with what is attractive, fashionable, and comfortable, rather than what is modest, discreet, and biblical. As

we will have ample opportunity later to discuss, having a concern for ourselves, rather than for others is the real problem behind these issues, and our dress code is no exception. We need to be sensitive to other's definition of "modest" and "decent" if we desire to truly act in love.

Obviously one of the reasons God demands that women dress modestly is to avoid unnecessarily tempting men to lust. While lust may be a temptation for women as well, the fact that men are particularly vulnerable to this sin explains why the Scripture's focus is on the dress code of women (cf. 1 Pet 3:3-4). The bottom line is that Christian women should be more concerned with the consciences of men, than the fashions of the world; with protecting men, rather than attracting them.

C.3.b) Worship music

Another example of a "debatable" issue would include the centuries-long debate concerning the best style of music for Sunday worship.¹³⁶ Many Christians assume this is only a modern issue, but actually, ever since the Reformation when Martin Luther (1483-1556) promoted hymns with instruments, while John Calvin (1509-1564) insisted on only psalms without instruments, the Church has been at considerable odds on this issue.

The clearest Scripture on the topic is Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 which state respectively:

Speak to one another with psalms [psalmos], hymns [hymnos] and spiritual songs [pneumatikos oide]. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord. (Eph 5:19)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. (Col 3:16)

Two things become clear in these verses. First, it is the attitude of the heart that is most important, not the style of music. Secondly, the Apostle recognized a wide variety of legitimate music styles when he suggests that "**psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs**" be sung in a Christian assembly. Beyond the obvious need for solidly Christian *lyrics*, the Bible simply says nothing about the

¹³⁶ For a detailed and helpful discussion of this issue, see Steve Miller, *The Contemporary Music Debate*, (Tyndale, 1993).

beat, tempo or *style* of the music to be used. No one has biblical authority to assert that their preferred music style is spiritually or biblically superior to another. Music style is a "debatable" issue; something on which God did not want to dictate specifics on and neither should we. Whatever style of music helps you worship God is a legitimate one.

However, the issue goes beyond preferences and can become a matter of offense. Someone, for instance, that was saved out of an addiction to satanic, "hard rock" music, may understandably be uncomfortable with some styles of Christian music that have a similar beat, even though much different lyrics. Likewise, why would it surprise us that four hundred year old hymns are not the most helpful style of worship music for a twenty year old Christian in the 21st century? Then again, why would those who are younger snicker at an eighty-year old Christian for whom the hymns are synonymous with "**spiritual songs**" that elicit "**gratitude in your hearts to God?**" Nonetheless, it is typical today to see the "hymn people" judging the "rock & rollers" for being unspiritual and for the "rock & rollers" to charge the "hymn people" with being culturally out to lunch.

It becomes readily apparent that differing convictions on "debatable" issues can cause a considerable amount of strife among Christians. Such issues have, in fact, split whole families, churches, and denominations. While the Apostle's instruction concerning "acceptable" convictions, as discussed further below, is not completely applicable here, his overriding purpose and themes in these passages are: 1) love and unity among Christians (cf. Rom 14:1,13,15; 15:5,7; 1 Cor 8:1; 10:23-24), and 2) that God be glorified (cf. Rom 15:6-7; 1 Cor 10:31).

He ties both together when he sums up his exhortation to the "weak" and "strong" in the Roman church by simply saying, "**Accept one another then, just as Christ has accepted you, in order to bring praise to God**" (15:7). To the factions in Corinth he says, "**So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do [including worship], do it all for the glory of God**" (1 Cor 10:31).

These two instructions are sufficient in themselves to give us ample direction in living with legitimate differences between God's people. Humility is again a key. First, we must humbly and carefully study the Scriptures to determine whether or not the issue is, in fact, "doctrinal" or "debatable." If we can find no clear teaching of Scripture that would elevate our opinion in a matter to the level of doctrine, then we must humbly admit that it is merely a preference for which you may or may not have some biblical principles for. Finally, we must not knowingly or unnecessarily

offend another in practicing our preferences on “debatable” issues. On this point, much more will be said in the following discussion regarding “acceptable” convictions.

C.4) “Acceptable” Convictions

C.4.a) Acceptable convictions ignore biblical teaching but do not harm others

In order to accurately interpret the Apostle in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, it is important to define what we have called “acceptable” convictions, and to distinguish them from “doctrinal” and “debatable” convictions. Simply put, an “acceptable” conviction is one that 1) ignores clear biblical teaching, but 2) does *not* involve an issue that is automatically harmful to people.

The key characteristic of “acceptable” convictions is that, while they may not reflect a full understanding of biblical truth, in and of themselves, their practice will not bring automatic harm to someone. Such are the specific issues addressed in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. These include the belief among the “weak” that eating meat that was sacrificed to idols, drinking wine, and disregarding the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays are sins against God.

First of all, such convictions ignore clear biblical teaching. Regarding the eating of meat in general, the Apostle confidently replied: **“As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself”** (Rom 14:14), no doubt reflecting Christ’s teaching in Mark 7:18-19. Concerning the eating of meat sacrificed to idols in particular, the Apostle writes: **“Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience”** (1 Cor 10:25).

As for drinking wine, while we are not to get drunk (cf. Eph 5:18), the Apostle had actually told Timothy to, **“Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses”** (1 Tim 5:23). Finally, the Apostle clearly abolished any obligation to any of the Jewish holidays,

including the Sabbath, when he wrote: **"One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind"** (Rom 14:5).

The Apostle sums up a lot of the freedom in the New Covenant when he writes the Colossians:

He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross. . . .

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. . . .

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (Col 2:13-14, 16-17, 20-23)

Therefore, placing restrictions on Christians concerning what they eat, drink, or how they approach the Sabbath do not reflect a full understanding of the **"grace in which we now stand"** (Rom 5:2).

However, if a Christian were to place such restrictions on *themselves*, it would not be automatically harmful to anyone. Therefore when the Apostle says in Romans 14:1: **"Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters,"** he is not condoning a variety of "doctrinal" convictions and thereby any and all sinful behavior that a person may simply feel comfortable with. Rather, there are issues of conscience that, while they may not reflect a full understanding of the truth, are acceptable because they are not automatically harmful to anyone. In the context of Romans 14 then, it is acceptable to abstain from eating vegetables (v. 2) because of cultural factors effecting a person's convictions (and conscience) in that area, and because the issue is rather harmless in and of itself.

However, the Apostle did not grant the same freedom for other areas of conduct that are automatically harmful to people such as sexual perversion, greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, and swindling. We are not even to eat with such people, let alone accept what is apparently acceptable to their own conscience (cf. 1 Cor 5:11).

In addition, it should be said that if any "harmless" practice were to be promoted as necessary for salvation, it would cease to be an "acceptable" conviction. It is conceivable, for example, that if the Jews in Rome wanted to practice circumcision simply because they thought it was part of being a good Jew, the Apostle would have allowed it (one is reminded of his circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16:3). However, because circumcision was being taught as a requirement for salvation in the Galatian church, the Apostle vehemently condemned it (Gal 5:2-4), and an "acceptable" practice became a doctrinal issue.

The difference then between those with a "weak" conscience and those with a "strong" conscience is how much their convictions are in line with biblical truth. The "strength" of a person's conscience, from the Apostle's perspective, depended on their real knowledge of the truth. Those with a "strong" faith or conscience are those who, like the Apostle, are "**fully convinced**" (Rom 14:14) of and "**know**" (1 Cor 8:4, 7) both the truths and freedom taught in the Bible. Those with a "weaker" conscience do not yet fully understand such things. More specifically, the issue is a person's level of understanding and application of the grace of God now given us in the New Covenant. Because grace is the real issue here, we might label those with a strong conscience as "freedomists" and those with a "weak" conscience as "legalists."

While the latter term may seem too derogatory to some, the Apostle makes it clear that while having a "weak" conscience is acceptable, it is not commendable. Although the Apostle writes that "**each one should be fully convinced in his own mind**" (Rom 14:5) regarding such issues, surely God would have our convictions ultimately based squarely on the word of God.

Accordingly, we read in Hebrews:

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the [true] teaching about [real] righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves [and their conscience] to distinguish good from [real] evil. (Heb 5:13-14)

It is accurately distinguishing between what is actually good and actually evil that someone with a “weak” conscience or a “legalist” has difficulty with.

Accordingly, Douglas Moo, Professor of NT at Wheaton, writes the following concerning Romans 14:

Paul’s decision to use the pejorative phrase “weak in faith” makes clear where his sympathies lie. We cannot avoid the impression (though his pastoral concerns lead him to keep it implicit) that Paul would hope that a growth in Christ would help those who were “weak” become “strong.”¹³⁷

Likewise, Erwin Lutzer, longtime teacher at Moody Church comments:

Those who had freedom in this matter were regarded by Paul as the strong; those who felt they had to obey the ancient rules were the weak. If we had been there, we might have seen this quite differently. We probably would have said that the person who adhered to the old Jewish standards was the strong person and that the one who had freedom to eat anything was the weak Christian. We tacitly assume that the Christian who has the liberty to enjoy certain activities is the weak one, whereas the strong one is the person who believes that such freedom is capitulation to the world.

Paul said that the opposite was true. A strong Christian will see that morally neutral activities should not be categorically forbidden. A weak Christian will multiply taboos, still thinking that spiritual living is conforming to the right set of 'don'ts.'¹³⁸

This probably explains why the Apostle openly shared his own convictions on the matter of foods (Rom 14:14), even though he instructs later that, **“whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God”** (Rom 14:22). Some may accuse the Apostle of not following his own instruction here, but it was no doubt his special position of authority and his concern that the “weak” grow in grace, that prompted him to not keep his convictions to himself.

Nevertheless, it is clear that God would have us study the Scriptures in order to establish convictions and “train” our conscience to better **“distinguish good from evil”** (Heb 5:14). However, such “strengthening” of our conscience is a process, just

¹³⁷ Moo, 836.

¹³⁸ Erwin Lutzer, *Who Are You To Judge?* (Moody, 2002), 221-2.

as gaining convictions and growing in Christian maturity are processes. Oppewall writes:

[T]he conscience is not a static thing. It is capable of growth and is, in fact, in a continual process of being shaped by social influences. The consciences of all are shaped by the standards of the company they keep and the groups in which they share. The Christian conscience is in a lifelong process of being shaped by the Word of God in the fellowship of believers. One of the purposes of the communion of the saints and the admonition of the Church is the shaping of the moral discernment of the individual in order that he grow up into mature discernment (cf. Eph. 4:13). ¹³⁹

As we will discuss below, the Apostle urges patience on the part of the more mature for the sake of unity and the spiritual health of the less mature. However, it is clear as well that there is an expectation that over time, a Christian's conscience will be strengthened as their convictions grow in the knowledge of the grace we have in Christ Jesus. At this point, the Apostle has some additional instruction regarding the relationship between those with a "strong" conscience, and those with a "weak" one.

C.4.b) "Freedomists" and "legalists" must love each other

In the context of food, the Apostle says:

The man who eats everything [the "freedomist"] **must not look down on the man who does not** [the "legalist"], **and the man who does not eat everything** [the "legalist"] **must not condemn the man who does** [the "freedomist"], **for God has accepted him.** (Rom 14:3)

In saying that "**God has accepted him**" we notice first of all that the Apostle is obviously not speaking about "doctrinal" matters here, or unbiblical and harmful convictions that God would not accept. His instruction is specifically applicable to the "acceptable" and "debatable" issues discussed above, and his instruction is crystal clear on such things: God alone is to judge. It is wrong for a "freedomist" to harbor any disrespect toward a "legalist," because of an inaccurate, but "acceptable" conviction; and it is likewise wrong for a "legalist" to harbor contempt toward a "freedomist" for the same thing. Such attitudes of mutual disrespect are unacceptable

¹³⁹ Oppewall, I:764-5.

because “**God** [the Master and Judge of both] **has accepted**” both of their convictions on these matters.

While it is not necessarily sin for someone to have a particular conviction on an “acceptable” or “debatable” matter, it is sin for someone to look down on another person for their conviction in such matters. In judging such convictions as sin, where God has judged them acceptable, we are the ones who sin. When we are faced with a fellow Christian who has a different, but acceptable conviction from our own, we need to recognize that we have just been thrust to the edge of a moral precipice, in grave danger of falling into sin. If we are not extremely careful, we will give in to the all too easy sin of judging or “**looking down on**” the other, and in the process abandon love which is the center of Christianity.

Concerning the “legalists” who may judge the “freedomists” C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) writes:

One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing himself without wanting every one else to give it up. That is not the Christian way. An individual Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reasons-marriage, or meat, or beer, or the cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people who do use them, he has taken the wrong turning.¹⁴⁰

On the other hand, specifically speaking of the tendency of “freedomists” to judge those they think are “legalists,” Erwin Lutzer warns:

[L]et us not be critical of those who would keep rules; they might be legalistic, but not necessarily. Jesus did not mind the Pharisees' keeping their rules (though some of them went beyond the bounds of Scripture), but He grieved over the fact that they stopped short of developing intimacy with God. . . .

Two people can keep the same rules; one can do so legalistically because he believes that the rules define his relationship with God. Another can keep the same rules, but do so knowing that the important thing is to cultivate his relationship with God. At root, legalism is a matter of heart and motive.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins, 2001), 79.

¹⁴¹ Lutzer, 220.

C.3.c) "Freedomists" must limit their freedom for the sake of the "legalists"

While the Apostle encourages both "freedomists" and "legalists" to love one another and to refrain from judging, he places a special responsibility on the "freedomists" to respect the conscience of the "legalists":

Accept him whose faith [conscience ¹⁴²] is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters . . . We who are strong [in conscience] ought to bear with the failings of the weak [in conscience] and not to please ourselves.
(Rom 14:1, 15:1)

One thing that becomes readily apparent in the Apostle's instruction concerning differing convictions is how sacred he views the Christian's conscience. It is nothing less than a "personal Bible," and thus this chapter concerning the conscience is entitled "The Bible Inside."

This is specifically applicable for "acceptable" convictions that actually ignore clear biblical teaching, but are harmless in and of themselves. In such issues, while there may be incorrect things currently written in our "personal Bible" that may not match what is written in God's perfect Bible, God allows, and even expects us to adhere to that "personal Bible." The Apostle makes this clear in Romans 14:23 when he says: **"the man who has doubts [about what Scripture teaches on eating meat] is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith [or a clear conscience]; and everything that does not come from faith [or a clear conscience] is sin."** ¹⁴³

¹⁴² Both the context of Romans 14 and the use of "conscience" repeatedly in 1 Corinthians in a similar context, leads us to equate "faith" in Rom 14:1 with "conscience. Along these lines Dr. Moo writes:

The "faith" with respect to which these people are "weak," . . . involves their individual outworking of Christian faith, their convictions about what that faith allows and prohibits. . . . While we must be careful not simply to read I Cor. 8-10 into Rom. 14-15, the undeniable parallels between the sections give some weight to the fact that the word that stands in I Cor. 8-10 in place of "faith" is "conscience" (cf. 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27, 28, 29). (836).

¹⁴³ The Catholic theologian John Henry Newman (1801-1890) would seem to even imply that the conscience represents the very presence of God in the heart of even the unbeliever when he wrote:

If, in doing wrong, we feel the same tearful, broken-hearted sorrow which overwhelms us on hurting a mother; if, on doing right, we enjoy

Along these lines, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) wrote:

When erring reason [i.e. a "weak" conscience] proposes something as being commanded by God [even though it is not], then to scorn the dictate of reason is to scorn the commandment of God. . . .

If then reason or conscience err with an error that is voluntary, either directly, or through negligence, so that one errs about what one ought to know [goes against their conscience]; then such an error of reason or conscience does not excuse the will, that abides by that erring reason or conscience, from being evil.

But if the error arise from ignorance of some circumstance [i.e. "weak" conscience], and without any negligence, so that it cause the act to be involuntary, then that error of reason or ["weak"] conscience excuses the will, that abides by that erring reason, from being evil.¹⁴⁴

Likewise, Dr. Moo is again helpful here:

Paul is not . . . claiming that any act that does not arise out of a basic trust and dependency on Christ is sinful, true as that may be. What he here labels "sin," rather, is any act that does not match our sincerely held convictions about what our Christian faith allows us to do and prohibits us from doing. For a Christian not a single decision and action can be good which he does not think he can justify on the ground of his Christian conviction and his liberty before God in Christ. Violation of the dictates of the conscience, even when the conscience does not conform perfectly with God's will, is sinful.¹⁴⁵

There are several reasons for this. First, and this is again important, the issue is not automatically harmful to yourself or others. While believing that Christians are obligated to conform

the same sunny serenity of mind, the same soothing, satisfactory delight which follows us from receiving praise from a father, we certainly have within us the image of some person, to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find our happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleadings, in whose anger we are troubled and waste away. These feelings in us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being. (*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [University of Notre Dame Press, 1979], 101).

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (online at <http://www.newadvent.com/summa>), I-II.19.5-6.

¹⁴⁵ Moo, 863-4.

their lives to the Jewish Sabbath may not reflect an accurate understanding of the NT, such a conviction is not automatically harmful to anyone, until it is allowed to become a divisive issue.

Secondly, God recognizes that there is a growth process involved in having all of our convictions match perfectly the truth of Scripture. God gives us grace to grow, and we must do the same for others. In fact, there may be a good reason that God may want a former alcoholic to feel guilty about having a sip of wine even though they are under grace and such a practice is allowed as a Christian. That "weaker" conscience may be for their own protection.

While God is certainly sovereign over what is written on the conscience of a person, it is important that fellow Christians, and especially Christian leaders, are extremely careful not to "tamper" with the conscience of another. "Freedomists" are vulnerable to the temptation of flaunting their freedom in order to "liberate" the "legalist," and therefore causing them to act against their "personal Bible." It is a prideful thing when a mere human takes it upon themselves to "strengthen" someone's conscience on an "acceptable" issue. While all Christians are responsible to some degree to help one another adhere to "doctrinal" matters which are clear in *God's Bible* and automatically affect people's welfare, no Christian has the liberty to tamper with someone's "*personal Bible*" regarding an "acceptable" conviction that is harmless. We notice that in the passages where the Apostle deals with such matters, he encourages mutual respect, not an effort to change the consciences of others.

Along these lines, the great Puritan theologian John Owens (1616-1683) wrote:

No power under heaven can cause conscience to think, act, or judge otherwise than it doth by its immediate respect unto God; for it is the mind's *self-judging* with respect unto God, and what is not so is no act of conscience. Wherefore, to force an act of conscience implies a contradiction. However it may be defiled, bribed, seared, and at length utterly debauched, it cannot admit of a superior power, a power above or over itself, under God. ¹⁴⁶

In other words, the only way to move a conscience against itself is to destroy it. Not only is the conscience a sacred thing, but it is a rather mysterious thing, with vulnerabilities that we may not fully

¹⁴⁶ John Owen, *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (online at ccel.com), VI.6.

understand, but which, nonetheless, make it susceptible to serious injury. The Apostle warns us that such "tampering" will have devastating consequences in the life of a "weaker" Christian, consequences that he is particularly descriptive of in 1 Corinthians 8:

[S]ince their conscience is weak, it is defiled [*moluno*]. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block [*proskomma*: offense] to the weak. . . . So this weak brother, for whom Christ

died, is destroyed [*apollumi*: ruined ¹⁴⁷] by your

¹⁴⁷ The meaning of the Apostle's use of *apollumi* both here in 1 Cor 8:11 and Rom 14:15 is important and difficult. Surprisingly, many of the most respected and conservative NT scholars suggest that the Apostle is teaching that an insensitive Christian with a "strong" conscience can actually cause a genuine Christian "**brother for whom Christ died**" (Rom 14:15) to lose their salvation.

For example, Dr. Moo writes: "Paul is warning the "strong" that their behavior has the potential to bring the "weak" to ultimate spiritual ruin—failure to attain final salvation" (854). Gordon Fee writes: "In saying that the brother "is destroyed" the Apostle most likely is referring to eternal loss" (387). Dr. Fee then approvingly quotes Hans Conzelmann: "He [Paul] of course presupposes the idea that the Christian, too, can lose his salvation" (Ibid. n. 61). Thomas Schreiner as well says, "These terms reveal that the danger spoken of here is nothing less than eschatological judgment . . . eschatological perishing is in mind" (*Romans*, [Baker, 1998]; 733-5). He lists others who agree including C. K. Barrett and C. B. Cranfield.

Dr. Fee's view is understandable, coming from a Pentecostal theological perspective which teaches that a born again Christian can lose their salvation. But Dr. Moo's (Professor of NT at Wheaton) and Dr. Schreiner's (Professor of NT at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) are inexplicable, particularly in light of both of them being defenders of salvation by grace. In response, we would disagree for the following reasons.

First, while the lexical data is surely on their side, (*apollumi* usually being used in the NT in a figuratively theological manner to refer to eternal damnation), this is not its only acceptable meaning. Literally, the word simply means "to destroy." While the idea of being killed or perishing is common in the NT, the NIV also translates it as "ruin" three times in the different renderings of the parable concerning pouring new wine into old wineskins (cf. Matt 9:17). This parable, by the way, with its illusion to what happens when you attempt to "expand" someone's grasp of truth too much and too quickly, has some intriguing parallels with the Apostle's warning concerning the conscience, and the parallel may give added weight to the suggestion that the Apostle is using *apollumi* here in the same way that Christ did.

In addition, *apollumi* is accurately translated as "wasted" when the Apostle John writes: "**When they had all had enough [bread] to eat, He said to His disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted [*apollumi*]"** (John 6:12). Likewise the term is rendered "spoils" when the Apostle writes: "**Do not work for food that spoils [*apollumi*]"** (John 6:27). All of these terms could be used to describe the harmful effects on a person's conscience without implying their loss of a salvation they possessed and resulting in eternal damnation.

Admittedly, we should be careful about accepting a less common use of a word in the NT in place of a more frequent meaning, unless other

knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound [*tupto*: lit. pummel repeatedly] **their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.** (vs. 7, 9, 11-13)

considerations convince us to do so. In this case, there are indeed some compelling reasons. To interpret the Apostle as saying that one Christian can cause another Christian to lose their salvation presents theological difficulties which, not only the above authors fail to deal with sufficiently, but that surely strengthen our interpretation in this instance. The biblical doctrine of the perseverance of salvation is far too clear and central in the NT to simply concede on the suggested translation of one word possessing several different meanings.

Even in this very passage, such God-given perseverance in eternal salvation is reinforced when the Apostle writes, **"Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand"** (Rom 14:4; cf. 11:11, 20, 22 for meaning of **"stands or falls"**).

Dr. Moo does not avoid these difficulties by simply suggesting that 1) the "weak" brother in question is not a Christian (cf. Schreiner, 735 n. 17), or 2) the Apostle is merely suggesting a hypothetical case (854, n. 28). Neither suggestion seems legitimate enough in the context of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 to even discuss. Interesting enough, Dr. Moo allows for our interpretation in his Romans entry to the *New Bible Commentary* in which he writes regarding 14:15:

The word *destroy* (*apollumi*) is a strong one, usually denoting eternal damnation . . . This may be the meaning here, although, if so, the Apostle may not think of this eventuality literally. Or it may be that 'destroy' is used in a weaker sense here: 'cause spiritual damage to.' (*New Bible Commentary*, [InterVarsity, 1994, 1155].)

In the end, we agree with John MacArthur (*MacArthur's New Testament Commentary: Romans 9-16* [Moody Press, 1994], Rom 14:15) and specifically F. F. Bruce (*1 and 2 Corinthians*, NCB, [Oliphants, 1971], 82) who point out the likelihood that the Apostle himself is defining what he means by the "destruction" (*apollumi*) of a **"brother for whom Christ died"** in 1 Corinthians 8:11, when in the next verse the Apostle says **"When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound** [*tupto*: lit. pummel repeatedly, fig. to offend] **their weak conscience, you sin against Christ"** (1 Cor 8:12).

These are no doubt strong words, but the Apostle does nothing to imply that the weak Christian might lose their salvation. Because 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 12 relate to exactly the same topic, they should be used to interpret one another. More than that, all of the Apostle's teaching in the NT itself militates against the idea that the actions of one Christian could actually cause another Christian to lose their salvation.

His warning is similar in Romans:

If your brother is distressed [*lupeitai*: grieved] **because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy** [*appollue*: ruin] **your brother for whom Christ died. . . . Do not destroy** [*katalue*: undo] **the work of God for the sake of food** (Rom 14:15, 20).

When a "freedomist" entices a "legalist" to act in a "freer" way, the conscience of the "legalist" suffers severe damage because their conscience is not yet actually "free."¹⁴⁸ The Apostle says the weaker Christian's conscience is "**defiled**," offended, ruined, pummeled, and distressed.

In reference to "ruining [*apollumi*]" someone's conscience, it is helpful to look at another context in which the same Greek word is employed. The King said, "**Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined** [*apollumi*]" (Matt 9:17). The image is not of something that completely ceases to exist, but rather is irreversibly damaged such that it can no longer perform the function for which it was made. In itself, a horrifying thought in relation to one's conscience, but the Apostle adds that such a thing is also a sin "**against Christ.**"

By "**stumbling block**" (1 Cor 8:9) the Apostle essentially means an "**obstacle in your brother's way**" (Rom 14:13) that hinders their spiritual growth. Dr. Lutzer explains:

This does not mean that we should never do anything that another Christian doesn't like! Christ frequently said and did things that caused offense-even to His own disciples. . . . For Paul, being a stumbling block meant to do something that

¹⁴⁸ Gordon Fee accurately describes the tension that may occur for someone with a "weak" conscience, in the context of eating meat sacrificed to idols in Corinth:

Some of the Corinthian believers are among those for whom the [demonic] "gods" and "lords" were a genuine reality while they were pagans. Such people are thus "still accustomed to the idol," that is, even though they now know that the god does not exist, their former association with him or her as a god is still a part of their experience of reality. They may tell their heads all they want that the god is only an idol and that an idol has no genuine reality. The fact is that their former way of life is woven into their consciousness and emotions in such a way that the old associations cannot be thus lightly disregarded. For them to return to the place of their former worship would mean once more to eat "as though it were truly being sacrificed to the god." (379).

would make a brother or sister fall back into his or her former way of life of sin.¹⁴⁹

One aspect of the spiritual growth that can be stunted by a **"stumbling block"** is a strengthening of their conscience apart from better understanding Scripture. If a "legalist" is enticed to sin against their conscience, their spiritual growth is actually stunted, and possibly permanently.

Obviously, as pointed out earlier, to act against one's conscience in such matters is to **"fall into sin."** No doubt it is such sin that causes the guilt and **"distress"** (*lupeo*: sadness, sorrow) that the Apostle describes in the parallel passage in Romans 14:15. We can readily see why the Apostle instructed both the "legalists" and the "freedomists" that: **"whatever you believe about these things** ["acceptable" and "debatable" issues] **keep between yourself and God"** (Rom. 14:22).

All of this makes it especially important that Christian leaders do not find themselves unnecessarily "weakening" the conscience of others in an area in which God would allow a "stronger" conscience. If a pastor, for instance, were to teach that eating certain foods, drinking any alcohol, listening to Christian "rock," or failing to practice the Jewish Sabbath, not wearing dresses and ties to church, not singing hymns in church, or not using the 1611 KJV Bible were all sins against God, such a pastor is severely harming his flock, and not helping them.

First of all, such "legalist" leaders are misrepresenting God in these matters. Secondly, they are imposing their own "stumbling blocks" of legalism on other believers, especially young ones, and such bondage is tragic, and unfortunately, far too common in the Church today. Thirdly, they are surely setting up their people to have a judgmental attitude toward the "freedomists" who live closer to the truth of the grace we enjoy in Christ Jesus regarding such matters.

Accordingly, we read in James: **"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly"** (3:1). Likewise, the Apostle instructs all Christian leaders: **"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers"** (1 Tim 4:16). While the Apostle's words certainly include eternal salvation, the word **"save"** has a broader meaning than this in the NT, and also includes the quality of our Christian life on Earth. Legalism promoted by

¹⁴⁹ Lutzer, 225.

spiritual authorities will severely hinder both unbelievers getting saved, and believers enjoying the salvation they have.

The Apostle is not denying that it can be a difficult thing for a "freedomist," such as he was, to endure the inconvenience that comes with what seems to be the unnecessary ignorance of a fellow Christian regarding the depth of the grace in which they stand. It is tempting to persuade such a person to not merely stand or wade in such a refreshing stream, but to plunge headlong into the grace we have been given. However, once again, God desires us to exercise patience in "debatable" and "acceptable" matters rather than our efforts to make people agree with us. Hopefully the above warnings regarding the injury that occurs when we attempt such lessons will serve to help, **"We who are strong . . . to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves,"** and to treat such people with the patience, humility, acceptance, love, and respect that they deserve as a fellow child of God.

In this, we see that while it is right and good for the "freedomist" to live according to their "strong" and biblically accurate conscience, there is something even more important. If the "freedomist" truly is more mature in their understanding of the Christian faith, and especially grace, they will limit the exercise of their freedom in order to exercise love toward the "legalist."

Here we would offer one final exhortation concerning the state of our conscience. While we noted above that God would have those with a "weak" conscience, obtain a "stronger" one, He also wants those with a "strong" conscience to have a "clear" one. In other words, it is not enough to simply have a mature and accurate understanding of what is right and wrong, resulting in a "strong" conscience. God wants us to obey the truth as well so that we might have a "clear" conscience. That's the goal Christian: a conscience that is both "strong" and clear, and if those with a "strong" conscience do not love those with a "weak" one, they will not, or at least should not, have a clear one.

C.4.d) "Freedomists" must limit their freedom for the sake of unbelievers

The Apostle's instructions do not only apply to other Christians. In 1 Corinthians 10 he is also concerned that not only the actions of a "legalist" might hinder someone getting saved, but the insensitivity of a "freedomist" might as well. Previously in chapter 9 he had encouraged the Corinthians to follow his example in becoming **"all things to all men so that by all possible means I**

might save some" (v. 22). With this perspective in mind, he addresses the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols:

[The "freedomist" Corinthians were saying] **"Everything is permissible"**—[the Apostle replied] **but not everything is beneficial.** [The "freedomist" Corinthians were saying] **"Everything is permissible"**--[the Apostle replied] **but not everything is constructive. . . .**

If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience [in general, enjoy your freedom in Christ]. **But if anyone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you** [obviously because such information was evidently important to him] **and for conscience' sake-- the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours. . . .**

Do not cause anyone [specifically in this context, unbelievers] **to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the Church of God--even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.** (1 Cor 10:23, 27-29, 32-33)

While we may have the freedom to do something like drink a bottle of beer, if we have reason to believe that it will offend an unbeliever and reflect on Christ in a bad way to them, we need to limit our freedom in this context as well.

It becomes apparent that in all of these matters, love is the key. What the Apostle prayed for the Philipians would seem to be a promise (and a challenge) that is very applicable to dealing with differences of conscience between people:

This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more [even as you grow in doctrinal] **knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God (1:9-11).**

Pastoral Practices

- Ask God to bring to mind anyone you have offended recently and if so, **"go and be reconciled to your brother"** (Matt 5:24) or whomever else you have offended, whether intentionally or

not. Especially consider whether or not you have ever tried to “strengthen” the conscience of a “weaker” Christian on a particular issue. Sincerely apologize to them and affirm them in the value of the convictions they have on an “acceptable” or “debatable” issue.

- Is there anyone in your ministry who has a “weak” conscience on a particular issue? Pray for them, committing yourself to not offend them and to defend them before others if necessary.

Extras & Endnotes

A Devotion to Dad

Our Father in Heaven, we thank you so much for creating all humanity with a conscience. We especially thank you for the "still small voice" that resides in us to tell us when we are going astray. We pray that you would help us to always remain sensitive to our conscience and keep it clear of any guilt so that we can serve you effectively and confidently. We pray too that we would not be the cause of offending the conscience of another. Finally, help us to maintain peace in all our relationships so that both our conscience, and the conscience of others may be free of any turmoil and that the harmony that you desire, both in us and around us, may be enjoyed.

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) What is a verse of Scripture that speaks about the importance of a Christian maintaining a clear conscience?
- 2) What are some reasons that it is important to keep a clear conscience?
- 3) How do we gain a clear conscience when we sin against God or others?
- 4) Why isn't every sin in our life necessarily on our conscience?
- 5) Define a "doctrinal" conviction and give an example. What helps us have unity over different "doctrinal" convictions.
- 6) Define a "debatable" conviction and give an example. What helps us have unity over different "debatable" convictions.
- 7) Define an "acceptable" conviction and give an example. Why are such convictions "acceptable"?
- 8) Why can we define what the Apostle calls a "weak" brother, a "legalists"? Why can we define the "strong" as a "freedomist"?

- 9) What does God expect of the "legalist"? What does He expect of the "freedomist"?
- 10) What are some of the dangers of a "freedomist" trying to "liberate" a legalist?
- 11) What are some common examples of legalism in the Church today?
- 12) Why must Christians at times limit their freedom for the sake of unbelievers.

Publications & Particulars

Chapter 3.3

The Guide Inside

Private Judgment & the Interpretation of Scripture

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Primary Points

- While accurate interpretation of Scripture depends on logical reasoning more than anything else, this concept does not seem spiritual enough many.
- It is not enough to claim that Scripture is our final authority, because actually it is our interpretation of Scripture that becomes our authority.
- It does not matter whether we think our reasons for our interpretations of Scripture are adequate, but whether God does!
- The *clarity of Scripture* means that it possesses sufficient clarity, and reason possesses sufficient ability, so that most of Scripture is readily understood.
- This doctrine of *the clarity of Scripture* is the perfect balance to its counterpart, the God-ordained *authority of private judgment*. It is because God designs His revelation to be sufficiently clear, and human reason to be sufficiently able, that humans are responsible to understand and obey it.
- Like any good father, God has ensured that the real difficulty regarding His revelation will not be *understanding* it clearly, but rather, *believing* and *obeying* it completely.
- The Scriptures are already the revelation of the Spirit and we do not need another revelation of the Spirit to properly understand and apply this revelation. Scripture is not in some secret code for which we need "illumination" in order to decipher it.

A) Explaining *Private Judgment* & the Interpretation of Scripture

In chapter 3.1 we wrote a great deal on issues related to the critical topic of human *private judgment*. This included a lengthy description and defense of the doctrine which should be read before continuing in this chapter.¹⁵⁰ There we concluded that our human *private judgment* is the bedrock of how we authenticate, accept, and decide what or who we will trust and value enough to exercise authority over our beliefs, attitudes, desires, and actions. As we have also noted, in our view, *private judgment* transcends other forms of foundational authentication and authority such as the Papacy in Roman Catholicism, a “testimony of the Spirit” in Calvinism, and mere Scripture in Evangelicalism. The first and third proposed foundations of authority require reasoning to authenticate and accept and are therefore not the most foundational. The second option doesn’t exist.¹⁵¹

Here, we wish to discuss how the immense authority of human *private judgment* applies to even the very important responsibility of interpreting Scripture. Again, while traditionally Roman Catholics have made such things the province of the pope, and Reformed theologians have claimed some immediate supernatural “illumination” of the Spirit, on the contrary, these things are ultimately determined by a person’s own logical reasoning, a concept that does not seem spiritual enough for most, but is the most honest reality. Nonetheless, Baptist theologian Millard Erickson has written:

[A] question arises concerning the relationship between biblical authority and reason. Is not some conflict possible here? Ostensibly the authority is the Bible, but various means of interpretation are brought to bear on the Bible to elicit its meaning. If reason is the means of interpretation, is not reason, rather than the Bible, the real authority, since it in effect comes to the Bible from a position of superiority?

¹⁵⁰ For an important description and defense of the doctrine of *private judgment* see section 3.1.C. For a further defense see chapter 3.5 as well, which provides further examples of the error that can be made in theology if this reality is not recognized.

¹⁵¹ For an introduction to these optional sources of foundational authority see section 3.1.C. For further discussion regarding the Roman Catholic papacy see chapter 13.7. Regarding the “testimony of the Spirit” see chapter 3.4.

Here a distinction must be drawn between legislative authority and judicial authority. In the U.S. federal government, the houses of Congress produce legislation, but the judiciary (ultimately the Supreme Court) decides what the legislation means. They are separate branches of government, each with its own appropriate authority.

This seems to be a good way to think of the relationship between Scripture and reason. Scripture is our supreme legislative authority. It gives us the content of our belief and of our code of behavior and practice. Reason does not tell us the content of our belief, it does not discover [divine revelatory] truth. .

When we come to determine the message's meaning, however, and at a later stage, assess its truth, we must utilize the power of reasoning. We must employ the best methods of interpretation or hermeneutics. . . . While there is a dimension of the self-explanatory within Scripture, Scripture alone will not give us the meaning of Scripture. There is therefore no inconsistency in regarding Scripture as our supreme authority in the sense that it tells us what to do and believe, and employing various hermeneutical and exegetical methods to determine its meaning.¹⁵²

A.1) Our Reason's Interpretation of Scripture is Our Authority

It would be a mistake to think that a discussion of the place of reason in making decisions is merely an academic or philosophical one. On the contrary, it is very important and practical in the Christian life, particularly as it relates to our relationship with Scripture. It is helpful here to remember our definition for *private judgment* established in chapter 3.1: *the God-given authority delegated to human reason to ultimately decide what we will believe and do.*¹⁵³ This includes how we will interpret the divine revelation of Scripture. Accordingly, we have written elsewhere:

While God has supernaturally revealed Scripture, He has not revealed a divinely authoritative interpretation of Scripture. Rather, we *read* it with our God-given physical faculties, and

¹⁵² Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., (Baker, 1998), 282-3.

¹⁵³ For an important description and defense of the doctrine of *private judgment* see section 3.1.C.

each statement is a fact that is interpreted by our God-given reason based on common sense principles of interpretation. . .

This, of course, partly explains why equally Spirit-filled Christians have a wide variety of interpretations of the one revelation of Scripture, instead of a more universal and unanimous interpretation a direct revelation from the Holy Spirit would provide. It is because the Holy Spirit has *revealed* Scripture that we have only one Gospel of Matthew; it is because the correct understanding of Scripture is a matter of human *private judgment* that we have many different and often conflicting interpretations of the Gospel of Matthew exercising authority over Christians' lives. ¹⁵⁴

The God-given place of our *Spirit-liberated reason* in interpreting and applying Scripture is often misunderstood. Accordingly, we noted in chapter 3.1:

The Presbyterian theologian Donald Bloesch writes: "The Bible is the Word of God in all that it teaches, though this teaching is not immediately self-evident but must be unveiled by the Spirit." The impression here is that our *Spirit-liberated reason* is not adequate to understand the full meaning of Scripture, but that a separate, additional *revelation* from the Spirit is necessary.

To the contrary, we would like to emphasize that *Spirit-liberated reason* is the most important tool for accurately interpreting and applying God's revelation in Scripture. We suggest that some supposed "illumination of the Spirit" ¹⁵⁵ should better be understood as *Spirit-liberated reason*. In other words, the Spirit is not in the business of constantly telling us how to interpret and apply Scripture, but rather, God has delegated such authority to a Christian's *Spirit-liberated reason* ¹⁵⁶ which has already been "fixed" by the Holy Spirit in spiritual regeneration enabling it to now properly interpret, apply, adore, and obey Scripture. ¹⁵⁷

While some may be looking for and praying for some new direct divine revelation to enable them to properly interpret and apply the

¹⁵⁴ Quoted from section 2.5.E.

¹⁵⁵ For further discussion regarding a supposed "illumination of the Spirit" for the interpretation of Scripture see chapter 3.5.

¹⁵⁶ For further discussion of what we mean by *Spirit-liberated reason* see chapters 4.15-16.

¹⁵⁷ Excerpt from section 3.1.C.4.d.

revelation of Scripture, the Apostle simply told Timothy, **"Do your best to . . . correctly handle the word of truth"** (2 Tim 2:15). Such instruction would seem meaningless if there was, in fact, some special supernatural "illumination" available to enable Timothy for his task. The Apostle says nothing about Timothy's need to seek additional revelation in order to understand the revelation of Scripture, but rather, implies that it is Timothy's responsibility to use his best judgment in order to **"correctly"** interpret, apply, and teach the Scriptures.

For example, when we read Christ saying, **"If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away"** (Matt 5:29), it is not some immediate, personal revelation from the Spirit that informs us that Christ is speaking hyperbolically, but rather our *Spirit-liberated reason*. All of the rules of sound interpretation are based on sound logic and reason.

And again, it is not enough to claim that Scripture is our final authority, because actually it is our *interpretation* of Scripture that becomes our authority. This is clearly demonstrated in the fact that we have a multitude of different denominations consisting of people who have personally decided for various reasons on varying interpretations, emphases, and applications of Scripture. Such decisions are made by human reason, and we will only accept and obey what we individually think is the correct understanding and response to a given portion of writing that we think is Scripture.

This is why the Apostle consistently speaks of appealing to people's moral and logical reasoning. Accordingly, he exhorts the Corinthians: **"I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say"** (1 Cor 10:15). Likewise, he writes, **"by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God"** (2 Cor 4:2), and, **"What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience"** (2 Cor 5:11). The Apostle understood that beliefs are processed by reason, and he therefore appealed to that.

Because such beliefs are stored in reason he told Timothy, **"Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of"** (2 Tim 3:14). Such beliefs, including our interpretations of the divine revelation of Scripture, are inescapably processed and produced by human reason, resulting in the God-ordained right and responsibility of human *private judgment*.

Long ago, the early Church leader Tertullian (c. 160–225), in his defense of the truth against heretics wrote of interpreting Scripture: "One's aim is carefully to determine the sense of the words

consistently with reason, which is the guiding principle in all interpretation.”¹⁵⁸ More recently, Millard Erickson has written:

With [a belief in the biblical God] as a starting point, the Christian theologian is to utilize the capacity of reasoning given by God to work out the implications of the revealed body of truth.¹⁵⁹

God provided Scripture to be interpreted and applied by reason. Accordingly, we have elsewhere noted the importance Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) placed on *private judgment* in relation to Scripture.¹⁶⁰ Specifically, John Gerstner notes that, “Edwards’ *Miscellanies* on Scripture are his most straight forward and comprehensive statement on interpreting the Bible.” In these notes Edwards scribbled:

The “reasonableness” of any given interpretation is the key to its validity. . . . What is plain to reason together with what Scripture teaches justify doctrine.¹⁶¹

In addition, Dr. Gerstner writes:

My very title, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, signifies the way Edwards did theology. Confident of the proper use of the finite and fallen human intelligence he everywhere gave a reason for his faith in biblical revelation which he expounded meticulously with one of the finest minds ever to appear in human history.¹⁶²

R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsey describe the importance of applying reason to the interpretation of Scripture because it comes to us in logical statements:

Though not a textbook in logic, the Bible assumes the validity of the law of noncontradiction on every page. Like any other document, it depends on the organon of logic for intelligible discourse. A perusal of biblical literature, especially the didactic epistles of the New Testament, reveals a high incidence of the word “therefore,” indicating a conclusion

¹⁵⁸ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 9, online at www.ccel.com.

¹⁵⁹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., (Baker, 1998), 57.

¹⁶⁰ For the view of Jonathan Edwards regarding *private judgment* and the interpretation of Scripture see section 3.1.C.3.

¹⁶¹ John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. (Berea, 1991), I.573.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, I.1.

which follows logically from stated premises . . . The declarative sentences of the Bible are logical units with subjects and predicates, having an assumed logic embedded in them . . .

Again, as with the law of noncontradiction, the law of causality is not only assumed in science and philosophy but is everywhere assumed by Scripture. The Bible offers no theory of causality but assumes its validity at numerous points. Just as the Bible uses the rationally loaded word “therefore,” so it also uses the causally loaded word “because.”¹⁶³

One of the most troublesome issues throughout the history of the Christian Church has been the various interpretations that have been given to Scripture. For example, any detailed commentary will readily demonstrate that there is hardly a single verse of God’s word for which its proper interpretation has not been disputed by Christians. While both the divine Author and the human author of a biblical text obviously intended one meaning, often times the text seems to yield different interpretations to equally regenerated, sincere, and intelligent readers.

Because the ministry of the Holy Spirit does not necessarily include providing absolute certainty of all of our interpretations of Scripture, we are left to our reason, much like a jury in a courtroom, weighing the available evidence in order to gain a reasonably certain, although not absolutely certain, verdict. None of this is to deny the *clarity of Scripture* that will be discussed below, but simply to recognize that because Christians must interpret Scripture for themselves, there is some variety in those interpretations.

As the popular theologian Wayne Grudem says:

It is not wrong to use human understanding, human logic, and human reason to draw conclusions from the statements of Scripture. Nevertheless, when we reason and draw what we think to be correct logical deductions from Scripture, we sometimes make mistakes.¹⁶⁴

A.2) We are Accountable for Our Interpretation of Scripture

¹⁶³ R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsey, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Academie Books, 1984), 81-2, 84-5.

¹⁶⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 34.

How do we define heresy? When we consider the fact that there are sincere, intelligent, and *professing* Christian scholars who deny that Christ claimed to be God in the Scriptures, several important questions come to mind. When does one have a sinful interpretation of Scripture as opposed to simply a wrong one?¹⁶⁵ At what point is Scripture clear enough that we become morally responsible, even with our human limitations, to know the correct interpretation? Are the Scriptures clear enough on some issues to label certain interpretations as sin? If so, who decides?

It becomes evident again, that several aspects of *private judgment* apply. God leaves us to our conscience and reason and will appropriately judge us for how we use them. For example, if He deems that the evidence in Scripture for the deity of Christ is clear enough for any sincere person to recognize, then we would suggest that those who deny it will have to answer to God the Son for that.

The principle is similar to that which God exercises in relation to Creation. Regardless of how humans may argue that the message in the created order is not clear enough to draw a conclusion that there is a God, He will nonetheless judge them for not using their reason correctly in order to draw the right and expected conclusion that there is a God. As we have written before, *in the end, it does not matter whether we think our reasons for our decisions are adequate, but whether God thinks our reasons are adequate!* This applies to our interpretations of Scripture as well.

