

Being Comfortable Not Knowing

Rhys N. Thomas

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Introduction

Determining the line between faith and sight can be daunting. The proposal of this book is that a universal line does not exist. Defining the line ends in legalism. People are different; situations are different. Second, although Biblical faith is based on evidence, that evidence is for determining if the resurrection really happened, if the predictions of the prophets all came true, and if the written word has reached us accurately. Once those three questions are answered, the promises of God become the guideline. God has not provided the methods by which He will accomplish those promises.¹ The faithful are expected to trust God that His promises will come about by unknown means. So, facts (sight) are used to establish the validity of the claims, but trust (faith) is required after that.

Finding my place in the kingdom can be just as troublesome. All the faithful receive the indwelling Spirit,² but how that plays out is different for each. The body, the church, is composed of people at different levels of faith with different gifts from that same Spirit.³ Faith lets us be comfortable with letting God do the distribution of superhuman skills as He sees fit. But, the faithful often wonder if they are recognizing or using the gift, or if they are manufacturing a cheap knock-off, or if they are missing or stifling what the Spirit is really trying to do. So, the faithful must trust that the indwelling Spirit is capable of accomplishing what has been promised without knowing how transformation is accomplished and not allowing easy answers to cause them to limit themselves to the humanly possible.

Being confident in my own acceptability to God while at the same time recognizing my own shortcomings has caused many to doubt themselves to the destruction of hope. Faithful people often do not recognize themselves as such, so they live in doubt, failing to achieve joy but rather majoring in anxiety and self-deprecation. Instead, the faithful should be encouraged by the acceptability of the many imperfect people described in the Bible whom God labelled as faithful. Further, God provides superhuman benchmarks specifically to assure the individual of that acceptance.⁴ The faithful need not make such a declaration of acceptability built on their own accomplishments or on hopeful but baseless claims.

Biblical faith must include a growth component, which means that the faithful can always find something less than flawless in themselves. A worldly perspective focuses on shortcomings rather than on stages of promised superhuman transformation. Biblical faith is based on how far we have come, not how far we have left to go.

The following chapters address the challenges presented by faith. The faithful must base some conclusions on physical evidence, or faith is founded on thin air. But the faithful cannot demand to see behind the curtain. The challenge is finding everything God has provided as evidence and methodology while, at the same time, being comfortable not only with letting God do what He has promised, but also with being confident that one's current state is acceptable.

Legalism, self-deception, and criticism are the most common divergences from a balanced view of a God whose sole purpose is to build a big family that will last. That family is built on mutual trust and selfless concern, not benchmarks or percentiles.

¹ Some representative promises of God may be found in *Appendix I: Promises from God concerning Life on Earth*.

² Romans 8:9

³ 1 Corinthians 12:4 – 27

⁴ e.g., 1 John 2:3, 3:16 – 19, 3:23 – 24, 4:1 – 6, 4:12 – 13, 5:13

Chapter 1: How Much Can We Expect to Know?

Jesus expected people to think. One of the reasons He spoke in parables was to force the listener to analyze and apply His stories. Two men who volunteered to follow Him were met with challenges to their incomplete thinking about the deprivation and single-mindedness that would accompany such a commitment.⁵ In another place, when the disciples awakened Jesus because their boat was taking on water in a fierce storm, He chastised them for not thinking through their fears.⁶ Jesus challenged the scribes and Pharisees to think through their traditions.⁷ Some traditions were just burdensome, some were convenient ways to avoid responsibility, and some were illogical. Jesus upbraided the scribes and Pharisees, and then the disciples, for not evaluating the evidence of Jesus' signs, challenging them to do something other than ignore them.⁸ Jesus had high expectations of Nicodemus, and challenged him to answer his own questions.⁹ As the crowds became larger and more demanding, Jesus dialed up the pressure to use their minds by employing outrageous figures of speech.¹⁰ These few examples among many illustrate that the gospel is for those who think; it is not a series of rituals and rules to obey. As with the Law, Moses said to the nation of Israel, "This is not too difficult for you."¹¹ Paul quoted a part of Moses' paragraph to make the same point to the Christians of Rome, "The Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart."¹²

As an encouragement, God has promised that He will always let the faithful know what they need to know, "Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets."¹³ He has further promised that those who are not sufficiently mentally capable will not be held responsible for failing to exercise an ability they do not have.¹⁴ The fact that Jesus preached the gospel to ordinary people, not specialists, was one of His proofs to John the Baptist that He was the Expected One.¹⁵ The Christian faithful, those to whom the indwelling Spirit has been given, are promised understanding and wisdom.¹⁶ Paul even makes the bold statement, "We have the mind of Christ."¹⁷ The original audience for this audacious claim was the church in Corinth, where everything went wrong.