¹⁶⁵ Reformed theologian John Frame's suggested answer to "What is heresy?" is as follows:

Is it sinful to hold the wrong view about limited atonement, for example? Holding a wrong view about this (or any doctrine) would be sinful only if (1) the person has the Bible in his own language, presented at a level suited to his mental capacity, (2) he has had the time and resources to come to a correct conclusion, and (3) he has nevertheless willfully rejected the truth (at some level of his thinking).

We should be gentle with those who differ from us; they may not be rebellious or sinful in their disagreement, only immature (in other respects they may surpass us). And, of course, we must always recognize the possibility that we may be wrong, that a brother or sister who disagrees may have something to teach us. (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* [Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987], 21).

Unfortunately, Dr. Frame picks a particularly sticky issue (limited atonement) for an example and seems to be assuming that there is clearly a right view of it that should be seen by all. Still, his thoughts have value.

The early Church Father Irenaeus (c. 180) recognized this very thing even considering the relatively minor issue of the correct interpretation of the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18:

Others then received this reading without examination; some in their simplicity, and upon their own responsibility, making use of this number expressing one decad; while some, in their inexperience, have ventured to seek out a name which should contain the erroneous and spurious number.

Now, as regards those who have done this in simplicity, and without evil intent, we are at liberty to assume that pardon will be granted them by God. But as for those who, for the sake of vainglory, lay it down for certain that names containing the spurious number are to be accepted, and affirm that this name, hit upon by themselves, is that of him who is to come; such persons shall not come forth without loss, because they have led into error both themselves and those who confided in them.¹⁶⁶

Those are words to ponder, and they demonstrate the authority that the early Church believed God has granted our reason and *private judgment*. They also remind us of the warning we read in James, **“Not many of you should presume to be Teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly”** (James 3:1).

Such a perspective regarding **“disputable matters”** (Rom 14:1) such as the interpretation of Scripture is reflected when the Apostle says: **“He who regards one day as special [because of his interpretation and application of Scripture], does so to the Lord. He who eats meat [because of his interpretation and application of Scripture], eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God”** (Rom 14:6). If your conscience confirms that you are putting God first, fearing and loving Him, rather than fearing man and loving yourself, then your decision in a “disputable matter” may be acceptable to God, even if, ultimately, you’re wrong, including, it would seem, in some of our interpretations of Scripture.

¹⁶⁷

Nonetheless, our interpretations of Scripture will be evaluated by God. As the Apostle said to one Bible Teacher, **“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who**

¹⁶⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.30, online at www.ccel.com.

¹⁶⁷ For further discussion of “disputable matters” in relation to our conscience see section 3.2.C.

does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). Notice that Teachers like Timothy will present their handling, (which certainly includes interpretation), of Scripture before God and that there is the possibility of suffering disapproval and shame for how the Word was interpreted and taught.

The Reformers, of course, had this same attitude toward the interpretation of Scripture. As we noted in a previous chapter, Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote:

Let me say once and for all that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these [Schwabach doctrinal] articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again in the light thereof, and have wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I have now defended the sacrament of the altar. I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the Last Judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let no one make this out to be a joke or idle talk; I am in dead earnest.

¹⁶⁸

Luther said this in reference to his teaching that when Christ said "**This is My body**" (Matt 26:26) in regard to the bread of communion, that He intended for us to take Him rather literally and believe that the bread was not just bread, but simultaneously the physical presence of Christ.¹⁶⁹ Luther's fellow reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), however, insisted that Christ merely intended for the bread to symbolize His physical presence. Nonetheless, Luther taught it with conviction, used his *private judgment* to arrive at it, and understood he was accountable to God for it.

¹⁶⁸ Martin Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* Timothy F. Lull ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 62-3.

¹⁶⁹ John Gerstner adds regarding Luther's interpretation of the Eucharist:

We call this [interpretation] profoundly rational because of the way Luther defended his apparent irrationalism. Oecolampadius asked him what more would be accomplished by Christ's corporeal presence in the eucharist than by His spiritual presence. Luther admitted that he did not know. But, if Christ commanded him to eat dung he would do it, knowing it was good for him. Sweet reasonableness! Luther could not have been more rational. The only question for any rational person is whether God has spoken and what He has said. Luther, wrongly we think, supposed that Christ meant that the bread He held was His body. If the Son of God did mean that, what rational man could disbelieve it? (*The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. [Berea, 1991], I.36).

More important than answering the question of which one is right, we would ask if God was equally pleased with both interpretations? Is the issue a “disputable matter,” and had each man used his reason correctly to reach his own conclusions, therefore each being perfectly acceptable to God? No mortal this side of Heaven can answer that question with absolute certainty, but these are the core issues in our responsibility to interpret and apply God’s word correctly.

The accountability of *private judgment* concerning the interpretation of Scripture is also reflected in the attitude of J. I. Packer regarding the correct interpretation of what “**all Israel**” means in Romans 11:26. After describing several opinions including his own, he writes: “But a good argument can be made for each option and it is for each of us to decide which we think fits the context best.”¹⁷⁰ Elsewhere, Dr. Packer lists the convictions that we must have concerning Scripture and among them is the belief that:

I must be ready to give account of my interpretative encounters with Scripture not just to my human and academic peers but to God himself, who will one day require this of every theologian and of me among them. This is to say that I must follow my method responsibly as one who must answer for what I do.¹⁷¹

As we have discussed further elsewhere, along with the God-ordained authority of our *private judgment* will be God-ordained accountability as well.¹⁷²

Dr. Packer’s honesty reminds us that the interpretation of some portions of Scripture is obviously a “**disputable matter.**” Can any human say for certain what God meant for us to understand when the Apostle wrote: “**Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?**” (1 Cor 15:29)? It is little wonder that NT scholar Gordon Fee claims that, “at least forty different solutions have been suggested” for the meaning of this verse.¹⁷³ While this may be an extreme case, there

¹⁷⁰ J. I. Packer, *Honoring the Written Word of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer*, Vol. 3 (Paternoster, 1999), 212.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁷² For the importance of divine accountability in the use of *private judgment* and how this distinguishes it from postmodern perspectives see section 3.1.C.4.f.

¹⁷³ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1987), 762.

are a myriad of other verses for which its correct interpretation is legitimately a disputable matter and the authority and responsibility of *private judgment* prevails. Accordingly, **"Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind,"** (Rom 14:5) that their interpretation is legitimate.

However, it is also important to note the accountability that is incurred when we decide *not* to confidently interpret Scripture. While this may be a legitimate approach to the Apostle's statement concerning baptism for the dead, we deplore the inexcusable popularity of labeling large portions of Scripture as "too obscure," or "too controversial" and too quickly assuming that God did not intend for us to interpret such passages accurately. There are a number of issues that contemporary Church leaders are choosing *not* to form convictions on and simply leave it to their flocks to decide for themselves. Again, while this may be legitimate for a few passages of Scripture, any God-appointed Teacher must be careful not to allow the fear of men, or apathy over God's word, to keep them from having and teaching the doctrinal convictions that God is expecting.

The suggestion that each person has the God-given right and responsibility to interpret Scripture may lead some to assume that God will condone a wide variety of interpretations. Such is not the case. God has designed both divine revelation and human reason such that accurate communication occurs between them rather automatically. Accordingly, the King told an audience: **"Why is My language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire"** (John 8:43-44). The communication problem was not because of obscurity in the revelation or the physical and mental inability of the people to understand that revelation. God had done His part. The problem was the sinful desires of the people and their intentional suppression of the God-given means for such communication to occur.

A.3) The Clarity of Scripture

This introduces what is known as *the clarity of Scripture*.¹⁷⁴ Essentially, this historic belief of the Church claims that divine revelation in Scripture possesses sufficient clarity, and that human reason possesses sufficient ability, so that Scripture is readily

¹⁷⁴ Theologians commonly refer to the *clarity of Scripture* as *perspicuity*.

understood by humans.¹⁷⁵ Accordingly, the Apostle Paul writes the Corinthians:

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the [simplicity¹⁷⁶] and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

¹³ For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, ¹⁴ as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus. (2 Cor 1:12-14)

The "**simplicity**" and clarity with which the Apostle wrote included both Corinthian epistles which contain some of the most

¹⁷⁵ We would suggest that our definition of the *clarity of Scripture* is better than the one suggested by the respected Reformed theologian John Armstrong who writes: "Basically, "perspicuity" (or clarity) means the Bible is self-interpreting as to its essential truths." ("The Authority of Scripture" in *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible* [Soli Deo Gloria, 1995], 136). Again, we would insist that nothing is "self-interpreting" and such a statement seems dishonest about the place that subjective human reasoning plays in even Dr. Armstrong's interpretation of Scripture.

¹⁷⁶ There is some debate as to the correct original word in the text of 2 Corinthians 1:12. Some manuscripts have *halotēti* which means "**simplicity**" (e.g. ESV, KJV, NKJV). Other manuscripts have *hagiotēti* which means "**holiness**" (e.g. NASB, RSV, NIV 84). C. K. Barrett admits that "The words, especially when written in Greek uncials, look much alike [and] confusion would be easy (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [Hendrickson, 1997], 68). Translations such as "**frankness**" (NRSV), "**honest**" (NLT, NCV), and "**integrity**" (NIV) do not reflect either.

Nevertheless, most commentators see reasons to confidently choose *halotēti* ("simplicity") as the correct reading. Dr. Barrett writes: "Paul is defending himself against a charge of duplicity, and an appeal to singleness of mind is particularly appropriate" (71). Paul Barnett adds "In our view [*halotēti*: "simplicity"] is probably to be preferred as better suited to the context and, moreover, recurring in 2 Corinthians (8:2; 9:11, 13; 11:3; cf. 4:2), whereas [*hagiotēti*: "holiness"] is not used elsewhere by Paul" (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 1997], 92). Albert Barnes and William Tyndale agreed (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Findex.Com, 1999). As did Charles Hodge (*Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*; online at www.ccel.com) and John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries*; online at www.ccel.com).

difficult passages in all of Scripture to correctly understand.¹⁷⁷ This is similar to what the Apostle says later in the same epistle: **"We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God"** (4:2).

This doctrine of *the clarity of Scripture* is the perfect balance to its counterpart, the God-ordained *authority of private judgment*. It is because God designs His revelation to be sufficiently clear, and human reason to be sufficiently able, that humans are responsible to understand and obey it.

In Scripture, God intended to provide a *revelation* of truth, not a mystery or puzzle. In pagan and postmodern religions obscure mysteries are what real divine revelations are made of. In authentic Christianity, divine mysteries are meant to be revealed, understood, and widely taught (cf. 15:51; Rom 11:25; 16:25; Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 6, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; 1 Tim 3:16; Rev 1:20).¹⁷⁸

Contrary to postmodern theology, our Father wants to *teach* us, not simply give us a bunch of things to debate about. He is not the author of confusion or gray areas, as those are the devil's playground. Contrary to postmodernism which glories in doubts, paradoxes, opinions, and ignorance, God knows how to communicate clearly and effectively, desires to do so, and has done so in the objective text of Scripture.

Accordingly, the early Church Father Chrysostom (c. 347–407), said:

¹⁷⁷ It can be noted here that 2 Peter 1:20 does not provide biblical evidence against the *right of private judgment* as it does not mean that Scripture cannot be interpreted by the individual. The context makes it clear that it is speaking of the "**origin**" of prophecy (cf. v. 21)- not its interpretation.

Some may see a contradiction in 2 Peter 3:16 where we read:

He [Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

However, the Apostle never implies that understanding him will never require careful study. This would not mean, however, that it is not understandable. Accordingly, the Apostle wrote Timothy: **"Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this"** (2 Tim 2:7).

¹⁷⁸ For further discussion of the different perspectives on spiritual mysteries between authentic Christianity and pagan religion see section 12.7.B.

The Prophets and the Apostles . . . established for all the things that are sure and clear, inasmuch as they are the common Teachers of the whole world so that each person by himself or herself might be able to understand what was said from the reading alone.¹⁷⁹

As Martin Luther once put it:

The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and adviser in heaven and on earth. That is why his words could have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call the written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue.¹⁸⁰

The Christian philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) wrote: "There is enough clarity in the Bible to enlighten the elect, and enough obscurity to humble them."¹⁸¹ Finally, Mary Queen of Scots said to John Knox: "You interpret the Scriptures in one manner, and they interpret it in another; whom shall I believe?" Knox answered: "You shall believe God, that plainly speaketh in His word . . . the word of God is plain in the self; and if there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, which is never contrarious to himself, explains the same more clearly in other places, so there can be no doubt, except for those who obstinately remain ignorant."¹⁸²

It is the Father's way and will to teach His children well, and He does this through providing a written revelation with a rather obvious and unambiguous meaning, designed to be rather readily understood by our *Spirit-liberated reason* which He also designed. Like any good father, God has ensured that the real difficulty regarding His revelation will not be *understanding* it clearly, but rather, *believing* and *obeying* it completely.

A.4) Reason's Ability to Apply Scripture

Accordingly, we would suggest that the authority of *private judgment* applies equally to the application of Scripture. Again, we

¹⁷⁹ Herman Bavink, *Prolegomena, Church Dogmatics* (Baker, 2003), 56.

¹⁸⁰ Martin Luther, *Concerning the Letter and the Spirit*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy Lull ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 78-9.

¹⁸¹ Quoted by Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Intervarsity, 2011), 102.

¹⁸² Ibid.

do not want to diminish what it means when we say that “God spoke to our need through the Scriptures.” Still, such a thing is often spoken of as some additional and separate “illumination” or revelation of the Spirit. Scripture does not teach such a thing.

For example, after the Apostle Paul relates some analogies about ministry to Timothy, he adds, “**Reflect** [*noei*: “contemplatively think over”] **on what I am saying** [writing], **for the Lord will give you insight into all this**” (2 Tim 2:7). How would “**the Lord . . . give . . . insight into**” what the Apostle was writing? An “illumination” by the Spirit? On the contrary, by using the God-given faculty of reason to carefully think about the meaning of the Apostle’s revelation. The reason that the Apostle attributes a resulting understanding as divine insight is not because it occurs in a mystical, miraculous way, but a mental, more regular way, in which we use the human means God has given us to understand His revelation. The Apostle does not imply or even hint that some supernatural “illumination” of the Spirit or an additional divine “inspiration” is needed to understand Scripture, but rather and simply mental reflection by Timothy.

The Scriptures are already the revelation of the Spirit and we do not need another revelation of the Spirit to properly understand and apply this revelation. Scripture is not in some secret divine code for which we need supernatural “illumination” in order to decipher it. The Spirit revealed Scripture, and now it requires the diligent use of our *Spirit-liberated reason* to fully understand that revelation and to apply it. While a reference to an “illumination of the Spirit” certainly sounds more spiritual, it is an unnecessary misunderstanding of something that actually occurs more naturally for the born again Christian.¹⁸³

What is commonly ignored on the issue of interpreting and applying Scripture is the God-given and God-glorifying capability and creativity of our *Spirit-liberated reason*. Our minds are well aware of our current emotional/spiritual needs and personal circumstances, and it is not *unspiritual* to point out that our *Spirit-liberated reason* is able to make encouraging, insightful, and mind/heart transforming connections between those needs and circumstances, and what we read in Scripture or hear in a sermon. Who would really doubt that the Christian’s mind would be perfectly capable of doing this without needing additional revelation from the Spirit? We do the exact same thing constantly and correctly in all sorts of ways in every day life.

¹⁸³ For further discussion of the idea of an “illumination of the Spirit” for the correct interpretation and application of Scripture see chapter 3.5.

This seems to be another case in which God the Holy Spirit is being called upon to do something that He has already equipped us to do ourselves. While some would claim that the proper and personal application of Scripture requires a revelation of the Spirit, we would only point out that the Spirit has already “fixed” our mind such that it is now capable of producing customized applications of God’s word for us without additional revelation.

Not even the spiritual gift of teaching (cf. Rom 12:7) supernaturally enables a teacher to automatically interpret and apply Scripture more accurately than others. On the contrary, the gift, like all spiritual gifts, essentially grants a supernatural and extraordinary *desire* to properly interpret and apply Scripture. This in turn results in more diligent and careful *hard work* than most others are willing to do in order to “**do your best to . . . correctly handle the word of truth**” (2 Tim 2:15). In other words, because the diligent and careful use of *Spirit-liberated reason* is the most important thing for properly interpreting and applying Scripture, the spiritual gift of teaching grants a supernatural desire to do this very thing, resulting in more accurate, helpful, and *thoughtful* interpretations and applications of Scripture.

Accordingly, the popular Bible teacher John Piper writes:

The work of the Holy Spirit in the process of interpretation is not to add information, but to give to us the discipline to study and the humility to accept the truth we find without twisting it.

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Likewise, theologians Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis, Professors of Theology at Denver Seminary write:

Divine illumination produces no new revelation; illumination opens the mind and will to the reception of revelation [in our opinion, at the time of spiritual regeneration].¹⁸⁵

Finally, we quote the Evangelical NT scholar Grant Osborne, Professor of NT at Wheaton:

While the Spirit enables the reader to gain insight into the Word, he does not provide that information for the reader. We still must utilize our rational capacity to draw inferences from the data.

As [John] Frame [from Westminster] states, the Spirit allows us to overcome the effects of sin on the rational process. “The Spirit does not whisper to us special reasons which are not

¹⁸⁴ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Baker, 2004), 42.

¹⁸⁵ Reference unavailable.

otherwise available; rather, he opens our eyes to acknowledge those reasons which are available" (Frame 1986:234).

In other words, the Spirit makes it possible for the reader to use every faculty to discern the Word and apply it. . . . The Spirit enables us to free our minds to the text but does not whisper to us the correct answer.¹⁸⁶

A.5) The Spirit's Affect on Interpreting Scripture: *Virtue, not "illumination"*

How then does the Spirit help us interpret and apply Scripture? We believe the answer is found when the Apostle Paul writes: **"God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline"** (2 Tim 1:7 NLT).

"Fear" particularly of people can easily distort our reasoning to the proper interpretation and application of Scripture. How else can we explain the popular denial or disregard in the Church of the seriousness of sin and the reality of Hell in our proclamations of the Gospel. Has the "fear of man" enticed us to ensure that, **"the offense of the cross has been abolished"** (Gal 5:11), the very thing the Apostle denounced other "evangelists" for? For many, it is a "fear of man" that has led to the acceptance of lesbian pastors in obvious contradiction to what Scripture clearly says (cf. Lev 18:22; Rom 1:18, 22, 24, 26-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Tim 2:11-14; 1 Cor 14:33-25). The fear of criticism and desire to be popular will indeed distort our reasoning such that we can deny the clear meaning and demands of God's word.

The **"power"** that the Spirit has given us has liberated our mind from the demonic oppression through which, **"The god of this age [satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ"** (2 Cor 4:4), or the value and divine truth in Scripture either. As we discuss further elsewhere, Our *Spirit-liberated reason* is now empowered to do what it was designed to do—receive, understand, and apply the revelation of God.¹⁸⁷

"Love" needs to be the motivation and goal of all our Bible interpretation and application. If we are looking in Scripture for a justification of selfish or sinful desires, or a platform on which to arrogantly correct or legalistically control someone, we might find

¹⁸⁶ Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Intervarsity, 1991), 341.

¹⁸⁷ For further discussion of how *Spirit-liberated reason* affects our relationship with Scripture, see section 4.15.C.

all of these in Scripture. But love of the Spirit in us will not be guiding us, and we will therefore reason to an incorrect interpretation or application of God's word. It is the supernatural love for God and people that the Spirit provides that brings us to Scripture with the proper desires to understand God correctly and to obey Him completely.

Finally, "**self-control**" is especially important in properly handling Scripture for the very reason that it requires disciplined, focused, undistracted meditation (i.e. reasoning) on the text of Scripture. The Apostle Peter shares something similar regarding prayer when he writes: "**[B]e clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray**" (1 Pet 4:7). The Apostle is not suggesting here that we simply need the Spirit to pray, as if He does this for us. What he implies is that we are able and expected to pray, and that in order to do so we need to engage our mind properly. Accordingly, the Spirit can help us do this, by granting us self-control over our thoughts and the ability to focus. Likewise, it is not the Spirit Who interprets Scripture for us, but Who can help us with the love and self-control necessary for us to reason properly over Scripture. These holy, humble, and passionate desires from the Spirit are the most critical virtues for enabling our reason to correctly interpret and apply Scripture.

A.6) Reason & Translations

The issue of *private judgment* also applies to translations of Scripture. Thankfully, most modern translations have been conducted in community where the *private judgment* of each individual is rightly balanced with the desire to be substantially united with the learned opinions of others before prescribing a particular rendering of God's word. However, translations of individuals include those of Jerome (c. 345–c. 419), John Wycliffe (c. 1329–1384), Erasmus (c. 1466–1536), William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536), Martin Luther (NT 1522, OT 1534), J. B. Phillips, (*The New Testament in Modern English*, 1958, revised 1972), or paraphrases such as the very popular *Living Bible* by Kenneth Taylor (published 1971), or the more recent *The Message* by Eugene Peterson (completed in 2002). These private translations have exercised a great deal of influence in the Church, and the authors of them have all expressed their ultimate dependence on their *private judgment* for the accuracy of their translations.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ For further on Bible translation see Book 15.

In addition to this, students in seminary are often encouraged to learn the original biblical languages well enough in order to effectively use their own *private judgment* to evaluate modern translations for themselves. All of this illustrates the *foundational authority* that *private judgment* has in our relationship with Scripture.

Pastoral Practices

- Interpreting the Bible correctly is critical to the Christian life, and the most important aspect of this task for the Christian is the proper use of *hermeneutics* or rules of interpretation. Study a good book on this subject such as *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* by Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva, (Zondervan, 1994). In addition, acquire and read good commentaries to see these rules put into practice.

B) Defending *Private Judgment* & the Interpretation of Scripture

B.1) The Humble Use of *Private Judgment*

In recognizing the God-ordained authority of *private judgment* we do not wish to promote dissension, arrogance, or heresy. It is not just any kind of *private judgment* that God has ordained or approves. Rather, *private judgment* was divinely designed to only work properly in an atmosphere of love, humility, and the fear of God.

Along these lines, in the context of human *private judgment*, the Apostle Paul writes in conclusion: **"So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God"** (Rom 14:22). The Apostle reminds us that not all of the personal convictions of our *private judgment* should be shared with others. **"These things"** in Romans 14 included the debate over the Jewish food laws and special days. What **"these things"** will be for us is best determined by doing **"everything in love"** (1 Cor 16:14).

As we have written briefly in the previous chapter, love for others, instead of love for our opinions, must always be our guide as to whether or not our opinion on a debatable matter should be shared with others. One of the most knowledgeable Christians who ever lived wrote: **"If I . . . can fathom all mysteries and all**

knowledge . . . but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor 13:2). While we are responsible to use our *private judgment* in obtaining our personal convictions, we do not automatically have the liberty or responsibility to share those convictions with others.

The Apostle also wrote, "**Only [say] what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen**" (Eph 4:29). As we have noted elsewhere:

Perhaps the proper relationship between the enormous authority God has delegated to our *private judgment*, and our need to exercise it with virtue, was best expressed by Martin Luther, a champion of *private judgment*, who famously wrote in his tract, *Concerning Christian Liberty*:

A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.¹⁸⁹

Immediately we see the need for humility if our *private judgment* is to be exercised as God intended. While the God-given authority of our *private judgment* is considerable, it is not infallible. Only the Lord knows how many errors in our convictions will be revealed on "**that Day**." The Apostle warned: "**Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies**" (1 Cor 8:1), reminding us that arrogance is the worst of all potential results of pursuing a greater knowledge of even sacred things. Likewise, Solomon the Wise wrote it is, "**A fool [who] finds no pleasure in understanding, but delights in airing his own opinions**" (Prov 18:2). In asserting the God-ordained authority of *private judgment* we do not wish to advocate arrogance, but rather personal responsibility.

Along these lines, J. I. Packer adds an important word regarding the importance of humility in the exercise of our *private judgment*:

The Reformation is often misrepresented as having taught the right of private judgment of Scripture in terms of the Christian's being privileged to disagree with the church, the Bible, and every external authority if his heart moves him so to do. In fact, the Reformers taught the duty of private judgment, in the sense that no adult may take his or her faith secondhand, but all must accept the discipline of verifying from Scripture whether what they have been told is so.

The Christian's conscience . . . as Luther memorably declared at Worms in 1521, is and must be subject to the Word of God—which means the teaching of Holy Scripture, which is God's own teaching about Himself and about us.

¹⁸⁹ Quoted from section 3.1.C.3.

Humility in private judgment means that one keeps searching the Scriptures until one is clear as to what God says, and that one forbids one's own proud intellect to close issues that the God of the Bible leaves open, or to jump to conclusions on matters about which Scripture does not speak, or to decline to take help in interpreting Scripture from Christian tradition, on the supposition that a godly Bible student gets on perfectly well without such help.¹⁹⁰

As Dr. Packer implies, humility will dictate that we seek counsel from others on any decision we are making, which can only enhance our *private judgment*. Accordingly, our God-given right to *private judgment* does not negate the God-ordained place of gifted teachers in the Church to help us understand and apply Scripture. From God's perspective, this right does not equal independence, but actually demands interdependence if it is to be used correctly.

B.2) The Freedom of *Private Judgment* is God's Way

Many in the Church today discount the God-ordained right of *private judgment* for the same reasons they neglect teaching, promoting, and practicing grace: they are afraid it will lead to more sin. But God's gift and delegation of *private judgment* for humans, like His grace, is not for those who want to rebel more, but who want to please Him more. And like grace, *private judgment* empowers us to do so.

Few things are as ironic and unfortunate today as the high praise that Martin Luther receives from Protestant theologians for using his *private judgment* against the interpretations of God's word in his day, contrasted with their criticism of this very thing today. We would suggest that it seems both inconsistent and dishonest to uphold this right when the results are to their liking, but then deny the God-ordained authority of *private judgment* when people come to different conclusions than their own. We realize, just as the Reformers did, that respecting the God-given authority of *private judgment* opens the way to all kinds of erroneous and conflicting opinions in the Church. However, we have more confidence in God's design of, and intentions for, our *Spirit-liberated reason*, and as a result, there will be less error than is feared.

The oldest and most influential opposition to *private judgment* in the Church has come from Roman Catholicism. Their doctrine of the infallibility of the pope not only denies this right to all others,

¹⁹⁰ J. I. Packer, *Truth & Power* (Harold Shaw, 1996), 297

but hypocritically and illegitimately gives it to one person.¹⁹¹ As discussed further elsewhere, traditional Romanism flat out denies the God-given *clarity of Scripture* and the God-given ability of the Christian's *Spirit-liberated reason*, and therefore, the God-given right and duty of individual Christians to interpret Scripture.¹⁹²

Roman Catholicism's concern has been a real one, namely, the abuse of such individual authority. However, the limitation of the Christian's freedom for the purpose of avoiding error has not been God's way. Accordingly, the respected Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) is honest about both the risks and the reality of the God-ordained place of *private judgment* in relation to Scripture when he writes:

The teaching of the perspicuity of Scripture is one of the strongest bulwarks of the Reformation. It also most certainly brings with it its own serious perils. Protestantism has been hopelessly divided by it, and individualism has developed at the expense of the people's sense of community. The freedom to read and to examine Scripture has been and is being grossly abused by all sorts of groups and schools of thought.

On balance, however, the disadvantages do not outweigh the advantages. For the denial of the clarity of Scripture carries with it the subjection of the layperson to the priest, of a person's conscience to the church. The freedom of religion and the human conscience, of the church and theology, stands and falls with the perspicuity of Scripture. It alone is able to maintain the freedom of the Christian; it is the origin and guarantee of religious liberty as well as of our political freedoms.

Even a freedom that cannot be obtained and enjoyed aside from the danger of licentiousness and caprice is still always to be preferred over a tyranny that suppresses liberty. In the creation of humanity, God himself chose this way of freedom, which carried with it the danger and actually the fact of sin as well, in preference to forced subjection. Even now, in ruling the world and governing the church, God still follows this royal road of liberty. It is precisely his honor that through freedom he nevertheless reaches his goal, creating order out of disorder, light from darkness, a cosmos out of chaos.

¹⁹¹ For further discussion regarding the Roman Catholic doctrine of Papal Infallibility see section 13.7.A.

¹⁹² For further discussion on Romanism's historical denial of the right of *private judgment* see section 3.1.C.3.

Rome . . . believes that the Holy Spirit teaches infallibly only through the agency of the pope. The Reformation, however, believes that the Holy Spirit indwells the heart of every believer, that every child of God shares in the anointing of the Holy One. It therefore puts the Bible in the hands of everyone, translates and distributes it, and in church uses no other language than the vernacular.¹⁹³

As noted elsewhere, not even the man accepted by the Roman Church to be their greatest theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), fully supported Rome's view when he wrote: "No one should decidedly adhere to an exposition of Scripture that with sure reason is ascertained to be false . . . in order that, from this, Scripture not be derided by the infidels."¹⁹⁴

B.3) Private Judgment Does Not Exclude the Spirit

Some claim that promoting the place of reason in the proper interpretation and application of Scripture is not "spiritual" enough. Again, our view is that the Holy Spirit has miraculously "fixed" our reason so that it can now function to accurately and effectively interpret and apply Scripture. Along these lines, James White comments:

For many, the guidelines we have noted regarding sound hermeneutic practice seem sterile, scholarly, and anything but spiritual. However, are we really banishing the Spirit when we make a commitment to fully use our minds in honestly handling the Word?

First, I truly believe that only the Spirit of God motivates a person to make such a commitment from the start. It is God-honoring to say, "I do not wish to put words in God's mouth; I wish to hear Him clearly, so that I may be conformed to His truth, changed by the Word's ministry in my soul, and found obedient to His will." The natural man has no such desire.

Second, perseverance to work through the difficult issues so as to bring God's truth to God's people (i.e., the work of the elder who teaches and preaches) is likewise as spiritual an

¹⁹³ Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena, Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (Baker, 2003), 477-9.

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas quoted in Donald G. Bloesch, *The Ground of Certainty* (Eerdmans, 1971), 35.

activity as one can possibly imagine. It is far easier to adopt the words of someone else, tell a series of heart-touching stories, and call it "good." Serious, intensive, long-term ministry of the Word in the context of the church takes a tremendous work of the Spirit, and when you see a man of God who has persevered in this work, do not praise him, but instead praise the One who has made him faithful.¹⁹⁵

So there are a myriad of ways that the Spirit is actively involved in our relationship with Scripture without having to suggest that He reveals or controls its interpretation or application for us.

B.4) The Unnecessary Doubting of Postmoderns

The divine design of revelation and reason is completely ignored by postmodern philosophers who suggest that humans cannot and should not be certain of their interpretation of Scripture. For example, Dr. Stuart Hackett, Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Trinity, rightly recognizes the need for humans to interpret Scripture for themselves, but then seems to deny their ability to confidently do so when he writes:

It is important to acknowledge and even insist that, since not even the most sympathetic and thoughtful reader of the Bible can reasonably claim unexceptionably that he is in possession of this ideally correct interpretation-and since there is no way to be incorrigibly certain that one has adequately identified, much less sufficiently considered, the total relevant context in his careful interpretation of Scripture-it follows that no interpreter can do more than claim, for his own understanding of Scripture, an approximation to that divinely authoritative and objective truth that an ideally correct interpretation would in principle provide.¹⁹⁶

Dr. Hackett's error is illustrated by the fact that if he was consistent in his epistemology he would also need to insist that his interpretation of the Gospel of Christ is only "an approximation" of its correct interpretation, because the authoritative source of the Gospel is Scripture. He has gone too far in emphasizing our humanness because he has ignored both the God-given *clarity of*

¹⁹⁵ James White, *Scripture Alone: Exploring The Bible's Accuracy, Authority, And Authenticity* (Bethany House, 2004), 94.

¹⁹⁶ Stuart Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim* (Baker, 1984), 260.

Scripture and God-given ability of *Spirit-liberated reason*. While we would agree that a relatively few parts of Scripture are difficult to interpret, postmodern philosophers like Dr. Hackett erroneously and indiscriminately apply this obscurity to all of Scripture. And again, such an approach ignores God's design of Scripture and *Spirit-liberated reason* which He intended to ensure adequate communication between them.¹⁹⁷

B.5) Private Judgement vs. "A Rule of Faith"

One of the more recent and detailed attacks on the God-ordained place of *private judgment* concerning the interpretation of Scripture has come from the pen of the Reformed scholar Keith Mathison. His book, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, has been endorsed by the popular theologian R. C. Sproul. This is not surprising, as Dr. Mathison is associate editor of *Table Talk* magazine from Dr. Sproul's *Ligonier Ministries*, and Academic Dean of *Ligonier Academy*.

Dr. Mathison claims that "The majority of evangelicalism has adopted"¹⁹⁸ the God-ordained place of *private judgment*. On the contrary, we would claim the majority have adopted, or at least unknowingly added, "the illumination of the Spirit" doctrine.

Throughout Dr. Mathison's book, he contrasts what he regards as the historical doctrine of *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone") with what he calls *solo Scriptura* which is interpreting Scripture through the individual's own reason. For example, he writes:

Solo scriptura results in the autonomy of the individual believer who becomes a law unto himself. Scripture is interpreted according to the conscience and reason of the individual. Everything is evaluated according to the final standard of the individual's opinion of what is and is not scriptural. The individual, not Scripture, is the real final authority according to *solo scriptura*. This is rebellious autonomy, and it is a usurpation of the prerogatives of God.¹⁹⁹

One could hardly describe the God-given authority of *private judgment* better. It is equally clear that Dr. Mathison views it as sin against Almighty God. However, in our opinion, it is the seriousness

¹⁹⁷ For further discussion of the attack of postmodern theologians on the concept of human certainty see section 2.6.A.1.

¹⁹⁸ Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Canon Press, 2001), 149.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 252.

of his accusation, rather than the force of his arguments, that demands the following rather lengthy refutation. Dr. Mathison seems to be wrong on most points, his main thesis appears to be rather meaningless, his warnings regarding the God-ordained place of *private judgment* seem rather sensational and inaccurate, and he offers no respectable alternative.

First, Dr. Mathison is wrong to suggest that neither Scripture,²⁰⁰ nor the Reformers supported the *right to private judgment*.²⁰¹ On the latter, for example, the author says:

Those who advocate [*private judgment*] under the banner of Martin Luther, John Calvin and the slogan *sola scriptura* [Scripture alone is our authority] do so either out of ignorance or dishonesty.²⁰²

On the contrary, in chapter 3.1 we provided numerous quotes from Church leaders throughout history, including Martin Luther, Richard Hooker, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Hodge.²⁰³ All of them supported the central place that a person's reason has in determining the meaning of Scripture.

Accordingly, while Dr. Mathison would accuse promoters of *private judgment* to be either ignorant or dishonest about the historical view of this doctrine, it would seem he is especially guilty himself of the latter when he quotes Charles Hodge at length throughout his book to support his thesis while conspicuously leaving out Hodge's clear support of *private judgment* as demonstrated elsewhere.²⁰⁴

Secondly, Dr. Mathison's main thesis that Scripture should be interpreted by a "rule of faith" is meaningless. First of all, he is confusing in how this concept is to be defined. At times he simply defines it as the contents of Scripture as when he writes:

[T]he *regula fidei* was a summary of the apostolic doctrine preserved by the Church, taught to the catechumens, and gradually inscripturated in complete form in the canonical books by the Apostles.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 157-183.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 83-123.

²⁰² Ibid., 153.

²⁰³ For historical support for the right of *private judgment*, see section 3.1.C.3.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Mathison, 273.

In other words, the “rule of faith” by which we are to interpret Scripture is Scripture. Dr. Mathison also agreeably quotes Charles Hodge who simply defines the “rule of faith” as what is plainly taught in Scripture.²⁰⁶ If Dr. Mathison is suggesting that we need to interpret Scripture with Scripture we strongly agree, but would add that we use our reason and *private judgment* to do so.

Elsewhere, he suggests this “rule of faith” that is to reign over our reason is to be found in the ancient creeds. For example, he writes:

If *sola scriptura* is true, the Scripture is to be interpreted by the Church within the hermeneutical context of the *regula fidei* or rule of faith. This rule of faith has found written expression in the ecumenical creeds [i.e. Nicene, Chalcedonian] of the Church.²⁰⁷

We noted above that for Dr. Mathison the “rule of faith” was “inscripturated in complete form in the canonical books by the Apostles.” Here he adds that it is has also, “found written expression in the ecumenical creeds.” We assume this is what he means when he later adds that, “it is therefore to the Church that we must turn for the true interpretation of the Scripture.”²⁰⁸ So, it would seem that the “rule of faith” that is to replace reason as our *final subjective authority* can be at least three different things: Scripture, creeds, and the Church.

Ironically, and rather hypocritically, Dr. Mathison’s postmillennial view of the return of Christ does not follow any of his sources for a “rule of faith.”²⁰⁹ No ancient creeds of the Church reflect postmillennialism, it has historically been a very minor view of the Church, and, in our opinion, it is not a very good interpretation of Scripture, and perhaps even a damaging one. Dr. Mathison has no honest choice but to admit that he himself has used his own *private judgment* to arrive at postmillennialism, and he has fallen into the very kind of error that he is rightfully so concerned about.

Nonetheless, Dr. Mathison claims that the “rule of faith” is the solution to what he considers to be the heresy of *private judgment*. For example, he describes the problem of various interpretations of Scripture and writes:

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 148.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 337.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 270.

²⁰⁹ See Keith Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (P & R Publishing, 1999).

Each man will claim that he bases his judgment on the authority of the Bible, but since each man's interpretation is mutually exclusive of the other's, both interpretations cannot be correct. How then do we discern which interpretation is correct?

The typical modern Evangelical solution to this problem is to tell the inquirer to examine the arguments on both sides and decide which of them is closest to the teaching of Scripture. He is told that this is what *sola scriptura* means—to individually evaluate all doctrines according to the only authority, the Scripture. Yet in reality, all that occurs is that one Christian measures the scriptural interpretations of other Christians against the standard of his own scriptural interpretation.

Rather than placing the final authority in Scripture as it intends to do, this concept of Scripture places the final authority in the reason and judgment of each individual believer. The result is the relativism, subjectivism, and theological chaos that we see in modern Evangelicalism today.

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We too lament some of the consequences of human imperfections, but Dr. Mathison has no other solution other than to essentially prescribe the ancient creeds or traditional interpretations of Scripture.

Obviously, the ancient creeds of the Church are vitally important guides to the interpretation of Scripture and should be taken into serious consideration. Nonetheless, there are several things that reduce their authority or helpfulness as well.

First, they are not any more infallible than human reason. There is nothing divinely inspired about creeds, and they are nothing more (or less!) than simply ancient summaries of historical, popular interpretations of Scripture. Similar, and perhaps even better summaries could be written today.

Secondly, their brevity as well hinders their usefulness in most of the doctrinal debates occurring today, not only because they don't address many teachings of Scripture, but their silence on an issue cannot be taken as an authoritative statement concerning it.

Dr. Mathison is also concerned that *private judgment* undermines pastoral authority in the church. He writes:

Sola scriptura [i.e. *private judgment* applied to Scripture] also undermines the legitimate ecclesiastical authority established by Christ. It negates the duty to submit to those who rule over you, because it removes the possibility of an

²¹⁰ Mathison, 240.

authoritative teaching office in the Church. To place any kind of real hermeneutical authority in an elder or teacher undermines the doctrine of *solo scriptura*.

Those adherents of *solo scriptura* who do have pastors and teachers to whom they look for leadership do so under the stipulation that the individual is to evaluate the leader's teaching by Scripture first. What this means in practice is that the individual is to measure his teacher's interpretation of Scripture against his own interpretation of Scripture. The playing field is leveled when neither the ecumenical creeds nor the Church has any more authority than the individual believer.²¹¹

Again, teachers, creeds, and the writings of the Church Fathers are all very valuable gifts of God provided to assist us in our interpretation of Scripture and must be humbly and diligently considered with a very respectful attitude. But none of them replace the God-given authority of our own *Spirit-liberated reason*. Does not Scripture say, **"The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures [with nothing more than reason and their *private judgment*] every day to see if what Paul said was true"** (Acts 17:11). God praises such activity even in the context of personally hearing an Apostle of Jesus Christ, let alone what our attitude should be toward creeds or the writings of men.

Finally, Dr. Mathison has no answer for the fact that teachers, churches, and even creeds have differed widely throughout history in their interpretations of Scripture. If they are to exercise authority over our own reason, which ones are to do so?

Like it or not, we are back to the fact that we are responsible to use our *Spirit-liberated reason* and that no other person or institution can or should replace its function in our lives. Human *private judgment* is the ultimate foundation of all other authorities that one might suggest, whether it be a pope, a creed, a pastor, the "testimony of the Spirit," or even the Bible. This is why God will hold all humanity responsible for how they used their *private judgment* to correctly assess the divine authority present in all the institutions, literature, and people which claim to speak for God.²¹²

²¹¹ Mathison, 251-52.

²¹² Again, the reader is urged to consult section 3.1.C for a fuller description and defense of the right and God-given authority of *private judgment*.

Extras & Endnotes

A Devotion to Dad

Our Father, we are humbled and sobered by the amount of freedom you grant us in our life. We recognize that with such freedom comes a great deal of responsibility. Help us to exercise our God-given decision-making faculties in a God-honoring way. Help us not to just blindly and apathetically accept the opinions of others, but neither to be arrogant and independent. We thank you today for our mind, and pray that our proper use of it would glorify You.

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) How have we defined *private judgment*?
- 2) How does Romans 14 support this doctrine?
- 3) How do the following Scriptures support this doctrine? 1 Corinthians 7:36-7; 2 Corinthians 9:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Acts 17:11; Romans 1:7.
- 4) How does *private judgment* apply to our interpretation of Scripture?
- 5) What are some problems with the idea that interpreting and applying Scripture correctly is dependent on a continual and immediate work of the Holy Spirit, rather than a result of using our *Spirit-liberated reason* that the Spirit "fixed"?
- 6) Why do we suggest that our *Spirit-liberated reason* is capable of customized applications of Scripture?
- 7) How would you articulate why the doctrine of *private judgment* is not simply an academic, philosophical issue, but an important and practical one?

- 8) What are important safeguards to the use of our *private judgment*?
- 9) What problem would postmodern philosophers have with our promotion of *private judgment* for interpreting Scripture? What was our response?
- 10) What is Dr. Keith Mathison's concerns about the *right of private judgment*? What is his solution? What do you think of his views?

Recommended Reading

- *Knowing Our God* chapter 3.1 which introduces the doctrine of the *right to private judgment*.
- *Knowing Our God* chapter 3.5 for a thorough discussion of the doctrine of an "illumination" of the Spirit which is the Protestant alternative to *private judgment* regarding the interpretation of Scripture.
- "Private Judgment" in *Practical Christianity* by Arthur W. Pink, (Baker, 1974). Unfortunately, one of the very few "modern" discussions of this vital topic.

Publications & Particulars

Chapter 3.3B

The Judge Inside

Private Judgment & the Recognition of Scripture

Overall Objective

To introduce the issues involved in establishing the foundation of the authority we grant to Scripture.

Table of Topics

A) The Problem of the Biblical Canon

B) *Private Judgment* & the Biblical Canon

C) Objections Regarding *Private Judgment* & the Biblical Canon

D) Different Approaches to the Biblical Canon

D.1) Human testimony

D.2) God's sovereignty

D.3) Self-authenticating Scripture

D.4) "Testimony of the Spirit"

D.5) All approaches ultimately depend on *private judgment*

Extras & Endnotes

Primary Points

- The question of “what is the canon?” is the same as asking “where is God’s word to us?” Hardly any question is more important.
- The foremost leaders of the early post-apostolic Church and Martin Luther testified that some of the documents in our current NT do not belong there.
- The best approach Ag to determining the correct NT canon of Scripture is the use of *private judgment* based on historical research regarding the Church’s testimony to the apostolicity of the documents.
- When God instituted divine revelation through Prophets, He made it clear that *private judgment*, through human reason, was to dictate and discern whether or not something was divine revelation (cf. Deut 18:20-22).
- Critics of the use of *private judgment* to determine what is Scripture ask “Whose reason has the right to make such a decision? The answer: Who indeed but the person who is being called upon to obey the revelation, possibly even at the cost of his own life!
- The reason that any Christian will pursue research on the canon of Scripture is to protect and promote its authority, not undermine it.
- If God led the Church in correctly recognizing the canon, then which Church did it lead? The Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Syriac, and Protestant churches differ on what documents belong in the NT. His sovereignty does not dictate or guarantee perfection.
- All of the approaches to establishing the authority of the biblical documents have human *private judgment* as their foundation.

A) The Problem of the Biblical Canon

The question of how do we know what Scripture says (hermeneutics) is obviously an important one. However, an even more fundamental question is, how do we know that God has spoken in Scripture (canonicity)? In other words, what is the method by which a Christian can know that a document, such as Micah or Matthew is direct divine revelation from God recorded by a man and having divine authority such that if we disregard or disobey it we automatically sin against God?

The question can be asked in another way as well: What is the correct "canon" of Scripture? The word "canon" is not very familiar to people outside the study of the Bible. Bruce M. Metzger, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Language and Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary tells us:

The term "canon" used with reference to the Bible means the collection of books which are received as divinely inspired and therefore [uniquely] authoritative for faith and life.²¹³

The question of "what is the canon?" is the same as asking "where is God's word to us?" Accordingly, it would be difficult to imagine a question that is more important. A conviction regarding what are the limits of this "collection" of "divinely inspired" documents is essential if we are to confidently base not only our practice on those writings, but to entrust our eternity to them as well. The information in the biblical canon tells us what is sin and what is not, telling us what our whole lives will be evaluated on by our Maker and Judge.

The significance of our confidence in the canon is well described by the popular theologian, Wayne Grudem:

The precise determination of the extent of the canon of Scripture is . . . of the utmost importance. If we are to trust and obey God absolutely we must have a collection of words that we are certain are God's own words to us. If there are any sections of Scripture about which we have doubts whether they are God's words or not, we will not consider them to have

²¹³ Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament, Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Abingdon Press, 1993), 273. Andrew Walls add in an introductory article to the popular *Expositor's Bible Commentary*:

The Greek word *kanon* means a "measuring rod." The canon of Scripture thus represents the list of writings accepted as authoritative and binding. Any concept of Scripture (i.e., a recognition of divine revelation in a written form) ultimately implies the concept of a canon that identifies and enumerates those writings. (631)

absolute divine authority and we will not trust them as much as we would trust God himself. ²¹⁴

And that is what Scripture is to the Christian. Documents we trust as much as God Himself because we believe them to be His word.