Certainly, we walk by faith, not by sight.¹⁸ However, the most important characteristic of Biblical faith is evidence: the historical validity of the resurrection of Jesus, the unblemished record of the prophets, and eye-witness testimony from those who saw what Jesus did.¹⁹ But how much evidence is required? Considering Jesus' high expectations of those in His day, the bar is dauntingly high. Humans have a disappointing penchant for seeking the minimum

⁵ Matthew 8:18 – 22

⁶ Matthew 8:23 – 27, Mark 4:35 – 41, Luke 8:22 – 25

⁷ Matthew 15:1 – 20, Mark 7:1 – 23

⁸ Matthew 16:1 – 20, Mark 8:11 – 21

⁹ John 3:1 – 15

¹⁰ John 6:22 – 71

¹¹ Deuteronomy 30:11 – 14

¹² Romans 10:6 – 8

¹³ Amos 3:7

¹⁴ John 9:41

¹⁵ Matthew 11:4 – 5, Luke 7:22

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:9 – 12, Ephesians 1:17 – 19, 2 Corinthians 3:14 – 18, Ephesians 3:17, James 1:5 – 8

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:16

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:7

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:3 – 8

requirements. Certainly, the evidence must be more than anecdotal and must be founded on references, not hearsay. Several high-quality books on Christian Evidences have been published.²⁰

As a comparison, every person has understandings based on various levels of evidence. Very few understand how all the major parts of an automobile work, yet millions entrust their lives to them every day. The same may be said for electrical devices. Each person has an acceptability threshold. Part of that threshold depends on the level of risk of serious injury or expense. We are likely to try something that appears harmless based on nothing more than the recommendation of a friend. But, signing a contract based on the oral promises of the salesman seems foolhardy. Holding a firearm target for a friend during live fire is stretching the limits of trust.

Acceptance of the evidences for Biblical faith will lead to a major lifestyle change, albeit one which portends to be positive. Each person has a different level of required evidence. Certainly, acting based on the anecdotal information of a stranger is at one extreme (although many sermons include just such appeals). At the other extreme is researching all of known archeology and history on the matter.

Some complain that all such archeological and historical evidence is insufficient. They require a personal encounter with the miraculous power of God. But such an attitude ignores the way people make informed decisions. Everyone is quite certain that other major figures of history existed, and that the historical events themselves actually happened. Archeology is just another form of indirect measurement. We use indirect measurement for most things, usually because it is impossible to go back in time to make the desired measurements, or the desired measurement cannot be obtained directly. We measure heights with rulers or tape measures, assuming that the devices are accurate and that we can read them correctly. We usually do not know how modern electronic scales work, but we measure goods and even ourselves in that way.

Certainly, God would be capable of providing a personal miracle for each potential believer. But consider what happened while Jesus was on earth. Tens of thousands of people observed blatant miracles, yet they asked for a sign. The Israelites observed the parting of the Red Sea, drank water which emerged from a rock after an action of Moses, received manna six days a week, and ate hordes of quail which spontaneously died in neat piles around the camp at intervals. Yet, only Joshua and Caleb believed that Israel could overthrow the city-states of Palestine. Miracles have not proven to be an acceptable rubric resulting in faith. So, God has provided a huge quantity of quality evidence that exceeds any and all reasonable demands and has left it where people can find it.

Interpretation of evidence also can be tricky. Because we tend to fill in the blanks between pieces of evidence with what we have always heard, we are likely to conclude that the evidence confirms a belief when it actually does not. However, our confidence should be in God, not in our ability to put everything together at once. “God is greater than our heart and knows all things.”²¹ So, as we grow and weed out the mistaken conclusions and come to realize that there are many more pieces of data yet to find, we can become unsure of our standing with God because of the certainty that our belief system is off plumb somewhere. But, as long as we are growing, God finds us acceptable.²²

²⁰ For example, *Evidences of Christianity* (J.W. McGarvey), *The Case for Christ* (Lee Strobel), *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Josh McDowell)

²¹ 1 John 3:20

²² 2 Peter 1:2 – 11, 2 Thessalonians 1:3 – 8, 1 Peter 2:1 – 3, 2 Corinthians 10:15, Romans 14:1

This notion of being acceptable even when we hold mistaken conclusions runs counter to a popular teaching called “doctrinal sin.” In short, the teaching proposes that unless one has the “correct” notion of all the “essential” doctrines, entry into heaven will be denied. However, this notion contradicts the concept of growth. If I must grow to have acceptable, Biblical faith, something that I “know” today may be proven wrong tomorrow. Further, the list of “essential” doctrines is different everywhere the position is taught. As a proof, one need only look up the teachings of one’s own group from fifty years ago. Every group changes its positions over time. Present-day church leaders do not agree with those of their own group over the Biblically-short span of half a century.