Unfortunately, there has been considerable debate in the early Church as well as today as to the correct canon of particularly the NT. This issue is illustrated in the fact that different branches of Christianity have had different Bibles. A study of the early Church (100-300 A. D.), the Syrian Church (200-present), the Roman Catholic Church (500-present), and the Protestant Church (1525-present) reveal the fact that there is some disagreement in what documents belong in the Bible. ²¹⁵ The most significant difference is perhaps that between Protestants and Roman Catholics, the latter claiming that fourteen additional documents (the Apocrypha ²¹⁶) should exercise authority over God's people. That has not seemed to matter much to Protestant Christians whose tradition has rejected these documents as having divine authority, and they have had none for millions of Christians for many centuries.

However, it is not simply the well known differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants concerning the correct contents of Scripture. Up to this point, our insistence on the importance of reason in authenticating divine revelation may seem like merely an academic, philosophical issue. Isn't the correct canon of Scripture a rather established fact? Some of the most godly and respected men in Church history have thought otherwise.

²¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 54. Underlining added.

²¹⁵ For further discussion of the differences in biblical canons throughout the history of the Church see the forthcoming Book 16.

²¹⁶ In ancient Greek the word *apokryphos* originally meant "hidden," "obscure," or "secret." By the second century, the word "apocryphal" was being used by Church Fathers such as Origen to denote religious literature, such as the counterfeit gospels of the Gnostics, which was inferior in authority to the Scriptures. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, the term Apocrypha was used to refer to a specific list of fourteen documents that the Roman Catholic Church appended to the OT at the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

These documents included 1 and 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch with the Letter of Jeremiah, Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. For further discussion see the forthcoming Book 16.

The Church Father Origen (c. 185-c. 254) was without question the greatest Bible scholar of the third century. His research concerning the correct text of Scripture is well known and resulted in a vast knowledge of the early Church's Bible. Writing around the year 240 he expressed his learned opinion on the authenticity and authority of certain NT documents and, among other things, wrote:

Peter . . . left us one acknowledged epistle, possibly two—though this is doubtful.²¹⁷

Origen was not just sharing his own opinion, but the majority view of Church leaders at the time. Based on his knowledge of the early history and widespread opinion of the NT documents, Origen never treated 2 Peter with the same authority as 1 Peter in his writings. He used reason and historical research to determine what documents were apostolic, and would therefore exercise divine authority in his life. He was not alone.

The widespread doubts regarding the apostolicity of 2 Peter remained 75 years later when Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260- c. 340), "deemed the father of Church history,"²¹⁸ and an authority on the history of the early Church second only to Luke himself, embarked on a diligent and wide ranging study of the earliest traditions concerning the authenticity and apostolic authorship of the NT documents. Around the year 315, Eusebius describes the general consensus of the Church at the time when he writes:

Of Peter one epistle, known as his first, is accepted, and this the early fathers quoted freely, as undoubtedly genuine, in their own writings. But the second Petrine epistle we have been taught to regard as uncanonical. . . .

On the other hand, in the case of the "Acts" attributed to him, the "Gospel" that bears his name, the "Preaching" called his, and the so called "Apocalypse" [of Peter], we have no reason at all to include these among the traditional Scriptures

. . .

Such are the writings that bear the name of Peter, only one of which I know to be genuine and acknowledged by the ancient elders.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. G. A. Williamson, ed. Andrew Louth, (Penguin Books, 1989), VI.25.8. (p. 202).

²¹⁸ "Eusebius," in *Who's Who in Christian History*, J. D. Douglas and Philip Comfort eds. (Tyndale House, n.d.)

²¹⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* trans. G. A. Williamson, ed. Andrew Louth, (London: Penguin Books, 1989), III. 3. (see Louth, 65-66).

Understand that Origen and Eusebius were not the obscure men they may be to modern Christians, but were among the most knowledgeable, respected, and influential Christian leaders in the first 300 years of Christianity. Hopefully, one is beginning to understand the practical importance of the issue of the God-ordained authority of *private judgment* and the value that God places on our reason. It is so valuable, in fact, that we would suggest that there is sufficient historical evidence for a careful reevaluation of the divine authority of some of the documents of the NT.

An early Church authority no less than St. Augustine (354-430) agreed. Augustine, leading the Western Church in the fifth century, seemed to recognize this authority of *private judgment* concerning the canon as well. He was well aware of the concerns that some early Church leaders had regarding a few NT documents, based on the kind of historical evidence that Origen and Eusebius had provided. Although he himself had sanctioned the current Protestant NT canon and the current Roman Catholic OT canon (including the Apocrypha), he recognized both the right and the responsibility for particularly Christian Teachers to exercise reasonable *private judgment* regarding the authority of individual documents. As a preface to his own listing of the biblical canon in his *On Christian Doctrine* he writes:

Among the canonical scriptures he [the interpreter of them] will judge according to the following standard: to prefer those [documents in the Bible] that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some of them do not receive. Again, among those which are not received by all, let him prefer those which are sanctioned by the greater number of churches and by those of greater authority to those which fewer and less authoritative churches hold. ²²⁰

Understand that this very knowledgeable and widely respected leader of a massive region of Christian churches was writing this after the NT documents had been in existence for well over 300 years. It is clear that even at this "late" date, after official councils had even decreed what they thought to be the limits of the biblical canon, that individual churches were exercising their *private judgment* themselves in regard to what was Scripture. Far from criticizing such an attitude, Augustine accepted it and even encouraged others to heed it in their own evaluations of the authenticity, and subsequent authority, of the NT documents. In

²²⁰ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.22, online at www.ccel.com.

addition, Augustine's opinion of what documents should be in the Bible was significantly different than the contents of our Bible today.
221

When we fast forward to the Reformation, we see the practice of *private judgment* in how Martin Luther (1483-1546), the founder of Protestantism, handled the NT canon. Luther flat out rejected the idea that determining the limits of Scripture depended on anything but the God-ordained place of *private judgment*. Subsequently, due to his own historical and literary research, he rejected four documents from the traditional NT canon and rejected the Roman Catholic Apocrypha as well.

Luther's concerns regarding the traditional canon are a well known piece of Reformation history. His views were first made public in his 1522 German translation of the New Testament. In the Table of Contents, he listed 23 books and assigned each a number. This list was followed by a blank space and then Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation are listed without numbers. In the Prefaces to these books, Luther describes his justification for separating these four from the others. In general it can be said that he relegated them to something less than Romans or 1 Peter because of his doubts that they were authored or authorized by Apostles.

Throughout Luther's arguments he uses evidence from early Church history to evaluate the authenticity of these NT documents. In fact he begins his discussion of the four doubted books by saying:

Up to this point we have had [to do with] the true and certain chief books of the New Testament. The four which follow have from ancient times had a different reputation. 222

Likewise, in his opening statement regarding James he states "this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients." 223 In the same way he says of James:

²²¹ Augustine accepted not only the twelve books of what we call the OT Apocrypha which is included in Roman Catholic Bibles, but also felt that:

Two books, one called Wisdom and the other Ecclesiasticus [not our Ecclesiastes], are ascribed to Solomon from a certain resemblance of style, but the most likely opinion is that they were written by Jesus the son of Sirach. Still they are to be reckoned among the prophetic books, since they have attained recognition as being authoritative. (*On Christian Doctrine*, ii. 13).

²²² *Luther's Works*, E. Theodore Bachman, ed., Vol. 35 (Concordia, 1960), 395-7.

²²³ *Ibid.*

I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God. However, to state my own opinion about it, though without prejudice to anyone, I do not regard it as the writing of an Apostle. . . . I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him.²²⁴

The underlined statement above is an excellent demonstration of human *private judgment*. And contrary to popular belief, Luther did not reject James based on his own doctrinal convictions. He said "it sets up no doctrines of men." He rejected it because "it was rejected by the ancients [Christians]" which is historically accurate.

While many would wish to relegate Luther's thinking to the pagan *rationalism* of the Enlightenment period, Luther lived a hundred years before that and opposed traces of it in the *humanism* of Erasmus (1466-1536) in his own day. Luther was not a *rationalists*, but simply and honestly recognized the God-ordained authority granted to human *private judgment*.

Some might even like to accuse Luther of sin for questioning what documents really belong in the NT. But the fact that he was not, and should not, demonstrates the recognized authority of *private judgment* in something even as vital as deciding the canon of Scripture.

As we fast-forward to 19th and 20th century liberal NT scholarship, we encounter what we believe are illegitimate challenges to the NT canon. In addition to the ancient questions about the documents noted above, it was popularly claimed that Ephesians, Colossians, and the Pastoral Epistles were not authored by the Apostle Paul. Liberal scholars generally don't have much of a problem with this, because they think these documents remain divinely authoritative even if their origin is not apostolic. Unfortunately, they don't take seriously enough their accusation that these documents were written by someone who *lied* about their authorship. Should we really trust someone who claims in a document to be a miraculously authenticated and divinely appointed Apostle, but was actually trying to deceive people about this so that his writing would have more authority? We think not.

We are somewhat reluctant to introduce such an important and potentially controversial topic without being able to finish it here with a thorough study of the historical credentials of the NT

²²⁴ Ibid.

documents. We understand that these are serious matters that must be investigated with the greatest care, as we do elsewhere.²²⁵

While the above may at first seem to throw the whole NT canon up in the air, anyone who has studied this issue knows that most of it settles back to firm earth immediately. For example, not even the most critical, unspiritual, and unreasonable liberal scholars deny that the Apostle Paul wrote Romans, as the historical evidence in the early Church for its authenticity and apostolic authority is undeniable to any reasonable person. The same is true for the vast majority of biblical documents.

However, contrary to many conservative scholars today, we do not simply brush aside the testimony of the early Church regarding the divine authority of some of the NT documents, and we suggest there is a place for a possible reevaluation of a few of them. Nonetheless, even if historically doubted documents like 2 Peter and James were excluded from the canon, it would not affect a single doctrine of the historical, orthodox, Christian Church. However, as noted above, we believe canonical issues demonstrate that this doctrine of *private judgment* is not simply an academic, philosophical issue, but rather, a very important and practical one.

B) *Private Judgment* & the Biblical Canon

In chapter 3.1 we wrote a great deal in support of the use of *private judgment* in determining and authenticating divine revelation. We will add additional support here. We have already noted that from the very beginning of God's communication with His people, God made it clear that *private judgment*, through human reason, was to dictate and discern whether or not something was divine revelation. We read of both the authority of Prophets and their recognition when God says:

[A] Prophet who presumes to speak in My name anything I have not commanded him to say . . . must be put to death. You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" If [a prediction] a Prophet proclaims in the name [and authority] of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That Prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him [or believe his words or writings represent the word of God]. (Deut

²²⁵ For a detailed study of the NT canon see the forthcoming Book 16.

18:20-22; cf. 13:1-3)

In other words, anyone speaking directly for God must miraculously and convincingly authenticate themselves as possessing such authority. And such authentication was delegated by God to the people to use their *private judgment* to evaluate someone claiming to have divine revelation. In the case of God's Prophets, they would be given the ability to supernaturally predict the future (cf. the NT Prophet Agabus, Acts 11:28; 21:10-11, 27ff.).

²²⁶ Therefore, **"If what a [self-proclaiming] prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken."** And how else would the people make such a determination apart from their reasoning and right of *private judgment*? Indeed, God's word was to possess ultimate authority for His people. Nonetheless, it was to be a human's reasoning that determined whether or not a person was God's messenger, or their statement was God's word.

We see the same authority of reason and *private judgment* being called for when the King says:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By [observing and evaluating with human reason] their fruit [life, effects] you will recognize them (Matt 7:15-16).

Likewise, the Apostle commands in the context of discerning whether or not a prophetic utterance is from God: **"Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good"** (1 Thess. 5:21). And no doubt the Apostle's reference to **"everything"** included not just people claiming divinely authoritative revelation, but documents as well, as it was this very church that would appear to have been duped by a false apostolic revelation (cf. 2 Thess 2:1-3).

Evidently, the Thessalonians needed such an exhortation to engage their reason in authenticating revelation, as we read in Acts:

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

²²⁶ For further on the biblical authentication of those with the biblical gift of prophecy see chapter 9.11.

Here we see another important test that reason must use in deciding whether or not to accept something as coming from God, namely, comparing it with previously authenticated revelation. Accordingly, the respected Reformed teacher A. W. Pink (1886-1952) observes on this passage:

Those Bereans sat in judgment upon the teaching of the Apostles! They are commended for doing so! Not only was it their privilege and duty, but it is recorded to their honour. ²²⁷

We find additional support for our approach of applying *private judgment* to determining divine revelation in the writings of the Christian philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). He was very respected in his day by theologians such as Jonathan Edwards for his defenses of the authority of human reason even in spiritual matters, and is famous for such writing even today. Accordingly, he wrote in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, "Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything." ²²⁸ More concerning our current point, Locke wrote: "To know that any revelation is from God, it is necessary to know that the messenger that delivers it is sent from God, and that cannot be known but by some credential given him by God himself." ²²⁹

Locke developed this perspective in more detail in a rather famous statement:

Whatever God hath revealed is certainly true; no doubt can be made of it. This is the proper object of faith; but whether it be a divine revelation or no, reason must judge. . . .

God when he makes the prophet does not unmake the man. He leaves all his faculties in the natural state, to enable him to judge of his inspirations, whether they be of divine original or no. When he illuminates the mind with supernatural light, he does not extinguish that which is natural. If he would have us assent to the truth of any proposition, he either evidences that truth by the usual methods of natural reason, or else makes it known to be a truth which he would have us assent to by his authority, and convinces us that it is from him, by some

²²⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *Practical Christianity* (Baker, 1974), 181.

²²⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, A. S. Pringle-Pattison ed. (Clarendon Press, 1967), IV.19.14, online at www.ilt.columbia.edu.

²²⁹ John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity with a Discourse of Miracles*, I. T. Ramsey ed. (Black, 1958), 80. (online at: www.setis.library.usyd.edu).

[supernatural] marks which reason cannot be mistaken in. Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything.

I do not mean that we must consult reason, and examine whether a proposition revealed from God can be made out by natural principles, and if it cannot, that then we may reject it; but consult it we must, and by it examine whether it be a revelation from God or no; and if reason finds it to be revealed from God, reason then declares for it as much as for any other truth, and makes it one of her dictates.

Every conceit that thoroughly warms our fancies must pass for an inspiration, if there be nothing but the strength of our persuasions, whereby to judge of our persuasions; if reason must not examine their truth by something extrinsic to the persuasions themselves, inspirations and delusions, truth and falsehood, will have the same measure, and will not be possible to be distinguished.²³⁰

In the same vein, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) described eight vital functions of human reason, the fifth being, "reason must verify any revelation as genuine."²³¹ In relating the view of Edwards, the influential Reformed theologian John Gerstner agreed that our position regarding the authority of human reason has been the historical Christian position, even though it is waning. Dr. Gerstner, an expert on Edwards, relates that the theologian believed:

To be sure, once the Bible by argument [or reason] is proven to be the Word of God there can be no more argument about the infallible authority of all of its message. Anyone at any time may return to the argument for biblical inspiration and the argument must be vindicated in the arena of debate or withdrawn. So said Jonathan Edwards and so said and says, (with a very weak voice today), the general historic Christian tradition. . . . Men receive things as truth purely because God has revealed them, yet . . . it is by the faculty of reason that men know it to be a revelation and by that faculty that they know that a divine revelation is to be depended on.²³²

²³⁰ Locke, *Understanding*, Book 4, ch. 18, part 10; ch. 19, part 14. It is unfortunate, that as William Abraham remarks, such a perspective is rare in Christian scholarship today and one must refer to Locke to find any serious discussion of it.

²³¹ John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. (Berea, 1991), I:51.

²³² Ibid.

In Charles Hodge's mind, the human reason behind the use of *private judgment* was to be used to establish the canon of Scripture through historical research. Accordingly, he wrote:

The principle on which the canon of the New Testament is determined is equally simple. Those books, and those only, which can be proved [by historical research accepted by *private judgment*] to have been written by the apostles, or to have received their sanction, are to be recognized as of divine authority. The reason of this rule is obvious. The apostles were the duly authenticated messengers of Christ, of whom He said, "He that heareth you heareth me."²³³

Likewise, the Reformed theologian B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) reflected the essence of *private judgment* when he insightfully wrote:

It is easy of course to say that a Christian man must take his standpoint not *above* the Scriptures, but *in* the Scriptures. He very certainly must. But surely he must first *have* Scriptures, authenticated to him [and accepted and approved by him] as such, before he can take his standpoint in them.²³⁴

More recently, William Abraham, Professor of Philosophy and Theology at SMU has written:

The fact is, revelation does not wear its authenticity on its face. We have to live in a situation where various religious traditions equally, sincerely, and confidently claim to speak definitively for God. Even within the Christian tradition the exact locus of revelation is disputed. This being so, we have to use our minds to decide between the options available. Once we commit ourselves, then revelation acts as a crucial criterion in our theology.²³⁵

Finally, we will quote the Christian apologist Norm Geisler on the relationship between reason and Scripture:

Of course, God's Word is ultimate and speaks for itself. But how do we know the Bible, as opposed to the *Qur'an* or the

²³³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., reprint (Hendrickson, 2003), 77.

²³⁴ Quoted by Norm Geisler in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics (BECA)* (Baker, 1999), 336.

²³⁵ William Abraham, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Prentice-Hall, 1985), 83.

Book of Mormon is the Word of God? One must appeal to evidence to determine this. No Christian would accept a Muslim's statement that "the Qur'an is alive and powerful and sharper than a two-edged sword." We would demand evidence. . . . Without evidence to establish one's claim to authority, there is no good reason to accept that authority.²³⁶

And contrary to the popular idea of the "testimony of the Spirit" apart from evidence,²³⁷ God has intended to authenticate His revelation with objective evidence. God's desire to have human reason determine the authenticity of divine revelation is consistently demonstrated in His practice of always supernaturally authenticating His appointed messengers, as briefly discussed in an earlier chapter (section 3.1.D). Accordingly, we wrote:

If God does in fact ultimately leave the decision to us as to whom or what will exercise authority in our lives, then it is important to ask what credentials do the above authorities [i.e. God the Father, the King, Apostles, etc.] possess in order to rightfully demand and expect our obedience? Briefly stated, God has ordained that *God-like deeds* are the required authentication of anyone or anything claiming *God-like authority*. . . .

Such is the case with the King as well. He did not expect someone to grant Him God-like authority without believing He had done God-like deeds. . . . Christ's miraculous abilities were specifically to authenticate His divine authority to God's people. . . . How then do we know that this same authority was passed on to the Apostles and Prophets as they claim? Once again, God authenticated their God-like authority by giving them the ability to perform God-like deeds.²³⁸

Therefore, regarding the NT, the manner in which its authoritative contents are established in *Knowing Our God* is through historical research into the early Church's testimony regarding their apostolic authorship and sanction. We believe only writings that have been written or endorsed by miraculously authenticated Apostles constitute NT documents that deserve to be elevated to the level of God-like authority. God expects us to use

²³⁶ Geisler, *Apologetics*, 38.

²³⁷ For further discussion regarding the popular but unsubstantiated theory of a "testimony of the Spirit" to the authentication of Scripture see the next chapter, 3.4.

²³⁸ Section 3.1.D.

our *private judgment* in gaining a conviction on the unique divinity of such documents, and historical research is specifically how this is accomplished. Accordingly, if there is convincing historical evidence that the early Christians believed a holy, God-sent miracle worker like the Apostle Paul wrote *The Epistle to the Romans* then it deserves a place above all the writings of men, and should be accepted as the written word of God.

C) Objections Regarding *Private Judgment* & the Biblical Canon

The suggestion of the use of human *private judgment* regarding the canon of Scripture is admittedly a serious one. Accordingly, Alister McGrath, Professor of Theology at both Oxford and Regent, questions the authority of reason on such an issue and asks, "What logic is to be allowed this central role? Whose rationality provides the basis of scriptural authority?"²³⁹

Along the same lines, Paul Helm, among a collection of entries by some of the most respected biblical scholars of our day, claims that reason is no guide for evaluating the authenticity of a divine revelation. He labels such an approach as "externalism" and writes:

A more general defect of externalism is the supposition that there is some *a priori* standard of reasonableness that the Scriptures must meet and do meet. But who is to decide what this standard is?²⁴⁰

Who indeed but the person who is being called upon to obey the revelation, possibly even at the cost of his own life! This is precisely how Scripture has functioned for martyred saints throughout the ages. And God Himself has given the freedom, responsibility, and standards by which we are to judge the truth or divinity of a revelation.

Nonetheless, our application of the God-ordained place of human *private judgment* to the canon of Scripture requires several clarifying statements. First, we claim that a critique of the canon of Scripture is not a critique of the rightful place of God's authority in our life, but rather, a critique of decisions made by men in the early Church. Because God has told no one the correct contents of

²³⁹ Alister McGrath, *A Passion For Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Intervarsity, 1999), 170.

²⁴⁰ Paul Helm, "Faith, Evidence, and the Scriptures" in *Scripture & Truth*, D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds. (Baker, 1992), 306.

Scripture, it is open to debate. As we have discussed more fully elsewhere:

Thankfully, God does not expect humans to recognize or respect *divine revelation* without divine authentication. One is reminded of Gideon who after receiving a divine mandate from an angel, repeatedly asked for confirmation of the source of the message (cf. Judg 6). And as we demonstrate elsewhere, God was *never* offended in the least with Gideon's requests, and even provided an additional miraculous authentication of the revelation that Gideon didn't ask for (cf. Judg 7:9-16). Like Gideon, we are not questioning God's authority, but simply where that authority can be found. In other words, the suggestion that our reason must be used to recognize and interpret revelation from God does not usurp the authority of God.

For example, one may think of a captain in the army who receives written orders that claim to be from his general, commanding him to advance against the enemy and risk the lives of his men. No one would question the captain's right and even responsibility to authenticate such a message, especially in a time of war when the enemy is constantly working to deceive (cf. 2 Cor 11:14). Far from showing disrespect for the authentic commands of his superior, the captain's inquiry would actually show a great regard for that authority.²⁴¹

Secondly, we insist that a God-honoring evaluation of the biblical canon requires a great deal of research that not all Christians are able and willing to do. We are not suggesting that Christians have the God-given right to reject documents that have been long and widely held to be Scripture on a mere whim. The issue must be their studied conviction regarding the historical evidence for whether or not the document was written by a divinely sent and authenticated individual. The reason that any Christian will pursue research on the canon of Scripture is to protect and promote its authority, not undermine it. Along these lines, the NT scholar William Sanday (1843-1920) wrote:

The certainty which springs from the absence of questioning and of search is a different thing from the certainty which comes after search and enquiry. And the latter kind of certainty is, we may be sure, the higher and better of the two. Belief which rests on grounds such as I have been describing touches the bottom; it feels the solid rock. Belief which rests

²⁴¹ 3.1.D.

upon [mere] authority [i.e. testimony/opinion of someone else] has always a certain amount of scaffolding between it and the base on which it stands; and the mind cannot help being haunted by the doubt whether that scaffolding is strong and firm enough to bear the weight thrown upon it. Will the authority itself bear the solvents of criticism?

But belief which has been itself tested by criticism--which comes out as the result of a critical process--cannot have any further solvent applied to it. Its anchor cannot drag. Its roots go down into the very constitution of the human mind. And the faith which springs from it has all that buoyancy and sense of freedom which comes from having no reserve--no weak place which one shrinks from putting to the proof.

The confidence which comes from the rigorous exclusion of opposing forces is one thing; that which comes from having met and fought and conquered them is another. The last alone is a healthy confidence; it alone carries with it the true assurance and elation of victory.²⁴²

While the average Christian need not be overly concerned with a thorough understanding of the issues surrounding the biblical canon, a Teacher and Bible scholar does.

However, the respected Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) wrote concerning the kind of harmful intellectual pride that can surround such matters:

[It is] not as though critical and historical examination were prohibited. Such endeavor for the glory of God is highly commendable. But as the physiologist's search for the genesis of human life becomes sinful if immodest or dangerous to unborn life, so does every criticism of Holy Scripture become sinful and culpable if irreverent or seeking to destroy the life of God's Word in the consciousness of the Church.²⁴³

Therefore, while questions regarding the biblical canon are acceptable, the unnecessary undermining of the authority of Scripture is sin.

Finally, anyone questioning the traditional biblical canon of a person belonging to a particular branch of Christianity (e.g. Romanism) must be very careful to exercise humility and love. Someone researching the topic may come to conclusions that differ

²⁴² William Sanday, *The Oracles of God* (Longmans, Green, 1891), 45, 81.

²⁴³ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. By Henri De Vries, (Eerdmans, 1946), 64.

from the tradition they have grown up in. Nonetheless, they must not prematurely press this matter, and they surely must not arrogantly flaunt their own freedom and conscience on this matter. This is the kind of “**knowledge** [that] **puffs up**” (1 Cor 8:1) if humility and love are not exercised. Many Christians will not be helped by insisting it is their individual responsibility to evaluate the canon of Scripture. If they are content to trust the beliefs of their spiritual tradition, then no one should deride their conscience on the matter.

Teachers of Scripture, however, need to study this topic more thoroughly as St. Augustine suggested. We believe they are expected to have a good understanding of the historical background of especially the NT documents and to come to their own conclusions regarding their apostolicity, and subsequent unique divine authority, especially for the purpose of defending their rightful authority.

D) Different Approaches to the Biblical Canon

If one is still unconvinced that the use of *private judgment* through historical research, is the foundational method of establishing the divine authority of the biblical canon, it may be helpful to discuss the other approaches that are suggested, noting their weaknesses.

D.1) Human testimony

First we will discuss the manner in which the vast majority of Christians come to believe that their Bible is the Word of God: people they trust have told them so. In other words, most Christians simply accept the testimony of their branch of Christianity without question. As discussed above, this is both understandable and acceptable as such Christians are simply responding to the God-ordained value and authority of *human testimony*²⁴⁴ and have used their own *private judgment* to evaluate the opinion of their respected peers and decided to adopt it.

It is essentially because of the power of *human testimony* that Christendom essentially has two different Bibles. Scholars from both main branches of Christianity have studied the literary evidence and testimonies of Jewish and early Christian history to determine which writings our spiritual ancestors believed to be

²⁴⁴ For further discussion on the place of *human testimony* as a source for the evidence of our beliefs see section 2.5.D.

authored by supernaturally authenticated messengers of God. This is the fundamental method of how both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity have made the critical epistemological distinction between what documents will exercise divine authority, as opposed to those that have merely been written by humans.

Subsequently, most individual Christians in each branch of Christianity, exercising their God-given right and responsibility of *private judgment*, have accepted the testimony of their scholars and leaders, therefore granting these documents divine authority in their own lives.

D.2) God's sovereignty

If people think a little deeper about why they trust the canon of their Bible, God's sovereignty usually comes to mind. In other words, it is both understandable and popular to believe that God has sovereignly controlled which documents ended up in the Bible and we just need to trust this is so. Along these lines, J. I. Packer, one of our favorite Protestant theologians, writes: "As the Spirit gave the Word by brooding over its human writers [it lead] the church to recognize their books as its canon for belief and behavior."

²⁴⁵

This is admittedly an attractive approach to our trust in the biblical canon. However, it would seem we need to ask, which Church did God lead? The Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Syriac, and Protestant churches differ on what documents belong in the NT.
²⁴⁶ Therefore, it seems misplaced for someone today to claim God has uniquely guided the branch of Christianity they belong to.

In addition, it is not very well known that for many *centuries* an Epistle to the Laodiceans was printed in Bibles and circulated throughout the Church as written by the Apostle Paul until it was revealed by historical research as a fraud. ²⁴⁷ God's sovereignty did not protect several generations from this human mistake, nor does it promise to protect us from other critical human mistakes.

Finally, we have passages in our NT that most scholars do not believe were in the original, and are therefore not divinely

²⁴⁵ J. I. Packer, *Knowing Christianity* (Harold Shaw, 1995), 37-8.

²⁴⁶ For further discussion of this see Book 16.

²⁴⁷ For further discussion on the Epistle to the Laodiceans see forthcoming Book 16.

authoritative, including the last twelve verses of the Gospel of Mark and John 7:53-8:11.²⁴⁸

Of course God has been sovereign over all of these branches of Christianity and their Scriptures, but His sovereignty does not dictate or guarantee perfection. We would also say God has been sovereign over the Church's copying of biblical manuscripts, the translation of the original languages into modern ones, and even its interpretations and teachings of those translations, but His sovereignty in such realms has not resulted in either unanimity or perfection as biblical manuscripts, translations, and interpretations have significantly differed.²⁴⁹

It should be recognized that even those who have decided to trust God's sovereignty over the canonization of the Bible have done so with nothing more than their own *private judgment*. They of course have the right to do so as God has not directly and objectively prescribed the canon of Scripture. However, it should also be recognized that approaching the recognition of Scripture in this way (or any way) is nothing more than the exercise of the person's *private judgment* to value a particular perspective more than others.

D.3) Self-authenticating Scripture

As introduced in chapter 3.1, many theologians claim that the divine authority of Scripture is "self-authenticating." One of the more influential theologians of "self-authentication" was the founder

²⁴⁸ See D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1992), 102-04.

²⁴⁹ This again brings up the important topic of God's *controlling sovereignty* and His *consenting sovereignty*. The former are things which God directly dictates, causes, controls, and guarantees, the latter are things that He simply allows because they do not alter His ultimate plans. For example, Acts 17:26 indicates that God dictated, caused, controlled, and guaranteed when, where, and to whom we would be born, illustrating His *controlling sovereignty*. But God gives us the freedom to sin against His perfect will, coming under His *consenting sovereignty*. Even so, God will not allow our freedom, or something occurring under His *consenting sovereignty*, to thwart His ultimate purposes, or that within His *controlling sovereignty*. Not only is He big enough to know and plan for the choices we make, He is big enough to alter our choices so that while we may not act according to His perfect will, we will act according to His perfect plan.

of *neoorthodoxy*,²⁵⁰ Karl Barth (1886-1968). In fact, "self-authentication" is perhaps the best one word description of the unique essence of neoorthodox theology. Accordingly, Dr. Barth wrote:

According to Holy Scripture God's revelation is a ground which has no sort of higher or deeper ground above or behind it, but is simply a ground in itself, and therefore as regards man an authority from which no appeal to a higher authority is possible.²⁵¹

Likewise, one of our favorite theologians, the Dutch Reformed Herman Bavinck wrote:

The authority of Scripture rests in itself and cannot be proven. Holy Scripture is self-attested and therefore the final ground of faith. No deeper ground can be advanced. To the question "Why do you believe Scripture?" the only answer is: "Because it is the word of God." But if the next question is "Why do you believe that Holy Scripture is the word of God?" a Christian cannot answer.²⁵²

Likewise, others speak of the acceptance of Scripture as simply an unbiblical "leap of faith" that apparently doesn't involve real reasons at all. The central problem with this is that, as we have clearly demonstrated elsewhere, God never expects us to believe

²⁵⁰ *Neo-orthodoxy* is a relatively complex theological perspective best known as the position Karl Barth (1886-1968) promoted. R. V. Schnucker relates in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (EDT)*:

Neo-orthodoxy . . . does not have the popularity it enjoyed earlier in the [20th] century. Certain inherent elements have precluded its continuing influence. For example . . . its view of Scripture, "The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be his Word" (Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 123), has been seen as a rejection of the infallible *sola Scriptura* of conservative Protestantism. . . .

Perhaps the greatest weakness within the movement has been its pessimism concerning the reliability and validity of human [even Christian] reason. [Its critics claim] If human reason cannot be trusted, then it follows that since neo-orthodoxy relied on human reason, it could not be trusted. ("Neo-orthodoxy," [Baker, 1994], 756)

Which is the same inevitable result of any philosophy or theology that degrades the God-given place of especially *Spirit-liberated reason*.

²⁵¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 5 vols., (T & T Clark, 1936-1977), vol. I, pt. 1, p. 350.

²⁵² Bavinck, 589.

anything without evidence, and we actually cannot and do not.²⁵³ Faith without evidence is foolishness, not *biblical faith*, as God gives us sufficient reasons to believe everything He wants us to believe. Nonetheless, many take a *fideistic* approach to the biblical canon.²⁵⁴

As William Abraham notes, this epistemological shortcut is tempting:

In these circumstances [of debating our final ground of authority] it is obvious that one way to deal expeditiously with either the secular or Christian epistemologist in search of a criterion of justification is to think of the canon of Scripture as an epistemic norm [i.e. self-authenticating]. . . .

Treating Scripture as an epistemic norm has all the features of a godsend which will not just keep the epistemological watch-dog at bay; it can call up in its favor all the weight of Christian history which has resolutely insisted that Scripture is indeed a canon of the faith. In fact, the opponent may well be perplexed at the dexterity of this challenge, for, as we have seen, canon has an epistemological edge to its meaning, and there is no doubt that this move gives the deep appearance of being profoundly Christian.²⁵⁵

We would only contend, again, that the biblical canon must be reasonably established rather than blindly accepted. This was the epistemology of such men as Augustine, Luther, Edwards, Hodge, and Warfield as demonstrated above.

Nonetheless, the popular theologian Wayne Grudem writes:

[T]he words of Scripture are "self-attesting." They cannot be "proved" to be God's word by appeal to any higher authority. . . . If we ultimately appeal to human reason, or to logic . . . as the authority by which Scripture is shown to be God's words, then we have assumed the thing to which we appealed to be a higher authority than God's words and one that is more true or more reliable.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ For further discussion of the fact that *biblical faith* is based on evidence and reason see chapter 6.12.

²⁵⁴ For further discussion of *fideism* which is "faith" without reason see chapter 2.10.

²⁵⁵ William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Clarendon, 1998), 102.

²⁵⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 78.

What Dr. Grudem appears to be forgetting is that our conviction, understanding, and belief in Scripture comes through our “reason” and “logic.” If Scripture were not reasonable and logical we would rightly reject them as true—which demonstrates that *subjectively*, reason does exercise authority over Scripture- and anything else claiming the right to be accepted as our authority. Our reason and logic is not simply physical senses like our eyes that merely *process* the words of Scripture. On the contrary, God made our reasoning faculties to *evaluate* and judge what our eyes see, including Scripture. Accordingly, even Dr. Grudem ends up recognizing the ultimate authority of our reason when he writes a few sentences later:

How then does a Christian, or anyone else, choose among the various claims for absolute authorities? Ultimately the truthfulness of the Bible will commend itself [to *what?*] as being far more persuasive [*by what means?*] than other religious books, or than any other intellectual constructions of the human mind such as logic and human reason. It will be more persuasive [to *what* besides our *reason?*] because in the actual experience of life, all these other candidates for ultimate authority are seen to be inconsistent [*by our reason*] or to have shortcomings that disqualify them, while the Bible will be seen [*by what?*] to be fully in [*logical?*] accord with all that we know about the world around us, about ourselves, and about God [all knowledge through what else but *reason?*]. ²⁵⁷

While Dr. Grudem wishes to denounce “intellectual constructions of the human mind such as logic, human reason” as our ultimate authority, all of his conclusions are based on judgments and evaluations performed by our God-given reason. The God-given place of our reason is simply inescapable.

Other critics of the God-ordained right and responsibility of *private judgment* over the canon of Scripture include NT scholar J. Ramsey Michaels who writes in a book sanctioned by a number of contemporary Evangelical Bible scholars:

The function of reason in relation to the Bible should not be to assess the ultimate validity of its claims to truth, but rather to discern the former and understand the content of the biblical revelation once its truth has been accepted by faith. ²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 79.

²⁵⁸ J. Ramsey Michaels, “Inerrancy or Verbal Inspiration?” in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels eds. (Baker, 1980), 68.

In the same vein, I. Howard Marshall, a very respected British NT scholar writes:

Acceptance of the Bible as the inspired Word of God is a matter of faith [not based on reason or evidence]. Therefore, the claim that what the Bible says is true cannot be anything else than a statement of faith, which may or may not be ultimately justified. . . .

Problems particularly arise [when] the authority of Scripture has been placed on a lower level than that of the individual's Christian judgment or of the Church. . . . [T]hey [should] function as subordinate authorities under the supreme authority of Scripture itself. Otherwise we are at the mercy of subjective opinions. . . . It is the Bible which is the Word of God and not our understanding of it. ²⁵⁹

The question that needs to be asked of such men is this: Did God ever expect His people to heed a Prophet or Apostle simply by some reasonless "faith" without sufficient justification? Unfortunately, Professors Michaels and Marshall and those who would agree with them seem to be neither honest nor right. No one merely accepts without reasons that the Bible is the word of God. Rather, anyone who has any confidence that the Bible is from God has reasons and evidence on which their conviction is based.

This evidence may be merely the opinion of people in their church or family who testify to the divine authority of all the documents in our Bible. Nonetheless, God never expected His people to accept a Prophet or Apostle as genuine without using their reason to assess the ultimate validity of their claims to truth. God does not view the Bible differently and neither should we. As will be demonstrated elsewhere regarding *biblical faith*, it always has justifiable reasons. ²⁶⁰ Trusting the Scriptures is not a blind leap in the dark, but rather, certain evidence has given us reason to trust it. Anything else would be God-condemned foolishness, not God-pleasing faith.

Secondly, if we are speaking of *foundational subjective authority*, ²⁶¹ that which really exercises influence over our lives, then contrary to Dr. Marshall, Scripture is actually subordinate to

²⁵⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Eerdmans, 1983), 51, 120-1, 124.

²⁶⁰ For further discussion of the fact that *biblical faith* is based on evidence and reason see chapter 6.12.

²⁶¹ For further discussion of the concept of *final subjective authority* see section 3.1.C.1.

"the individual's Christian judgment" because it must be at least accepted and interpreted by reason. Thirdly, surely Dr. Marshall would admit that we are all "at the mercy of subjective opinions" including himself. For example, one wonders how Dr. Marshall would explain his own interpretation of Scripture in which he believes it teaches that a real born again Christian can lose their salvation?²⁶² In this very case, this rightly respected NT scholar is "at the mercy of subjective opinion," his "understanding" of Scripture is exercising authority and not Scripture itself, and, in our opinion, he is wrong.

Along the same lines, one could hardly find a greater denial of the God-given authority of *private judgment* than the following from E. J. Carnell, former Professor of Theology at Fuller:

The first thing to take note of is the fact that the standing witness of the Biblical text itself is that in both part and the whole it is objectively and plenarily [completely] inspired. The writers presume to speak with such commanding authority that to approach their judgment critically through criteria gained on non-Christian presuppositions is itself an act of sin. The conservative accepts the Biblical witness as true until it can be shown to be otherwise.²⁶³

We would agree with Dr. Carnell that to use reason to deny reasonably authenticated revelation is foolish and even sinful. However, it is a virtue rather than a vice to exercise critical judgment on the claim of a person or document to be such authoritative revelation. In addition, Dr. Carnell's reason for accepting the biblical documents as divine revelation is that, "The writers presume to speak with such commanding authority." This is terribly inadequate as the writers of many of the spurious documents produced in the early history of the Church made the same claim and impression. Finally, is not Dr. Carnell merely using his own *private judgment* to come to this conclusion?

The same tendency to deny the authority of reason can be found among *presuppositional theologians*²⁶⁴:

According to [Cornelius] Van Til, the proper method of defending the absolute authority of Scripture is that method

²⁶² See I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, 2nd ed. (Bethany House, 1974).

²⁶³ E. J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Eerdmans, 1956), 196.

²⁶⁴ For further discussion regarding *presuppositional theology* see section 2.12.D.

which incorporates the notion of the absolute authority of Scripture in its foundational premise. Any method which does not proceed from the presuppositional basis of the absolute authority of Scripture involves a presupposition of human autonomy. Scripture must be taken as "self-attesting" if we are to avoid autonomous thinking.²⁶⁵

It needs to be recognized again that the reason Scripture seems true to anyone, including Dr. Van Til, is because his *Spirit-liberated reason* has evidences to accept it as such. We would suggest that we arrive at the same place as Dr. Van Til and other *presuppositional* theologians, but that we are simply more honest about the way we get there.²⁶⁶

D.4) "Testimony of the Spirit"

A third approach suggested as to how we recognize the divinity of a document is referred to as the "testimony of the Spirit." This approach also would appear to bypass the need for any objective

²⁶⁵ R. C. Sproul, "The Case for Inerrancy: A Methodological Analysis" in *God's Inerrant Word*, John Warwick Montgomery ed. (Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 246.

²⁶⁶ Similar critiques could be made of other *presuppositional theologians* other than Van Til. For example, John Frame, in his *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), takes the presuppositional shortcut to establishing Scripture's authority on pages 247-77, but had earlier recognized the importance of reason in receiving Scripture on page 71 where he writes:

We must insist also that human interpretation [which depends on reason] is involved in any knowledge of facts [including those in Scripture]. We can have no knowledge of facts devoid of human interpretation, for knowing itself is interpretation. We have no access to reality apart from our interpretative faculties. To seek such access is to seek release from creaturehood.

Likewise, Robert Reymond criticizes a reasoned approach to the authentication of Scripture by espousing a view that ultimately leads to full blown skepticism regarding all knowledge of humans (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Thomas Nelson, 1998], 111-116). However, he admits elsewhere that, "men through the utilization of "ordinary means" may come to a knowledge of the truth of Scripture. What are these "ordinary means"? Simply the reading, hearing, and study of the Word" (88). While Dr. Reymond may disagree, we would suggest that here he is essentially saying that human reason is our subjective authority that at least dictates the interpretation of the truth we will receive from Scripture.

evidence, and rather, claims that the Holy Spirit directly tells us what documents or writings are divinely inspired. The problems with this approach, as discussed thoroughly in the next chapter (3.4), are that there is no biblical support for the idea, nor does it practically work. While the moral New Nature in us would certainly validate the moral commands of Scripture, how do we validate amoral doctrines such as Christ's deity? Could an uninformed believer read the Roman Catholic Apocrypha and know by the direct revelation of the Spirit that they are not divinely inspired? It is not because of some lack of a "testimony of the Spirit" that Protestants have rejected the Apocrypha, but because of their exercise of *private judgment* and historical research.

Likewise, no regard for some "testimony of the Spirit" or God's providence is recognized when, as mentioned above, NT scholars virtually unanimously agree that the last twelve verses of the Gospel of Mark are not Scripture.²⁶⁷ It is because of research and reason that we can confidently conclude that these words in our Bible were not given by God, and therefore do not have God-like authority over our lives like the rest of Scripture. All of this is why we have insisted, as the Reformed theologian Charles Hodge did, that "it is the prerogative of reason to judge of the credibility of a revelation."

So once again, we are back to the *foundational subjective authority* of human *private judgment* as the final arbiter of what we personally believe is Scripture. And in fact, this is by God's design.

A related approach to authenticating the correct contents of Scripture to a "testimony of the Spirit" is recognizing their spiritually edifying effect. It is understandable that we would conclude the Bible's documents as divinely inspired because of their effect on us. However, we would point out that mere affect is not a sufficient way to discern whether a communication is direct divine revelation from God *through* men, or merely the biblical thoughts *of* men. Have we not been similarly affected by Spirit-filled sermons and even some Christian books? And what would we do with the less edifying portions of our Bible? Doesn't Romans *feel* more like something written by God than the Song of Solomon?

Along these lines, a founding theologian of Evangelicalism, Carl F. H. Henry (1913-2003), in his monumental work *God, Revelation and Authority* has written:

While inner (subjective) evidence for the canonical books may be useful, the question remains whether a sincere Christian left to himself would identify all or only our present

²⁶⁷ See D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1992), 102-04.

twenty-seven New Testament books out of a larger selection of literature. Would he include all the canonical books and exclude all apocryphal books? Even pious men have at times questioned the canonical status of some of these writings. . . . Can the canonical works be discriminated solely in terms of one's inner spiritual response?

[T]he Bible's authority does not rest upon our experience of the truth of Scripture. Scripture does, indeed, manifest its power in inner experience, but this experience is not the basis and ground of its claim to be authoritative. Not only does such an appeal by-pass historical concerns [and evidence] crucial for the efficacy of the Bible, but it also confers upon other Christian literature [books, sermons, etc.] through which the Spirit may speak [only to some] a dignity equal to that of the Bible.²⁶⁸

D.5) All approaches ultimately depend on *private judgment*

Perhaps then, the value of promoting the God-ordained authority of *private judgment* in recognizing divine revelation is supported by the inadequacy of other approaches. Nevertheless, it needs to be admitted that these alternative approaches to recognizing divine revelation have been held by many people for a long time. This is why, regarding the use of *private judgment* on such a matter, the Reformed scholar John Gerstner, in reflecting the view of Jonathan Edwards, remarks:

[N]either Geneva [Calvinism], Canterbury [Anglicanism], nor Rome [Catholicism] likes this view. But what is wrong with a view which says, once the authority of the Bible has been established [by reason], it is to be obeyed [by reason].²⁶⁹

Nevertheless, as we have mentioned all along, one thing to notice about all of the approaches to establishing the authority of the biblical documents mentioned above is that the foundation of all of them is *private judgment*. Even the rather meaningless approach

²⁶⁸ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority (GRA)*, 6 vols. (Word, 1979), IV.420, 421, 423, 436-7. Underlining added.

²⁶⁹ John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. (Berea, 1991), I.51-2. It is interesting to note that Dr. Gerstner is known to have been a very important mentor in the education of R. C. Sproul. However, while Dr. Gerstner seemed to advocate the *right of private judgment* as supported by Jonathan Edwards, Dr. Sproul endorses Mathison's book which criticizes such an approach.

of “self-authentication” is believed because people with reasons have decided that is why the Bible is authoritative for them. Likewise, this is the foundation of a belief that God sovereignly pieced the Bible together, as well. And recognizing the divinity of Scripture by its effects certainly is a matter of reason assessing evidence and making a determination.

Accordingly, the determination of the correct collection of Scripture has not been a matter of direct *divine revelation* from God, but rather, a matter of careful *human research* based on the historical evidence God has sovereignly preserved. Accordingly, it is because God has not granted a revelation of what documents are Scripture, that we suggest this is a matter of *private judgment* conducted by *human research* through our Spirit-controlled *liberated reason*.

Pastoral Practices

- Do you have a good and accurate understanding of how we have obtained an OT and NT? Do you know the history of their canonization? These are obviously important for the teacher of the Bible. Do not settle for superficial answers such as “God just gave it to us.” Pastors need to understand how.

Extras & Endnotes

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) What does it mean to you that 2 Peter was not widely accepted as a NT document even 300 years after it was supposed to have been written? Or as Luther said, James was “rejected by the ancients”?
- 2) What is our approach to establishing the canon of the NT? What problems do you see with this approach?
- 3) What are other approaches to establishing the correct canon of Scripture? What problems do we see in them? Do you agree or disagree?

Recommended Reading

- For a good introductory study to the topic see F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Intervarsity, 1988).
- For a detailed discussion of the biblical canon see Book 16 of *Knowing Our God*.

Publications & Particulars

Book 3

Biblical Authority

Part II

***Critiques of Popular
Views of Authority***

- ◊ **3.4:** Reevaluating the “Testimony of the Spirit” for the Recognition of Scripture 179
Does the Holy Spirit Tell Us What is God’s Word?
- ◊ **3.5:** Reevaluating the “Illumination of the Spirit” for the Interpretation of Scripture 231
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Does the Holy Spirit Tell Us We Are Saved?

Chapter 3.4

Reevaluating the "Testimony of the Spirit" to Scripture

Does the Holy Spirit Tell Us What is Scripture?

Primary Points

- A "testimony of the Spirit" is claimed to enable us to determine what is Scripture and what is not.
- There is no clear biblical support for this application of the Holy Spirit.
- Rather than securing the certainty of biblical authority, the "testimony" undermines it by subjecting it to the subjective experience of the individual.
- The supposed effects of the "testimony" are difficult to distinguish from those that may be experienced from communication other than Scripture.
- If the "testimony" is as effective as many claim, then we would expect a new Christian to identify all or only the sixty-six books of our present biblical canon out of a larger selection of literature.
- The "testimony" must not have operated for many early Church leaders who accepted the OT Apocrypha as Scripture.
- Unlike "testimony" proponents, we claim that nothing in all of Creation is self-authenticating, nor did God intend it to be so.
- In essence then, it would seem the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit" becomes just another example of contemporary *pragmatism* in which we believe something to be true, like Scripture, because "it works." What happens when it doesn't "work?"
- The key to identifying Scripture is to know what documents were written by supernaturally educated and authenticated men. Such a determination can only be based on historical research.
 - C.1.b) Scriptures that refer to regeneration in salvation
 - C.1.c) Scriptures that refer to assurance of salvation
 - C.1.d) Scriptures that refer to revelation

C.2) The Doctrine's Practical Ineffectiveness

A) A Definition & Description of the "Testimony of the Spirit"

In the previous chapter we made the case that the epistemological foundation of our trust in the divine authority of particularly the NT is historical research, evaluated by our reason, and exercised under the God-ordained authority of our *private judgment*. However, many Christians claim otherwise, referring to a "testimony of the Holy Spirit" that enables us to know what is Scripture. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* defines this concept as, "The theological designation of the Holy Spirit's activity in bringing about the believing acknowledgment of Scripture's inherent authority."²⁷⁰ The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* states that:

The witness of the Spirit . . . has as such the irrefutable force of testimony to Scripture as God's Word, definitively establishing for believers its authenticity and authority. The Spirit's witness is naturally and necessarily a witness to Scripture inasmuch as it provides it with the supreme proof, "that God in person speaks in it"²⁷¹

Simply put, it is being claimed that the Holy Spirit somehow "tells us" that a particular writing or document is the divinely imparted word of God, as opposed to the mere writing of a human.

²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Fred H. Klooster, "Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (EDT)*, Walter Elwell ed. (Baker, 1984), 564.

²⁷¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Witness of the Spirit," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley ed., 4 vols., (Eerdmans, 1988), IV.1088.

²⁷² Some Reformed writers not only suggest that the "testimony" secures the authority of Scripture, but the ancient creeds as well. For example, Keith Mathison writes:

Advocates of *sola scriptura* do not believe these creeds to be without error because of a belief in ecclesiastical infallibility. We believe them to be inerrant for the same reason we believe the table of contents of Scripture to be inerrant because of the corporate testimony of the Holy Spirit to Christ's people. (*The Shape of Sola Scriptura* [Canon Press, 2001], 339.

It is rather amazing in our opinion that Dr. Mathison would claim that God has secured and authenticated divine authority for the "creeds." Which ones? For further critique of Dr. Mathison's view of epistemological authority see section 3.3.B.5 in the previous chapter.

While other theologians had discussed the revelatory ministry of the Spirit, it was John Calvin (1509–1564) in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* who first fully developed the doctrine under the heading: "Scripture Must Be Confirmed By The Witness Of The Spirit. Thus May Its Authority Be Established As Certain; And It Is A Wicked Falsehood That Its Credibility Depends On The Judgment Of The Church."²⁷³ As the heading suggests, Calvin's immediate concern was that the Roman Catholic Church of his day claimed it alone had the authority to decide, by the decrees of councils, what literature was divine Scripture and what was not.²⁷⁴

Accordingly, Calvin wrote:

²⁷³ Most theologians point to Calvin as the originator of the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit." Accordingly, Bernard Ramm, who has written the most detailed defense of the doctrine, writes, "According to Pannier and Warfield there is nothing on the subject before Calvin [who is] the author of the *testimonium*" (*The Witness of the Spirit* [Eerdmans, 1959], 23, 79).

Dr. Ramm adds, "Where Calvin derived this doctrine is not known. It appears only in seed form in the first edition of the *Institutes*, so we may infer that he did not enter into his Protestant faith with this doctrine fully developed" (12).

In light of Dr. Ramm's view, it is odd that elsewhere he attempts to find the "testimony of the Spirit" to Scripture in Augustine (cf. 23). However, he supports this with only references to Augustine's thoughts on the regeneration of people in order to accept the Gospel and the deity of the Holy Spirit. More convincing is John Owen's quotes of Clement of Alexandria (c. 155- c. 220) on this doctrine (*A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, [online at ccel.com], VI.6).

Nonetheless, Richard Gaffin, Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster is right when he asserts, "The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, by which we are brought to a saving conviction of the divine origin and truth of Scripture, is a particular doctrine the church owes to Calvin." ("The Holy Spirit," *WTJ* 43 (Fall 1980), p. 60).

²⁷⁴ Ramm suggests several reasons for Calvin's desire to promote the "testimony":

In developing his doctrine of the *testimonium* Calvin was faced with three alternative theories. Christian certainty was explained by Romanism as the gift of an infallible Church to the believing Catholic. The enthusiasts, or fanatics, found their certainty of faith in an immediate revelation of the Holy Spirit, a revelation which was not bound to the contents of Scripture. And some apologists were asserting that they could demonstrate the truthfulness of the Christian faith by purely rational evidences. Calvin was unhappy with all three theories, and developed his doctrine of the *testimonium* in opposition to each of them. (*Witness*, 12)

[A] most pernicious error widely prevails that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church. As if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended upon the decision of men! . . . They ask: who can convince us that these writings came from God? Who can assure us that Scripture has come down whole and intact even to our very day? Who can persuade us to receive one book in reverence but to exclude another, unless the church prescribe a sure rule for all these matters? What reverence is due Scripture and what books ought to be reckoned within its canon depend, they say, upon the determination of the church. . . . Yet, if this is so, what will happen to miserable consciences seeking firm assurance of eternal life if all promises of it consist in and depend solely upon the judgment of men? ²⁷⁵

Obviously, the questions that Calvin mentions are incredibly important, and, in fact, the Roman Church did precisely what Calvin was accusing them of at the Council of Trent (1545-63), adding the Apocrypha to the OT. In his effort to deny the Roman Church's authority in this matter, Calvin promoted the personal ability of each and every Christian to recognize what was authentic written divine revelation, and what was not, by virtue of the Holy Spirit that worked in them. Calvin's view has some similarities to the Reformation doctrine of the *right of private judgment*. However, in our opinion, because he seemed to disregard the God-ordained place of *Spirit-liberated reason*, He placed the ground of certainty regarding the canon on a more mystical ground. His description of the Spirit's ability to enable us to recognize divine documents from merely human ones is found in the following:

If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences — that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smallest quibbles — we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit. . . .

[I]t is clear that the teaching of Scripture is from heaven . . . all the books of Sacred Scripture far surpass all other writings. . . . The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded. . . .

²⁷⁵ Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, online at www.ccel.com, I.vI.2.

Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit. For even if it wins reverence for itself by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit.

Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men. We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgment may lean; but we subject our judgment and wit to it as to a thing far beyond any guesswork! . . .

Such, then, is a conviction that requires no reasons; such, a knowledge with which the best reason agrees — in which the mind truly reposes more securely and constantly than in any reasons; I speak of nothing other than what each believer experiences within himself —though my words fall far beneath a just explanation of the matter.²⁷⁶

On the contrary, how could he extol the powers of the "testimony" more than claiming "with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it [Scripture] has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men." That is a lot of certainty, and apart from any evidence.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that Calvin's promotion of the "testimony" did not keep him from seeing value in reasonable proofs for the authority of Scripture. Accordingly, Richard Muller writes:

Calvin's often-cited comments on certainty [in the authority of Scripture] point out the difficulty, not the resolution, of the question: He affirms, strongly, against Roman Catholic approaches to the problem of authority and certainty that "the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason" and that "the highest proof of Scripture derives . . . from the fact that God in person speaks in it," and that, therefore, Scripture is "self-authenticating."

But he then devotes an entire chapter of the 1559 *Institutes*—longer and more detailed than his discussion of the self-authenticating character of the text—to his discussion of

²⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.4-5.

rational evidences of the divinity and "credibility" of Scripture. Indeed, Calvin discusses these evidences of divinity at greater length than either Bullinger or Musculus [post-Reformation theologians often criticized today for their commitment to reason].²⁷⁷

Nevertheless, with the teaching of Calvin, the doctrine of the "testimony" became the standard approach to establishing the authority of the Scriptures. Accordingly, when Calvin wrote the Gallic Confession (1559) it stated:

We know these books to be canonical, and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church, as by the testimony and inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books which, however useful, can never become the basis for any articles of faith.

Subsequently, when the English Reformers authored the very influential Westminster Confession (1646), it included the following:

(I:4) The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God (1 Thes 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19, 21; 1 John 5:9)

(1:5) We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture (1 Tim 3:15). And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts (Isa 59:21; John 16:13, 14:1 Cor 2:10-12; 1 John 2:20, 27). (underlining added)

While proponents of this view may not wish to claim as much, the inevitable conclusion to such a doctrine is that the "testimony of

²⁷⁷ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2, Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Baker, 1993).

the Holy Spirit" gives the Christian the ability to confidently discern between various documents what is divinely imparted by God and possessing divine authority, from documents merely written by spiritual men. It is, no doubt, an ingenious idea, and admittedly, a much more spiritual sounding approach to the authentication of Scripture than the approach of reason.

Unfortunately, we do not think there is sufficient biblical or practical support to accept Calvin's answer to the critical question of how do we know what documents are divinely imparted by God. In fact, we would suggest that one of the biggest mistakes in modern theology is the wide-spread acceptance to Calvin's epistemology, while at the same time, rejecting his soteriology. For our part, we reject the former and larger agree with the latter.

What the "testimony of the Spirit" claims to do is rather clear: revealing to the Christian the divine authority of Scripture. How it supposedly does this is difficult to understand. Accordingly, William Abraham writes:

What Calvin exactly means by this [testimony of the Spirit] is notoriously difficult to determine, but there is no doubting its central place in his epistemology. . . . [I]n essence, appeal to the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit is an appeal either to an internal divine revelation or to the personal experience of the believer.²⁷⁸

Here, Dr. Abraham offers what seems to be the two possibilities of how proponents of the "testimony" describe its working. Some speak of it as "an internal divine revelation." For example, the well-known Protestant theologian Bernard Ramm (1916-1992) writes in what is probably the most detailed defense of the "testimony of the Spirit":

This confession (Matt 16:16-17) [revealed to and made by the Apostle Peter] was a statement of revelation, namely, that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God; it was made by an inward revelation, a testimonium. This confession, and the certainty that accompanied it, was the product of the inward revealing act of God the Father and is a reflection of that total New Testament doctrine of illumination.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ William Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology : From the Fathers to Feminism* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 134-5.

²⁷⁹ Ramm, *Witness*, 43. One of many examples of the confusing and contradictory nature of Dr. Ramm's description and defense of the "testimony" is demonstrated by comparing this quote with the following: "Nor is the *testimonium* a voice which says, 'The Bible is the Word of God.' This would be a revelation, not an illumination. The believer

Dr. Ramm speaks of the "testimony" as a *revelation* of the Spirit, about Scripture, but separate from it. This would seem to be precisely what Calvin said at times, including in his commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16 where he writes:

If someone objects, "how can this be known?" [that all Scripture is authored by God], I reply that God is made known to be the author, both to teachers and pupils, by the revelation of the same Spirit . . . The same Spirit, therefore, who made Moses and the prophets certain of their own calling now also testifies to our hearts that he has used them as his servants to instruct us.²⁸⁰

Clearly, then, there is information being divinely revealed here that is about Scripture, but separate from it. This *revelation* of the "testimony" of the Spirit is commonly described as an *illumination* which *Webster's* defines as: "to give knowledge to; to give spiritual insight."²⁸¹ Clearly the term conveys the idea of giving information of some kind. The same is true of the word *persuasion*, which is used by Calvin and the Confessions quoted above. It is important to recognize here that persuasion of any kind requires *evidence and information* apart from what we are being persuaded about. In other words, if the Holy Spirit is persuading us that a particular document is Scripture, then He is providing us with divine revelation and knowledge apart from what Scripture is actually saying.

For example, we read the biblical quote:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. (Eph 1:3-4)

How do we know this is divine revelation concerning the truth of our predestination to salvation? What is being claimed by proponents of the "testimony" is that when reading this, we are not

eventually comes to this decision, but not in this manner" (94). In one paragraph he seems to be saying it is a revelation and in another he denies it.

²⁸⁰ John Calvin, *Calvin's Bible Commentaries*, online at www.ccel.com., 2 Tim 3:16.

²⁸¹ *Webster's*, 413. Actually, this is the definition for "enlighten" because the definition for "illuminate" is simply: "to enlighten spiritually or intellectually." (599).

only receiving information about our predestination to salvation, but by virtue of the "testimony of the Spirit" I am also receiving information, or a "persuasion" that this quote was divinely imparted by God, not just written by a man.²⁸² Does the Spirit give us such a revelation about Scripture but apart from it? We will refute such an idea below by demonstrating that no Scripture promises or

²⁸² The fact that persuasion requires the conveying of information makes Dr. Ramm sound contradictory and confusing when he states, "The *testimonium* is an illumination and a persuasion. It is not an impartation of knowledge" (Ramm, *Witness*, 93). Again, according to *Webster's*, illumination is the "giving of knowledge," and so is anyone's understanding of persuasion.

Likewise, John Frame writes:

[T]he Reformers saw no difficulty in affirming both the sufficiency of Scripture and the necessity of the Spirit's testimony. They made it clear (for even in their time there were misunderstandings in this area) that the Spirit's testimony was not a new revelation; rather, the Spirit's work was to illumine and confirm the revelation already given. . . . The Spirit witnesses that the Word is true, but the Word already has told us that!

Again, the claim that the Spirit "confirms" the revelation of Scripture requires revelation/information apart from Scripture. Accordingly, *Webster's* defines "confirm" as, "to give new assurance of the validity of; remove doubt about by authoritative act or indisputable fact" (275). The idea is that any confirmation of any claim requires evidence about, but apart from, what is being confirmed. Therefore, there seems to be no way around the fact that if, as Dr. Frame says, "the Spirit's work [is] to . . . confirm revelation already given," then such a confirmation must contain some sort of revelation that is in addition to and separate from the bare text of Scripture.

We can certainly understand the effort by proponents of the "testimony of the Spirit" to deny that it involves extra-biblical revelation, but they cannot coherently do so. Along these lines, it is interesting to note Dr. Ramm's claim that:

The *testimonium* is a revealing action, not a revealed content. It is an illumination, not a communication. For this reason Calvin opposed the enthusiasts who claimed a revelation with a content. (*Witness*, 18)

If Calvin really had in mind those who claimed direct divine communication from the Spirit apart from Scripture when he developed the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit" then the great theologian made a mistake, because it is impossible to understand the "testimony" as something other than a claim that the Spirit is telling us something apart from Scripture. While the mere words of Scripture can claim they are inspired (2 Tim 3:16) mere words cannot authenticate such a claim. Therefore, if we choose to claim that Scripture is authenticated by a "testimony" from the Spirit, we must be willing to admit it is an extra-biblical revelation.

describes such a thing, nor does such an approach work in practical experience.

While some describe the "testimony" as an "internal divine revelation," others refer to it as what Dr. Abraham called a "personal experience of the believer." What seems to be meant by this is that when we are exposed to Scripture and feel comforted, encouraged, or guided, that this supposedly unique experience authenticates the words as divine.

Along these lines, Paul Helm in his entry to the Evangelical classic, *Scripture and Truth* edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge is given the task of explaining, "What evidence ought to persuade people that the Bible is the Word of God?"²⁸³ Helm's answer is, "the certainty of the Scriptures as revelatory documents lies in their being confirmed in experience . . . the *impact* of the revelation on the lives of those who receive it."²⁸⁴ So, in this view of the "testimony of the Spirit" to the divinity of Scripture, it is the claim of a unique experience through which the Spirit does its convincing work.

However, we should immediately recognize the dangers of authenticating divine revelation by how it makes us feel. As we will discuss further below, such a "testimony" of experience does nothing to distinguish Scripture from other types of mere human communication (books, sermons, counsel) that may be equally edifying, encouraging, or comforting at times.²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Paul Helm, "Faith, Evidence, and the Scriptures" in *Scripture and Truth*, D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge eds. (Baker, 1992), 304.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. 312. The same essential point is suggested by Philip E. Hughes in another entry to the book. (see p. 193)

²⁸⁵ Other advocates of the "testimony of the Spirit" to the divinity of Scripture claim that it simply communicates and authenticates the "truth" or "authority" of Scripture, not so much its "inspiration" or "canonicity." Such confusion is illustrated when Dr. Ramm writes that the "testimony":

[E]stablishes the reality of a canon, but not its limits. The reality of the canon means a truth of God, a givenness of revelation, and its fixation in Scripture. The New Covenant is written, and the life of Christ is documented, and the revelation given the apostles is inscripturated. The reality of a canon is involved in the testimonium.

. . .

No critical or historical study can deliver to the consciousness of the believer anything but a probable judgment; but only in the testimonium do we arrive with certainty at the notion of a written revelation of God. But the testimonium cannot settle the limits of the canon. Here the way of faith must yield to the way of science [historical research].

Finally, we would clarify that if proponents of the "testimony of the Spirit" wanted to define it as simply the Spirit's work in regeneration to renew the human "heart" such that we can now recognize and appreciate truth in the Gospel and Scripture, then we would have little argument with them.²⁸⁶ This is precisely the process and affect we have described elsewhere concerning *Spirit-liberated reason*, including the following:

Some of us may remember trying to understand the Scriptures before we were born again. Even though the words were in English, the meaning seemed like Mandarin Chinese. Still, even though we may have understood the *meaning* of the words in Scripture, we did not understand their *significance*. Then, after being born again, the Scriptures came alive! The difference was simply that our *devil-darkened*

The contention, that the testimony of the Spirit revealed in Christian experience is the test of canonicity," writes de Witt, "is as wide of the mark, and it is an error of the same kind, as the contention that the musical enjoyment of the music of Handel's Messiah is testimony to the historical fact that Handel was its author, which is nonsense. (*Witness*, 93, 125)

What is nonsense is trying to say that the Holy Spirit gives us certainty that something is divine revelation but then deny it has anything to do with determining what documents are to be included in the Bible. In response, the well-regarded Lutheran theologian J. W. Montgomery states the obvious:

One cannot dualistically split the "truth" and "authority" of the Bible from its "inspiration" and "canonicity," claiming that the witness of the Spirit applies to the former and not to the latter. This is because truth, authority, inspiration, and canonicity are integrally connected (a problem with any one of them will be a problem for all); if the Holy Spirit is the *sine qua non* for establishing one, He will likewise be essential for validating the rest. ("Lessons from Luther on the Inerrancy of Holy Writ" in *God's Inerrant Word*, J. W. Montgomery ed. [Bethany Fellowship, 1974], 390).

²⁸⁶ For example, Dr. Ramm writes that the "testimony of the Spirit" to the divinity of Scripture is:

an opening of the eyes of the understanding; an unplugging of the ears of the soul; a removal of a veil from the mind; a persuasion by the divine barrister. (*Witness*, 86)

We could agree with everything except the last statement, persuasion being a very different thing than simply enabling, the latter not involving revelation while the other does.

reason was liberated to discern and recognize truth as God intended [and replaced with *Spirit-liberated reason*]. . . .²⁸⁷

This is what the Apostle is describing regarding the Jews and their need to be regenerated in order to "see" Christ in Scripture. He writes:

But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is [epistemological²⁸⁸] freedom. (2 Cor 3:14-17)

We suggest that the Apostle is pointing out that the Jews were epistemologically blind to the Christ revealed in the OT Scriptures. Because of this dullness of mind and their veiled hearts they could not properly interpret Scripture, but with the regenerating work of the "**Spirit of the Lord**" their minds and hearts are freed to do so.²⁸⁹

Indeed, by virtue of spiritual regeneration, every Christian now possesses *Spirit-liberated reason* instead of the *devil-darkened reason* of those who are spiritually dead. Accordingly, the Spirit-controlled moral and logical reasoning of the Christian will perceive in the Bible that here is the greatest concentration of the most important truths in the world, and truth that is *objectively* confirmed in experience. For example, the moral New Nature in us would certainly validate the moral commands of Scripture. Not only

²⁸⁷ For further discussion of the place of reason concerning Scripture see sections 2.5.E, 3.1.C and chapter 3.5.

²⁸⁸ Admittedly, our interpretation of 2 Cor 3:14-17 goes against that of most commentators (e. g. Barrett, Kruse, Barclay, Barnett) who claim the Apostle is speaking of a freedom from the law or sin in general as is described in Romans 6-7. But this does not reflect the immediate context in which the Apostle is speaking epistemologically here of dull minds and veiled hearts. The freedom, therefore, is an epistemological freedom reflecting Romans chapter 8 rather than chapters 6-7. And it is this epistemological freedom that would better account for the Apostle's confidence and boldness in preaching the truth, not a freedom from the Mosaic Law.

²⁸⁹ Excerpted from section 4.15.C. See chapter 4.16 for further discussion of the epistemological work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration as regards the Gospel.

that, but these documents contain the Gospel that saved us and was the cause of our spiritual regeneration.

However, no matter how wonderful these things are, they are not found in every part of the Bible. Therefore, while the Gospel and moral commands contained in Scripture may be validated by our experience of moral regeneration, its historical and amoral doctrinal contents (e.g. Trinity) need some other objective criteria. And even the way in which these things are validated, does not constitute a revelation from the Spirit, but a reasoned evaluation of our experience. This is perhaps our greatest disagreement with those who promote the "testimony" doctrine. While we claim the recognition of Scripture is a matter of *research* with our God-given and *Spirit-liberated reason*, proponents of the "testimony" want to claim that an unauthenticated, subjective, "secret" revelation of the Spirit tells us what is Scripture, apart from any human reasoning or objective evidence.

It is obvious then that this is a critically important issue. There are few questions more important than, "How do we know if the sixty-six books in the Bible are the words of God instead of merely the words of men?"

B) Promoters & Critics of the "Testimony of the Spirit"

The promoters of the doctrine of the "testimony of the Holy Spirit" include the vast majority of the most influential Christian scholars, theologians and historians in the last 450 years, including today. The names include Calvin, Zwingli, Turretin, Owen, Bavinck, Kuyper, Young, Richardson, Berkhof, Van Til, Packer, Ramm, Schaff, Sproul, Reymond, Grudem, Ryrie, Waltke, Bruce, Bromiley, Bloesch, Frame, and Carson. Notable exceptions include Luther, Hodge, Warfield, and Edwards.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ Some wish to add Jonathan Edwards as among those who supported the "testimony of the Spirit" for the authentication of Scripture. For example, Stephen J. Nichols attempts to prove this in his book, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003). In our view, Nichols downplays Edward's emphasis on objective reason and *virtue apologetics* for the authentication of the Christian religion and highlights his relatively few statements concerning the testimony of the Spirit for assurance of salvation, resulting in a rather severe distortion of Edward's epistemology. In addition, Nichols ends up making the same contradictory, confusing, or

Because of its promotion by Calvin and its existence in the Church's most respected confessions, it should not be surprising that the idea has been overwhelmingly popular, particularly among Reformed theologians. For example, the greatly admired seventeenth century Puritan theologian John Owen (1616–1683) wrote in his massive study of the Holy Spirit:

Wherefore, I say in general, that the Holy Spirit giveth testimony unto and evinceth the divine authority of the word by its powerful operations and divine effects on the souls of them that do believe. . . . [The Holy Spirit] effectually ascertains our minds of the Scriptures being the word of God, whereby we are ultimately established in the faith thereof. And I cannot but both admire and bewail that this should be denied by any that would be esteemed Christians. . . . God by his Holy Spirit doth secretly and effectually persuade and satisfy the minds and souls of believers in the divine truth and authority of the Scriptures, whereby he infallibly secures their faith against all objections and temptations whatsoever. ²⁹¹

Likewise, J. I. Packer, another Puritan theologian, at least in heart, describes the "testimony of the Spirit" to Scripture when he says:

Through the inner witness of the Spirit, Christians recognize that the Scriptures "breathe out something divine" and come with God's own authority to all who hear or read them. . . . The church's certainty about the canon rests finally, after all has been said that can be said about the history and pedigree of the separate books, on the Spirit-given awareness that they bear divine witness to Christ, and God himself speaks to us what they say. ²⁹²

[R]ecognition of canonical Scripture depends ultimately on the covenanted inner witness of the Spirit, whereby the divine source and authority of those books which the church has historically attested to (not, therefore, the apocrypha) is made evident to faith. ²⁹³

impractical defenses of the doctrine that are addressed in this chapter. For further on this see below under section B and section 3.6.C.

²⁹¹ Owen, VI.6.

²⁹² J. I. Packer, "'Sola Scriptura' in History and Today" in *God's Inerrant Word*, John Warwick Montgomery ed. (Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 49.

²⁹³ J. I. Packer, *Truth & Power* (Harold Shaw, 1996), 59.

The ground of faith is the recognition of man's word as God's word. How does it come about? Through the work of the Holy Spirit, opening and enlightening the 'eyes' of the mind so that man 'sees' and knows the divine source . . . of the message that confronts him.²⁹⁴

Dr. Packer's emphasis on this doctrine is especially important to note. Not only because of his stature as a great theologian, but because few others have been as involved in the battle for the authority of Scripture, and Dr. Packer consistently falls back on this doctrine as an argument.

Likewise, the renowned OT scholar Bruce Waltke writes:

The fact is that the Holy Spirit offers conviction that the Bible is truth. . . . It is well known that the Bible claims to be the Word of God, but what is not as well known is that the truthfulness of the Bible depends on the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and not on human reason. My conviction that the Bible can be trusted as God's Word does not come from human reason, but from the Holy Spirit. If Scripture's claim to truth must be validated by finite, fallible human reason, then even if it is inspired revelation of truth, humanity cannot know it and must continue to despair of attaining the meaning and value they seek.²⁹⁵

One of our favorite theologians, Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), is even more dogmatic about the centrality of the "testimony" not only to epistemology, but Christianity itself:

The testimony of the Holy Spirit is so far from being the Achilles' heel of Protestantism that it should rather be called the cornerstone of our Christian confession, the crown and seal of all Christian truth, the triumph of the Holy Spirit in the world. Take away the testimony of the Holy Spirit, not only in relation to Scripture, but to all the truths of redemption, and there is no more church. . . . the apologetic value of the testimony of the Holy Spirit is second to none.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁴ J. I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* (Eerdmans, 1958), 118.

²⁹⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Eerdmans, 1995), 177-8.

²⁹⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena, Church Dogmatics* Vol. 1 (Baker, 2003), 599-600.

Likewise, the very highly respected NT scholar F. F. Bruce (1910-1990) has written some of the most detailed descriptions of the *historical evidence* for the authenticity, apostolicity, and authority of Scripture. Nonetheless, he writes:

The work of the Holy Spirit [i.e. the fact that He has inspired a document] is not discerned by the means of the common tools of the historian's trade. His inner witness gives the assurance to hearers or readers of scripture that in its words God himself is addressing them.²⁹⁷

Also speaking of a subjective assurance of the authority of Scripture, Wayne Grudem writes:

Our ultimate conviction that the words of the Bible are God's words comes only when the Holy Spirit speaks *in* and *through* the words of the Bible to our hearts and gives us an inner assurance that these are the words of our Creator speaking to us. . . . Thus, the words of Scripture are "self-attesting."²⁹⁸

Finally, the very important *Chicago Statement of Inerrancy* (1978), developed by many of the finest Evangelical scholars of our day states: "We affirm that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the Scriptures, assuring believers of the truthfulness of God's written Word."²⁹⁹

We see then that the idea that the Holy Spirit supernaturally authenticates Scripture is deeply embedded in the best of Christian theology. Still, the doctrine has not been without its opponents, even within the Reformed camp. First of all, the historical support for the doctrine has been relatively thin. The Dutch Reformed theologian Valentine Hepp, writing in the 1960's in support of the doctrine, admits that before, and even immediately after Calvin, "There has been . . . very little recognition of the existence of the general testimony of the Spirit."³⁰⁰

For example, even men such as Augustine (354-430) and Aquinas (1225-1274) who thought and wrote extensively on such epistemological/philosophical subjects, and "many Reformed theologians" have not included this doctrine in their epistemologies.

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²⁹⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, (InterVarsity, 1988), 281.

²⁹⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 77.

²⁹⁹ Quoted from Grudem, 1206.

³⁰⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Unpublished syllabus, 1955), 50.

³⁰¹ Bavinck, 600. He adds:

The Puritan divine, Richard Baxter (1615-1691) wrote:

I confess, for my part, I could never boast of any such testimony or light of the Spirit or reason; neither of which, without human testimony or tradition, would have made me believe that the book of Canticles [Song of Solomon] is canonical and written by Solomon, and the book of Wisdom apocryphal and written by Philo, as some think, or that Paul's Epistle to the Laodiceans and others is apocryphal [not Scripture], and the second and third Epistle of John canonical. Nor could I ever have known all or any historical books, such as Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, to be written by divine inspiration, but by tradition.

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As noted in the previous chapter, another Puritan at heart, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), described eight vital functions of human reason, the fifth being, "reason must verify any revelation as genuine."³⁰³ In relating the view of Edwards, a foremost expert on his theology, Dr. John Gerstner, relates that he believed:

To be sure, once the Bible by argument [or reason] is proven to be the Word of God there can be no more argument about the infallible authority of all of its message. Anyone at any time may return to the argument for biblical inspiration and the argument must be vindicated in the arena of debate or withdrawn. So said Jonathan Edwards and so said and says, (with a very weak voice today), the general historic Christian tradition. . . . Men receive things as truth purely because God has revealed them, yet . . . it is by the faculty of reason that

Admittedly, only a few statements about the Holy Spirit occur in the works of Luther, Zwingli, and Melancthon. But Calvin developed this doctrine at length and related the subject matter to the content as well as to the form and authority of Scripture. . . .

[G]radually the doctrine of the internal testimony began to lose its place of honor even in Reformed theology. Already in Turretin, Amyrald, Molina, et al., it was weakened and identified with the so-called illumination of the Holy Spirit by which the intellect is enabled to note the marks and criteria of the divinity of Holy Scripture (583-4).

Which, by the way, is what we would suggest is the proper perspective, and what we refer to as *Spirit-liberated reason*.

³⁰² Preface to second part of *Saints Rest*, quoted in *How God Inspired the Bible*, J. Paterson Smyth (James Pott & Co., 1918), 26-7.

³⁰³ John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3 vols. (Berea, 1991), I:51.

men know it to be a revelation and by that faculty that they know that a divine revelation is to be depended on.

Likewise, Eduard Ruess, well known for his multi-volume work on the canon of Scripture in the nineteenth century, wrote concerning how the Reformers distinguished the documents of Scripture:

Was it really in virtue of the sovereign principle of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit? Would it be quite true to say that the first Protestant theologians, while unmoved by the enthusiastic eloquence of the author of [the apocryphal] Wisdom, so much extolled by the Alexandrians, felt the breath of God in the genealogies of Chronicles, or the topographical catalogues of the book of Joshua? . . . I have some difficulty in believing that they arrived at the distinction they drew by any test of that kind.³⁰⁴

In a similar vein, the seventeenth century Jesuit theologian St Francis de Sales (1567-1622), exposed the difficulty of appealing to the inner witness as follows:

Now let us see what rule they [the Reformers] have for discerning the canonical books from all of the other ecclesiastical ones. 'The witness,' they say, 'and inner persuasion of the Holy Spirit.' Oh God, what a hiding place, what a fog, what a night! We are not in this way very enlightened in so important and grave a manner.³⁰⁵

The eminent Reformed theologian B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) clearly had little use for the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit" in order to establish the authority of the Scriptures. Accordingly he wrote:

[T]he mystical tendency is manifesting itself at the present day most distinctly in a widespread inclination to set aside apologetics in favor of the "witness of the Spirit." The convictions of the Christian man, we are told, are not the product of reason addressed to the intellect, but the immediate creation of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Therefore, it is intimated, we may do very well without these reasons, if indeed they are not positively noxious, because tending to substitute a barren intellectualism for a vital faith.

³⁰⁴ Eduard Reuss, *History of the Sacred Scriptures of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1884), 312.

³⁰⁵ Abraham, 167.

It seems to be forgotten that though faith be a moral act and the gift of God, it is yet formally conviction passing into confidence; and that all forms of convictions must rest on evidence as their ground, and it is not faith but reason which investigates the nature and validity of this ground.

"He who believes," says Thomas Aquinas, in words which have become current as an axiom, "would not believe unless he saw that what he believes is worthy of belief." Though faith is the gift of God, it does not in the least follow that the faith which God gives is an irrational faith, that is, a faith without cognizable ground in right reason. We believe in Christ because it is rational to believe in Him, not even though it be irrational.

Of course mere reasoning cannot make a Christian; but that is not because faith is not the result of evidence, but because a dead soul cannot respond to evidence. The action of the Holy Spirit in giving faith is not apart from evidence, but along with evidence; and in the first instance consists in preparing the soul for the reception of the evidence.³⁰⁶

Likewise, Dr. Warfield wrote elsewhere:

The "testimony of the Holy Spirit in the heart" does not communicate to man any new powers, powers alien to him as man; it is restorative in its nature and in principle merely recovers his [reasoning] powers from their deadness induced by sin. The knowledge of God to which man attains through the testimony of the Spirit is therefore the knowledge which belongs to him as normal man; although now secured by him only in a supernatural manner.³⁰⁷

Warfield is describing what we have referred to as the spiritual liberation of reason in regeneration, and it probably was not helpful

³⁰⁶ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Apologetics" in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, reprint, 10 Vols. (Baker, 2000), IX:15.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., "Calvin's Doctrine of God," V:151.

for him to refer to it as the "testimony of the Spirit" at all.³⁰⁸ Along these lines, Avery Dulles writes:

[B. B.] Warfield, while greatly admiring [Abraham] Kuyper and [Herman] Bavinck [and certainly Calvin], criticizes their views on faith and reason. The Amsterdam theologians, he objects, indulge a mystical tendency that substitutes the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit for the objective grounds perceptible to reason. . . . The Holy Spirit does not produce faith without grounds but enables us to grasp the objective validity of the grounds.³⁰⁹

Based on his knowledge and support of the theology and epistemology of Jonathan Edwards, it is not surprising that John Gerstner (1914-1996), one of the most respected Reformed theologians of our day, is quite critical of the "testimony of the Spirit" doctrine in his very helpful little book, *A Bible Inerrancy Primer*. While Dr. Gerstner did not reject some place for the "testimony of the Spirit" in the Christian's life, he believed the concept was "misused" when "the Internal Testimony is submitted as proof that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God."³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Elsewhere Warfield attempts to defend Calvin's view as being in line with Warfield's own insistence on the priority of external historical evidence, but in our view does not succeed. Reading Calvin's statement on the issue in the *Institutes* (I.vii) makes it clear that Calvin prioritized the more subjective and internal "witness of the Spirit" over any external criteria, just as did the Westminster Confession. Warfield, *Works*, V.70-103.

³⁰⁹ Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 99.

³¹⁰ John H. Gerstner, *A Bible Inerrancy Primer* (Baker, 1965), 14. It can be added that Dr. Gerstner attempts (unsuccessfully in our opinion), to defend the Westminster Confession of Faith in light of his criticisms of the doctrine of the testimony of the Spirit. He writes:

It may be necessary to show that we are not here opposing the Westminster Confession of Faith's view of things but actually defending it. It teaches that "our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof of the Scriptures is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (1, 5). But these words teach only that the "Testimony of the Holy Spirit" "persuades" us of the Inspiration of the Bible. (Ibid., 16).

The Confession seems to say more than that. It says "our full persuasion and assurance" depends on the Spirit and all other criteria are far secondary.

Likewise, the renowned Evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry (1913-2003) has written:

While inner evidence for the canonical books may be useful, the question remains whether a sincere Christian left to himself would identify all or only our present twenty-seven New Testament books out of a larger selection of literature. Would he include all the canonical books and exclude all apocryphal books? Even pious men have at times questioned the canonical status of some of these writings. . . . Can the canonical works be discriminated solely in terms of one's inner spiritual response? . . .

[T]he Bible's authority does not rest upon our experience of the truth of Scripture. Scripture does, indeed, manifest its power in inner experience, but this experience is not the basis and ground of its claim to be authoritative. Not only does such an appeal by-pass historical concerns [and evidence] crucial for the efficacy of the Bible, but it also confers upon other Christian literature through which the Spirit may speak [to some] a dignity equal to that of the Bible.³¹¹

We could hardly state our view any clearer, and those who propose some "testimony of the Spirit" should more seriously consider the words of such a respected, evangelical, and learned theologian as Dr. Henry.

C) Suggested Problems with the "Testimony of the Spirit" Doctrine

C.1) The Doctrine's Lack of Scriptural Support

In our critique of the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit" we will argue first that we see no Scriptural support for it. Calvin, uncharacteristically, does not even offer any Scriptures in support of his discussion on the topic. Accordingly, Geoffrey Bromiley writes:

The Reformers might advocate Scripture as a norm, but they offered little biblical support for their specialized use of the phrase "witness of the Spirit." They did not do so, however, because they regarded the matter as self-evident.³¹²

³¹¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Word, 1979), IV.420, 421, 423, 436-7. Underlining added.

³¹² Bromiley, 1088.

Needless to say, it is not "self-evident" to all Spirit-filled Christians and we need some scriptural support for such a critical doctrine.

However, it must be asked that even if there was biblical support for the "testimony" and it is the "testimony" that is telling us what is Scripture, then how do we know we have biblical support? We are arguing in a subjective circle that does not provide the kind of confidence that promoters of the "testimony" seek.

Nonetheless, many have suggested supporting verses, although they are consistently in a mere footnote or parentheses, with no discussion of them whatsoever.³¹³ The popular Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul, for example, says:

[T]he New Testament is replete with allusions to the work of the Spirit in securing our confidence in the Word. These references are scattered throughout the New Testament and include such classic texts as 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; 1 John 1:10; 2:14; 5:20; Colossians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15-16; and others.³¹⁴

Likewise, after suggesting that 1 John 5:7-13 supports the doctrine, Bernard Ramm says in a footnote:

For other verses on the interior witness of the Spirit see John 15:26 ("he shall bear witness of me"); Romans 8:14-16 ("the Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit"); Gal. 4:6; 1 John 2:27 ("his anointing teacheth you"); 3:24 ("And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he gave us"); 4:13; 5:10-13; and 5:20. We must also keep in mind the numerous acts of the Spirit in the book of Acts [whatever that has to do with it]; and the powerful renewing effects of the Holy Spirit on the human mind (Rom. 8:4-27, John 3:3, and Titus 3:5).³¹⁵

³¹³ The only real exception is Bernard Ramm's, *The Witness of the Spirit*.

³¹⁴ R. C. Sproul, "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit" in *Inerrancy*, Norman Geisler ed. (Zondervan, 1979), 353. Dr. Sproul notes elsewhere, "For an excellent, comprehensive survey of the biblical texts relevant to this see Ramm." (*Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine*, [Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005], 204). All supporting verses in Ramm's *Witness of the Holy Spirit* are dealt with in this chapter or other chapters referred to.

³¹⁵ Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Authority* (Eerdmans, 1957), 33.

J. I. Packer offers the following verses in a footnote for support after his discussion of the doctrine: John 3:3; 1 Cor 2:14-15; 2 Cor 4:6; Eph 1:18; 1 John 2:20, 27; 5:7, 20.³¹⁶

The Westminster Confession quoted above provides the following verses for its statement that:

Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority [of Scripture], is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts. (Isa 59:21; John 16:13, 14; 1 Cor 2:10-12; 1 John 2:20, 27).

Finally, John Frame suggests that Ephesians 1:17ff; 3:14-19; and 5:8-21 speak of the "testimony of the Spirit."

Obviously and understandably there is a good deal of redundancy in these lists. Still, they demonstrate that there certainly is no shortage of suggestions for Scripture that supports Calvin's version of the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit." Before discussing these passages, it is important to be reminded once again what specifically is said to be taught in these Scriptures. In other words, the question to ask is do any of these verses clearly teach us that the Holy Spirit enables us to confidently discern literature that is the written recording of direct revelation from God, from that which is merely the recording of the thoughts of men? Do they teach that the Spirit helps us detect Scripture? In all the flurry of verses thrown at this doctrine, none of them support what these authors suggest they support.

C.1.a) Scriptures that are irrelevant

First of all, many of the verses provided by the above authors seem to have nothing whatsoever to do with the Holy Spirit enabling us to discern the writings of God from the writings of men. For example, the Westminster Confession suggests Isaiah 59:21:

As for Me, this is My covenant with them," says the LORD. "My Spirit, Who is on you, and My words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever," says the LORD.

Most commentators believe this promise applies to the end-time restoration of Israel, not an operation of the Spirit in the Church.

³¹⁶ Packer, *Fundamentalism*, 118.

Even if some would apply it somehow to the Church today, it speaks of direct divine revelation, not a "testimony" to written Scripture.

Likewise, R. C. Sproul lists 1 John 1:10 above as a "classic text" supporting the "testimony of the Spirit" to Scripture. It says, **"If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word has no place in our lives."** This verse would seem to simply affirm that Scripture has no authority for the unbeliever. Dr. Sproul cites other texts that have nothing to do with the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit," including 1 John 2:14 in which John tells, **"young men"** that **"the word of God lives in"** them and Colossians 2:2 where the Apostle writes, **"My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ."** For our part, we do not see what these passages have to do with a "testimony of the Spirit" to the divinity of Scripture.

Similarly, John Frame suggests that Ephesians 5:8-21 speaks of the "testimony of the Spirit." However, the Apostle simply introduces this section with the statement, **"For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light,"** and proceeds to describe the moral virtues that Christians should have.

Finally, Bernard Ramm comments, "In its own way the most remarkable verse upon this subject is I John 5:20."³¹⁷ There we read: **"We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him Who is true."** At best, this is a reference to the regeneration of the Spirit which gives us **"understanding"** of the saving revelation of Jesus Christ in the Gospel. There is nothing here about a promised ability to detect written divine revelation, and to suggest so would seem to be unreasonable.

C.1.b) Scriptures that refer to regeneration in salvation

Most verses used to support a "testimony of the Spirit" to the divinity of Scripture actually apply to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. This simply (and wonderfully!) exchanges our rebellious nature with the Spirit, and liberates our reason,

³¹⁷ Ramm, *Witness*, 46.

allowing us to do the most reasonable thing in the world: receive the free gift of salvation in Christ.³¹⁸

For example, both Drs. Sproul and Packer cite 2 Corinthians 4:6 as support for the "testimony of the Spirit" to the divinity of Scripture. There the Apostle writes: **"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."** This applies to how we get saved, not how we know what documents are Scripture.

Other verses cited for support simply describe the convicting work of the Holy Spirit to the Gospel. For example, many proponents of the "testimony of the Spirit" to Scripture cite 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5 which reads: **"For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our Gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction."** Here, as in many other places, we see a description of the Spirit's work in the process of salvation. And the reason the Apostle knew these Thessalonians has been chosen by God to be saved was the observable fruit of the Spirit in their lives, including sorrow and repentance for their sins and the number of other supernatural attributes Paul ascribes to them in verse 6-9.³¹⁹

Proponents of the "testimony of the Spirit" to the divinity of Scripture commonly suggest that the work of the Spirit in enabling us to receive the Gospel, continues in some way to tell us what is Scripture as well. Accordingly, this is a primary approach of Bernard Ramm who claims:

Whatever differences Luther and Calvin may have had in regard to the testimonium and the relation of Word to Spirit, they were one in their belief in the reality and necessity of the testimonium. In his Small Catechism Luther wrote: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Ghost has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me by his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith." . . .

Thus the witness of the Spirit is precisely the taking of Christ out of the domain of historical faith and making him the reality

³¹⁸ For further discussion of the relationship between regeneration and conversion see chapter 4.16.