This observation does not lead to the conclusion that teachings do not matter. Only a legalist would take that illogical position. Rather, the faithful do the best they can with what they have. God promises that the needed understanding and wisdom will come, and will slowly straighten it out. But, a quick look at more than nineteen centuries of church history shows that we are not getting closer to an accurate perception, but rather are circling it in unpredictable orbits. Neither giving up on growth nor intentional ignorance is acceptable.

Many have been taught over the centuries that sin keeps one out of heaven. That is not the case. Jesus already paid the debt to justice for all sins, both for the faithful and for the unbeliever.²³ The question at judgment is, “Faith or not?” God determines what acceptable faith is. Certainly, nine passages give works as the standard at Judgment.²⁴ But further reading shows that faith produces acceptable works, rather than works being a standard of themselves.²⁵ So, focusing on a certain shortcoming, in this example in the area of doctrinal “purity,” is a works mentality which the New Testament soundly condemns.

By what rubric will God judge faith as acceptable or not? Biblical faith has several characteristics:²⁶

- (1) recognizing the resurrection as evidence,
- (2) recognizing the need for a sacrifice (and what a Biblical sacrifice is),
- (3) acceptance of the Word of God as true,
- (4) a realistic hope of heaven,
- (5) trust in the promises of God (and knowing what those promises are),
- (6) taking on the divine nature,
- (7) evangelism,
- (8) growth.

As we grow our faith, we may encounter various plateaus and difficult circumstances. To break the stagnation, we should go back to the characteristics of faith and focus on the one or ones that appear to be having the most trouble, that appear to be the weakest. Another method is to review the step-wise sequence given in 2 Peter 1:5 – 7, focusing on the step before the one that appears to be giving difficulty.

So, to answer the question posed in this chapter, every faithful person is responsible for establishing faith on evidence, to become aware of that evidence. The process is on-going. Acceptance of the gospel should be on par with one’s personal level of confidence for important

²³ 1 John 2:2

²⁴ Romans 2:6 – 7, Romans 2:15, 2 Corinthians 11:15, 1 Peter 1:17, Revelation 2:23, 2:26, 14:13, 20:12 – 13, 22:12

²⁵ Romans 3:20, 3:27 – 28, 4:2, 4:6, 9:11, 9:32, 11:6, 2 Corinthians 10:11, Galatians 2:16, 3:2, 3:10, Ephesians 2:8 – 9, 2 Timothy 1:9, Titus 1:16, 3:5, James 2:14, 2:17 – 20, 26, 2:21, 2:24

²⁶ See *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 4, “The Faith Economy,” Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

matters. For example, reality is much better than speculation.²⁷ The faithful have nothing to fear from reality, because reality is where God lives. As knowledge and understanding grow, new information will come into conflict with previous convictions. That is an opportunity for rejoicing, not fear. A flaw has been discovered in one's "house."²⁸ Upon encountering a structural defect, the faithful should rejoice because no catastrophic damage has been done to that house of faith, so the flaw can be repaired. Further, the repair will make the building stronger.

However, one should always desire confirmation that God has accepted one's faith, despite the sure probability that serious flaws in understanding will be discovered as time passes. Fortunately, God has supplied confidence builders in a faithful life to re-affirm that acceptability. The faithful are not allowed to confidently assert their own acceptability (which is arrogance), but must observe God's markers. For example, when we see ourselves overcoming ourselves in areas in which we had failed repeatedly in the past, we then have that evidence.²⁹ Or, when we see ourselves executing the things we profess to believe (when we are being consistent to a superhuman degree), we are assured that God has accepted us.³⁰ When we see superhuman selflessness coming out of us unexpectedly, we have that assurance.³¹ All three of these markers are at a level that normal humans cannot achieve through self-discipline or enforcement or fear. These are like the levels expressed in, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the power may be of God and not of us."³² The context of the passage is evangelism, so the observers are outsiders. When unbelievers decide that congratulating you on your character is pointless because, obviously, something bigger than you is responsible, then you have reached that level of acceptability, at least for the moment. You always have the right to leave, but growing faith is simple once the individual stops trying to accomplish watered-down objectives and turns loose the indwelling Spirit to progress in its character development task.