³¹⁹ However, the NLT reads here: **"the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance that what we said was true."** If this is the correct translation, then we would claim that it was not through some subjective "witness" but because of the observable supernatural fruit that the Holy Spirit worked as a result of their conversion.

he is in justifying faith. . . . The conviction of divinity associated with the Gospel spreads to include the total canon. . . . The *testimonium*, which is related immediately to the Gospel, relates itself immediately to the entire Scripture.³²⁰

In response, we would first suggest that there is no biblical or practical reason to suggest that the regenerating work of the Spirit in conversion applies to "the total canon" of Scripture, because not everything in Scripture is the Gospel, but rather, Jewish history and commands to Christians. Secondly, Luther's words regarding conversion cannot be used to claim that he would have supported Dr. Ramm's claim. Finally, there is an underlying misapplication of the Spirit's work in salvation here. It is not a *revelatory* work, but a regenerating and releasing work. In other words, the Spirit does not reveal or communicate the Gospel, but it is proclaimed in a variety of ways just like any other information in this world. Rather, the Holy Spirit gives us a new "heart" to be able to receive the Gospel, which we believe in the same way we believe other things.³²¹

Therefore, there is no warrant in using Scriptures that speak of spiritual regeneration to support the idea of an ongoing *revelation* or communication from the Spirit that tells us what documents are Scripture (e.g. John 3:3; Eph 3:14-19; Tit 3:5). The born again experience is unique to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and cannot be applied to any other Gospel, or to any other Scriptural truths.³²²

The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, will not cause regeneration, nor can its truth be authenticated in the same way as the Gospel. Accordingly, while we do not support the idea that a superior experience authenticates each and every one of the sixty-six books of the Protestant Bible, we have suggested elsewhere that superior virtue and life transformation is the ultimate authentication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We would simply claim that there is no biblical or practical evidence to apply this objective authentication of the Gospel to some subjective authentication of say, Ezra or James in which the Gospel is not communicated.

³²⁰ Ramm, *Witness*, 20, 36, 68-69.

³²¹ For further discussion of the relationship between regeneration and conversion see chapter 4.16.

³²² For further discussion regarding the Spirit's role in our salvation see chapter 4.16. If it is further asked what authenticates the Gospel, we would answer objective *virtue*, not a subjective revelation of the Spirit. This is discussed in Book 5: *Biblical Apologetics*.

Accordingly, some theologians use the *testimonium* to refer to the work of the Spirit in salvation, as the Evangelical theologian Peter Jensen writes:

It is no accident, then, that what has been known inadequately as the 'internal testimony of the Spirit' should turn out to refer to the way God, through the Gospel, draws his people into the supremely loving relation of the Trinity, into the love of God, the communion of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit, so defined, is his special work in relation to the Gospel, and, from the point of view of the saved, it is one of the glories of what God has done for them in Christ.³²³

Likewise, another Evangelical theologian, J. W. Montgomery writes:

[T]he *testimonium* has to do with soteriology (how one is saved), not with bibliology (how Scripture is validated). Calvin was . . . not correct . . . when he suggested that the objective evidence for scriptural truth is inadequate in itself apart from the Spirit's working.³²⁴

Indeed, the real "testimony of the Holy Spirit" is the supernatural virtue produced by our regeneration in salvation, which authenticates the exclusivity of the Gospel for salvation.³²⁵

C.1.c) Scriptures that refer to assurance of salvation

Other verses used to support the "testimony of the Spirit" to the divinity of Scripture actually refer to our assurance of salvation (e.g. Rom 8:15-16; Gal 4:6; 3:24; 4:13; 5:7-13). For example, Bernard Ramm writes:

The two classical passages of the *testimonium* are Galatians 4:6 ("and because ye are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'""); and Romans

³²³ Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Intervarsity, 2002), 256. Unfortunately, although Dr. Jensen seems to accurately define this work of the Spirit here, he seems to describe it elsewhere as an ongoing process.

³²⁴ Montgomery, 391.

³²⁵ For a defense of virtue as the ultimate apologetic of the Christian faith see Book 5: *Biblical Apologetics*.

8:15-16. . . . 1 John 5:6-12 is a most remarkable passage in connection with the *testimonium*.³²⁶

Not only do such verses have nothing to do with the authentication of the canon of Scripture, they are not even speaking of some subjective direct revelation of the Spirit either, but rather, the objective, observable fruit the Spirit produces in our life (cf. Gal 5:18-23), or the miracle working of Christ (cf. 1 John 5:6-12). This is discussed further elsewhere.³²⁷

C.1.d) Scriptures that refer to revelation

Finally, many of the Scriptures used to support the *testimonium* to Scripture speak of some sort of revelation from the Holy Spirit, but do not tell us that the content of that revelation is information about what documents are Scripture and which are not. For example, the great Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) wrote:

Jesus said, "He [the Holy Spirit] abideth with you forever"; and this has primary reference to this testimony concerning the Word of God. In the believing heart He testifies continually: "Fear not, the Scripture is the Word of your God."³²⁸

Again, the claim is that the Spirit is providing an extra-biblical revelation about the Bible that tells us "the Scripture is the Word of your God." The question of whether or not the Holy Spirit is revealing anything today apart from Scripture demands more discussion than we will provide here. Therefore, verses commonly used to support the idea that the "testimony of the Spirit" is a revelation about Scripture are discussed elsewhere including: John

³²⁶ Ramm, *Witness*, 50.

³²⁷ For further discussion regarding the Spirit's role in our assurance of salvation see chapters 3.6 and 5.5.

³²⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. by Henri De Vries, (Eerdmans, 1946), 193.

10:37; 14:16-17; 15:26-27; 16:13-14; 1 Cor 2:10-15; Eph 1:17-18; and 1 John 2:20, 27.³²⁹

Briefly, we can first say that many of these passages are promises exclusive to the Apostles concerning their unique reception of divine revelation. They do not promise that all Christians are to receive divine revelation. Secondly, even if these passages are interpreted to mean that the Holy Spirit is revealing information apart from Scripture today, they say nothing about the fact that such information includes what is the correct collection of divinely given documents. Finally, most proponents of the "testimony" want to deny that it is a revelation at all, and therefore, Scriptures that speak of an extrabiblical revelatory ministry of the Spirit do not serve them well anyway.

Admittedly, many verses used to support the "testimony of the Spirit" to the divinity of Scripture are not discussed in detail here, but elsewhere. Nonetheless, we will make the claim here that such an application of the "testimony of the Spirit" has no biblical backing. We can go on and demonstrate as well that it is not a part of our practical experience either.

C.2) The Doctrine's Practical Ineffectiveness

Proponents of the view we are discussing suggest that the Spirit allows us to detect and distinguish the written word of God from what is merely the written words of men. This process is described either as some sort of divine revelation or an inner experience. Here we will deal specifically with the idea that the unique divinity of Scripture is authenticated by its affects on us. As noted above, the Evangelical theologian Paul Helm gives a good description of this approach when he writes:

[T]he power of the Scriptures to raise and satisfy certain distinctive needs in the reader, particularly the recognition of his sin before God and the enjoyment of forgiveness and reconciliation to God through Christ. Connected with this is the displaying in Scripture of excellent moral standards that focus and integrate the life of the reconciled person. And connected with this is the provision of new motivations to

³²⁹ For detailed discussions of the proper interpretations of these Scriptures that some view as promising extra-biblical revelation from the Spirit see Book 14 chapters 14.13-14.18.

reach out for the newly set standards. . . .

[T]he certainty of the Scriptures as revelatory documents lies in their being confirmed in experience . . . the *impact* of the revelation on the lives of those who receive it.³³⁰

Calvin had written much the same thing when he supported the self-authentication of Scripture as follows:

How peculiarly this property belongs to Scripture appears from this, that no human writings, however skillfully composed, are at all capable of affecting us in a similar way. Read Demosthenes or Cicero, read Plato, Aristotle, or any other of that class: you will, I admit, feel wonderfully allured, pleased, moved, enchanted; but turn from them to the reading of the sacred volume, and whether you will or not, it will so affect you, so pierce your heart, so work its way into your very marrow, that, in comparison of the impression so produced, that or orators and philosophers will almost disappear; making it manifest that in the sacred volume there is a truth divine, a something which makes it immeasurably superior to all the gifts and graces attainable by man.³³¹

We do not wish to diminish the excellencies of Scripture one little bit, and fully agree with the above observations, but not with the application and conclusions. Accordingly, several questions come to mind at this point. What if a certain portion or even a whole book of the Bible does *not* affect me in such a glorious way? Is it still to be considered divinely communicated? If so, why? Are those portions or books of the Bible that affect me the most to be considered more divinely imparted than others? Haven't sermons, Christian books, and other means of communication had similar affects in our life? Are these then to be considered as uniquely divinely given and on par with Scripture in authority?

It would seem then to be rather meaningless, and even potentially hazardous, to recognize Scripture based on it *affects*, as these may at times be indistinguishable from the popular, motivational, teaching and writing of mere humans. Rather, the definition of Scripture must reside in its *source*, and that being supernaturally authenticated messengers of direct divine revelation.

Again, Dr. Helm's own question (and ours) is "What evidence ought to persuade people that the Bible is the Word of God?"

³³⁰ Helm, 310, 312. The same essential point is suggested by Philip E. Hughes in another entry to the book. (see p. 193)

³³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.viii. 1.

Whatever evidence that is, it must be unique enough to set the Bible apart from all other communication, speech, literature, or otherwise. Dr. Helm's application of what he calls "the theological doctrine of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" ³³² does not provide such evidence.

While we rarely want to be redundant, we are led to quote Carl F. H. Henry on this point once again:

While inner evidence for the canonical books may be useful, the question remains whether a sincere Christian left to himself would identify all or only our present twenty-seven New Testament books out of a larger selection of literature. Would he include all the canonical books and exclude all apocryphal books? Even pious men have at times questioned the canonical status of some of these writings . . . Can the canonical works be discriminated solely in terms of one's inner spiritual response? . . .

[T]he Bible's authority does not rest upon our experience of the truth of Scripture. Scripture does, indeed, manifest its power in inner experience, but this experience is not the basis and ground of its claim to be authoritative. Not only does such an appeal by-pass historical concerns [and evidence] crucial for the efficacy of the Bible, but it also confers upon other Christian literature through which the Spirit may speak [to some] a dignity equal to that of the Bible. ³³³

Which is why we have no record of any Church Father ever appealing to a "testimony of the Spirit" to support the identification of a document as Scripture. This includes Irenaeus (died c. 175–195) who was compelled by the numerous Gnostic forgeries of Scripture in his day to give proof of where the authentic Christian revelation could be found. He did not appeal to some subjective "voice" of the Spirit, which would actually support Gnostics and mystics both then and today. Rather, Irenaeus wrote of how carefully the early Church had preserved the traditions concerning what documents the Apostles of Jesus Christ wrote. ³³⁴

An honest Christian will admit that if an ancient and orthodox, although actually merely human authored document existed in their Bible, there is no guarantee whatsoever that they would recognize it as such. The example of the widespread and centuries-long

³³² Helm, 312.

³³³ Henry, IV.420, 421, 423, 436-7. Underlining added.

³³⁴ For further discussion of early Church testimonies to the authority of NT documents see Volume 3

acceptance of the forged *Epistle to the Laodiceans* as Scripture is offered as at least some proof of this.³³⁵ Protestants would claim that this "witness of the Spirit" evidently failed such great Christians as St. Augustine and other early Church Fathers who accepted the OT Apocrypha as divine revelation from God.

Along these lines, one wonders what Protestant promoters of the "testimony of the Spirit" can say in reference to their rejection of the OT Apocrypha? At least Calvin was consistent when he explained his rejection of it by stating that he did not sense the "majesty of the Spirit" in the Apocrypha.³³⁶ However, this seems to be nothing more (or less!) than exercising the subjective authority of our *right to private judgment*, although we would suggest such a judgment be made based on objective historical data rather than a subjective feeling.

We can ask here as well how the OT saints knew the limits of divinely imparted Scripture? They did not possess the Spirit like NT believers do, and we may conclude that at least for them, no such "testimony of the Spirit" existed. Along these lines, Dr. Abraham notes:

This doctrine [of the "testimony of the Spirit"] continued to be maintained even while the Reformers and their followers appealed to the Jewish community's decisions on the canon when it came to deciding the boundaries of the Old Testament. Somehow it was all right to appeal to the [historical] Jewish community to determine the boundaries of the Old Testament, but it was not appropriate to appeal to the [historical] Christian community concerning the boundaries of the New Testament. Few appear to have been aware of the obvious inconsistency in these deliberations.³³⁷

In addition, as noted in the previous chapter, some honesty is called for in how people really come to believe that certain documents of Scripture are Scripture. Rightly or wrongly, most Christians accept the biblical canon not on some "testimony of the Holy Spirit" as much as the testimony of the Christian community in

³³⁵ For further discussion of the fraud regarding the *Epistle to the Laodiceans* see the forthcoming Book 16.

³³⁶ Quoted by Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Columbia, 1952), 118.

³³⁷ Abraham, 155.

which they grow up in.³³⁸ While this may not seem as “spiritual,” it is through this more natural testimony of parents and pastors that most Christians become convinced of the authority of Scripture, and such repeated testimony becomes tradition.³³⁹

And the convincing nature of testimony and tradition in human epistemology is demonstrated by the fact that very few Christians ever feel a need to investigate the canon of Scripture for themselves. Nevertheless, we would humbly suggest that what many declare as the “testimony of the Spirit” is nothing more (and nothing less!) than the more natural and cumulative effect of the testimony of humans and tradition.

Accordingly, a born-again Christian growing up in the Roman Catholic Church is probably going to believe that *Bel and the Dragon* is divinely given Scripture worthy of exercising God-like authority over their lives, and no “testimony of the Spirit” is likely to overcome the testimony of their priest or catechism teacher. Nor will they probably research the document’s historical and textual credentials in order to make a judgment for themselves as to whether or not their community of faith is right.

³³⁸ Accordingly, we would suggest that the following testimony of J. I. Packer in support of the “testimony of the Spirit” could just as easily be explained as an example of the testimony of the Christian community:

I was converted at age eighteen through the Inter-Varsity people at Oxford University. They gave me my nurture, and one of the first things that became reality for me in the course of that nurture was what John Calvin some years later taught me to recognize as the inward witness of the Holy Spirit to the divinity of Holy Scripture. I can still remember the gathering at which I went in, not at all sure that the Bible was the Word of God, and came out absolutely certain that it was, though all that had happened was that one visionary chapter of the Book of Revelation had been reverently expounded.

It was not, as I said, until long after that I found in Calvin the phrase that fits what had happened to me. Calvin said that this Spirit-given certainty that the Bible is the Word of God is something that every Christian experiences. I rejoiced when I read that, for that was what I had experienced. (*Honoring the Written Word of God* [Paternoster, 1999], 161).

We in no way intend to be disrespectful of Dr. Packer’s interpretation of his experience, but would simply suggest that the same affect can be explained by the confidence with which the teacher preached the word and that others exhibited in the authority of what was being preached. In other words, could there be a more natural explanation for becoming convinced in the authenticity of Scripture, then the supernatural one claimed?

³³⁹ For further discussion of the important and God-ordained place that human testimony has in our beliefs see section 2.5.D.

Such a reality in both Catholic and Protestant contexts needs to be taken into consideration when evaluating a statement such as that made by Robert Godfrey when he writes, "The self-authenticating character of the canon is demonstrated by the remarkable unanimity reached by the people of God on the canon."

³⁴⁰ While such unanimity may exist among those who never question the canon, there are significant disagreements among those who have actually researched the topic. ³⁴¹

C.3) The Doctrine's Potential Dangers: *Pragmatism, Neoorthodoxy, & Liberalism*

In essence then, it would seem the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit" becomes just another example of contemporary *pragmatism* in which we believe something to be true, like Scripture, because "it works." What happens when it doesn't "work?" This supposed "self-authentication" of Scripture is no different than how anything else is supposedly self-authenticated. A New Age self-help book will authenticate itself because of its positive, and even life-changing affect on a person. Why are people spending billions of dollars on such materials? Because it works. Does this mean the New Age gurus have truth? Probably. And this is exactly the problem with such a pragmatic approach to recognizing what is ultimately divinely authored from what is merely humanly authored. A lot of programs and perspectives "work," and even contain truth, but that does not guarantee their divinity.

Accordingly, Dr. Gerstner remarked:

The "testimony of the Holy Spirit" seems no different than Samuel Coleridge's rather famous, but widely rejected statement, "That is inspired which inspires me" or Barth's contention that the word of God is "that which finds me." ³⁴²

³⁴⁰ Robert W. Godfrey, "What Do We Mean by Sola Scriptura?" in *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 19.

³⁴¹ For further discussion of ancient and modern disagreements on the canon see Volume 3.

³⁴² John H. Gerstner, "Warfield's Case for Biblical Inerrancy" in *God's Inerrant Word*, John Warwick Montgomery ed. (Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 135.

Not only is our experience with Scripture insufficient to distinguish it from other Christian communication, it does not distinguish it from any other religious communication either. Some, no doubt, may describe their experience with reading the sacred literature of Hinduism or New Age philosophies in a similar way as Christians would in regards to Scripture. It is difficult to see how the conviction that a believer experiences from the spoken or read word of God is any more powerful than what many unbelievers might experience with other words. Movies, music, and Muslim clerics have been known to have a forceful, life changing affect on people without some "illumination" or ministry of the Spirit of God.

Accordingly, J. W. Montgomery notes, "The 'inward witness' remains as subjectively unverifiable as the Mormon claim to a 'burning in the bosom.'" ³⁴³ Likewise, the Evangelical apologist E. J. Carnell writes:

There are hundreds of conflicting faiths in the world, many, if not all, of which claim to be based upon some manifestation of the witness of God's Spirit to our hearts. These claims cannot all be true, for they are inconsistent, and consistency is the first property of truth. ³⁴⁴

Likewise, Paul Helm essentially admits this very thing when he writes:

It might be said that the view that I am defending, that the evidence for the Scriptures being the Word of God is primarily internal [experiential] evidence, leaves that position formally similar to the position of the truth claims of the myriad other religions and ideologies. In a sense this is perfectly true. Christianity is in this position. ³⁴⁵

No it is not. The human Apostles and Prophets who wrote OT and NT Scripture have claims to truth that significantly exceed others. Muhammad, for example, the author of the Koran, never dared to predict the future or perform miracles. God's ordained messengers did, clearly authenticating themselves in unique and superior ways that sets their writing apart from all other human communication.

³⁴³ Montgomery, 393.

³⁴⁴ E. J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Eerdmans, 1956), 67.

³⁴⁵ Helm, 318.

An appeal to an internal, admittedly subjective experience is fraught with difficulties.³⁴⁶ For example, several early Church leaders in the fourth century rejected John's Revelation because it did not impress them spiritually enough. As noted above, Calvin stated that he rejected the OT Apocrypha because he did not sense the "majesty of the Spirit" in it. Would we claim that such subjective criteria are a legitimate reason for a Christian to *reject* something as the written word of God to be obeyed? If not, then we cannot claim that such subjective criteria are sufficient to *accept* something as the word of God to be obeyed.

As NT scholar I. Howard Marshall notes:

It would be simple to gather testimonies from Christians to show that every kind of material in the Bible can serve as a vehicle for conveying the Word of God to them. However, it must also be admitted that some Christians would say that there are some parts of the Bible which do not speak to them.

³⁴⁷

And why wouldn't such people be justified in rejecting the divinity of such portions of Scripture if the authentication of them depends on them "speaking" to us? In the end, such a doctrine does not protect the authority of the Scriptures as well as Calvin and subsequent theologians have thought.

³⁴⁶ Obviously, proponents of applying the "testimony of the Spirit" in this way attempt to refute its subjectivity. Helm, for example, writes:

[O]ur position cannot be ruled out as mere subjectivism, the idea that so-called religious or theological truth is merely about the believer's own state of mind. For while there is a subjective side of things, a believer, there is an objective side, the text and its meaning, something public and verifiable. (313).

Nonetheless, Dr. Helm's criteria for evaluating the objective text is still highly subjective.

Likewise, Bernard Ramm ends up with similarly confusing and contradictory language when he attempts to refute the subjectivity of the "testimony":

The important thing is to note that the *testimonium* is by its very nature a divine and secret work and therefore incapable of objectification. It is an easy temptation to brand the *testimonium* as subjective, but from the theological side the privacy of the *testimonium* is its very strength, for it is by the same token immediate and therefore certain and sure. (*Witness*, 76)

³⁴⁷ I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Eerdmans, 1983), 22.

Millard Erickson more honestly admits the insufficiency of a subjective, experientially-based criteria for accepting Scripture when he writes:

While inspiration conveys a special quality to the writing, that quality is not always easily recognized and assessed. On the one hand, the devotional materials and the Sermon on the Mount have a quality that tends to stand out and can be fairly easily identified. In part, this is due to the subject matter. In other cases, however, such as the historical narratives, the special quality conveyed by inspiration may instead be a matter of the accuracy of the record, and this is not as easily or as directly assessed. Nevertheless, the sensitive reader [whatever that means] will probably detect within the whole of the Bible a quality that unmistakably points to inspiration.³⁴⁸

Maybe. Then again, maybe not. And then what happens to the authority of Scripture? This feeling that Calvin describes is not nearly as clear, unique, and consistent as he suggests. For example, what the contemporary Reformed theologian John Armstrong prescribes for gaining certainty in the authority of Scripture would seem to work for other literature as well. He writes:

When we are assailed by doubts regarding the authority of the Scripture what are we to do? The answer of this truth is that we must have more profound intercourse with the Word of God itself. Here, as we read, meditate, and study the Scripture we are acted upon by God the Holy Spirit who bears witness to the supreme authority of the Word through the self testimony of the Scripture.³⁴⁹

We would suggest that if one applied the same diligent attention to the *Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, or the *Shepherd of Hermas*, or even to a sermon by Charles Spurgeon, that one may experience something indistinguishable from what Armstrong is describing. Feelings and affects may help us distinguish between good and bad spiritual writing, but they will not distinguish spiritual writing written *about* God or Scripture, from that which is directly *from* God and *is* Scripture.

³⁴⁸ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Baker, 1998), 244, underlining added.

³⁴⁹ John H. Armstrong, "The Authority of Scripture" in *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 128-9.

Accordingly, Dr. Gerstner replies against the subjectivity of the doctrine under discussion:

If it is so used as proof of Inerrancy [or canonicity] how is it such unless somehow God's Spirit testifies, tells, signifies to us, reveals in us or the like that the canonical Scriptures are from him? . . .

In summary we must reject the Testimony of the Spirit as the basis of Inerrancy [or canonicity] . . . because: first, if his "Testimony" is construed as audible or verbal [revelation], it simply does not exist; second, if his "Testimony" is construed as a spiritual effect [experience] intensifying our feelings as we read Scripture this is not a proving of the Inspiration or Inerrancy [or canonicity] of Scripture . . .

[The doctrine] amounts to this: "My heart is moved when I read the Bible more and/or differently than when I read any other literature. Therefore, this Bible, which is the occasion or cause of this wonderful feeling, must be God's Word." . . .

Christians do, in fact, testify that often when they read the Bible nothing "happens." . . . Instead of abiding by the laws of evidence [and reason] which God has given us we become laws to ourselves . . .

No one is likely ever to admit that the Bible is the Word of God apart from this experience here described. Nothing so powerfully affects men's convictions about Inspiration as this experience. Nevertheless, precious and valuable as it is, the believer's testimony is not the basis of an argument for Inerrancy [or canonicity]. On the contrary, Inerrancy [and canonicity] must be the basis of validating Christian experience.³⁵⁰

Such a subjective approach involving the Spirit can result in the following rather ridiculous statement by the otherwise very respected Reformed theologian Francis Turretin (1623–1687):

Although believers are persuaded by the testimony of the Holy Spirit of the inspiration of the Scriptures, it does not therefore follow that all who possess the Spirit should agree in receiving equally every book. Since he [the Holy Spirit] is not given to all in an equal measure [what?], so neither does he furnish all with an equal knowledge both as to the principle of religion and as to its doctrines, nor move them to assent by an equal power. Hence some Protestants might doubt concerning one

³⁵⁰ John Gerstner, *Primer*, 16-20.

or another canonical book because they were not yet sufficiently enlightened by the Holy Spirit.³⁵¹

Need we say more?

But there is one more thing to say here and that is a concern that this doctrine is rather identical to a *neoorthodox* or *existential*³⁵² view that Scripture does not become the word of God until it is

³⁵¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, James T. Dennison ed., 3 vols. (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), I:97.

³⁵² Millard Erickson provides one of the more succinct descriptions of *existentialism*, although it is a very difficult concept to accurately and fully define. Erickson writes:

There are many aspects or dimensions to the tenet of [*extentialism*]. Basically it is the contention that reality cannot be captured within, or reduced to, intellectual concepts. It goes beyond them, or breaks out of them. Further it is not possible to put ideas into a logical system . . . Humans can detect no discernible pattern of meaning. The meaning of reality must be created by one's own free choice. (46.)

Existentialism is essentially anti-rational (many would say plain irrational), downplaying to a great degree the value of God-given reason. Individualism and autonomy are characteristic as well. In addition, Dr. Erickson says, "The final tenet of existentialism is subjectivity . . . Where the object evokes great inward passion or subjectivity, there is truth. This is the really important type of truth" (Ibid., 47).

Finally, Dr. Erickson notes:

Of all philosophies existentialism has probably been the one most widely utilized and even adopted by theologians in the twentieth century, particularly from about 1920 to 1950 or 1960. The major influence of Soren Kierkegaard was not on his day but on those who lived two and three generations after his time. Karl Barth, for example, recognized the presence of Kierkegaardian thought in his first attempt at writing a dogmatics, and even though he attempted to purge it from his later writing there is some question whether he ever fully succeeded. And the indebtedness of Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr to Kierkegaard is clear, as is the existentialist basis of the thought of Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann.

There have been various effects of this existentializing of theology. First is the subjectivizing of truth. Truth is truth when it becomes truth for me. It is not to be thought of as an objective set of propositions; it must be assimilated by someone if it is to be regarded as truth. Second is the separation of religious truth from more objective types of truth in general. Unlike these other types of truth revelation does not come through general culture. A third result of the existentializing of theology is a nonsubstantive or nonessentialist view of religious reality. Truth, sin, and salvation are not fixed substances, "blocks of reality," or permanent states. They are dynamic occurrences. (Ibid., 47).

experienced as such. Lutheran Professor of Theology, J. Theodore Mueller succinctly describes the Barthian view of Scripture as follows:

Barth regards only that as the Word of God which the Spirit impresses upon the individual human mind as such, or, we may say, the Bible is God's Word only so far as God speaks through it. If God does not speak through the Scriptures they are not God's Word, but merely man's word.³⁵³

Compare this to descriptions of Evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem in his popular *Systematic Theology* of how the "testimony of the Spirit" authenticates Scripture:

Our ultimate conviction that the words of the Bible are God's words comes only when the Holy Spirit speaks *in* and *through* the words of the Bible to our hearts and gives us an inner assurance that these words are the words of our Creator speaking to us.³⁵⁴

They seem rather identical and equally incorrect and eventually dangerous.

A similar *neoorthodoxy* seems evident in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, which as noted above, defines the "testimony" of the Holy Spirit as, "The theological designation of the Holy Spirit's [present-ongoing] activity in bringing about the believing acknowledgment of Scripture's inherent authority."³⁵⁵ Later, however, the author says, "This doctrine of the internal testimony should not be confused with the Barthian view that . . . acknowledges authoritative revelation only in an ever-recurring, present act of God."³⁵⁶ Why not?

It seems obvious that the foundation of neoorthodoxy's view of Scripture and what has been derived from Calvin's "testimony of the Spirit" to the word of God are dangerously indistinguishable. In fact, Karl Barth (1886–1968) concluded the section of his *Church Dogmatics* on the inspiration of Scripture by stating that Calvin's

³⁵³ J. Theodore Mueller, "The Holy Spirit and the Scriptures" in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, Carl F. H. Henry ed. (Baker Book House, 1958), 278-9.

³⁵⁴ Grudem, 77.

³⁵⁵ Klooster, 564.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

view of how Scripture is authenticated essentially summed up his own.³⁵⁷

Contemporary adherents of this view do not often take this seriously enough. What can eventually happen is precisely what the Presbyterian seminary Professor Paul Achtemeier does with it in his recent book, *Inspiration and Authority*:

Without the internal testimony of the Spirit, Scripture remains mute in its witness to the truth. That insight is of central importance for any understanding of the inspiration of Scripture because it is clear evidence that that inspiration does not in fact cease with the production of the writing but must also continue with the reading, or "inspiration" does not describe a significant reality. . . .

It is just the insight into the necessity of this internal testimony of the Spirit, therefore, which confirms our insight that we must understand inspiration in terms of a process rather than in a more static way as limited to the individual authorship of individual books . . . the Spirit witnesses to the truth of the content of Scripture, and in that way convinces us of its inspired nature . . . the testimony of the Holy Spirit is essential to a recognition of the inspiration and hence the authority of the biblical witness.³⁵⁸

Obviously, such a conclusion was neither Calvin's intention, nor many of those who espouse this view today. But again, at least in our understanding, proponents of this particular application of the "testimony of the Spirit" have not adequately differentiated their view from *neoorthodox* theology, nor do we think they can do so.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 5 vols. (T&T Clark, 1936-1977), I.ii. 536 ff. Accordingly, G. W. Bromiley writes in the *ISBE*:

In later centuries rationalist attacks tended to push the appeal to the Spirit's witness into the background, especially as it came to be equated increasingly with an unsubstantiated feeling or experience, but Barth revitalized the Reformation teaching in the 20th cent., boldly claiming that he found here, not the Achilles' heel of the Protestant system as D. F. Strauss had alleged, but "its indestructible strength" (CD, 1/2, 537). (IV:1088).

³⁵⁸ Paul Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority* (Hendrickson, 1999), 123-24, 148.

³⁵⁹ Dr. Ramm certainly attempts to distinguish the "testimony of the Spirit" from Barthian theology, but would seem unsuccessful. Throughout the book he claims it is wrong to identify the "testimony" with "religious experience" (cf. *Witness*, 26), yet has to admit that: "A *testimonium* which [does not include] experience would be meaningless. Nevertheless the *testimonium* is not religious experience *per se*" (104). Such is the

Unfortunately, liberal Bible scholars have taken advantage of the weaknesses of the doctrine of the "testimony" to attack the inerrancy of Scripture. This allows them to reject the traditional view of the divinity and Apostolic authorship of the NT documents and still claim they can be authoritative. One of the first such scholars to do so was the Presbyterian OT scholar C. A. Briggs (1841-1913). In support of their own liberal views of biblical authority supported by the doctrine of the "testimony" Jack B. Rogers and Donald McKim of Fuller Seminary write:

Briggs . . . launched a violent attack on Princeton's "scholastic theology" [i.e. Hodge and Warfield] as the real but misguided foe of evangelical [liberal] biblical criticism. He rejected inerrancy and also the Princeton position that canonicity depended on authorship or tradition. Instead Briggs appealed to the Reformers and interpreted them as teaching that canonicity depended upon the witness of the Holy Spirit. He also made a distinction between "plenary" and "verbal" inspiration. Briggs accepted plenary inspiration, which acknowledged errors and inconsistencies in the Bible but which nonetheless held Scripture to be the infallible rule of faith and practice. But he rejected verbal inspiration.

The testimony of the Westminster Confession was explicit for Briggs: "The Westminster Confession excludes human authorship from the inspiration and divine authority of the Scriptures, when it states: 'The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man.'" ³⁶⁰

It is true that even good doctrines can be abused by bad theologians, but we suggest it is the weaknesses within the doctrine of the "testimony" that make it a particularly useful tool in the hands of those who would undermine the divine authority of Scripture.

C.4) The Doctrine's Unnecessary Depreciation of Spirit-Liberated Reason

difficulty one has in distinguishing Calvin's *testimonium* from Barth's *neoorthodoxy*.

³⁶⁰ Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (Harper & Row, 1979), 351, 356

Bernard Ramm offers an explanation as to why Calvin settled on his application of the "testimony of the Spirit":

Having rejected the authority of the Roman Church and its effort to underwrite the authority of the Bible, Calvin might have turned to human reason to demonstrate the authority of the Bible. But there were two matters causing hesitancy in this procedure: (1) the human reason had come under certain darkening effects from sin; and (2) being fully persuaded by human reason the believer would still have but human faith. There must be a divine certainty about divine matters.³⁶¹

If this is true, we would suggest Calvin was wrong. First of all, there does not seem to be an adequate appreciation for the significant difference between a Christian's supernaturally *Spirit-liberated reason* and the "sin darkened" reason of the spiritually dead.³⁶² Let it be said here that no "testimony of the Spirit" will force a Christian to accept something that violates their God-honoring, and God-given logical reasoning faculties. No action of the Spirit can or should make up for a lack of objective evidence for the authority of Scripture.

Secondly, Dr. Ramm and other proponents of this doctrine are erroneously claiming that some subjective operation of the Holy Spirit can grant us a level of certainty that is greater than what reason can produce. As demonstrated elsewhere in *Knowing Our God*, God created humans to believe nothing without reasons, and our certainty is directly dependent on the amount of evidence we have.³⁶³ We may admit that our experiences with biblical documents are part of the evidence upon which we believe them to be divine, but it is not the only or ultimate evidence. In addition, while proponents of the "testimony" suggest our conviction of the divinity of Scripture comes to us by revelation instead of reason, they still must admit that this supposed revelation is processed, evaluated, stored, and protected by reason.

Accordingly, there are some similarities in how God authenticates both His existence and His Word—through reason. It is not a separate *revelation* that is authenticating the revelation of Creation and Scripture in the following passage, but the use of reason:

³⁶¹ Ramm, *Witness*, 28-9.

³⁶² For further discussion of the important difference between *Spirit-liberated* and *devil-darkened* reason see chapters 4.12-16.

³⁶³ For further discussion of the relationship between objective evidence and human certainty see chapters 6.12-14.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands.² Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.³ There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.⁴ Their voice goes out into all the Earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens He has pitched a tent for the sun,⁵ which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.⁶ It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.⁷

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.¹¹ By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Ps 19:1-11)

Here, David is in awe of what his reason perceives about God's Creation and written Word. It is not the Holy Spirit that is directly revealing to David how supernatural Creation is. The Apostle says that unbelievers are without excuse for not recognizing the same thing, even though they only have reason, not the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 1:18-20). Likewise, the attributes of God's word are being perceived and evaluated here by David's Spirit-controlled reason. It is not a revelation from the Spirit that is telling Him Scripture is so awesome, but His reason.

Now if proponents of the "testimony" want to claim that these perceptions of reason regarding the attributes of Scripture help to secure our confidence in its divinity then, in our opinion, they would appear to be on the right track. However, when they disparage the God-given place and purpose of Spirit-controlled reason, and illegitimately claim a direct revelation from the Spirit that grants our certainty in Scripture, they actually not only undermine the God-given authority of reason, but Scripture itself.

When critics of Scripture come knocking, causing doubt in the minds of believers concerning its authority, it will not help to claim that some revelation or feeling from the Holy Spirit will defend it from all attacks. The very Reason that "spiritualists" have slandered and rejected as a guide, will be the very Reason they will be searching for and begging to come back to help. The best defense for attacks on the authority of Scripture is not some

mystical "testimony," but rather reasonable evidences, and a reasonable refutation of the critic's arguments. The convictions of the "testimony" are only safe where there is ignorance of the issues involved in establishing the divine authority of the documents of Scripture. When such ignorance is penetrated by the first knowledgeable critic, it is reason and research that will be needed to restore confidence, not a feeling.³⁶⁴

This leads to another fatal flaw in the popular application of the "testimony of the Spirit." While its proponents claim that Scripture is self-authenticating, we claim that nothing in all of Creation is self-authenticating, nor did God intend it to be so. As we have written elsewhere:

We would humbly suggest that even the word "self-authenticating" is nonsense because nothing in all of Creation is "self-authenticating," at least not in a convincing way. Not even God is "self-authenticating," but rather provides abundant objective evidence for His existence (cf. Rom 1:18-20). Likewise, Jesus Christ Himself said, "If I testify about Myself [i.e. "self-authentication"], My testimony is not valid" (John 5:31; cf. vs. 32-37). What else in all Creation would these theologians claim is "self-authenticating"? In the end, "self-authentication" becomes no authentication at all, which is a fairly scary position to put the Word of God in.³⁶⁵

The closest thing to self-authentication in Scripture is the proclaimed and fulfilled prophecies it contains. Yet even this evidence requires careful, objective historical research and has nothing to do with a subjective "testimony of the Spirit" but

³⁶⁴ For example, John Owen writes:

What is the ground and reason why the meanest [most humble] and most unlearned sort of believers do assent unto this truth, *that the Scriptures are the word of God*, with no less firmness, certainty, and assurance of mind, than do the wisest and most learned of them; yea, oft times the faith of the former sort herein is of the best growth and firmest consistency against oppositions and temptations. (VI.6)

Again, we would simply suggest that the confidence that the "unlearned" have in the canon of Scripture is simply a demonstration of the God-ordained place of *human testimony* by which they have gained such confidence. However, convictions based on the mere testimony of people are fine until the testimony of other equally convincing people is heard- then personal research is needed. For further on human testimony as a God-ordained source of reliable knowledge see sections 2.5.C and 3.3B.D.1.

³⁶⁵ For further discussion of the meaninglessness of "self-authentication" see section 3.1.C.4.b

everything to do with the God-ordained authority of human reason for validating the divinity of a revelation.

Something as subjective as the mere claim of the presence of the Holy Spirit cannot be the ground of certainty for a human.³⁶⁶ How do we know that it is the Holy Spirit? By objective tests. This is precisely what the Apostle John was claiming when he wrote:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. (1 John 4:1-3)

For the Apostle, not even God the Holy Spirit was self-authenticating. And he did not instruct us to authenticate divine revelation (whether from a prophet or otherwise) through subjective feelings, but rather objective evidence, such as a verbal confession of the Incarnation.

Did the Bereans authenticate divine revelation because of how "helpful" or inspiring the words of the Apostle Paul were to them? On the contrary, they "examined the [OT] Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). They had an objective test for revelation, not a subjective one, and they were commended in the early Church because of it.

³⁶⁶ The uselessness of the kind of subjective authentication in the "testimony" is illustrated when Dr. Ramm writes:

Because it is in the heart or spirit, it has been called a secret witness or an inner witness. It is common to all Christians but not to all men. It is inner and therefore not a datum available to psychologists or philosophers. There is a great objectivity here and at the same time a real subjectivity. All Christians have sympathetic rapport with those fellow Christians who have the same witness in their hearts. Yet this witness can in no sense be made a public object. Therefore most philosophers and psychologists will always suspect its integrity, which need cause Christians no concern. If it is true that only the pure in heart can see God, then there is nothing more to say except that spiritual realities must be spiritually discerned. (*Witness*, 52)

It may be noticed that we start with the same kind of subjective claims concerning the superiority of the Christian faith in chapter 2.2 when we point out that we have experienced regeneration and no one following other faiths has. If we would have left it at that, our argument would have had the same subjective weakness as Dr. Ramm's description of the "testimony." However, we add to our subjective claims an attempt to prove them with the objective evidence of *virtue apologetics* in Book 5. Dr. Ramm seems to glory in the fact that he does not even attempt the same thing in his defense of the "testimony."

If the "testimony of the Spirit" were applied consistently to the authentication of Scripture, then the need for external, objective evidence for Scripture's authority would be diminished, if not eliminated. This is, in fact, the very conclusion that can be drawn from Calvin and the Westminster Confession on this doctrine. Accordingly, Dr. Bromiley admits that the Reformers:

believed firmly that to receive the Spirit's witness is to know beyond question that Scripture is God's Word, so that difficulties at the human level will not cause undue alarm. First and last the authenticity of the Bible rests, not on the ability of believers to resolve difficulties, but on the Spirit's own attestation of the truth of its message.³⁶⁷

Elsewhere, Dr. Bromiley similarly writes:

The attack on the historical reliability of the Bible was damaging just because orthodoxy no longer had full confidence in the witness of the Spirit but had to find for it rationalistic support by a reversal of the relationship between inspiration and inerrancy, suspending the former on the latter. . . . orthodoxy was guilty of all these unfortunate tendencies . . . exalting [man] in his rationality . . . and showing so little genuine appreciation for the illumination of the Holy Spirit and His work. . . . The inspiration of Scripture is genuinely the work of the sovereign Spirit, whose operation cannot finally be subjected to human analysis, repudiation, or control.³⁶⁸

This would appear to be nothing less than a fideistic intellectual copout. It is clearly being suggested that issues of inerrancy, apparent contradictions, and questionable or even negative historical evidence regarding the authenticity and authority of the Scriptures can be simply whisked away because of some supposed mystical and comforting feeling from "the Spirit."

John Calvin's acceptance of 2 Peter and James are a case in point. Regarding the former, Calvin wrote regarding 2 Peter 3:16 ["(Paul's) letters contain some things that are hard to understand"] that, "Peter himself would have never spoken thus."³⁶⁹ Likewise, regarding James, Calvin said, "as to the author, there is somewhat more reason for doubting [that he was an Apostle]."³⁷⁰

³⁶⁷ Bromiley, IV:1088

³⁶⁸ Reference unavailable.

³⁶⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 2 Pet 3:15

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, James

There is a great deal of reasoning occurring here in Calvin's mind, and he accordingly uses reason to counter his own doubts by essentially saying of both epistles that they contained nothing heretical. While that would seem insufficient credentials for accepting a document as the word of God, it is nonetheless obvious that Calvin certainly used his own reason to support the divine authority of these documents in his own mind. However, not surprisingly, despite his doubts that the Apostle Peter could have written 3:16, and perhaps the rest of the epistle as well, he finally responded: "In every part of the Epistle the majesty of the Spirit of Christ appears."³⁷¹ What he meant by that, and how he knew it, remain a mystery.

The same inconsistency between human reason and the "testimony" seems evident in the great Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof when he wrote:

Many scholars [place] . . . human reason . . . as an arbiter over the divine revelation. This, of course, cannot be the position of those who believe that the Bible is the Word of God. . . .

Resting, as it ultimately does, on the testimony of the Holy Spirit, no amount of historical investigation can shake this conviction. . . . This being our position, we unflinchingly accept all that the various books of the Bible tell us concerning their authorship, destination, composition, inspiration, etc. Only in cases where the text is evidently corrupt, will we hesitate to accept their dicta as final.³⁷²

Ah, so there is a place for reason in detecting a corruption of the biblical text and therefore rejecting it as God's word? For all of Dr. Berkhof's accusations against those who would use reason to authenticate revelation ("cannot be the position of those who believe the Bible is the Word of God"), he himself accepts reason to do this very thing.

D) A Better & Biblical Approach to Identifying the Word of God: *Research rather than revelation*

As outlined elsewhere, we are advocating that we authenticate and recognize the *writings* of men who received divine revelation

³⁷¹ Ibid., 2 Peter

³⁷² Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1915), Prolegomena.

the same way they were authenticated for their *speaking* that divine revelation.³⁷³ The Jews were not instructed to accept a Prophet as God-sent because of some subjective "testimony of the Spirit," but rather God wanted them to base their decision on a reasonable assessment of objective, miraculous evidence that the Prophet was expected to provide (cf. Deut 18:20-22). Namely, the ability to miraculously predict the future. The same was true of the King (cf. John 14:10-11) and the Apostles (cf. 2 Cor 12:12), whom God authenticated as His messengers with miracle working abilities.

The key, therefore, to identifying Scripture is to know what documents were written or sanctioned by such supernaturally authenticated men. Accordingly, J. I. Packer, although a foremost proponent of a "testimony of the Spirit" for establishing the authority of the Biblical documents, writes:

[T]he fixing of the New Testament canon (a work which was almost finished within a century of the apostolic age) was in essence a matter of finding out by historical enquiry which books were authentically apostolic, i.e. were written or sanctioned by apostles, or came from the inner circle where revelation operated through prophets and apostles (cf. Eph. 3:5).³⁷⁴

Likewise, R. C. Sproul, in a chapter length explanation of how the NT documents came to be accepted as divinely authoritative, does not even mention the "testimony of the Spirit," but explains their historical credentials.³⁷⁵ In a similar manner, Millard Erickson makes an admirable, although unnecessary attempt to synthesize our more objective approach to authenticating Scripture with the more subjective "testimony of the Spirit" when he writes:

The inner witness of the Spirit . . . frequently works through means rather than directly. He creates certainty of the divine nature of Scripture by providing evidences that reason can evaluate.³⁷⁶

According to Dr. Erickson, the "evidences that reason can evaluate" ultimately depend on "historical enquiry."

³⁷³ See sections 3.1.C-D.

³⁷⁴ Packer, *Honoring*, 36.

³⁷⁵ R. C. Sproul, "The Establishment of Scripture," in *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1995

³⁷⁶ Erickson, 283.

Of course, it is tempting to think that God has indeed provided a supernatural, immediate authentication of the divinity of Scripture. As Edward Dowey has noted, "In one bold stroke, by the exact correlation of word and Spirit, Calvin answered in principle the question of the canon."³⁷⁷ We could wish this were true, but in reality, our certainty in determining which documents deserve the authority of divine Scripture is a matter of painstaking *research*, not immediate *revelation*. Accordingly, we devote an entire book to this task elsewhere.³⁷⁸

Another obvious reason that theologians have promoted the "testimony of the Spirit" for the identification of what is Scripture is because they have desired to provide a level of certainty to this issue that is greater than what we can really have. For example, Calvin wrote concerning the canon of Scripture, "We do not seek arguments or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our judgment and intellect as to a thing elevated above the necessity of being judged."³⁷⁹ It is interesting to note how often the Holy Spirit is used in theology to make things more supernatural and certain than they really are, and all of this without scriptural or practical warrant. Elsewhere we have written:

For the regenerated Christian, Jesus Christ is more than a probability. However, there is a tendency in Christianity to claim *absolute certainty* in more areas than we can. Does God give us warrant to be absolutely certain about everything like He is? No. And, in fact, we are left to probabilities and our own *private judgment* in more areas than some Christians think. But this is precisely what God intended, and it is yet another example of the gap between us and our Creator. God expects us to live in the realm of *private judgment*, our *Spirit-liberated reason*, a multitude of probabilities, and *adequate certainty*, all of which are under His sovereignty.³⁸⁰

And such is the case with even the canon of Scripture.

However, as we noted in the previous chapter:

[W]hile the above may at first seem to throw the whole NT canon up in the air, anyone who has studied this issue knows that most of it settles back to firm earth immediately. For

³⁷⁷ Dowey, 118.

³⁷⁸ For a thorough study of the canon of Scripture, see the forthcoming Book 15 of KOG.

³⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.5.

³⁸⁰ Quoted from section 2.6.C.

example, not even the most critical, unspiritual, and unreasonable liberal scholars deny that the Apostle Paul wrote Romans, as the historical evidence in the early Church for its authenticity and apostolic authority is undeniable to any reasonable person. The same is true for the majority of biblical documents.

However, contrary to many conservative scholars today, we do not simply brush aside the testimony of the early Church and regarding the divine authority of some of the NT documents, and we suggest there is a place for a possible reevaluation of a few of them. Nonetheless, even if historically doubted documents like 2 Peter and James were excluded from the canon, it would not affect a single doctrine of the historical, orthodox, Christian Church. However, as noted above, we believe canonical issues demonstrate that this doctrine of *private judgment* is not simply an academic, philosophical issue, but rather, a very important and practical one.³⁸¹

Perfect objectivity may be a human impossibility. However, when we are substantiating truth claims, it is important to adopt the approach that is as objective as possible. We freely admit that even our own approach to determining what literature is Scripture has a subjective element to it. Concerning the authentication of the NT canon, for example, we propose the criteria to be inerrancy and historical evidence of apostolic authorship or sanction. However, it is obvious that even these more objective evidences will be subjectively interpreted and evaluated differently by different people. In the end, there is no way to substantiate truth claims in a way that will be objective and convincing for everyone. This is why we say that *the most* objective approach should be taken, and that God has given us all both the responsibility and accountability for using our right to *private judgment* in the best and most virtuous way we can.

Finally, as noted above, "the testimony of the Spirit" doesn't provide us with any greater certainty that a document is divine revelation anyway. What some would base on a *feeling*, we base on *history*. There is a lot more that supports the authority and reliability of *history*, than the trustworthiness of our *feelings*. The *feelings* that "the testimony of the Spirit" is said to provide are not in the least bit unique to Christians. But the *history* of the

³⁸¹ Excerpt from section 3.3B.A.

authorship, authentication, duplication, distribution, collection, protection, application, fulfillment, and tradition of Christian Scripture is far superior and supernatural than any other writing known to humanity.

Publications & Particulars

Chapter 3.5

Reevaluating the "Illumination of the Spirit" for the Interpretation & Application of Scripture

Does the Holy Spirit Tell Us What Scripture Means?

Overall Objective

To offer a biblical and practical evaluation of the popular suggestion that the Holy Spirit communicates the proper interpretation and a practical application of Scripture through an on-going "illumination."

Table of Topics

- A) An Introduction to the "Illumination of the Spirit"**
- B) Support for & Critiques of the "Illumination of the Spirit"**
- C) Biblical Problems with the "Illumination of the Spirit"**
 - C.1) Scriptures Referring to Inspiration and Regeneration
 - C.2) Ephesians 6:17: *The Sword of the Spirit*
 - C.3) Other Scriptures
- D) Additional Problems with the "Illumination of the Spirit"**

Publications & Particulars

Primary Points

- A "testimony of the Spirit" is claimed to enable us to determine what is Scripture and what is not.

A) An Introduction to the "Illumination of the Spirit"

In chapter 3.1 we wrote a great deal concerning the place of *Spirit-liberated reason* and our *private judgment* for interpreting Scripture through human research. Against this, or in addition to it, many claim that correctly interpreting Scripture is more a matter of *divine revelation* through what is called the "illumination of the Spirit." This doctrine is very closely related to the "testimony of the Spirit," discussed in the previous chapter. The difference is that the "testimony" is said to enable us to *recognize* Scripture, while the "illumination" supposedly enables us to *interpret* and *apply* Scripture.

Accordingly, we have quoted the Presbyterian theologian Donald Bloesch as saying, "The Bible is the Word of God in all that it teaches, though this teaching is not immediately self-evident but must be unveiled by the Spirit."³⁸² Likewise, in an entry to the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, the popular NT scholar Charles Ryrie provides a succinct definition of the "illumination of the Spirit":

Specifically, the doctrine of illumination relates to that ministry of the Holy Spirit that helps the believer understand the truth of Scripture. . . . [I]nspiration concerns the method by which the Holy Spirit [once and for all] superintended the writing of Scripture; and illumination refers to the [continuing] ministry of the Spirit by which the meaning of Scripture is made clear to the believer.³⁸³

As in the case of the "testimony of the Spirit," the "illumination" is a supposed ongoing, revelatory activity of the Spirit enabling us to do something that we would suggest our Spirit-enabled reason is already able to do. While many Christians promote a *continual illumination* of the Spirit after conversion, we suggest our experience is better explained as an *initial liberation* of reason by the Spirit with continuing effects. We do not believe that anyone has any need or basis on which to confidently claim some special "illumination" and that such an illegitimate claim disparages the God-given place of *Spirit-liberated reason* and our responsibility to use it for His purposes and glory. God does not do for us what He

³⁸² Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Harper & Row, 1978), 2:273.

³⁸³ Charles C. Ryrie, "Illumination" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (EDT) Walter Elwell ed., (Baker, 1984), 545.

has already enabled us, and expects us, to do ourselves. For example we do not wake up on Sunday morning for church service and expect God to supernaturally translate us there. He could, of course, but He doesn't because He has already given us the means to get there ourselves. Such is the case, we believe, with the interpretation and application of Scripture.

Perhaps the greatest error then, with the teaching of an "illumination of the Spirit" is not recognizing the great sufficiency of God's normal way of equipping us to understand and apply Scripture, therefore suggesting the need for a continual miracle of divine intervention into our thinking. On the contrary, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit has given us a New Nature, and a *Spirit-liberated reason* for the purpose of effectively interpreting and applying God's revelation in Scripture to our lives. Accordingly, as we have written elsewhere, the work of the Spirit in understanding and applying Scripture correctly is not an ongoing "illumination" but the supernatural virtues necessary for any proper reasoning.³⁸⁴

B) Support for & Critiques of the "Illumination of the Spirit"

Also similar to the "testimony of the Spirit," the doctrine of the "illumination of the Spirit" has a large and respectable following. John Calvin (1509–1564) and other Protestant Reformers, in particular, described the relationship between the Spirit and Scripture as one in which the former is constantly working to remind, explain, and "illuminate" Scripture to us. In spite of Martin Luther's (1483–1546) consistent insistence on the simplicity and clarity of Scripture, John MacArthur quotes him as saying: "The Bible cannot be understood simply by study or talent; you must count only on the influence of the Holy Spirit."³⁸⁵ Likewise, Charles Hodge (1797–1878) wrote in his *Systematic Theology*: "The inward teaching of the Spirit is to be sought by prayer, and the diligent use of the appointed means."³⁸⁶

This position is concisely described by R. C. Sproul when he writes:

³⁸⁴ Regarding "reasoning rightly" see section 4.4.C.

³⁸⁵ John MacArthur, *MacArthur's New Testament Commentary*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Parsons, 1997), 1 Cor 2:15.

³⁸⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., reprint (Hendrickson, 2003), I:IV.1.

The Holy Spirit may be distinguished from the Word, but to separate the Word and the Spirit is spiritually fatal. The Holy Spirit teaches, leads, and speaks to us through the Word and with the Word, not apart from or against the Word.³⁸⁷

We can sympathize with what Dr. Sproul desires to protect, but as we will argue below and elsewhere, we can find no Scripture that would promise or prescribe such a thing. Rather than the more spiritual sounding explanation that the "Holy Spirit teaches, leads, and speaks to us through the Word" we would suggest that in reality the Holy Spirit has given us a *Spirit-liberated reason* so that the Spirit-given Scriptures teach, lead, and speak to us through the more natural means of our minds.

Still, it must be admitted that the teaching of the "illumination of the Spirit" in relation to Scripture has a wide, historic, and respectable following. For example, the well known OT scholar Bruce Waltke writes:

When I came to Regent College I was asked to teach a hermeneutics course, so I went to the library to find the best books on interpreting Scripture. I looked through all the books written on that topic during the past decade, the 1980's, and read about ten of them carefully. They all said the same thing: Read the Bible as you would any other book. I was astounded.

No one mentioned the importance of praying through Scripture. The role of the Holy Spirit seemed to be driven out by academic scholarship. The Word of God is different; it is unique. We cannot fully understand His Word without the enablement of the Spirit. Reading the Bible as a scholarly or intellectual exercise is certainly possible, but to receive the full blessing of the Lord's Word, and to understand His full meaning, we must approach the Scriptures through the Spirit of God. . . .

Before you begin to read your Bible, pray for the Lord to speak directly to you through His Word. Pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten you. Having spiritual understanding is nothing mystical; it means having God's Spirit teach you [and that is not mystical?]. . . .

[I]n theological circles people speak of "exegesis" - constructing some accredited method to get out of the written text what the original author intended. If we accept the concept that the Holy Spirit plays a determinative role in revealing truth, then we must also concede that the Holy Spirit

³⁸⁷ R. C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Tyndale, 1990), 121.

must be an essential part of our lives if we are to correctly read and interpret Scripture.

Unfortunately, many Christians seem to divorce theology from spirituality. I have seen seminary faculties divided over this issue, with those teaching spirituality courses fearing that those who teach exegesis will subvert the students' faith, and those teaching exegesis suspicious of their counterparts for not relying enough on the originally intended meaning of the Bible.

Historically, orthodox theologians confess that the Holy Spirit must illumine the Bible's meaning. "No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God," says Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:11. The apostle argues that only as we are in step with the Spirit can we know the things of God. "For if God does not open and explain Holy Writ," Martin Luther commented, "no one can understand it." Similarly, John Calvin in the Catechism of the Church of Geneva wrote:

Our mind is too weak to comprehend the spiritual wisdom of God which is revealed to us by faith, and our hearts are too prone either to defiance or to a perverse confidence in ourselves or creaturely things. But the Holy Spirit enlightens us to make us capable of understanding what would otherwise be incomprehensible to us, and fortifies us in certitude, sealing and imprinting the promises of salvation on our hearts.

In our modern day, the Chicago Statement of Faith continues the tradition: "The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning."

Yet I find that most modern Bible scholars subscribe to the idea intellectually while ignoring it in practice. Almost any textbook on hermeneutics or Bible interpretation written by an evangelical during the past twenty years emphasizes finding the meaning of the original language in its historical context while neglecting to mention the role of the Holy Spirit and His impact on the life of the interpreter.³⁸⁸

We will address several of Dr. Waltke's points in the discussion that follows. Here we would only ask if it is possible that the reason "that most modern Bible scholars subscribe to the idea intellectually while ignoring it in practice" is that the idea is impractical? One

³⁸⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Eerdmans, 1995), 74-5, 180-2.

wonders, for instance, how Dr. Waltke would defend his "framework" theory of Genesis 1-2 in which he essentially denies any literal, face value interpretation of the text at all concerning scientific or chronological matters. If one reads his writing, the scholar never appeals to some "illumination of the Spirit," but rather does all he can to appeal to ones reason.³⁸⁹

While Dr. Waltke mentions the support for the "illumination" among the Reformers, there are many contemporary adherents to the idea as well. For example, the highly respected British teacher D. M. Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) wrote: "What we [Christians] need is the illumination of the Holy Spirit upon our minds to enable us to understand it [Scripture] and to expound it."³⁹⁰ We would suggest Christians *have already been* "illuminated" in the sense that at the time of our regeneration the Spirit gave us a new "heart" and released our moral and logical reasoning from automatic, domineering, sinful control. Therefore, we no longer need "illumination." And as demonstrated below in section C.1, Scripture teaches we have already been "illumined."

Likewise, the influential Reformed theologian, Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) taught:

He who thinks that the Holy Spirit really gave the Scripture, but now leaves its appropriation to our natural reason, is woefully mistaken. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit, who gave the Scriptures, is Himself the perpetual author of all appropriation of their contents to the individual.³⁹¹

³⁸⁹ For Dr. Waltke's defense of the "framework theory" of Genesis 1-2 see "The Literary Genre of Genesis, Chapter One." *Crux*, Dec. 1991; 2-10. Also, "The First Seven Days: What is the Creation Account Trying to Tell Us?" *Christianity Today*, 12 Aug. 1988; 42-46.

³⁹⁰ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Sovereign Spirit: Discerning the Gifts* (Harold Shaw, 1985), 76.

³⁹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Eerdmans, 1953), 402. Elsewhere Dr. Kuyper goes on to write:

Hence the Holy Spirit alone can interpret the 'Scripture. . . . Hence the work of the Holy Spirit with reference to interpretation is indirect and the means employed are: (1) scientific study; (2) the [pastoral/teaching] ministry of the Word; and (3) the spiritual experience of the Church. And it is by the cooperation of these three factors that, in the course of ages, the Holy Spirit indicates which interpretation deviates from the truth, and which is the correct understanding of the Word. (194)

Here, Dr. Kuyper is at least willing to admit that the Spirit uses indirect means (even "scientific study") to guide us in interpretation. Here there is no need to imply a separate, ongoing, direct revelation of the Spirit.

We would remind this great theologian that no born again Christian has merely "natural reason," and we would still ask why the Christian's reason is insufficient to accomplish the "appropriation," interpretation, and application of the truths of Scripture? And it is hard to read Dr. Kuyper in any other way than the Spirit's authorship of Scripture was not enough, but that now He must also be "the perpetual author," revealer, and inspirer of its meaning.

The great Princeton theologian Charles Hodge wrote:

Protestants admit that there is a common faith [understanding of Scripture] of the Church, which no man is at liberty to reject, and which no man can reject and be a Christian. They acknowledge the authority of this common faith for two reasons. First, because what all the competent readers of a plain book take to be its meaning, must be its meaning. Secondly, because the Holy Spirit is promised to guide the people of God into the knowledge of the truth, and therefore

However, he does not take the same approach to the application of Scripture of which he writes:

Hence this work of application belongs to the Holy Spirit alone, for only He knows the relation which the Scripture must sustain at last to every one of God's elect. As to the manner in which the work is performed, it is either direct or indirect.

The indirect application comes most generally through the ministry, which attains its highest end when standing before his congregation the minister can say, "This is the message of the Word which at this time the Holy Spirit intends for you." An awful claim indeed, and only attainable when one lives as deeply in the Word as in the Church. Besides this there is also an application of the Word brought about by the spoken or written word of a brother, which sometimes is as effectual as a long sermon. The quiet perusal of some exposition of the truth has sometimes stirred the soul more effectually than a service in the house of prayer.

The direct application of the Word the Holy Spirit effects by the reading of the Scripture or by remembered passages. Then He brings to remembrance words deeply affecting us by their singular power. And, although the world smiles and even brethren I profess ignorance concerning it, it is our conviction that the special application of that moment was for us and not for them, and that in our inward souls the Holy Spirit performed a work peculiar to Himself. (195)

Again, we are not denying this is how it *may* happen, but we disagree with the complete denial that our *Spirit-liberated reason* is capable of doing the same, and normally does so by God's own design. Did not give us a mind to remember things like Scripture? Proponents of the "illuminaition" do not seem to think so.

that which they, under the teaching of the Spirit, agree in believing must be true.³⁹²

In our view, Dr. Hodge's first reason for trusting the Christian faith is adequate and biblical, but the second is unnecessary and non-existent. Dr. Hodge is obviously appealing to John 16:13 which, as we demonstrate elsewhere, was a promise specifically given to, and needed by the Apostles for the *reception* of Scripture, not to us for the *understanding* of Scripture.³⁹³

In the same vein, the honorable J. I. Packer writes:

As the Spirit gave the Word by brooding over its human writers and leading the church to recognize their books as its canon for belief and behavior, so now he becomes the authoritative interpreter of Scripture as he shows us how biblical teaching bears on our living. To be sure, what Bible books meant as messages to their first readers can be gleaned to some extent from commentaries. But what they mean for our lives today is something we learn only as the Spirit stirs our insensitive consciences.³⁹⁴

We can note here again, that if it was the Spirit who led the early Church to recognize the canon, why did it accept the OT Apocrypha? Also, Dr. Packer seems to question the *clarity of Scripture* and the ability of the Spirit-filled Christian to understand its intended meaning. Finally, we would insist that a born again Christian does not possess an "insensitive conscience," but rather, normally eagerly desires to understand and obey Scripture. And it is the Spirit regenerated moral (conscience) and logical reasoning (mind) that we received at the time of our conversion that can enable us to decide "how biblical teaching bears on our living," not some separate, ongoing, additional revelation or information from the Spirit as is clearly suggested here.

Another contemporary proponent of an "illumination of the Spirit" for the interpretation and application of Scripture is the Adventist theologian Norman Gulley who writes:

One can be aware of all the historical-grammatical principles for interpretation and still misinterpret the texts if done in human wisdom alone. . . . Theological students studying Scripture will ask that the Holy Spirit enable them to see

³⁹² Hodge, I:V.6.

³⁹³ For further discussion of Scriptures relating to the revelation of Apostles, and particularly John 16:13 see chapter 14.13 and section D.

³⁹⁴ J. I. Packer, *Knowing Christianity* (Harold Shaw, 1995), 37-8.

through the human's words to the divine content within. This is the reverse process experienced by the biblical writers [in divine revelation], but equally dependent on the Holy Spirit. . . . Ask the Holy Spirit to interpret truth to you as Christ promised He would (John 16:13-15). The use of hermeneutical tools is not sufficient to arrive at the truth-intent.³⁹⁵

In the first sentence Dr. Gulley ignores the biblical difference between the *Spirit-liberated reason* of the born again Christian and the *devil-darkened reason* of the unbeliever.³⁹⁶ In the second sentence Dr. Gulley dangerously suggests there is a spiritual, deeper meaning in Scripture that goes beyond the face value meaning of the text. In the third sentence he equates the "illumination" to apostolic divine revelation, a perilous perspective that will be addressed momentarily. In the fourth sentence the author misapplies Christ's promise to the Apostles concerning their divine revelation. It would seem that the author's own supposed "illumination" has failed him here and he would have been well served by the very rules of hermeneutics he disparages, by correctly noting the context and literal content of John 16:13-15.³⁹⁷ The final sentence is not only erroneous, but dangerous. The tools of interpretation are indeed quite "sufficient to arrive at the truth-intent" of Scripture for the reason and heart of the believer.

Unfortunately, we get the same impression from the popular Southern Baptist author, Henry Blackaby in his popular study, *Experiencing God*. In response to the claim, "I can open the Bible, pick out a verse that I want to use, and claim that I have a word from God for my circumstance," Dr. Blackaby responds:

Sin has so affected us (Rom. 3:10-11), you and I cannot understand the truth of God unless the Holy Spirit of God reveals it. . . . Some may wonder why [this approach] is not acceptable. They may ask, "Can't I get a word from God from the Bible?" Yes you can! But only the Holy Spirit of God can reveal to you which truth of Scripture is a word from God in a

³⁹⁵ Norman Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Andrews University, 2003), 133, 163, 709.

³⁹⁶ For an introduction to the difference between the *Spirit-liberated reason* of the regenerated believer and the *devil-darkened reason* of the unregenerated unbeliever see chapters 4.12-16.

³⁹⁷ For further discussion of Scriptures relating to the revelation of Apostles, and particularly John 16:13 chapter 14.13 and section D.

particular circumstance. . . . You cannot understand the Word of God unless the Spirit of God teaches you.³⁹⁸

While we appreciate the error that Dr. Blackaby is confronting, we would suggest he also ignores the difference between *devil-darkened reason* and *Spirit-liberated reason*, and the latter enables us to apply Scripture in their proper context, not some direct, immediate inspiration of the Spirit. Elsewhere, Dr. Blackaby writes, "God speaks to give application of his Word to the specific circumstances in your life."³⁹⁹ This is clearly a promise of direct divine revelation in addition to the text of Scripture and beyond a simple use of *Spirit-liberated reason*.

Dr. Blackaby illustrates his point by relating the following story:

Have you ever prayed for one thing and got another? I have. Then some dear soul would say, "God is trying to get you to persist. Keep on praying until you get what you want." During one of those times I kept asking God in one direction, and I kept getting something else.

In the middle of that experience, I started reading from the second chapter of Mark in my quiet time. That is the story of the four men who brought their crippled friend to Jesus to be healed. Because of the crowd, they opened a hole in the roof and let the man down in front of Jesus. Jesus said, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5).

I started to read on, but I sensed that the Spirit of God said, "Henry, did you see that?" I went back and began to meditate on that Scripture. Under the guiding, teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, I began to see a wonderful truth. The four men were asking Jesus to heal the man, but Jesus forgave the man's sins. Why? They asked for one thing, and Jesus gave another! This man and his friends asked for a particular gift, but Jesus wanted to make the man a child of God so he could inherit everything!

I found myself weeping before God and saying: Oh, God, if I ever give You a request and You have more to give me than I am asking, cancel my request!⁴⁰⁰

Forgive us if we come across too harsh, but we think Dr. Blackaby is *lying*. Not intentionally, but he is self-deceived and

³⁹⁸ Henry T. Blackaby, and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God Workbook* (Lifeway, 2000), 36-37, 78.

³⁹⁹ Henry and Richard Blackaby, *Hearing God's Voice* (Broadman & Holman, 2003), 18.

⁴⁰⁰ Blackaby, *Experiencing God*, 91.

deceiving others when he claims to have an ongoing conversation with the Holy Spirit Who tells him how to interpret and apply Scripture. As we point out elsewhere in a discussion of *mega mysticism*, God never promises such a thing.⁴⁰¹ It would seem Jonathan Edwards would not have thought Dr. Blackaby's approach to Scripture was all that spiritual when he wrote:

So some are much affected with some apt thoughts that come into their minds about the Scripture, and call it the Spirit of God teaching them. So they ascribe many of the workings of their own minds, which they have a high opinion of, and are pleased and taken with, to the special immediate influences of God's Spirit; and so are mightily affected with their privilege. .

. .

And if persons have the will of God concerning their actions, suggested to them by some text of Scripture, suddenly and extraordinarily brought to their minds, which text, as the words lay in the Bible before they came to their minds, related to the action and behavior of some other person, but they suppose, as God sent the words to them, he intended something further by them, and meant such a particular action of theirs; I say, if persons should have the will of God thus suggested to them with texts of Scripture, it alters not the case. The suggestion being accompanied with an apt text of Scripture, does not make the suggestion to be the nature of spiritual instruction.

As for instance, if a person in New England, on some occasion, were at a loss whether it was his duty to go into some popish or heathenish land, where he was like to be exposed to many difficulties and dangers, and should pray to God that he would show him the way of his duty; and after earnest prayer, should have those words which God spake to Jacob, Gen. 46, suddenly and extraordinarily brought to his mind, as if they were spoken to him; "Fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will go with thee; and I will also surely bring you up again." In which words, though as they lay in the Bible before they came to his mind, they related only to Jacob, and his behavior; yet he supposes that God has a further meaning, as they were brought and applied to him; that thus they are to be understood in a new sense, that by Egypt is to be

⁴⁰¹ *Mega mysticism* is the belief that God regularly communicates to us regarding extrabiblical matters (e.g. what job to choose) through more direct and miraculous means of divine revelation such as inspired intuitions, miraculous "signs," and the spiritual gifts of "knowledge" and "prophecies." For further discussion see Book 14.

understood this particular country he has in his mind, and that the action intended is his going thither, and that the meaning of the promise is, that God would bring him back into New England again.

There is nothing of the nature of a spiritual or gracious leading of the Spirit in this; for there is nothing of the nature of spiritual understanding in it. Thus to understand texts of Scripture, is not to have a spiritual understanding of them. Spiritually to understand the Scriptures, is rightly to understand what is in the Scripture, and what was in it before it was understood: it is to understand rightly, what used to be contained in the meaning of it, and not the making of a new meaning.⁴⁰²

In Dr. Blackaby's apparent desire to super-supernaturalize his relationship with Scripture, he completely ignores the value of the gift God has given him in his *Spirit-liberated reason* to correctly interpret and then practically apply Scripture to his current needs, desires, and struggles. Instead, he wishes to claim direct divine *revelation* for these things, something that he cannot confidently do. It would seem too unspiritual for Dr. Blackaby to admit what we have noted elsewhere:

What is completely ignored on the issue is the God-given and God-glorifying creativity and capability of our *Spirit-liberated reason*. Our minds are well aware of our current emotional/spiritual needs and personal circumstances, and it is not *unspiritual* to point out that our *Spirit-liberated reason* is able to make encouraging, insightful, and mind/heart transforming connections between those needs and circumstances, and what we read in Scripture or hear in a sermon. Who would really doubt that the Christian's mind would be perfectly capable of doing this without needing additional revelation from the Spirit? We do the exact same thing constantly and correctly in all sorts of ways in every day life.

This seems to be another case in which God the Holy Spirit is being called upon to do something that He has already equipped us to do ourselves. While some would claim that the proper and personal application of Scripture requires a revelation of the Spirit, we would only point out that the Spirit has already "fixed" our mind such that it is now capable of

⁴⁰² Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, III:4; online at www.ccel.com.

producing customized applications of God's word for us without additional revelation.⁴⁰³

More recently, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity, has written:

The idea that biblical meaning is something that can be recovered by understanding simply by reading relegates the doctrine of the Holy Spirit to the theological margins. . . . Understanding is theological because we are enabled to follow the issue of the text only by the Holy Spirit. The role of the Spirit is to enable us to take the biblical texts in the sense that they were intended, and to apply or follow that sense in the way we live. . . .

[T]he Spirit illumines the letter by impressing upon us the full force of its communicative action, its illocutions. The Spirit does not alter biblical meaning. Rather, "the spiritual sense is the literal sense correctly understood." The distinction between "letter" and "spirit" is just that between reading the words and grasping what one reads. Likewise, the difference between a "natural" and an "illuminated" understanding is that between head and heart knowledge, between having an opinion and having a "deep sense of its truth, goodness, and beauty." Illumination has to do with the quality and the force of our appreciation of the literal sense.⁴⁰⁴

Contrary to Dr. Vanhoozer, understanding the Scriptures *may be* as simple as reading it for the regenerated Christian. It is our reason by which "we are enabled to follow the issue of the text," not "only by the Holy Spirit." Dr. Vanhoozer also seems to make the same mistake as many others, dividing the head from the "heart" and implying that some supernatural action of the Spirit is needed, in addition to the work of our mind on the text of Scripture, if we are to understand "the spiritual sense" of it, instead of just the "literal sense." It is wrongly suggested here that our minds will only be "reading the words" but the immediate action of the Holy Spirit will allow us to "grasp" their real meaning. Dr. Vanhoozer's description may apply to an unregenerated person, but not a

⁴⁰³ Quoted from section 3.3.A.1.

⁴⁰⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, & Hermeneutics* (Intervarsity, 2002), 208, 228, 233-4.

regenerated one, and he falls into the "faculty psychology" we have addressed elsewhere.⁴⁰⁵

Similar unfortunate tendencies are communicated in the following from Dr. Woodrow Kroll, host of the popular radio program *Back to the Bible*:

I always prepare myself to read the Bible. It's like stretching before you exercise. I ask God to give me a right understanding of the text and a proper interpretation of what I read. The apostle Paul wrote, "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10). Why should I struggle getting to know the deep things of God if the Holy Spirit can help me understand them?⁴⁰⁶

Several responses are in order to such a statement. First, praying before you read Scripture, as discussed further below, is certainly advisable and appropriate. However, it may be misguided to ask God to do something that He has already given you the ability to do, like interpreting and applying Scripture. Usually, a regenerated Christian has no more need to ask God for help in understanding the Bible, than he does in asking God's help to open the Bible. It is possible that if God were to respond audibly to such prayers, he would quote existing Scripture which simply says, "**Do your best [Be diligent NASB] to . . . correctly handle the word of truth**" (2 Tim 2:15), implying that if there is a lack of understanding, it is additional *human research* that is needed, not *divine revelation*.

In addition, praying for the proper interpretation of Scripture is not nearly as trustworthy as many suggest, and is, in fact, no guarantee at all. Many people have offered such a sincere prayer and have still incorrectly interpreted and applied Scripture. Also, there is no biblical warrant for praying that God will grant us a separate revelation telling us the meaning of Scripture. Rather, we should pray for a clear, focused, objective, eager, humble, hungry *mind*, so that the faculty that God has given us for interpreting and applying Scripture can be used properly.

Secondly, 1 Corinthians 2:10 does not support Dr. Kroll's suggestion. A careful *and reasoned* interpretation of the passage

⁴⁰⁵ For further discussion of "faculty psychology" which, in our opinion, erroneously distinguishes between such concepts as the human mind/ "heart" and reason/ "will" see chapter 4.2.

⁴⁰⁶ Woodrow Kroll, *Back to the Bible: Turning Your Life Around with God's Word* (Multnomah, 2000), 174.

will reveal that the Apostle is referring to the divine revelation that Apostles received, taught, and recorded in Scripture, not to some continual revelation of the Spirit to all Christians.⁴⁰⁷

Thirdly, while we assume Dr. Kroll did not intend such, his statement implies that a revelation from the Spirit can bypass the need for careful and diligent study of the Scriptures. In fact, no matter how much promoters of the "illumination" attempt to say otherwise, such a great emphasis on the need for the work and influence of the Spirit in our interpretation of Scripture diminishes the perceived need of good and laborious hermeneutics.

Accordingly, the respected Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland rightly asserts:

The Spirit . . . does not teach us the cognitive meaning of the text. He leaves that up to us. . . . I fear that our inaccurate emphasis on the Holy Spirit's role in understanding Scripture has become an easy shortcut to the hard work of building a personal library of study tools and using them. As Gallup poll after Gallup poll has shown, the result of our inaccurate emphasis on the Spirit, along with our intellectual laziness, is that modern Christians are largely illiterate about the content of their own religion and feel inadequate because of it. We need local churches dedicated to the task of training believers to think theologically and biblically. We must develop intelligent Christians.⁴⁰⁸

Again, the Apostle told Timothy: "**Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth**" (2 Tim 2:15 NASB). Here, the Apostle clearly implies that the accurate interpretation and application of Scripture requires hard, mental work, not a revelation or "illumination" of the Spirit. It is the easy, mystical interpretations of Scripture "from the Spirit" that have proven to be the source of heresy throughout the Church's history.

Accordingly, then, our prayers before approaching Scripture are for the purpose of ensuring that we are being controlled by the Spirit Who is not, "**a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline**" (2 Tim 1:7 NLT), all of which are necessary virtues to enable us to use our reasoning as God

⁴⁰⁷ For further commentary on 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 see section 14.13.E.

⁴⁰⁸ J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (NavPress, 1997), 47, 48.

intended in order to properly understand and apply Scripture, as discussed elsewhere.⁴⁰⁹

Another affect of the "illumination" doctrine is to suggest that there is some sort of deeper, hidden meaning that requires more than our reason to discover. For example, Dr. Bloesch writes:

My own position could be regarded as a fusion of biblicism and spiritualism. The Spirit not only certifies the truth of the biblical witness but brings this truth home to the contemporary situation. The Spirit illumines the Bible . . . In biblical hermeneutics we begin with the natural sense of the passage but do not remain with this sense. We proceed to the spiritual sense-the relation of the text to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, a relation that is unfolded only by the Spirit working with our spirits to lead us into the knowledge of the truth.⁴¹⁰

For Dr. Bloesch, it would seem the "natural sense" of Scripture is not spiritual enough, and because of his erroneous and unbiblical dependence on some supposed continuing activity of the Spirit, he again sounds very Barthian. And as with the "testimony of the Spirit," we find it difficult to separate "the illumination" from the *neoorthodox* teachings of Karl Barth (1886–1968) and others that many Evangelicals have discounted as dangerous. Barth emphasized that reading the "letter" of Scripture was not enough for divine communication, but that a separate operation of the Spirit was needed to make the words of Scripture the real word of God.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹ For further discussion of the place of Spirit-given virtue in properly interpreting Scripture see section 3.3.A.5.

⁴¹⁰ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit* (InterVarsity, 2000), 279.

⁴¹¹ *Neo-orthodoxy* is a relatively complex theological perspective best known as the position Karl Barth (1886–1968) promoted. R. V. Schnucker relates in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (EDT):

Neo-orthodoxy . . . does not have the popularity it enjoyed earlier in the [20th] century. Certain inherent elements have precluded its continuing influence. For example . . . its view of Scripture, "The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be his Word" (Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 123), has been seen as a rejection of the infallible *sola Scriptura* of conservative Protestantism. . . .

Perhaps the greatest weakness within the movement has been its pessimism concerning the reliability and validity of human [even Christian] reason. [Its critics claim] If human reason cannot be trusted, then it follows that since neo-orthodoxy relied on human reason, it could not be trusted. ("Neo-orthodoxy," [Baker, 1994], 756)

In addition, when Dr. Bloesch says, "In biblical hermeneutics we begin with the natural sense of the passage but do not remain with this sense. We proceed to the spiritual sense," his use of the "illumination of the Spirit" opens the way for the mystical/allegorical type of interpretation that ones like Origen (c. 185- c. 254) were known and subsequently denounced for, and depreciates the value of the historical-grammatical method of interpretation. Origen, in fact, used the idea of the ongoing work of the Spirit in the life of those more spiritual, to enable them to get at otherwise hidden meanings of Scripture. In essence, he distinguished between those with "the illumination" and those without it.⁴¹²

It becomes obvious too that the "illumination of the Spirit" doctrine can encourage the idea that the Spirit may lead people to several different interpretations of Scripture, based on the "spiritual sense" and that all of them can be correct because it is the Spirit that is interpreting the word for us.

Unfortunately, it is not only in the interpretation of Scripture but in its life changing application that a supposed "illumination of the Spirit" is considered necessary. For example, the popular and rightly respected Christian counselor Ed Smith writes:

The written Word is the primary source for truth information, but apart from the Holy Spirit interpreting, instructing, and illuminating this written Word, we only gain knowledge. Hebrews 4:2 expresses the need to have the Holy Spirit's help for understanding the scriptures: "For we also have had the Gospel preached to us, just as they did, but the message they heard was of no value to them because those who heard it did not combine it with faith."

For example, a non-believer can read the Bible and become more knowledgeable in Biblical fact, yet be void of life transformation and true spiritual understanding. Unless the Holy Spirit reveals truth, we cannot receive it beyond the point of knowledge. A pastor may preach a sermon and we may hear and understand what he said without truly receiving it, but when the Holy Spirit releases truth into our innermost parts, it illuminates our souls and releases us from the bondage of lie-based thinking.⁴¹³

Which is the same inevitable result of any philosophy or theology that degrades the God-given place of especially *Spirit-liberated reason*.

⁴¹² For further discussion of Origen's approach to interpreting Scripture see his *De Principiis*, Book 4, ch. 1, para. 10.; online at www.ccel.com

⁴¹³ Ed M. Smith, *Theophostic Prayer Ministry Basic Seminar Manual* (New Creation, 2005), 138.

As discussed more fully elsewhere, Dr. Smith is clear that our God-given *Spirit-liberated reason* faculties are not sufficient to enable the Scriptures to change our life.⁴¹⁴ He erroneously confuses what happens in regeneration and the preaching of the Gospel (i.e. Heb 4:2), with some supposed ongoing activity of the Spirit to enable believers to think correctly.

In addition, Dr. Smith would seem to completely ignore the tremendous difference between the *Spirit-liberated reason* of the regenerated believer, and the *devil-darkened reason* of the spiritually dead unbeliever. For the former, mere knowledge of the Scriptures will most often be life changing for the humble believer controlled by the Spirit in their New Nature. There is no need, nor any Scripture, for some additional "release" of the truth by the Holy Spirit in order to experience mind renewal. The Holy Spirit has already released our minds in order to properly process the clear revelation in Scripture to renew our mind.

When the Apostle Paul simply instructed, "**be transformed by the renewing of your mind**" (Rom 12:2), he was writing to people whose minds had been freed to receive, process, and accept the life changing truth of Scripture, and never even hinted at the need for some "illumination of the Spirit." Rather, as we have written elsewhere:

[W]hen the Apostle commanded, "**be transformed by the renewing of your mind** (*nous*; understanding, reason)" he was not describing some mystical process that bypasses our reason. On the contrary, life transformation is essentially a process of replacing the lies we believe with the truth of God, and our reasoning faculties, the very place God created for us to discern truth from falsehood is vital in this matter. While it is popular to disparage merely cognitive methods for life transformation, the Scriptures emphasize them.

Sanctification and practical holiness is not something that simply descends upon us from on high as some spiritual anointing like some suggest, but rather is, in large part, a process that results from constantly improving our moral and logical reasoning (i. e. conscience and mind). Accordingly, the Apostle describes the process by which one becomes consecrated to God. Simply put, we must exchange the worldly lies we believe with the truth of God to form new beliefs, all of which is the domain of our reason. Our life is "transformed" when the beliefs that are processed, evaluated,

⁴¹⁴ For further discussion of the helpfulness, but biblical errors in Dr. Ed Smith's Theophostic Prayer approach to counseling see Appendix 14.A.

accepted, and stored by reason are renewed to conform to Scripture, rather than the world.⁴¹⁵

Mind renewal and spiritual transformation for the regenerated believer, then, are described in Scripture as a matter of right reasoning, not the "illumination of the Spirit." And anyone would have a hard time proving otherwise from Scripture.

All of this talk of an "illumination of the Spirit," of course, plays into the hands of our "charismatic" brethren who insist that the Spirit is constantly and clearly granting divine revelation today apart from the reasoned understanding and application of the written word of God. And advocates of the "illumination of the Spirit" have little ground to stand on to critique them, as an ongoing, immediate, supernatural guidance of the Spirit in our interpretation and application of Scripture is rather indistinguishable from the mysticism that is rampant in *Charismaticism*.

Accordingly, the influential Reformed theologian John Armstrong, no doubt a proponent of the "illumination" doctrine, nonetheless critiques the same idea in *Charismaticism* when he writes: "According to modern charismatics and enthusiasts of all types Scripture is illumined, or made plain, by a personal or privatized inner light, which is communicated directly or immediately to the soul."⁴¹⁶ While Dr. Armstrong intends this to be a critique, it would seem impossible to distinguish this description from how others describe the "illumination of the Spirit" in relation to Scripture. No doubt, the insistence of many that this "illumination" only applies to the written word, certainly serves to protect it from some of the dangerous subjectivism in *Charismaticism*, but in principle, it is just as unbiblical.

Along these lines, the popular Baptist theologian Millard Erickson writes:

[T]here are some groups that regard the Holy Spirit [instead of Scripture] as the chief authority for the Christian. Certain charismatic groups, for example, believe that special prophecy is occurring today. New messages from God are being given by the Holy Spirit. In most cases, these messages are regarded as explaining the true meaning of certain biblical passages. Thus, the contention is that while the Bible is

⁴¹⁵ Quoted from section 4.3.C.

⁴¹⁶ John H. Armstrong, "The Authority of Scripture" in *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 134.

authoritative, in practice its meaning would often not be found without special action by the Holy Spirit.⁴¹⁷

Again, while many Evangelicals would reject this practice of *Charismaticism*, they have little to complain about because their doctrine of the "illumination" is hardly different. Even here, Dr. Erickson is being critical of the idea that Scripture's "meaning would often not be found without special action by the Holy Spirit," and he even writes eloquently about the use of reason and rules of interpretation in understanding Scripture.⁴¹⁸ However, a few pages later Dr. Erickson writes:

A view emphasizing the objective component [of interpreting Scripture, i.e. reason and rules] regards the Bible alone as the authority; it relies on methods of interpretation to the neglect of the inner witness of the Spirit. . . . He . . . gives understanding of the text through the exegete's work of interpretation.⁴¹⁹

What this fine theologian criticizes on page 278 of his *Christian Theology*, he seems to endorse five pages later. Dr. Erickson is not content to say that God has given us *Spirit-liberated reason* in order to properly interpret and apply Scripture, but insists that the Spirit is constantly and supernaturally intervening in our reasoning, such that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit Himself who "gives understanding of the text."

Finally, the "illumination of the Spirit" doctrine can result in just one more attack on the God-ordained value and place of the born again Christian's *Spirit-liberated reason*. Like the "testimony of the Spirit," the "illumination" mistakenly suggests that something God intended to be a matter of regenerated human *research*, is a matter of divine *revelation*.

For example, Dr. Bloesch seems to deny any need for the Christian to even *think* about Scripture when he writes, "The Bible is the Word of God in all that it teaches, though this teaching is not immediately self-evident but must be unveiled by the Spirit."⁴²⁰ In other words, it would seem, the correct interpretation comes as a direct revelation, not requiring any mental processes in order to

⁴¹⁷ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Baker, 1998), 278.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 282-3.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁴²⁰ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Harper & Row, 1978), 2:273.

obtain it. Again, we would suggest that at the time of our spiritual regeneration and conversion, the Spirit "fixed" our reasoning faculties and restored them to their intended function.

Along the same lines, the Charismatic philosopher J. P. Moreland attempts to differentiate the "analytical" interpretation of Scripture which depends on reason, and the more spiritual application of Scripture which depends on a special, immediate action of the Spirit. He writes:

The analytical mode for the reading and study of Scripture is highly honored in the scholarly evangelical tradition. The words Bible study, exegesis and hermeneutics are associated with this approach in which we bring questions to the text and analyze it in order to gain knowledge of the truth. Analytical reading highlights the use of our God-given minds to master the public meaning of the God-given written text, an essential process [how about the *only* process] to discern the objective truth of God's special revelation. . . .

Yet meditative Scripture reading also offers a rich opportunity to visit with God, although it has not been discussed much in our particular evangelical tradition. Evangelicals have begun to recognize the need for both approaches, yet the question is, how do these approaches relate to each other? Our preference is to engage them in a cyclical process, now employing an analytical mode, now pausing to engage the meditative mode, then again employing an analytical mode, and pausing again to engage the meditative mode and so on. Through such repetitive movement we can seek understanding of truth and universal principles for living and welcome God's penetrating and personal touch on our lives.

Meditative reading is of a different tone and texture and adds another dimension to how the Bible can affect our lives. Here we patiently wait and listen for God to speak to us personally. Our purpose is not to master a certain portion of Scripture, but to read a few verses, slowly, meditatively, perhaps vocalizing each word, and monitoring our heart to sense God's movement to highlight a certain word or phrase or sentence for our attentive reflection and rumination. . . . We wish to be ready for God to speak to us personally.⁴²¹

Several responses are in order. First, we wonder why Dr. Moreland would assume that not all the words of the King, the

⁴²¹ J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith* (Intervarsity, 2008), 180-82.

Apostles, and Prophets are God's personal word to us. They are all equally personal to us.

Secondly, what the author may mean is that not all of God's word is equally applicable to our current needs, circumstances, desires, or decisions. Understandably, Scriptures that relate more directly to these things will seem more "personal." Nonetheless, it is wrong for Dr. Moreland to super-supernaturalize and mega mysticize the process of finding personal applications for the commands and promises of Scripture. Both the "analytical" and "meditative" mode of reading Scripture require and involve nothing more (and nothing less!) than our God-given *Spirit-liberated reason*. Meditation itself is the focused effort of our *Spirit-liberated* human reason, not the quiet listening for another divine revelation.

C) Biblical Problems with the "Illumination of the Spirit"

C.1) Scriptures Referring to Revelation and Regeneration:

Eph 1:18- *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened*

We have claimed throughout this chapter that the proponents of the "illumination" have no clear support from Scripture for their doctrine. We have dealt with some of these erroneous proof texts in the previous chapter regarding the "testimony of the Spirit." In addition, we thoroughly discuss many such texts in Book 14 regarding mysticism in general. More specifically, we demonstrate that many of the biblical promises used to defend the "illumination of the Spirit" doctrine, most clearly apply to the divine revelation that the King promised to His Apostles to *produce* Scripture, not some ongoing, constant, and immediate ministry of the Spirit to enable us to interpret and apply Scripture accurately.⁴²²

Likewise, we would suggest that promoters of the "illumination" are also confusing it with the regeneration of the Spirit at the time of conversion. It is interesting to note that in passages where the Spirit is said to be interacting with the word, the context would seem to be the preaching of the Gospel and the regeneration and conversion of the spiritually dead people hearing it, not to a

⁴²² For further discussion of the biblical promises of apostolic divine revelation see chapter 14.13.

continuing ministry of the Spirit for the believer to interpret Scripture (cf. 1 Thess 1:4-5; Acts 16:14; 2 Cor 4:6).

Nonetheless, we will address a few common proof-texts for the "illumination" doctrine here. First, in Ephesians 1:18 the NIV translates the Apostle saying: "**I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you.**" Such a translation suggests that the Apostle is praying for an ongoing "illumination" of the Spirit in the lives of the Ephesian Christians so that they can understand divine revelation. However, the NET Bible more accurately reflects the Greek text:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you spiritual wisdom and revelation in your growing knowledge of Him, – since the eyes of your heart have been enlightened– [*pephōtismenous* – past tense]– so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what is the wealth of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the incomparable greatness of His power toward us who believe . . . (Eph 1:17-19 NET⁴²³)

This translation reflects the fact that the Greek participle *pephōtismenous* ["having been enlightened"] is in the perfect tense, meaning an action that has already been completed in the past with continuing results in the present. Accordingly, Harold Hoehner, Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, notes in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*:

⁴²³ Regarding Ephesians 1:18, the translators of the NET Bible note:

The perfect participle *πεφωτισμένους* (*pephōtismenous*) may either be part of the prayer ("that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened") or part of the basis of the prayer ("since the eyes of your heart have been enlightened"). Although the participle follows the *ἵνα* of v. 17, it is awkward grammatically in the clause. Further, perfect adverbial participles are usually causal in NT Greek.

Finally, the context both here and throughout Ephesians seems to emphasize the motif of light as a property belonging to believers. Thus, it seems that the author is saying, "I know that you are saved, that you have had the blinders of the devil removed; because of this, I can now pray that you will fully understand and see the light of God's glorious revelation." Hence, the translation takes the participle to form a part of the basis for the prayer [not a hoped for result]. (Online at <http://net.bible.com/bible>, *in loc.*)

For further discussion of the proper meaning of Ephesians 1:17-18 see section 14.18.A.4.

The NEB, NASB, and NIV state another request: **I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.** However, this is not a new sentence in Greek. It seems to be parenthetical, as in the KJV, ASV, and RSV. In other words, Paul had prayed (v. 17) that they might have true spiritual insight into God, and then he included the phrase, "having the eyes of your heart enlightened" (RSV). Paul's request for them to know God was within proper bounds because their hearts had *been* enlightened (the Gr. perf. tense indicates past action with continuing results). ⁴²⁴

Therefore, enlightened hearts is something Paul describes the Ephesians as already having. Accordingly, the prayer would read that God, **"may give you spiritual wisdom and revelation ⁴²⁵ in a knowledge of Him (your heart having already been enlightened), so that you would know . . ."** The enlightenment that Paul is speaking of then is not some future operation of the Spirit yet to occur that will provide some sort of "illumination" but rather the "illumination" has already occurred for these Christians at the time of regeneration. Perhaps this view of "illumination" is reflected by Dr. MacArthur who writes: "God must open the eyes of our understanding before we can truly know and rightly interpret His truth. His truth is available only to those with a regenerate spirit and in whom His Spirit dwells, for only the Spirit can illumine Scripture." ⁴²⁶ We can wholeheartedly agree with this. The necessary "illumination" is available and active to all "with a regenerate spirit and in whom His Spirit dwells." Of course "illumination" is needed, but it is given permanently in regeneration, and is not an ongoing, sporadic ability.

C.2) Ephesians 6:17: *The Sword of the Spirit*

Ephesians 6:17 is understandably another verse that is used to support the idea that the Holy Spirit is dynamically and continually interacting between us and Scripture. There the Apostle says:

⁴²⁴ Harold Hoehner, "Ephesians" *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, (SP Publications, NT, 1983; OT, 1985)

⁴²⁵ For arguments that the "wisdom and revelation" Paul is speaking of in Ephesians 1:17 refers to the doctrinal knowledge that would come through the NT Apostles and Prophets, instead of some *private inspiration*, see section 14.18.A.4.

⁴²⁶ MacArthur, *Commentary*, 1 Cor 2:15.

"Take the . . . sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The suggestion is that the Spirit personally and directly interacts with memorized or known Scripture to bring to mind the specific spiritual truth needed to counteract the lie with which satan may be attacking. This may be the case, but the verse does not clearly state that.

Most commentators suggest that the phrase "**the sword of the Spirit**" is a genitive of source or origin, suggesting simply that the sword of written, memorized Scripture *came from* the Spirit (i.e. through the divine revelation of Apostles and Prophets), rather than suggesting that the Spirit is *using* the Scripture.⁴²⁷ The idea of the Spirit being the revelational *source* of the Scripture, rather than the means of its application, parallels the phrase "**the armor of God**" (6:11, 13) in this very passage. Here we understand that the armor comes *from* God, not that it is used *by* God, and that we have both the ability and responsibility to put it on and apply it. Such would seem to be the case with the "**sword of** [from] **the Spirit**" which is Scripture. Scripture is given by the Spirit and it is now actually up to us to apply our knowledge of it and "**take**" it and use it effectively.

In fact, a major problem with *super-supernaturalizing* the real process by which we apply Scripture to our lives is to leave Christians defenseless. The author has worked with a number of Christians who believed picking up and using "**the sword of the Spirit**" was God's job, not theirs. Accordingly, they were "waiting on God" to rescue them from the onslaught of negative, sinful thinking in their mind. It was not until they recognized their God-given ability and responsibility to fight themselves, did they begin to have victory. The biblical statement "**take up the shield of faith**" is a *command* for us to do, not a promise of what God will do. And it is a command to believe the correct biblical truth that defeats the particular lie we are being attacked with. And our *Spirit-liberated reason* is able to do that.

God will not do for us what He has already enabled us to do. If we think we cannot walk without some sort of divine intervention, then we will not walk. Likewise, if we do not think we are capable

⁴²⁷ A. S. Wood comments in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*:

The genitive *tou pneumatos* ("of the Spirit") is hardly appositional, since the following words identify the sword with *rhema theou*, ("word of God"). Nor is it a genitive of quality (the spiritual sword). Some make *ho* ("which") refer to *pneumatos*, i.e., "the Spirit who is the word of God," but that is not substantiated in any other NT passage. The genitive is either of possession or better still of origin or source (Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. CD-ROM (Zondervan, n.d.).

of fighting the devil by taking up the sword of the Spirit and applying the Scriptures to the lies we are being attacked with, we will not do it. We will be "waiting on God," which sounds spiritual, but because in this case it is not biblical, the devil takes great advantage of it. We have *already* been enabled to successfully process truth for spiritual battle. God has given us a sword (the truth in Scripture) and the means to use it (*our Spirit-liberated reason*) and we just need to use them both!

This idea of personal God-given ability and therefore responsibility is again reflected in the Apostle's instruction to Timothy to, **"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth"** (2 Tim 2:15 NASB). Again, no promise of some sort of guidance from the Spirit here. Likewise, he says in Colossians, **"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom"** (Col 3:16). Obviously the place where the "word of Christ" would "dwell" is our mind, and if it does so, we will be equipped to **"teach and admonish one another with all wisdom"** making additional revelation from the Spirit unnecessary. Certainly few would claim that we should expect the Spirit to use Scripture that we do not know, therefore demonstrating the importance of our mind regardless.

This is the view of the highly respected NT scholar F. F. Bruce (1910-1990) who writes concerning Ephesians 6:17:

"God's word" is his utterance- "every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3 LXX). It is through his Spirit that his word is both uttered and received on earth [in Scripture]. Perhaps the best example of the use of his word to repel spiritual foes is seen in Jesus' employment of the text just quoted (Deut. 8:3) to repel the tempter in the wilderness (Matt. 4:4). The divine utterance, the product of the Spirit [that which **"is written"** (Matt 4:4)], lends itself readily to the believer who has laid it up in his heart (cf. Ps. 119:11; Col. 3:16a) for effective use in the moment of danger against any attempt to seduce him from allegiance to Christ.⁴²⁸

Dr. Bruce sees no need to imply that it was the Spirit of God, rather than the mind of Christ, that appropriately remembered and applied what **"is written"** (cf. Matt 4:4, 7, 10) in Scripture. No doubt, the King had memorized Scripture and used His reason to bring them to mind and apply them to the lie the devil was

⁴²⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT) (Eerdmans, 1984), 409-10.

attacking with. Neither Ephesians 6:17 nor Matthew 4 would seem to be a case in which the Holy Spirit had to immediately reveal the needed Scripture in the face of temptation. It would seem then that a very good interpretation of Ephesians 6:17 would be that the word of God which was originally revealed by the Spirit and recorded in Scripture, is to be applied to whatever lie Satan is attacking with, in the same way we remember and apply other truths—with our reason.⁴²⁹

Here, we will point out an additional and related error regarding Ephesians 6:17. This concerns the meaning of the Apostle's use of the word *rhēma* (an utterance, saying, word) instead of the more common *logos* (something said, word) to refer to the "**word** [*rhēma*] **of God**." It is common, particularly in Pentecostal circles, to differentiate between these terms and suggest that *logos* is simply a written or spoken word, but *rhēma* refers to a word that has a Spirit-empowered effect on the recipient.

Besides smelling like *neoorthodoxy* which denies that the written word is God's word, there is no linguistic or biblical support for imposing this meaning on the use of *rhēma*. *Logos* and *rhēma* are most often used interchangeably in the Scriptures with no

⁴²⁹ As we noted above, many Scriptures speak of the work of the Spirit specifically in conjunction with the preaching and reception of the Gospel. Accordingly, many commentators suggest that the Apostle is speaking specifically of the preaching of the Gospel in Ephesians 6:17 (cf. Rom 1:16). For example, Peter O'Brien writes in his well regarded commentary on Ephesians:

This sword of the Spirit is identified with 'the word of God' a term which in Paul often signifies the Gospel. However, he normally uses *logos* ('word') instead of *rhēma*, which appears here. The two terms are often interchangeable, but the latter tends to emphasize the word as spoken or proclaimed (as in 5:26).

If this distinction holds here, then Paul is referring to the Gospel (cf. Rom. 10:17), but stressing the actual speaking forth of the message, which is given its penetration and power by the Spirit [cf. 1 Thess 1:5]. . . .

What is in view here is not some ad hoc word addressed to Satan, as though what we speak against him will defeat him. Rather, it is the faithful speaking forth of the Gospel in the realm of darkness, so that men and women held by Satan might hear this liberating and life-giving word and be freed from his grasp. (*The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans, 1999], 482).

This is possible, but for our part, we would not limit the Apostle's words to evangelism. Why would he leave out of the spiritual battle the important work that Teachers and Pastors do with the word of God as well? Are there not other truths important for the spiritual protection of believers apart from the contents of the saving Gospel?

meaningful difference at all. The only possible difference that can be made is that *logos* may refer to a more extended statement in order to express an entire thought, while *rhēma* may specify a single word or utterance.⁴³⁰ Matthew 12:36 illustrates our point where the King says, **"But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word [rhēma] they have spoken."** Surely the "*rhēma*" spoken here is not Spirit-empowered.

C.3) Other Scriptures

Henry and Richard Blackaby write:

At the close of the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus appearing to his followers who had gathered together. Scripture indicates that Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45 HCSB). Apparently even when Christians gather together, they cannot understand the Scriptures apart from the work of God in opening their hearts and minds. Since Pentecost, the role of the Holy Spirit is to help people understand what the Bible has to say to them.⁴³¹

Again, the Blackabys imply that there is an absolutely necessary, continual, and evidently revelatory work of the Holy Spirit that enables believers to "understand what the Bible has to say to them." What is missed here is that the disciples had not yet been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. A few verses later, Jesus tells them, **"I am going to send you what My Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high"** (v. 49). Of course He needed to open their minds to understand the Scripture. They were spiritually dead. But that was no longer needed after Pentecost, and after the miracle of regeneration gave them a *Spirit-liberated reason*. And such is the case for all regenerated believers today.

Likewise, Dr. MacArthur writes:

⁴³⁰ Accordingly, the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* relates that in the Greek OT, the two terms are "often synonymous," and that in the NT "*logos* can often designate the Christian proclamation as a whole, *rhēma* usually relates to individual words and utterances." (H. Haarbeck, "Word" *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)* Colin Brown ed., 4 vols., [Zondervan, 1986], III:1120-21). See also O'Brien, 482.

⁴³¹ Blackaby, *Hearing God's Voice*, 70.

The psalmist understood the need for God's illumination of His Word. He prayed, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law" (Ps. 119:18). He did not need the Lord's help to read His Word, but he knew he needed His help to understand it.⁴³²

It is possible that such a prayer as "**Open my eyes**" was needed by the psalmist, whoever he was, under the Old Covenant in which God's people were not universally given *Spirit-liberated reason* through supernatural regeneration at the time of spiritual conversion. Thus, David prays elsewhere, "**Do not . . . take your Holy Spirit from me,**" (Ps 51:11) referring to something he had witnessed in Saul's life (cf. 1 Sam 16:14), but could not happen under the New Covenant (cf. Eph 1:13-14). Therefore, perhaps such a prayer was more appropriate in an age in which *Spirit-liberated reason* was both rare and potentially fleeting.

In addition, it is very possible that by the psalmist asking that God would correct his thinking, that he is merely asking the Spirit to control his mind with the virtues we have discussed above so that he is thinking properly in regards to God's word.

Finally, we would like to suggest that such a prayer is very appropriate in any age. Our difficulties and concerns with the doctrine of "illumination" are not intended to deny that God has the freedom to supernaturally intervene in our thought processes and divinely reveal thoughts that the more normal process of meditating on Scripture with our *Spirit-liberated reason* would not have produced. God may very well do this, and if we need Him to, He will. Because we do not know when our *Spirit-liberated* and empowered faculties will be inadequate to fulfill His will, and we therefore need a miracle, it is appropriate to habitually ask for one. Nonetheless, we see no Scripture that prescribes or promises the miracle of insight that the "illumination" doctrine claims. And we must remember that miracles are rare by definition, and that God is not in the habit of doing for us what He has already enabled us to do.

D) Additional Theological & Practical Problems with the "Illumination of the Spirit"

No Christian is in a position to dogmatically deny that God would ever supernaturally give us a direct *divine revelation* in order to

⁴³² MacArthur, 1 Cor 2:15.

enable us to accurately interpret and creatively apply the written *divine revelation* we already have in Scripture. While we do not believe God has promised this, He is still free to do it when and if He pleases. However, proponents of the "illumination of the Spirit" are not honest enough about the difficulty of distinguishing between the more normal and sufficient processing of our *Spirit-liberated reason* and the possible, but more supernatural occurrence of God directly intervening in our thinking to ensure the proper conclusions. The only way that anyone could test such a thing is to practice the age old process of comparing other clear Scripture with our interpretation, which obviously gets us back to the use of our reason for interpreting Scripture.

One critical question is how does a person "turn on" the "illumination" and how does it get "turned off"? Proponents of this view certainly imply that we are at times experiencing the "illumination" and at other times we are not. Why is this so? What do we need to do to be "illuminated"? *The Scriptures never say*. Wouldn't that be an important thing for us to know? If we need some sort of ongoing but conditional "illumination" why wouldn't God instruct us on the conditions? And proponents of the illumination doctrine never tell us either.

We also mention in chapter 3.3 that the doctrine of the "illumination" is an attack on the historically held belief in the *clarity of Scripture* of which we have written elsewhere:

Essentially, this historic belief of the Church claims that divine revelation in Scripture possesses sufficient clarity and that human reason possesses sufficient ability, so that Scripture is readily understood by humans. . . . It is because God designs His revelation to be sufficiently clear, and human reason to be sufficiently able, that humans are responsible to understand and obey it. ⁴³³

Also, proponents of the "illumination" doctrine leave us in the rather ridiculous position of needing a divine revelation in order to properly understand and obey another divine revelation. Where would this circular dependency stop? Why don't we need additional revelation in order to understand and apply the revelation that comes through "illumination?" Is it because it is more clear and straight-forward than the objective words written on the page? Accordingly, we have written elsewhere:

[A]fter the Apostle Paul relates some analogies about ministry to Timothy, he adds, "**Reflect** [*noei*: "contemplatively think over"] **on what I am saying** [writing], **for the Lord**

⁴³³ Excerpted from section 3.3.A.3.

will give you insight into all this" (2 Tim 2:7). How would **"the Lord . . . give . . . insight into"** what the Apostle was writing? By using the God-given faculty of reason to *research* the meaning of the Apostle's revelation.

The reason that the Apostle attributes a resulting understanding as divine insight is not because it occurs in a mystical, miraculous way, but a mental, more regular way, in which we use the human means God has given us to understand His revelation. The Apostle does not imply or even hint that some supernatural "illumination" of the Spirit or an additional divine inspiration is needed to understand Scripture, but rather and simply mental reflection by Timothy.

The Scriptures are already the revelation of the Spirit and we do not need another revelation of the Spirit to properly understand and apply this revelation. Scripture is not in some secret divine code for which we need supernatural "illumination" in order to decipher it. The Spirit revealed Scripture, and now it requires the diligent use of our *Spirit-liberated reason* to fully understand that revelation and to apply it. While a reference to an "illumination of the Spirit" certainly sounds more spiritual, it is an unnecessary misunderstanding of something that actually occurs more naturally for the born again Christian.⁴³⁴

The suggestion that we need a revelation of the Spirit in order to interpret and apply the revelation of the Spirit we have in Scripture is also in danger of redefining the divine revelation of God's Apostle's and Prophets. In other words, what is being claimed is that the work of the Spirit in revelation is not enough, but that another, continual, supernatural act of the Spirit is needed for the work of divine revelation to be completed. For example, Colin Gunton, Professor of Christian Doctrine at King's College, University of London unfortunately laments that:

[M]uch of the history of the doctrine of inspiration is in large measure an attempt to equate inspiration and revelation in such a way that the text in some way or other replaces or renders redundant the mediating [interpreting] work of the Spirit. . . .

Here I am very close to the classic Reformed distinction between the external word of scripture and the *verbum internum* [revelation, illumination, inspiration] of the Spirit. The modern version of the confusion of inspiration and revelation is . . . the tendency to turn the text [Scripture], the

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

narrative, etc. into the divine agent [instead of an immediate and additional inspiration of the Spirit].⁴³⁵

Putting some supposed spontaneous, possibly intermittent action of the Spirit between the text of Scripture and the mind of the Christian has no biblical warrant and has some dangerous consequences. Notice how Dr. Gunton uses such a doctrine in order to propose something very popular in postmodern theology:

Any new [inspiring] action [of the Holy Spirit], therefore, can be expected within the framework of this eternal revelation [i.e. Scripture]. [This implies] the possibility of progress in theology which is grounded in revelation, and in particular the promise that the Spirit will lead the church 'into all truth'. Therefore dogma and theology are revisable, scripture is in certain respects open to question, but revelation, mediated through scripture, is not.⁴³⁶

Likewise, James DeYoung, Professor of New Testament at Western Seminary, claims in his book, *Beyond the Obvious: Discover the Deeper Meaning of Scripture*, that because of this same spontaneous and intermittent work of the Spirit, God can give "new truth and revelation to those who listen for his voice."⁴³⁷

If the Spirit actually did such a thing how would we know? Does this not seem to open up the Scriptures to all kinds of various interpretations in the name of the Spirit? And if it is a spirit that is telling us the correct interpretation of Scripture, how do we know it is the Holy Spirit? Isn't the devil in the habit of offering an interpretation and application of Scripture (cf. Gen 3:1-4; Matt 4:5-7)?

There are several other practical difficulties with the doctrine of the "illumination of the Spirit" as well. First, if we are so dependent on the Spirit for correctly interpreting Scripture, who gets the blame when we interpret and apply it incorrectly? Likewise, haven't we all experienced being strongly convinced of a particular interpretation or application of Scripture in a way that certainly *felt* like a supernatural "illumination," only to discover later that our interpretation or application was wrong? Didn't we *feel* the same way when it turned out to be right? Doesn't this expose the danger

⁴³⁵ Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (T&T Clark, 1995), 66.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁴³⁷ James DeYoung and Sarah Hurty, *Beyond the Obvious: Discover the Deeper Meaning of Scripture* (Vision House, 1995).

of putting our trust in a *feeling* which is basically how the "illumination" of the Spirit manifests itself in those who claim it?

Another question is: Are the myriad of differences in biblical interpretation due to one party being more "illuminated" with the Spirit than others? We know of no Evangelical theologian who would describe interpretations of Scripture in this way.

Without exception, correct interpretations are described and promoted in very scientific terms such as "fitting the facts," "making sense of the biblical data," "reflecting the context," "not contradictory," and otherwise being what any reasonable person would conclude from an unbiased reading of the text. Such interpretations are supported with arguments and evidence in a courtroom-like manner appealing to our reason. No one appeals to some subjective "illumination" of the Spirit to defend their interpretation of Scripture, because there is no validity to such a thing.

Accordingly, Gary Friesen remarks:

By way of illustration, there is one area where an appeal to inner impressions is deemed to be invalid in decision making. Virtually no one admits to such an approach in biblical interpretation-the science of hermeneutics. There are many accepted principles for the study of God's Word, but tuning in to inward impulses is not one of them. If a commentator were to adopt the [mystical] view of decision making and apply it to matters of biblical interpretation, he might write something like this:

Having just explained the five possible interpretations that Bible scholars have suggested for this text, this writer confesses that this is a very difficult passage to understand. In such cases, the Holy Spirit must be the final Guide. In response to my prayer for guidance, the Spirit has indicated to my heart through His still small voice that the correct interpretation is the last one listed above.

Surely such a rationale would raise red flags in the mind of the reader.⁴³⁸

And so should the claims of proponents of "illumination." On the contrary, erroneous interpretations are exposed and demonstrated with logic and reason because this is the way that humans were made to determine and recognize the truth. Theologians can theologize about the Spirit continually guiding us in our interpretations of Scripture, but in practice they do not seem to

⁴³⁸ Gary Friesen and J. Maxon, *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Multnomah, 1980), 131-32.

believe it, or use it, and in fact demonstrate the very dependence on reason that we believe in.

Additionally, the need for supernaturally revealed customized applications of Scripture is exaggerated. Not only because our God-given moral and logical reasoning are capable of effectively applying Scripture, but because needs and circumstances of people are fairly universal and the rather easily understood encouragements in Scripture speak to them all. Do we really need the Holy Spirit to supernaturally reveal to us a customized application of, "**I can do everything through Him Who gives me strength**" (Phil 4:13)? We know how that applies to our lives today, and it would not seem to be because the Holy Spirit directly and supernaturally revealed something to us apart from Scripture.

Finally, as with the "testimony of the Spirit" to the canon of Scripture, we perceive a desire in the promotion of the "illumination of the Spirit" to provide a greater, even supernatural level of certainty for our interpretation of Scripture. Like the "testimony," this teaching accomplishes no such thing, and we are again left to the right use of our liberated, but human reason. An "illumination" of the Spirit certainly sounds more spiritual, supernatural, and certain, but it is neither necessary, biblical, accurate, nor honest about how God really works. In the matter of properly interpreting, applying, and teaching Scripture, God has simply said, "**Do your best**" (2 Tim 2:15).

Publications & Particulars

Chapter 3.6

Reevaluating the "Testimony of the Spirit" to Salvation

Does the Holy Spirit Tell Us We Are Saved?

Overall Objective

To offer a biblical and practical evaluation of the popular suggestion that the Holy Spirit communicates directly and subjectively to us that we are saved.

Table of Topics

- A) Historical & Modern Support For Assurance Through a "Testimony of the Spirit"**
- B) Biblical Support for Assurance through Objective Virtue**
 - B.1) The Apostle John's Support of Objective Assurance
 - B.2) Jesus' Support of Objective Assurance
 - B.3) The Apostle Paul's Support of Objective Assurance
- C) Historical Support for Assurance through Objective Virtue**
- D) Practical Problems & Dangers with an Assurance through a "Testimony of the Spirit"**

Publications & Particulars

Primary Points

- The "testimony of the Spirit" teaching is used to suggest that the Holy Spirit directly and subjectively communicates to us that we are saved.
- We wish to suggest that the "testimony of the Spirit" to our salvation that the Scriptures speak of is not so much an internal, subjective, and mystical communication, but rather, it is the external, objective, and practical evidence provided by His obvious fruit working in our lives.
- There is no clear biblical support for such a ministry of the Spirit.
- The Bible's most concentrated teaching on the assurance of our salvation is 1 John. However, John never points his listeners to some subjective, assuring ministry of the Spirit, but rather to the objective evidence He manifests in our lives.
- No amount of subjective, peaceful, self-affirming feelings about one's relationship and standing with God can, or should, make up for a lack of the objective moral evidence of one's life.
- Romans 8:15-16 tells us that the Spirit testifies to our sonship *with* our spirit, not *to* it, and is in the context of describing the objective fruits of the Spirit.
- A subjective foundation for our assurance is no foundation because even spirits must be tested objectively.
- An emphasis on some sort of subjective assurance of our salvation has given some an excuse to ignore a lack of objective evidence, leading to a false assurance.

A) Historical & Modern Support For Assurance Through a "Testimony of the Spirit"

As noted in chapter 3.4, the idea of a rather mystical, direct, subjective testimony of the Spirit was essentially the invention of John Calvin. Before him, there is little evidence for such an idea. As we said there, in our opinion, one of the greatest mistakes of modern theology is the widespread rejection of Calvin's biblical soteriology, and the widespread acceptance of his unbiblical epistemology.

Nonetheless, Calvin commented on the Apostle Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 1:22, **"He anointed us, set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come":**

Here, however, the Apostle declares in general terms, that the elect have the Spirit given them, by whose testimony they are assured that they have been adopted to the hope of eternal salvation. Hence we may know the nature of faith to be this, that conscience has from the Holy Spirit a sure testimony [revelation] of the good-will of God towards it, so that, resting upon this, it does not hesitate to invoke God as a Father. . . .

Let us observe, however, that it is not acquired in a natural way, and is not attained by the mental capacity, but depends entirely upon the revelation of the Spirit.⁴³⁹

Clearly, Calvin is promoting the idea of a subjective, direct, revelation of the Spirit, apart from anything our reason ("mental capacity") would evaluate, that confirms our salvation. Such a perspective is simply an out growth of his doctrine of the testimony of the Spirit for the recognition of Scripture discussed in chapter 3.5.

However, not even Calvin could completely dismiss the objective evidence that the indwelling of the Spirit provides, and wrote

⁴³⁹ *Calvin's Bible Commentaries*, 2 Cor 1:22; online at www.ccel.com.

Such a clear statement concerning a supposed subjective and direct revelation of the Spirit makes the following remark from Stephen J. Nichols rather absurd:

Calvin argued against the idea that assurance is subjective. To be sure, the Spirit's witness is internal, but that internal witness has an external ground. It is the testimony of the Spirit to the individual, not the testimony of the individual to himself. (*An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* [Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003], 111).

elsewhere that objective, "Personal holiness is not the condition for faith but the true evidence of our faith."⁴⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Calvin certainly promoted the idea of a more mystical and subjective foundation for our assurance.

Many Reformed theologians followed him and accordingly we read in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646):

This certainty [of salvation] is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.⁴⁴¹

Like most theologians, the authors of the Confession were willing to give some attention to the more objective "inward evidence of those graces" that the Spirit produces, but also wished to add a subjective dimension to the Spirit's work as well, a "witnessing with our spirits."

This subjective "testimony of the Spirit" to our salvation is primarily espoused by Reformed theologians, as Presbyterian theologian Donald Bloesch comments:

[I]n Reformation theology we do not need to look for [objective] evidences of our [right] standing in the sight of God, for faith itself brings us the assurance that we are loved by God and forgiven through the sacrifice of Christ.⁴⁴²

We are not surprised then to find the fine Reformed teacher D. M. Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) saying that this subjective and rather mystical "testimony of the Spirit" is "the highest form of assurance possible; there is nothing beyond it. It is the acme, the zenith of assurance and certainty of salvation."⁴⁴³

⁴⁴⁰ Quoted by Donald Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit* (Intervarsity, 2000), 110. Underlining added.

⁴⁴¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XVIII.1. Underlining added.

⁴⁴² Bloesch, 55. The Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof reports that in addition to himself, such Reformed theologians as Kuyper, Bavinck, and Vos: "correctly hold that true [saving] faith . . . carries with it a [subjective] sense of security, which may vary in degree." (*Systematic Theology* [Banner of Truth Trust, 1958, repr. 1998], 508)

⁴⁴³ Quoted by John Stott in *The Message of Romans* (Intervarsity, 1994), 235. Lloyd-Jones makes a similar statement in his *God the Holy Spirit* ([Crossway, 1997], 162). But then a few paragraphs later he says, "The

Even the well-known Evangelical apologist William Craig, known for his promotion of objective evidences for Christianity, writes:

[T]he witness of the Holy Spirit [is] 'self-authenticating,' and by that notion I mean (1) that the experience of the Holy Spirit is veridical [truthful, genuine] and unmistakable (though not necessarily irresistible or indubitable [sure]) for the one who has it and attends to it; (2) that such a person does not need supplementary arguments or evidence in order to know and to know with confidence that he is in fact experiencing the Spirit of God.⁴⁴⁴

More examples could be given of those who support some sort of mystical, subjective, direct revelation by the Spirit that assures us of our salvation, but these will do. Especially since the concept would seem to us to lack biblical support. On the other hand, an assurance of our salvation based on the objective virtue produced by the Holy Spirit in us is amply attested in Scripture.

B) Biblical Support for Assurance through Objective Virtue

B.1) The Apostle John's Support of Objective Assurance

The Bible's most concentrated teaching on the assurance of our salvation is 1 John. However, the Apostle never points his listeners to some subjective, assuring ministry of the Spirit, but rather to the

characteristics of a true assurance are these: first and last and always—humility" (163), which would seem to reflect the objective *virtue apologetics* we advocate.

⁴⁴⁴ William Lane Craig in *Five Views on Apologetics* Cowan, Steven Cowan, ed. (Zondervan, 2000), 29.

objective evidence He manifests in our lives.⁴⁴⁵ While we deal with most of these passages elsewhere, some will be discussed here.⁴⁴⁶

Contrary to some who teach that it is *gifts* of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, that proves our salvation, we contend that it is the *fruits* of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22-26; Col 3:12-15). Against the common teaching of our Roman Catholic and Lutheran brothers that our *water* baptism gives us assurance of our salvation, we would claim that it is the life transformation that comes with *spiritual* baptism (cf. Eph 1:13-14). And against many Reformed and Evangelical theologians who suggest some inner, subjective feeling of assurance that the Spirit communicates to our spirit, we insist that the real "testimony of the Spirit" to our salvation is the objective, observable virtue that flows out of the born again Christian's life.

It is this very thing that the Apostle John is so eager to explain in his epistle. While the Apostle's purpose for writing his Gospel was **"that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name"** (21:31), his purpose in 1 John is, **"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life"** (1 John 5:13).

⁴⁴⁵ Nonetheless, no less a Christian scholar than William Craig writes:

John repeatedly emphasizes that it is the Holy Spirit who imparts to the believer the knowledge that his Christian beliefs are true. In John's gospel Jesus tells his disciples that the Holy Spirit will teach them all things (John 14:26), and in his first epistle John underscores this fact by rejoicing that his readers have no need that anyone should teach them, since the anointing they received from God, which abides in them, teaches them about all things (1 John 2:20, 26-27).

Similarly, in John's gospel, Jesus promises to send the Spirit of truth to abide in the disciples so that they might know that they are in Christ and Christ in them (John 14:16-17, 20). And in his first epistle John again underlines the reality of this promise: "This is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.... We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (1 John 3:24; 4:13). John uses his characteristic phrase "we know" to emphasize the confidence Christian believers have that our faith is true, that we really do abide in God and he in us. (Craig, 32)

Unfortunately, Dr. Craig is using these scattered references to support the doctrine of a subjective "testimony" of the Spirit to salvation. However, we believe a reading of chapters 14.13-14.15 will demonstrate these verses have a different interpretation and application.

⁴⁴⁶ For further discussion specifically regarding the revelatory work of the Spirit described in 1 John 2:20, 27 see chapters 14.13 and 14.15.

His goal in his Gospel is the salvation of unbelievers, while his goal for the epistle is assurance for believers.⁴⁴⁷ While the Apostle John claims in his Gospel that it was Christ's physical miracles that authenticated Him as the only way of salvation (cf. John 14:6; 20:30), he claims in his epistle that it is our miraculous, objective virtue that proves we have such salvation.

For example, he writes in simple and straightforward terms:

We know that we have come to know Him if we obey His commands. The man who says, "I know Him," but does not do what He commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys His word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. (1 John 2:3-6)

In other words, the certainty of our salvation rests not in feelings or subjective revelations from the Spirit, but rather in the objective evidence of our Christ-like virtue. Renowned NT scholar John Stott, in his superb commentary on 1 John, comments on this passage as follows:

The Gnostics in particular laid claim to the knowledge of God. They had been enlightened with the true *gnōsis*. John does not deny the possibility of knowing God, since both the Old Testament and the Gospel promise it (e.g. Jer. 31:34; Jn. 17:3). But he insists that no religious experience is valid if it does not have [objective] moral consequences (cf. Tit, 1:16). It is not the person who claims to be a Christian and to know

⁴⁴⁷ Dr. Stott remarks regarding the central subject of John's epistles:

The predominant theme of these letters is Christian certainty. Their characteristic verbs are *ginōskein*, 'to perceive' (twenty-five times) and *eidenai*, 'to know' (fifteen times), while a characteristic noun is *parrisia*, 'confidence of attitude' or 'boldness of speech'. The certainty of Christian people is twofold - objective (that the Christian religion is true) and subjective (that they themselves have been born of God and possess eternal life). Both are expounded by John, who takes it for granted that this double assurance is right and healthy.

His teaching about these certainties, their nature and the grounds on which they are built, urgently needs to be heard and heeded today. . . . A fresh certainty about Christ and about eternal life, based upon the grounds which John gives, can still lead Christian people into that boldness of approach to God and of testimony to the world which is as sorely needed as it is sadly missing in the church today. (*Letters of John*, (TNTC) [Eerdmans, 1988], 56, 60)

God who is presumptuous, but the person whose claim is contradicted by his conduct. He is a liar (v. 4).⁴⁴⁸

The Apostle repeats this truth several times in this short letter. He writes again in chapter 2:

Anyone who claims to be in the light [correctly believing what is necessary for salvation] **but hates his brother is still in the darkness** [i.e. unsaved]. **Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.** (1 John 2:9-11)

Granted that the supernatural and superior virtue of Christians proves the truth of Christ, how do we know if we possess the truth of Christ? The Apostle writes:

If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of Him. (1 John 2:29)

No one who lives in Him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen Him or known Him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil . . .

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:6-10)

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. (1 John 3:14)

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in His presence whenever our hearts condemn us. (1 John 3:18-20)

⁴⁴⁸ Stott, *Letters*, 95.

Dr. Stott comments regarding these latter verses:

It is implied that we shall be able to do this [be assured of our salvation] only if we know that we belong to the truth. It is the mind's knowledge by which the heart's doubts may be silenced. But how can we know this? What is the meaning of the *this is how* with which the verse begins? . . .

Here (as in 4:6) it seems to refer back to the preceding paragraph about love. It is 'everyone who loves' who 'has been born of God and knows God' (4:7). Love is the final objective test of our Christian profession, for true love, in the sense of self-sacrifice, is not natural to human beings in their fallen state. Its existence in anyone is evidence of new birth and of the indwelling Spirit (3:24; 4:12-13), and it shows itself 'with actions'.

'There are actual things we can point to - not things we have professed or felt or imagined or intended, but things that we have done' (Law). If we thus love 'in truth' (v. 18), we may indeed have full assurance in our hearts. 'The fruit of love is confidence' (Westcott).⁴⁴⁹

The Apostle John also explains why love is the ultimate proof of our standing with God:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 John 4:7-8)

The kind of love that God is requiring can only come from Him, and He only gives it to those who know Him.⁴⁵⁰

Obviously, in none of these statements is the Apostle implying that a born again Christian cannot sin. First of all, he has already said that to claim sinless perfection is to be deceived (cf. 1:8, 10), and secondly, he has promised that, "**if anybody does sin, we have One Who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One**" (1 John 2:1).

Also, we would contend that the clearest, most immediate proof of our spiritual regeneration is our *desires*, not our practice. It is our *desires* to be holy that change rather powerfully and immediately when real conversion occurs, because we immediately

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁵⁰ For a discussion of 1 John 3:18-4:2; 4:13; and 5:6-11, which some claim would support a subjective, mystical "testimony of the Spirit" see section 5.5.A.1.

receive "**a new heart and . . . a new spirit**" (Ezek 36:26), which is Christ's own heart and Spirit because He has come to live inside of us. However, while our *desires* change rather powerfully and immediately, it will require our whole Christian life for our consistent *practice* to catch up. God changes our desires radically and instantly at conversion, but we still need to, "**be transformed by the renewing of [the beliefs of our] mind**" (Rom 12:2) so that we more consistently practice what we desire.

Therefore, it is not our fluctuating performance which we should base our assurance of salvation on, but our ardent, abiding, enormous hatred of sin in our lives. This is precisely what is illustrated in the life of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:14-25. His struggle with sin in him, *even after over 20 years of being an Apostle of Jesus Christ*,⁴⁵¹ was very real.⁴⁵² But even more real was his great hatred for that sin. He wrote:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. . . . So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 7:15-25)

Do you sense the passionate "**hate**" for indwelling sin in the Apostle's words? It was not the absence of sin that alone demonstrated the Apostle possessed the Holy Spirit, but his great desire to be holy. Accordingly, it is not only the victories over sin that prove our salvation, but the very fact that we are "**waging war**" against it at all, tells us the Holy Spirit lives in us.

So much so that the Apostle recognized that, in a sense, "**it is no longer I myself who do**" the sins he hated, but the sinful

⁴⁵¹ F. F. Bruce dates the Apostle's conversion in A. D. 33 and the writing of Romans in A. D. 57. ("Paul the Apostle," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley ed., 4 vols., [Eerdmans, 1988], III:699, 709)

⁴⁵² There is a great deal of debate regarding whether or not the Apostle is speaking of a regenerated believer in Romans 7:15-23. In the end, identical language in Galatians 5:16-17, which seems most clearly to refer to the internal moral struggle of believers, provides strong evidence for our position that the Apostle is speaking of the same thing in Romans.

habits and lies still operating in the unrenewed parts of his mind. On the contrary, he said, **"in my inner being** [my real regenerated self] **I delight in God's law,"** which is something the unregenerate will *never* do (cf. Rom 8:5-11). And it is that very **"delight"** in obeying God, and our passionate hatred for sin, that will inevitably result in the practically holier life that the Apostle John describes so clearly.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵³ Many will feel that the Apostle John's rather dogmatic and unqualified statements must be balanced with the honest warning of the Apostle Paul:

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each His task. ⁶ I planted the seed [the church in Corinth], Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, Who makes things grow. ⁸ The man who plants and the man who waters [the local church] have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building [a local church].

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation [planted the local church in Corinth] as an expert builder, and someone else [another pastor/teacher] is building on it. But each one [pastor/teacher] should be careful how he builds [the local church]. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

¹² If any man [pastor/teacher] builds [the local church] on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ his [pastoral/teaching] work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's [pastoral/teaching] work. ¹⁴ If what he has built [specifically regarding the local church] survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Cor 3:10-15)

First, it is important to notice that the context here specifically regards those involved in ministry, like a Paul or Apollos (vs. 5-9), and the **"work"** being evaluated is specifically their efforts to **"build"** the local church. As NT scholar Gordon Fee puts it:

This text . . . is neither a challenge to the individual believer to build his or her life well on the foundation of Christ, nor is it grist for theological debate [e.g. a proof text for purgatory]. Rather, it is one of the most significant passages in the NT that warn--and encourage--those responsible for "building" the church of Christ. In the final analysis, of course, this includes all believers, but it has particular relevance, following so closely as it does vv. 5-9, to those

with teaching/leadership responsibilities. (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT) [Eerdmans, 1987], 145)

Likewise, Charles Hodge wrote concerning 1 Corinthians 3:15:

The apostle is here speaking of those teachers who, although they retain the fundamental doctrines of the gospel, yet combine them with error. This is plain from v. 12, "If any man shall build on this foundation." It is not enough, therefore, that a minister hold fast to fundamental truth; he must take heed what he teaches in connection with that truth. If he mingles with it the wood, hay and stubble of his own philosophy, he will find himself a loser on the day of judgment. (*Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, online at ccel.com; cf. Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM [Findex.Com, 1999]; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 2000], 296; contra Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 1985], and John MacArthur (*MacArthur's New Testament Commentary*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM [Parsons Technology, 1997])). C. K. Barrett apparently has no specific opinion, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Hendrickson, 2000])

Accordingly, we are reminded of the warning in James: "**Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly** (James 3:1). Evidently, the King will more rigorously evaluate the work of Pastors and Teachers on that Day, specifically how Christ-centered their philosophy of ministry was.

Nonetheless, such a truth need not be seen as a correction of the biblical expectation that all born again Christians will bear significant and recognizable amounts of virtuous fruit. In other words, isn't it possible for a minister to exhibit the fruits of love and holiness in his personal life, but allow false doctrine and worldly wisdom to influence how he proceeds to teach, grow and lead the local church? We think so, and this is specifically what the Apostle Paul is speaking of.

Accordingly, NT scholar Anthony Thiselton writes:

The argument [of 1 Cor 3:5-17] flows on from what has been established in 1:18-3:4 [the dichotomy between Christ-centered wisdom and worldly wisdom]. . . . The background contrast between "two wisdoms" . . . provide two evaluative frames of reference within which assessments of ministers, the ministry, and ministerial activity appear in very different lights. (296)

Along the same lines, Dr. Fee explains:

It is unfortunately possible for people to attempt to build the church out of every imaginable human system predicated on merely worldly wisdom, be it philosophy, "pop" psychology, managerial techniques, relational "good feelings," or what have you. But at the final judgment, all such building (and perhaps countless other forms, where systems have become more important than the gospel itself) will be shown for what it is: something merely human, with no character of Christ or his gospel in it. Often, of course, the test may come this side of the final one, and in such an hour of stress that

The Apostle John's concern, then, is not the struggle with a sin here and there that all Christians experience. Rather, he is writing of the habitual and persistent pursuit, practice, and even pleasure of sins against God and our conscience. Christians do not habitually practice sin, do not persistently pursue it, and certainly do not enjoy living in it. This is what makes us radically and miraculously different than we were before our rebirth, and from the rest of the world who are still **"all under sin"** (Rom 3:9).

One could hardly make our point better than the renowned NT scholar F. F. Bruce (1910-1990) who wrote concerning the kind of assurance of salvation taught in 1 John:

Whatever high claims may be made by one who indulges in sin, that indulgence is sufficient proof that he has no personal knowledge of Christ. . . . [T]he new birth involves a radical change in human nature; for those who have not experienced it, sin is natural, whereas for those who have experienced it, sin is unnatural—so unnatural, indeed, that its practice constitutes a powerful refutation of any claim to possess the divine life.⁴⁵⁴

Some may find the Apostle John's instruction on the proof of salvation too dogmatic and unqualified. However, we should be careful of watering down his statements. Of course, theoretically, one could **"not do what He [Christ] commands,"** be one who **"hates his brother,"** and **"one who continues to sin" and still be a Christian, even though the Apostle says they would be "a liar," "still in darkness,"** and have never **"known Him"** (1 John 2:4, 9; 3:6). Perhaps a real born again Christian could live for an extended period of time in a hateful, sinful lifestyle. But we seriously doubt it. For certain they would be miserable, and if not, than they truly would have no basis to believe they belong to Christ.

which has been built of moderm forms of *sophia* [wisdom] usually comes tumbling down. (144)

Therefore, 1 Corinthians 3:5-15 is not a clear statement that we can expect genuine believers in general to live a life that bears so little fruit of the Holy Spirit living in them, that in the end, they have virtually nothing to show for it. On the contrary, the Apostle's focus here is on one particular type of Christian work, that of pastors and teachers building the local church. Even the imagery of **"escaping from the flames"** seems to refer to the metaphorical building, which is the local church, being spoken of throughout the passage, and what specifically is burning then is that work, or the building (as a noun and verb), of a local church.

⁴⁵⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1970), 90, 92.

And this is the Apostle John's point. We doubt he intended to exclude all possibility that there could be someone whom God knows is a Christian, but whose life is so barren of holy, virtuous fruit at the moment, that to a discerning human it would not seem so. Nonetheless, in such cases we can lovingly and biblically warn people that although their claim to be saved may be true, neither we nor they have reason to believe it is true. This is because, as the Apostle John so clearly teaches, all that humans have to go on is the presence or absence of the objective supernatural virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit. And this is why throughout Scripture, those who claim to know Christ are encouraged to, "be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure" (2 Pet 2:10; cf. Phil 2:12; Heb 3:7-19; 6:1-12; 10:26-39).

While the Apostle John's appeal to objective moral fruit for the assurance of salvation is clear, some take some of his statements out of context in order to suggest otherwise. For example, the Apostle writes: "**And this is how we know that He lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us**" (3:24). Interpreted in isolation, this may be implying some subjective assurance of the Spirit of our salvation. However, in the immediate context, both before and after this statement, the Apostle specifically tells his readers that this assurance of the Spirit is not based on a subjective feeling, but demonstrable virtue. The full passage says:

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in His presence whenever our hearts condemn us. . . .

Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from Him anything we ask, because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him. And this is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He commanded us. Those who obey His commands live in Him, and He in them. And this is how we know that He lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us.

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. (1 John 3:18-4:2)

In verses 18-19, the Apostle clearly teaches that our assurance of salvation is to be based on the objective fact that we **"love . . . with actions."** In verse 24, the proof that we **"live in Him and He in" us** is the objective evidence that we **"obey His commands."** The Apostle then immediately states, **"And this is how we know that He lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us,"** because it is by the Spirit that we can love others and obey God. And if someone wishes to interpret the Apostle as saying that this work of the Spirit is direct, subjective and sufficient, he goes on to warn us about trusting any spirit without objective evidence. It is simply inexcusable exegesis to insert a subjective work of the Spirit in the immediate context of objective works of the Spirit.⁴⁵⁵

Accordingly, Dr. Stott adds concerning 1 John 3:24:

It may at first sight seem that this reference to the Holy Spirit within us introduces a subjective criterion of assurance . . . which is inconsistent with what has gone before. But this is not so.

The Spirit whose presence is the test of Christ's living in us, manifests himself objectively in our life and conduct. It is he who inspires us to confess Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh, as John immediately proceeds to show (4:1ff.; Cf. 2:20, 27). It is also he who empowers us to live righteously and to love our brothers and sisters (cf. 4:13; Gal. 5: 16, 22).

So if we would set our hearts at rest, when they accuse and condemn us, we must look for evidence of the Spirit's working, and particularly whether he is enabling us to believe in Christ, to obey God's commands and to love our brothers; for the condition of Christ dwelling in us and of our dwelling in him is this comprehensive obedience (24a), and the evidence of the indwelling is the gift of the Spirit (24b).⁴⁵⁶

Another verse that could be misinterpreted on this topic is 1 John 4:13 where we read, **"We know that we live in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit."** Again, we would insist that in the context, the Apostle points to objective evidence in our lives for proof that **"He has given us of His Spirit."** Again, Dr. Stott writes:

⁴⁵⁵ Which makes it difficult to explain why John MacArthur in his commentary on Romans 8:15-16 claims that 1 John 3:18-21 includes "subjective evidence" that sets, **"our hearts at rest"** in God's presence when we question our standing before Him. (*Commentary*)

⁴⁵⁶ John Stott, *The Letters of John (TNTC)*, (Eerdmans, 1988, repr. 1999), 154-5.

This, then, is the sequence of thought [in 1 John 4:12-16]: we know that we live in God and God in us 'because he has given us of his Spirit' (13), and we know he has given us of his Spirit because we have come to 'acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God' (15), and to live 'in love' (16).⁴⁵⁷

Finally, some have derived a subjective, mystical operation of the Spirit from the following as well:⁴⁵⁸

This is the One Who came by water and blood--Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit Who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which He has given about His Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made Him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about His Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. (1 John 5:6-11)

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 168-9.

⁴⁵⁸ For example, William Craig writes concerning this passage:

In fact, in a remarkable passage, John actually appears to compare the degree of certainty generated by the inner witness of the Spirit with that furnished by the historical testimony of the ministry of Jesus. . . . The "water and the blood" in this passage probably refer to the baptism and crucifixion of Jesus as marking the beginning and end of his earthly ministry, and "man's testimony" to the apostolic witness to the events of that ministry.' John, who in his gospel lays such weight on the apostolic testimony to the signs of Jesus' ministry in order "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31), now says that the testimony of the Spirit is even greater than the apostolic testimony. As Christian believers we have the testimony of God living within us, assuring us of the veracity of our faith. Although John is eager to present evidences for the truth of Christ's claims, it is apparent that he does not consider such evidence necessary for knowledge of those claims. (Craig, 32)

We would suggest that Dr. Craig is right in saying that the testimony of "water and blood" concerning Christ point to objective, historical evidences. However, he is wrong to assert that the accompanying testimony of the "Spirit" is subjective, mystical, and even more assuring than physical, historical, objective evidence.

First, we should notice that **"the testimony God has given about His Son"** (v. 10) is that **"God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son"** (v. 11). Therefore, **"the testimony"** relates to our assurance of salvation.

How is this **"testimony"** communicated and authenticated? The Apostle says, **"there are three that testify"** to this: **"the Spirit, the water and the blood"** (vs. 7-8). What do these mean?

While there are various interpretations as to what the Apostle meant by the **"water and blood,"** we agree with Dr. Stott who remarks:

We need . . . to find an interpretation of the phrase which makes *water and blood* both historical experiences 'through' which he passed and witnesses in some sense to his divine-human person."⁴⁵⁹

We would suggest that John's statement that Christ, **"came by water and blood"** is a reference to his physical birth and death. Accordingly, Jesus Himself referred to natural birth as being **"born of water"** (John 3:15⁴⁶⁰). Christ's "natural" birth would testify to his humanity, and precisely against what the false teachers that John was concerned about were denying: The incarnation of God. Likewise, the fact that Christ bled on the cross was a demonstration of His humanity. But Christ was not only human but God. How was this proven? By **"the Spirit."** How did this occur? Throughout the Gospels the authentication of Christ's divinity through the Spirit occurred through His miracle working and resurrection (cf. John 20:30-31; 10:24-26, 38; 14:11; 15:24; Acts 2:22).

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 180. (See Stott, *John*, 46-7).

⁴⁶⁰ Some contend that when Christ says **"born of water,"** (John 3:5) He means Christian water baptism. And then they conclude that water baptism is essential to being **"born again."** However, although water baptism and the baptism of the Spirit are at times mentioned together (Matt 3:11; Acts 1:5; Rom 6:1-11), Christ makes it clear that He is speaking of a person's physical birth as a baby, not water baptism.

His statement that **"Flesh gives birth to flesh"** in John 3:6 is synonymous with being **"born of water"** in verse 5, just as the **"Spirit giv(ing) birth to the spirit"** is synonymous with being **"born of . . . the Spirit."** So the meaning of being **"born of water"** is defined by the meaning of the statement, **"Flesh gives birth to flesh."** And the clearest understanding of that is that Christ is talking about a person's physical birth.

This interpretation is strengthened by Nicodemus's statement that a person, **"cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"** All Christ is saying is that only people who are physically created by God and then spiritually born again by the Spirit of God, will be saved.

How then is this **"testimony in"** our **"heart"**? Obviously these things are simply the belief of every Christian. We are reminded of Paul's promise that: **"If you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' [deity], and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved"** (Rom 10:9). Remembering that the biblical concept of **"heart"** is virtually synonymous with the cognitive reasoning functions that produce our beliefs, desires, and decisions, we recognize that the Apostle is stressing objective evidence for our faith.

While the testimony of coming to Earth **"by water and blood"** clearly proved Christ's humanity, the testimony of the Spirit working through Him and even raising Him from the dead proved His deity. There is no need here to find some obscure, mystical testimony of the Spirit to Who Christ was.⁴⁶¹

B.2) Jesus' Support of Objective Assurance

And this was not only the teaching of the Apostle John. The King had made the same claim in His Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matt 7:21-27). He described people doing all sorts of things even in His **"name"** including prophesying, exorcisms, and miracles. And yet, **"many"** of these very kind of people were unsaved **"evil doers."** It was in this context that Christ said, **"Not everyone who [merely] says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the [moral] will of My Father Who is in Heaven."**

Christ went on to compare two kinds of people. There are those who **"hear these words of mine and put them into practice,"** and therefore, have a saving faith that will **"not fall."** But there are those who **"hear these words of mine and do not put them into practice"** and therefore have a "faith" **"built . . . on sand"** which will, at some point, **"fall with a great crash."** For Christ, it was obedience to His word that tested the legitimacy of a person's salvation (cf. Matt 13:18-23; John 15:1-8).

B.3) The Apostle Paul's Support of Objective Assurance

⁴⁶¹ For further discussion of the Holy Spirit's objective testimony of authenticating Christ see sections 3.1.C and 6.14.B. Some will suggest the 1 John 2:20-27 is biblical support for a subjective "testimony of the Spirit" to our salvation. This passage is dealt with in section 14.15.B.

In addition, we may note here that this was precisely the Apostle Paul's point in relating the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. In verse six he states clearly that, **"The only thing that counts [for possessing and claiming salvation] is faith expressing itself through love."** As Dr. Stott puts it here, "the faith which saves is a faith which works, a faith which issues in love,"⁴⁶² and a love that can be objectively observed.

While throughout Galatians 5 the Apostle is certainly speaking of the internal moral battle that occurs between the **"sinful nature"** and **"the Spirit"** (Gal. 5:17) in the life of the believer, he also makes it clear in the passage that the objective "fruit" of the Spirit is the evidence that a person is **"not under law"** (v. 18, i.e. saved) and that they **"belong to Christ Jesus"** (v. 24).

On the other hand, those who do not bear the fruit of the Spirit, but by default, exhibit the **"acts of the sinful nature"** (v. 19) prove their damned state because, as the Apostle says, **"I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God"** (v. 21).⁴⁶³ No amount of subjective, peaceful, self-affirming feelings about one's relationship and

⁴⁶² John Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Intervarsity, 1994), 134.

⁴⁶³ Unfortunately, Dr. Stott would seem to take the view that Paul's discussion in Galatians 5 only regards those Christians who are in bondage to sin and those living in liberty, and their internal struggle between the Spirit and the flesh (145-54). Accordingly, he does not even address the meaning of Paul's references to being **"under the law"** (v. 18, cf. v. 23). Dr. Cole takes the same position, suggesting that **"under the law"** does not even apply to the Mosaic law. (209) The internal moral struggle of the Christian is obviously part of Paul's thought (cf. 5:17), but the Apostle goes beyond that to claim that those who **"are led by the Spirit . . . are not under law"** (v. 18) and that those who really live in the flesh, **"will not inherit the kingdom of God"** (v. 21). The bondage that Paul is most concerned about in this chapter and throughout the epistle is to the Mosaic law, which leaves one **"under a curse"** (3:10) and **"alienated from Christ"** (5:4). It is living in the power of the Spirit, producing His fruits, that proves we are no longer under that law and are saved.

R. N. Longenecker seems to recognize that Paul is addressing two issues in this passage when he comments:

Paul sets out his lists of vices and virtues in order to highlight his two conclusions: (1) that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (v 24), and so cannot live in a libertine fashion; and (2) that "since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (v 25), thereby expressing "the fruit of the Spirit" in our lives. (*Galatians* (WBC) [Nelson, 1990], 249; cf. 246-7)

standing with God can, or should, make up for a lack of the objective moral evidence of one's life.

Accordingly, the Apostle Paul testifies in Acts, **"First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds"** (Acts 26:20). This is why he told the Romans: **"Through Him and for His name's sake, we received grace and Apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the [moral] obedience that comes from [saving] faith"** (Rom 1:5). *Saving faith* will result in obedience to God and prove our salvation.

Having Christ in us is to be saved, and the Christ in us will show Himself. Paul wrote the Corinthians: **"You show that you are a letter from Christ . . . known and read by everybody . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts"** (2 Cor 3:2-3).

Like the Apostle John in his epistle, the apostle Paul reminds us that supernatural virtue is what the confidence of our salvation is based on when he says, **"Those [deacons] who have served well gain . . . great assurance [parrēsia] in their [saving] faith in Christ Jesus"** (1 Tim 3:13).⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶⁴ There is a great deal of debate as to what Paul meant regarding a **"great assurance [parrēsia] in their faith in Christ Jesus"** (1 Tim 3:13). While we relate it to a confidence before God, most others apply it to a boldness in speech (cf. TEV, Calvin, MacArthur). Some allow for both meanings rather simultaneously (cf. George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles (NIGTC)* [Eerdmans, 1992], 174; John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* [Intervarsity, 1996], 102).

NT scholar Gordon Fee relates the options and leans toward our own view when he writes:

The meaning of this last phrase [in 1 Timothy 3] is not entirely clear. The word for great assurance often conveys the sense of having boldness or openness toward others (cf. 2 Cor. 3:12; Phil. 1:20; Philem. 8; cf. also GNB). But the word can also refer to one's "confidence" before God, as in Ephesians 3:12 (cf. Heb. 10:19, 35). Hence the NIV translates **great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus**.

This is not an easy decision. On the one hand, it would add a further dimension to what it means to have good standing, namely, the confidence in speech that comes from soundness in life and work. On the other hand, it could refer to the double nature of the "reward;" namely, a good reputation with other people and confidence before God. On the whole, the latter is to be preferred, because the qualifying prepositional phrase says "in **faith**" (not in *the*

Nonetheless, the chief texts for supporting a mystical testimony of the Spirit to our salvation come from Paul's writings. He writes in Romans 8:15-16:

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by Him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself testifies with [symmartyrei] our spirit that we are God's children. (Rom 8:15-16)

Dr. Bruce reflects a common interpretation of this statement when he writes this "is the New Testament basis of the doctrine of

faith), implying, as throughout 1 Timothy, one's own **faith in Christ**. (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus (NIBC) [Hendrickson, 1988], 89-90)

The primary support for interpreting Paul here as referring to a boldness in speech is that this is what *parrēsia* literally means (*pan*, all, *rhēsis*, speech: "freedom of speech"). Accordingly, this is how it is used throughout Acts (cf. noun: 2:29; 4:13, 29, 31; 28:31; verb: 9:27f.; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26).

However, as with any language, it was common for the literal meanings of classical Greek words to change to more popular meanings over the centuries, and these may not have much relationship to the word's original etymology. Thus, throughout the NT, *parrēsia* is used in ways that have nothing to do with speech at all (cf. 1 John 2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14; Eph 3:12; Heb 3:6; 4:16; 10:18-19, 35; Job 22:26; 27:10 in LXX).

Finally, we believe the context of Paul's statement favors our view that he is speaking of an assurance of salvation, rather than a boldness of speech. First, Paul clearly says this confidence relates to a deacon's personal "**faith in Christ**," and says nothing here about boldness of speech at all. Secondly, public speaking as in evangelism or teaching would not seem to be a primary expectation of first century deacons, but rather practical service. Finally, Paul is stating the rewards of service and assurance of salvation would certainly be more valuable than boldness of speech.

Accordingly, Albert Barnes commented:

As it is here connected with "faith" . . . it means, evidently, not so much public speaking, [but] as a manly and independent exercise of faith in Christ. The sense is, that by the faithful performance of the duties of the office of a deacon, and by the kind of experience which a man would have in that office, he would establish a character of firmness in the faith, which would show that he was a decided Christian. This passage, therefore, cannot be fairly used to prove that the deacon was "a preacher," or that he belonged to a grade of ministerial office from which he was regularly to rise to that of a presbyter. (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM [Findex.Com, 1999], *in loc.*).

the 'inward witness of the Holy Spirit.'" ⁴⁶⁵ Likewise, mega church Pastor Bill Hybels writes regarding this Scripture:

In other words, the Holy Spirit whispers and tugs and nudges and makes impressions on the spirits of true believers, and this is what he says: "Rejoice! You've trusted Christ, and now you're a member of the family. Relax! The agonizing is over; you're on the flight to heaven." ⁴⁶⁶

First, we should notice the Greek text here. The Apostle uses the word *martyr* ("testify") with the prefix *sym* ("together with"). In other words, the Apostle is saying that the Holy Spirit testifies *along with* "**our spirit**," not *to* it. The Apostle is saying nothing here about the Holy Spirit communicating something to our spirit, which is erroneously reflected in the NLT which says, "**For His Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children.**" To the contrary, what the Apostle is saying is that both the Spirit and "**our spirit**" are simultaneously testifying to something else, namely that we are God's children. ⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, (TNTC) (Eerdmans, 1985, repr. 1999), 158.

⁴⁶⁶ Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not to Pray* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 1998), 140.

⁴⁶⁷ There is some debate on the meaning of *symmartyrie* in Romans 8:16 and some commentators suggest that with the Apostle really is saying that the Holy Spirit is testifying *to* our spirit instead of *with* it, against all English translations that we are aware of. The respected Reformed theologian John Murray (1898-1975) argued that the Apostle meant the Spirit witnesses *to* us, not *with* us (cf. *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. [Eerdmans, 1959, 1965; reprint 1997], 297).

Likewise Dr. Stott, for example, even though he prefers the RSV and NEB translations of 8:15-16 writes:

How is his witness borne, then, and what is implied by the prefix *sym* in the verb *symmartyre*? Normally *sym* is translated 'together with', in which case there would be two witnesses here, the Holy Spirit confirming and endorsing our own spirit's consciousness of God's fatherhood. So NEB . . . This would be readily understandable, since the Old Testament required two witnesses to establish a testimony.

On the other hand, is it really possible in experience to distinguish between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit? More important, would not these two witnesses be inappropriately matched? Surely we cannot stand alongside the Holy Spirit and give testimony for what standing has our spirit in this matter? Of itself it surely has no right at all to testify to our being sons of God. In this case the prefix *sym* is simply intensive, and Paul meant that the Holy Spirit bears a strong inward witness to our spirit that we are God's children. (1 John, 234)

More specifically, the text is saying that the Spirit and **"our spirit"** are together *proclaiming* something. The "testimony" is the audible **"cry"** of the Holy Spirit, through our human spirit that God is our Father. Accordingly, the Apostle explicitly says we, **"received the Spirit of sonship. And by Him we [audibly] cry, 'Abba, Father.'"** This is what **"the Spirit of sonship"** is doing when, **"The Spirit Himself testifies . . . that we are God's children."** He is making a public proclamation, not an inward, silent, private, mystical communication to ourselves. The reason this audible proclamation is also made **"with our spirit"** is that the Spirit-prompted proclamation must go through our mind to be audibly expressed. It is our voice that makes the **"cry, 'Abba, Father,'"** not the Spirit's voice.

The parallel statement in Galatians 4:6 seems to explicitly describe this when the Apostle writes: **"Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts [i.e. "spirits"], the Spirit Who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'"** It is again the Spirit indwelling our heart/spirit prompting us then to audibly **"call out"** by the Spirit through our heart/spirit **"Abba, Father."**

This would seem to be similar to what the Apostle describes elsewhere when He writes: **"Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit"** (1 Cor 12:3). Again, when we **"say, 'Jesus is Lord,'"** we can be understood as **"speaking by the Spirit of God."** Therefore, it is by virtue of being indwelt with the Holy Spirit that our spirits can proclaim that God is our Father and Jesus is Lord.

We would suggest that Dr. Stott does not write with his normal helpfulness here. First, Scripture itself distinguishes between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit. Secondly, as we will suggest, we have interpreted the Apostle as stating that the Holy Spirit enables us to acknowledge God as our Father and does this *through* an exclamation made from our spirit (i.e. mind), and so in essence, both provide it.

Accordingly, we believe Dr. Schreiner is more accurate when he writes:

The Holy Spirit confirms that we are God's children by bearing witness with our spirit. Some construe the verb (*symmartyrei*, bears witness together) to mean simply "testify" or "assure," and the prefix [*sym*] loses its force (e.g., Cranfield 1975: 403). More likely, however, the prepositional prefix retains its meaning, as it does in Rom. 2:15 and 9:1 (see the exegesis of those verses [p. 123, 479], and the intention is to say that the witness derives both from the Holy Spirit and from our human spirit (so Dunn 1988a: 454; Moo 1991: 540; Fee 1994: 568-69). (*Romans*, BECNT [Baker, 1998], 426).

Accordingly, we believe the sense of Romans 8:15-16 is best translated in the RSV, NRSV, and NEB translations. The latter renders the passage:

The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery leading you back into a life of fear, but a Spirit that makes us sons, enabling us to cry 'Abba! Father!' In that cry the Spirit of God joins with our spirit in testifying [i.e. publicly proclaiming] that we are God's children.

We see then that after the Apostle says the Spirit has relieved us of the fear of God and enables us to call out to God as our Father, he simply restates the same thing in the next sentence. The statements are not saying two entirely different things such as 1) The Spirit enables us to acknowledge God as our Father, and 2) the Spirit tells our spirit that God is our Father. Rather, both statements are saying the same thing: the Spirit enables us to acknowledge God as our Father and does this through an exclamation made from our spirit/mind.

If one wishes to reject this interpretation and insist that the Holy Spirit is communicating something *to* our spirit instead of *with* it, they still encounter difficulties in suggesting this is some sort of immediate, subjective, revelatory action of the Spirit. Accordingly, John MacArthur comments: "Paul does not have in mind just some mystical small voice saying we are saved," and goes on to suggest that the Apostle is referring to the objective evidence that the Spirit produces.⁴⁶⁸

Likewise, Dr. Stott helps us to notice the context of these verses, which certainly points to objective evidence, rather than the subjective kind:

[T]he whole paragraph concerns the witness he bears us, that is, the assurance he gives us. The question is: precisely how is the Spirit's witness borne? Paul assembles four pieces of evidence. First, the Spirit leads us into [objective] holiness (verse 14 being linked to verse 13 by the conjunction *because*). Secondly, in our relationship to God he replaces fear with freedom (15a). Thirdly, in our prayers he prompts us to call God 'Father' (15b-16).

Fourthly, he is the firstfruits of our heavenly inheritance (17, 23). Thus radical holiness, fearless freedom, filial prayerfulness and the hope of glory are four [objective] characteristics of the children of God who are indwelt and led

⁴⁶⁸ MacArthur, *Commentary*.

by the Spirit of God. It is by these [objective] evidences that he witnesses to us that we are God's children.⁴⁶⁹

Likewise, if the Apostle is speaking of a testimony from the Holy Spirit to our spirit we would suggest that the Apostle is referring to the *objective* evidence that the Holy Spirit creates in transforming our lives and giving us a new and consistent power over sin, all of which the Apostle wrote a great deal about in Romans chapters 6-8 leading up to the verse in question.⁴⁷⁰ His statement should be understood in this context, instead of as an isolated statement, separated from what the Apostle has been teaching in this section of Scripture.

The Apostle is not implying that the Spirit provides a subjective assurance of our salvation that is apart from, and in spite of, the objective fruit that the Apostle John continually points to in his teaching.

Accordingly, Edwards wrote of Romans 8:15-17:

There are two kinds of spirits the apostle speaks of, the spirit of a slave or the spirit of bondage, that is fear; and the spirit of a child, or spirit of adoption, and that is love. The apostle says, we have not received the spirit of bondage, or of slaves, which is a spirit of fear; but we have received the more ingenuous noble spirit of children, a spirit of love, which naturally disposes us to go to God as children to a father, and behave towards God as children. And this is the evidence or witness which the Spirit of God gives us that we are his children. . .

So that it appears that the witness of the Spirit the apostle speaks of, is far from being any whisper, or immediate

⁴⁶⁹ Stott, *Romans*, 230.

⁴⁷⁰ Millard Erickson agrees when he writes:

In the earlier part of Romans 8, Paul dwells on this work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has liberated us from the law (v. 2). Henceforth believers do not walk and live according to the flesh, their old nature, but according to the Spirit (v. 4), having their minds set on the Spirit (v. 5). Christians are in the Spirit (v. 9), and the Spirit dwells in them, a thought that is repeated three times (vv. 9, 11 twice). As the Spirit indwells believers, he guides and leads them, and the deeds of the flesh are, accordingly, put to death (v. 13). All those who are thus "led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (v. 14). The Spirit is now at work giving them life, [objectively] witnessing that they are sons rather than slaves, and thus supplying clear [objective] evidence that they are truly in Christ (vv. 15-17). (*Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., [Baker, 1998], 890.

suggestion or revelation; but that gracious holy effect of the Spirit of God in the hearts of the saints, the disposition and temper of children, appearing in sweet childlike love to God, which casts out fear, or a spirit of a slave.⁴⁷¹

Likewise, the nineteenth century Bible scholar, Albert Barnes (1798–1870) would appear to understand the Apostle here better than many twentieth century commentators when he remarks concerning Romans 8:16:

[I]t means that the Holy Spirit furnishes evidence to our minds that we are adopted into the family of God . . . If it be asked how this is done, I answer, it is not by any revelation of new truth; it is not by inspiration; it is not always by assurance; it is not by a mere persuasion that we are elected to eternal life; but it is by producing in us the appropriate [objective] effects of his influence.

It is his to renew the heart; to sanctify the soul; to produce "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance," Gal. 5:22-23. If a man has these, he has evidence of the witnessing of the Spirit with his spirit. If not, he has no such evidence.

And the way, therefore, to ascertain whether we have this witnessing of the Spirit, is by an honest and prayerful inquiry whether these [objective] fruits of the Spirit actually exist in our minds. If they do, the evidence is clear. If not, all vain confidence of good estate; all visions, and raptures, and fancied revelations, [and some supposed "inner testimony" of the Spirit] will be mere delusions.⁴⁷²

And the Pentecostal NT scholar Gordon Fee agrees concerning Romans 8:16:

⁴⁷¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, II.1.11; online at www.ccel.com

⁴⁷² Barnes, Rom 8:16. Commentators whom we would suggest miss the mark would include John Murray who simply states concerning this passage that the "witness of the Spirit" to our salvation is a very subjective, feelings oriented communication that is:

made manifest in sealing to the hearts of believers the promises which are theirs as heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ and the generating in them of the assurance of the great love the Father has bestowed upon them that they should be called children of God. (*Romans*, 297-8)

With all due respect to a great theologian, such an assurance is meaningless.

This means that those who make much out of the concept of "the inner witness of the Spirit" are probably also missing Paul's point. One need not doubt that such an "inner witness" results, as it were; but Paul is almost certainly not speaking to some deep, interior witness that the Spirit makes within us. Rather, as already suggested, he is simply elaborating on the significance of the Abba-cry, that by our crying out to God the Spirit thus bears witness with [not to] our spirits that we are God's children.⁴⁷³

C) Historical Support for Assurance through Objective Virtue

While there has been considerable support for Calvin's rather mystical view of the testimony of the Spirit, we would suggest there is equal or greater historical support for the more objective view that Spirit-produced virtue is the true testimony of the Spirit to our salvation. St. Augustine (354-430) put it this way, in the context of what proves we have received the Holy Spirit:

When we laid the hand on these infants, did each one of you look to see whether they would speak with tongues, and, when he saw that they did not speak with tongues, was any of you so wrong-minded as to say, "These have not received the Holy Ghost." . . . If then the witness of the presence of the Holy Ghost be not now given through these miracles, by what is it given, by what does one get to know that he has received the Holy Ghost? Let him question his own heart. If he love his brother, the Spirit of God dwelleth in him.⁴⁷⁴

Elsewhere Augustine said, "Now whosoever has not charity is wicked, because this gift alone of the Holy Ghost distinguishes the children of the kingdom from the children of perdition."⁴⁷⁵

From there, as with a lot of theology, we fast-forward to Martin Luther (1483-1546) who wrote:

Faith . . . is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12-13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and

⁴⁷³ Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson, 1994), 569.

⁴⁷⁴ Augustine, *Homily on the Epistle of St. John*, 6.10; online at www.ccel.com.

⁴⁷⁵ Augustine, *The Trinity*, xv, 18; online at www.ccel.com

spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. It is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever.⁴⁷⁶

Even for Luther, then, it would seem no subjective "witness of the Spirit" could make up for a lack of objective fruit of the Spirit when it came to an assurance of salvation. Accordingly, he described the "testimony of the Spirit" in objective ways when he wrote:

By this Holy Spirit, as a living, eternal, divine gift and endowment, all believers are adorned with faith and other spiritual gifts, raised from the dead, freed from sin, and made joyful and confident, free and secure in their conscience. For this is our assurance if we feel this witness of the Spirit in our hearts, that God wishes to be our Father, forgive our sin, and bestow everlasting life on us.⁴⁷⁷

Here, Luther equated the "witness of the Spirit in our hearts" to things that could be objectively recognized such as "spiritual gifts," power over sin, joy and confidence, and a conscience free from guilt. Accordingly, we wish to suggest again that the "testimony" of the Spirit to our salvation that the Scriptures speak of is not so much an internal, subjective, and mystical communication, but rather, it is the external, objective, and practical evidence provided by His obvious fruit working in our lives.

Likewise, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) completely rejected John Calvin's idea of a mystical, subjective testimony of the Spirit to our salvation. As Dr. Bloesch relates, "For Jonathan Edwards Christian [moral] practice is the cardinal sign that we have been endowed with the Spirit,"⁴⁷⁸ in distinction from some subjective action of the Spirit. Accordingly, in the conclusion of Edwards' massive study on this very subject, *Religious Affections*, and after rejecting many other approaches to the assurance of salvation,

⁴⁷⁶ Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy Lull ed., (Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 101.

⁴⁷⁷ Martin Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," in Lull, 66.

⁴⁷⁸ Bloesch, 55.

including the subjective doctrine of a "testimony of the Spirit," he writes:

I shall consider Christian practice and holy life, as a manifestation and sign of the sincerity of a professing Christian, to the eye of his neighbors and brethren. . . . And that this is the chief sign of grace in this respect, is very evident from the word of God. [Christ taught] men's fruits must be the chief evidence of what sort they are . . . so it is the evidence that Christ has mainly directed us to give to others, whereby they may judge of us: Matt. 5:16. . . . Doubtless, when Christ gives us a rule how to make our light shine, that others may have evidence of it, his rule is the best that is to be found. . . . Thus it is plain, that Christian practice is the best sign or manifestation of the true godliness of a professing Christian, to the eye of his neighbors. . . .

Christian practice is plainly spoken of in the word of God, as the main evidence of the truth of grace, not only to others, but to men's own consciences. It is not only more spoken of and insisted on than other signs, but in many places where it is spoken of, it is represented as the chief of all evidences. . . .

Another thing which makes it evident, that holy practice is the chief of all the signs of the sincerity of professors, not only to the world, but to their own consciences, is, that this is the grand evidence which will hereafter be made use of, before the judgment seat of God; according to which his judgment will be regulated, and the state of every professor of religion unalterably determined [cf. Matt 25:31-46]. . . .

Now from all that has been said, I think it to be abundantly manifest, that Christian practice is the most proper evidence of the gracious sincerity of professors, to themselves and others; and the chief of all the marks of grace, the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences, that which seals and crowns all other signs. . . .

Another thing which makes it evident, that holy practice is the principal evidence that we ought to make use of in judging both of our own and others' sincerity [in claiming to be a Christian], is, that this evidence is above all others insisted on in Scripture. A common acquaintance with the Scripture, together with a little attention and observation, will be sufficient to show to anyone that this is ten times more insisted on as a note of true piety, throughout the Scripture, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelations, than anything else. . . .

And for us to make that great which the Scripture makes little, and that little which the Scripture makes great, tends to

give us a monstrous idea of religion; and (at least indirectly and gradually) to lead us wholly away from the right rule, and from a right opinion of ourselves, and to establish delusion and hypocrisy. . . . Christian practice is plainly spoken of in the word of God, as the main evidence of the truth of grace, not only to others, but to men's own consciences.⁴⁷⁹

Because of Edwards' strong stand against Calvin's more subjective "testimony," we read the following rather interesting account from Edwards' brother-in-law:

Samuel Hopkins records a rather curious conversation that he had with George Whitefield [1714–1770] about Jonathan Edwards in 1770. After a few comments about the tendencies of New England ministers, Whitefield quipped, "Is it not surprising, and much to be regretted, that good Mr. Edwards should deny the witness of the Spirit?"

Hopkins replied, "I did not know that he had. What do you understand sir by the witness of the Spirit?" Whitefield's pause caused Hopkins to surmise that he was searching, unfruitfully, for an answer, so Hopkins advanced one: "Do you mean by it an impression upon the imagination, by some immediate communication from the Spirit, that your sins are forgiven and that you are a child of God?"

"No," said Whitefield, "that does not express my opinion."

Hopkins then advanced another option: "Do you then mean an influence of the Spirit of God, exciting such a love for God and Jesus Christ, such clear views of their character, as that the subject of it knows from experience and from Scripture, that he is a child of God and an heir of salvation?"

Whitefield declared that this "accords more with [my] views."

Hopkins concluded the exchange by exclaiming, "This is that witness of the Spirit for which Mr. Edwards pleads, in distinction from the former, which he represents as a form of enthusiasm [i.e. mysticism]." ⁴⁸⁰

Edwards was a champion of the need to see the objective virtue of the Holy Spirit as the biblical means by which we gain assurance of our salvation, and he disdained the idea of a subjective

⁴⁷⁹ Edwards, II.12.

⁴⁸⁰ Nichols, 124. Nichols is referencing, *The Works of Samuel Hopkins*, 3 vols. (Reprint, Boston Doctrinal Book and Tract Society, 1854), 1:87. For Hopkins's further exposition on assurance, see 1:519–34.

"testimony" of the Spirit which was and is a cornerstone of the Reformed theology he otherwise embraced. Edwards' disdain for the doctrine, makes it all the more distasteful that some, apparently out of a blind desire to preserve their precious doctrine of the "testimony," have actually enlisted Edwards as a supporter of it.

For example, Stephen J. Nichols in his book, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards*, consistently downplays, disregards, and confuses the theologian's clear conviction on the objective fruits of the Spirit proving salvation, and manages to make him a great champion of the mystical "testimony" of the Spirit, which is the author's own conviction. Accordingly, he writes:

However, [Ava] Chamberlain's understanding of Edwards's doctrine of assurance is too narrow. "According to Edwards," she asserts, "Christian practice was the locus of assurance." By treating assurance simply as a human [but also supernaturally moral, virtuous] response to the work of God in one's life, she fails to see that assurance is produced by the Spirit, as the equivalent to Calvin's *internum testimonium Spiritus Sancti*.⁴⁸¹

On the contrary, it is Dr. Nichols who "fails to see" Edwards' approach to assurance correctly, and he rejected the subjective approach of Calvin, which was precisely what prompted George Whitefield's concern. While Edwards occasionally mentions Calvin's doctrine, he was a Puritan in thinking and a Pietist at heart, and in agreement with them, the objective moral fruit produced by the Holy Spirit was the ultimate apologetic for Christian faith.

Accordingly, John Gerstner, a much better authority on Edwards remarks:

It runs as a refrain through Edwards' preaching that actions speak louder than words. Indeed, in his most famous treatise on the subject, *Religious Affections*, with respect to others and to oneself, the greatest test of religious experience is clearly this one [i.e. virtue].⁴⁸²

Dr. Bloesch also notes that elements of Puritanism and Pietism rejected the subjective view of the Spirit's testimony to our salvation:

⁴⁸¹ Nichols, 117-18.

⁴⁸² John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, (Berea, 1991), III.13.

[O]ne of the major debates in Puritanism revolved around the assurance of salvation. Whereas the Reformers taught that faith itself brings assurance, the Puritans . . . encouraged believers to look for signs and evidences that attest the genuineness of their commitment to Christ. . . .

While orthodox Lutherans gained their security by looking back to their baptism, the Pietists underlined the need for a new experience, a new regeneration. . . . [They insisted that] our salvation is meaningless unless it produces fruits of obedience that attest whether we belong to Christ. . . . In contrast to Lutheran orthodoxy Zinzendorf [1700–1760, a foremost leader of Pietism] held that saving faith includes the impetus to love. "Even if one believes, yet he will not be saved, if he does not love. . . . There is no saving faith which is not simultaneously love for Him who laid down His life for us." ⁴⁸³

We think Scripture proves Zinzendorf right.

D) Practical Problems & Dangers with an Assurance through a "Testimony of the Spirit"

The first problem with making some subjective action of the Spirit the bedrock assurance of our salvation is that it is just that: subjective. NT scholar Thomas Schreiner, Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes that this supposed action of the Spirit is:

a religious experience that is ineffable, for the witness of the Holy Spirit with the human spirit that one is a child of God is mystical in the best sense of the word. ⁴⁸⁴

While we have a great deal of respect for Dr. Schreiner, we must confess that calling something "mystical" is often simply an attempt to put a spiritual spin on nothing more than a feelings-oriented, and therefore, unreliable experience. As we have discussed thoroughly throughout *Knowing Our God*, we were created to trust facts, not feelings, or even spirits.

⁴⁸³ Bloesch, 115, 119.

⁴⁸⁴ Schreiner, 503.

Accordingly, we read in 1 John: **"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God"** (4:1). And how else can we test such things except by objective means, rather than subjective ones? And this is precisely what the Apostle prescribes when he writes: **"This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God"** (4:2).⁴⁸⁵

Secondly, an emphasis on some sort of subjective assurance of our salvation has given some an excuse to ignore a lack of objective evidence, leading to a false assurance. For example, the NT scholar Everett F. Harrison writes in the popular *Expositor's Bible Commentary*:

A comparison of [Romans 8:]15 and 16 will bring out an important truth concerning the assurance of salvation. All too often a believer may come to the point of doubting his salvation because his sanctification has proceeded so slowly and so lamely. The Spirit, however, does not base his assuring testimony on progress or the lack of it in the Christian life.⁴⁸⁶

Dr. Harrison and others seem to forget that it was this very lack of holiness that prompted the Apostle to exhort the Corinthians: **"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves"** (2 Cor 13:5). And the test was not to see whether or not they *felt* like they were Christians, but whether or not they were *acting* like Christians (cf. 2 Cor 12:20-13:11). Such an approach to

⁴⁸⁵ For all of Dr. Bloesch's support of a mystical assurance from the Spirit, he seems to end up agreeing with us that the ultimate test must be objective. He writes:

I believe that the final authority for the Johannine writer is the paradoxical unity of Word and Spirit, since he appeals both to the witness of objective history that is mediated by church tradition and to the interior witness of the Spirit. The continuing witness and developing tradition of the apostolic church needs to be illumined by the Spirit if it is to have final or ultimate authority for faith. At the same time, John is not espousing subjectivism, for the spirits must be tested (1 Jn 4:1-2). (316)

First of all, we have argued above that the Apostle never "appeals . . . to the interior witness of the Spirit." Secondly, it would seem even Dr. Bloesch recognizes the inadequacy of such a subjective criteria and ends up with an objective one which is the kind the Apostle prescribes in order to test the spirits.

⁴⁸⁶ Everett F. Harrison, "Romans," Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. CD-ROM (Zondervan, n.d.), *loc. cit.*

the work of the Spirit in assuring us of our salvation can serve to give many a false assurance.

Here we are reminded of the King's sobering words when He said:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father Who is in Heaven. ²²Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!' (Matt 7:21-23)

There is little doubt that such people could have professed to an internal, reassuring sense in their spirit that they had a personal relationship with Christ. What is also certain is that they did not possess the fruits of the Spirit in a sincere and supernatural manner. It is just this kind of horrible deception that can be encouraged by the teaching of the "testimony of the Spirit" to our salvation.

One wonders if the reason for commonly suggesting our assurance of salvation depends on something other than objective evidence, is to give a sorry excuse for the multitude of people who claim to be born-again Christians but do not live like it. It is unfortunate that such a doctrine has given such people warrant to muster up their own internal and faulty confidence and ignore the real evidence exhibited in the way they love, talk, and think. Such a position is not only unbiblical, but also not helpful for the Christian, and dangerous to the Church.

The perspective of Edwards and Augustine is so desperately needed in a world in which so many claim to be Christians, and then stain the name of Christ by being sinful. The result is that the high and holy calling of Christian means nothing because a multitude of obviously unregenerated people are claiming it and being allowed to do so. The Church is so eager to add to its numbers, make it easy to become a "Christian," and not offend, that it is reluctant to promote supernatural virtue as the real sign of being worthy to call oneself a Christian. The result is perhaps the world likes us more, but we have abandoned the example of our Savior Who called His followers to radical virtue, cared much for spiritual maturity, and very little about numerical quantity, and reserved His strongest

rebukes for those who claimed a relationship with God but did not live like it.⁴⁸⁷

Accordingly, John Wesley (1703–1791) warned of such self-deceit when he wrote: "How many have mistaken the voice of their own imagination for the witness of the Spirit of God, and then idly presumed they were the children of God while they were doing the works of the devil."⁴⁸⁸

Likewise, Wesley's contemporary during the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards wrote:

Here it may be proper to observe, that it is exceedingly manifest from what has been said, that what many persons call the witness of the Spirit, that they are the children of God, has nothing in it spiritual and divine; and consequently that the affections built upon it are vain and delusive. That which many call the witness of the Spirit, is no other than an immediate suggestion and impression of that fact, otherwise secret, that they are converted, or made the children of God, and so that their sins are pardoned, and that God has given them a title to heaven. . . .

What has misled many in their notion of that influence of the Spirit of God we are speaking of, is the word *witness*, its being called the witness of the Spirit. Hence they have taken it, not to be any effect or work of the Spirit upon the heart, giving [objective] evidence, from whence men may argue that they are the children of God; but an inward immediate suggestion, as though God inwardly spoke to the man, and testified to him, and told him that he was his child, by a kind of a secret voice, or impression: not observing the manner in which the word witness, or testimony, is often used in the New Testament, where such terms often signify, not only a mere declaring and asserting a thing to be true, but holding forth evidence from whence a thing may be argued, and proved to be true.

Thus Heb. 2:4, God is said to "bear witness, with signs and wonders and divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost." Now these miracles, here spoken of, are called God's witness, not because they are of the nature of assertions, but evidences and proofs. . . .

⁴⁸⁷ For further discussion of *saving faith* and *false faith* see section chapters 6.2 and 6.6. For discussion of the denial of the need for objective fruit to claim regeneration and conversion see section 6.6.B.

⁴⁸⁸ Reference unavailable.

Many have been the mischiefs that have arisen from that false and delusive notion of the witness of the Spirit, that it is a kind of inward voice, suggestion, or declaration from God to man, that he is beloved of him, and pardoned, elected, or the like, sometimes with, and sometimes without a text of Scripture; and many have been the false and vain (though very high) affections that have arisen from hence. And it is to be feared that multitudes of souls have been eternally undone by it.⁴⁸⁹

Those are true and sobering words that would not seem to be heeded enough by those who promote the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit" to the assurance of our salvation.

A third problem with such an approach to assurance is that it becomes difficult to explain why many Christians do not have it. If it is a universal work of the Spirit on behalf of Christians then why doesn't the Spirit assure all Christians of their salvation? Is it because they lose the Spirit, or it somehow stops "talking" to them? If it is suggested that sin can hinder the assurance of the Spirit, then we would suggest we are right back to the objective tests of salvation that we support. Which would seem to be exactly what William Craig, a proponent of the "testimony" to our assurance, is saying when he remarks, "Only as we walk in the fullness of the Spirit can we be guaranteed the assurance of which Paul speaks."⁴⁹⁰

Fourthly, this approach to assurance can lead to dividing God's people into the "haves" and "have-nots" in terms of some special spiritual experience. Our Pentecostal brothers and sisters, of course, do this in a number of ways, including their teaching on the "baptism of the Holy Spirit." Unfortunately, the great Evangelical D. M. Lloyd-Jones fell into similar error regarding the "testimony of the Spirit" to salvation. His friend and contemporary, John Stott wrote concerning Romans 8:15-16:

I do not feel able to leave these verses without alluding to an interpretation of them to which Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has given currency. He devoted four chapters to the expression 'you received the Spirit of adoption' (Rom 8:15) and eight more to 'the witness of the Spirit' (v. 16). Following Thomas Goodwin and other Puritans, he understood the former as 'a very special form or type of assurance' more emotional than intellectual, given subsequent to conversion though not essential for salvation, and conveying a profound feeling of

⁴⁸⁹ Edwards, II.1.10-11.

⁴⁹⁰ Craig, 31.

security in our father's love. Similarly he interpreted the witness of the Spirit (which he identified with the 'baptism' and the 'sealing' of the Spirit) as a distinctive and overwhelming experience which confers 'an absolute assurance.'⁴⁹¹

Dr. Lloyd-Jones offered several examples of some famous Christians who described a special, spiritual experience of God in support of his interpretation. In response, Dr. Stott writes:

I have no wish whatever to call in question the authenticity of the experiences described. Nor do I doubt that many Christian people continue to be granted similar profound encounters with God today. Nor is there any problem in affirming that the ministry of the Spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15) and the inner witness of the Spirit (v. 16) are designed to bring us assurance. My anxiety is whether the biblical texts have been rightly interpreted. I have the uneasy feeling that it is the experiences which have determined the exposition.

For the natural reading of Romans 8:14-17 is surely that all believers are 'led by the Spirit' (v. 14), have 'received a Spirit of adoption' (v. 15, REB), and cry 'Abba, Father' as the Spirit himself bears witness to them that they are God's children (v. 16) and therefore also his heirs (v. 17). There is no indication in these four verses that a special, distinctive or overwhelming experience is in mind, which needs to be sought by all although it is given only to some. On the contrary, the whole paragraph appears to be descriptive of what is, or should be, common to all believers. Though doubtless in differing degrees of intensity, all who have the Spirit's indwelling (v. 9) are given the Spirit's witness too (vs. 15-16).⁴⁹²

Suggesting that some mystical, revelatory experience of the Spirit is needed in order to reach the "the zenith of assurance and certainty of salvation," as Dr. Lloyd-Jones claimed⁴⁹³ is ominously close to the Roman Catholic teaching that only a special revelation from God can provide such assurance.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹¹ Stott, *Romans*, 235.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 236. Underlining added.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 235.

⁴⁹⁴ Bruce Demarest writes:

The Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent rejected the teaching that a Christian may be certain he is saved. Given the Roman doctrines of merit and purgatory, only a special revelation

Fifthly, basing the assurance of our faith on a subjective "testimony of the Spirit" is essentially indistinguishable from the feelings based epistemology of the founder of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), whose views have been rightly rejected by conservative Evangelical theologians. This becomes evident in Gordon Spykman's description of Schleiermacher's approach to epistemology:

Schleiermacher [is] . . . the undisputed father of modern theology. His great achievement lies in this, that he adapted Kant's philosophical vision to theology. It is no exaggeration to say that "the entire nineteenth century belongs to Schleiermacher" (Karl Barth). After Kant, modern theology was destined never to be the same again. He had demolished the long-standing rational arguments on which theology had traditionally rested its case. How then could theology still be rescued? That was the Herculean challenge to which Schleiermacher addressed himself. What new substructure could be laid as a prolegomenal base of support for a systematic exposition of the Christian faith?

Schleiermacher attacked this problem by accepting the Kantian conclusion that the objects of religious belief have no "objective" status. They are postulates of the human mind. Christian doctrine must therefore rest on some "subjective" basis. The idea of *Gefühl* ("feeling") filled this need. It became the hermeneutic key to doing theology . . .

Schleiermacher believed that he had offered new grounds on which to construct a Christian theology. His approach was, however, just as man-centered and subjectivist as Kant's. True to Kant, however, Schleiermacher refused to justify it on the basis of rational argumentation. He appealed rather to the phenomena of religious experience. The result was Christian faith rooted in finely attuned spiritual feeling. The task of theology is to offer a systematic exposition of this universal *Gefühl*. Its base of support is the scientific study of the phenomena of human religions, which serves then as the prolegomena for a study of the Christian religion.⁴⁹⁵

from God could provide the individual with assurance of final salvation. ("Assurance," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (EDT), Walter Elwell, ed., [Baker, 1984], 92)

⁴⁹⁵ Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Eerdmans, 1992), 30-31.

Therefore, a subjective, feelings-oriented ground for our faith is both what Schleiermacher and a mystical "testimony of the Spirit" promote, and the latter should be rejected by Evangelical theologians as they have the former.

Finally, resting the epistemological foundation of the genuineness and exclusivity of our Christian faith on something as elusive, subjective, mystical, and private as some "testimony of the Spirit," guts the Christian faith from its most important proof for its superiority over other faiths. What would keep anyone from claiming the same "testimony," when objective virtue is deliberately excluded as a test of it, and it is defined as merely a subjective, mystical "feeling" of assurance that one is in a right relationship with God? This is yet another reason we promote *virtue apologetics* and the claim that the objective, supernatural virtue of the indwelling Spirit is the ultimate and universal proof of the exclusivity of salvation through Christ.⁴⁹⁶

Pastoral Practices

- Because many in the Corinthian church were not living up to the moral standards of authentic Christianity, Paul instructed them at the end of 2 Corinthians to, "**Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you--unless, of course, you fail the test?**" (2 Cor 13:5). Paul was exhorting them to evaluate the spiritual fruit in their lives to demonstrate that Christ was indeed living in them. We would like to suggest that you do the same for a moment. Not because the authenticity of your Christianity is in question, but rather, to really experience *virtue apologetics* for yourself.

Compare yourself to who you were before the time you believe your spiritual rebirth occurred. Or consider the life of the typical unbeliever in your neighborhood, classroom, or work place. Are you more loving? Are your motives different? Do you demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit more than you did before, and more than your relatives, co-workers, and friends who do not have the Holy Spirit? We believe such an exercise will prove our point, and be a helpful reminder that you have in

⁴⁹⁶ Such *virtue apologetics* is developed and defended in Book 5: *Biblical Apologetics*.

fact been regenerated and sealed with the Holy Spirit for eternal life.

- It is important to teach our people a biblical perspective on assurance of salvation. This was the Apostle John's purpose in 1 John and it should be one of our purposes as well. Teaching the biblical perspective of the Apostle can help those real Christians who are unnecessarily struggling with assurance, and help merely religious people in your congregation realize they do not have the Holy Spirit or the Savior. Challenging people to more honestly look at the objective fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives will be a good thing.

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