²⁷ 1 Timothy 1:3 – 7, 6:4, 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:16, 4:4, Titus 3:9, Romans 12:3

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 3:10 – 17

²⁹ Romans 8:13

³⁰ 1 John 3:18 – 19

³¹ 1 John 4:12 – 13

³² 2 Corinthians 4:7

Chapter 2: What If We Do Not Know Everything?

I once started a sermon with, “Do you find perfection to be stressful?” The audience was amused, fortunately, rather than frightened. The previous chapter addressed how much one may expect to know, followed by some small inquiries into the occasions in which we are certain that there are holes in our thinking. This chapter addresses those shortcomings in more detail with the goal of showing that the faithful can be comfortable in their presumed ignorance. A wise man once said, “You don’t know what you don’t know.” That is reality, so the faithful should be comfortable with recognizing that they do not have everything figured out, not frightened that God may reject them over an erroneous concept that has not been well researched yet.

What are the repercussions of holding erroneous concepts or of just not knowing about certain subjects? Paul provided an excellent illustration in 1 Corinthians 3:10 – 13, “According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which has been laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear, for the day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.”

Every faithful person has learned from others. Hopefully, the majority of the information which led to faith and to the maturation of faith came from the Scriptures. But, one’s own understanding of those Scriptures, mixed with the influence of the understandings of others, produces a fusion of conclusions of greater and lesser quality. Of course, the Scriptures are true. But, flaws are introduced in the process of absorbing those truths through blending assumptions, previous teachings, and faulty logic along with the truth.

Paul illustrated that the quality of construction dictates the survivability of the structure. As illustrated in the parable of the sower,³³ tribulation or persecution or the cares of this world or the deceitfulness of riches can overwhelm poor quality faith.

As noted in the previous chapter, God has provided assurances of acceptance for each faithful person. When the faithful see themselves overcoming themselves in areas of previous persistent failure,³⁴ God has provided that assurance. When the faithful see themselves being consistent from theory to action without resorting to the convenient excuses common to man,³⁵ God has provided that assurance. When the faithful see themselves being selfless to a superhuman degree, God has provided that assurance.³⁶ The “superhuman” descriptor is provided by observers who are not Christians as they glorify God for this remarkable behavior rather than thinking that the behavior arose from superior self-control.³⁷

Legalists try to get around the problem with a variety of illogical positions. Most develop a list of minimum requirements. However, the Scriptures have no such benchmark. A popular work-around is to cite a few verses but avoid mentioning others on the same subject. For example, on the topic of being “saved,” nineteen passages in the New Testament make reference to that process, providing twenty benchmarks, half performed by God, half by the person seeking

³³ Matthew 13:3 – 23, Luke 8:5 – 18

³⁴ Romans 8:13

³⁵ 1 John 3:18 – 19

³⁶ 1 John 4:12 – 13

³⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:7

salvation.³⁸ Of course, all of those twenty items should be present. But, people are quite adept at self-deception, so they often stop before researching the idea completely. The problem is overcome by allowing God to provide the validation rather than promising salvation to all who meet the list generated by that group. Of course, the claim is made that that group's list is from the Scriptures, making the unspoken assumption that the group has arrived at flawless understanding and execution of that understanding, without considering that some facets may have been overlooked.

The concept of “doctrinal sin” is a convenient way of disposing of those with different understandings. The major flaw in the concept is overlooking that Jesus died for all the sins of every person, even the sin of misunderstanding. Another example may be found in the letters to groups or congregations in the New Testament. In each one, the addressees were corrected about something, yet throughout those letters the addressees were called saints and brethren. Having a misunderstanding did not exclude them from the family of God. Only a few flawed doctrines were deemed dangerous enough to warrant exclusion: (1) calling bad behavior good,³⁹ (2) being divisive,⁴⁰ and (3) teaching the Jesus did not come in the flesh.⁴¹

Another example is baptism. Different groups practice it in different ways (some not at all) for different reasons. The New Testament gives a dozen different symbols contained in the one action.⁴² The Anabaptists of the 16th century were known as those who were “baptized again” by immersion as adults having been baptized by sprinkling as infants. The common method of baptism in Western Europe was the sprinkling of infants. But, the Greek Orthodox church immersed infants because, being Greek-speaking, they could not find a convenient work-around for the word, baptism, which clearly means to immerse. The Anabaptists focused more on the fact that infants were being baptized, drawing the obvious conclusion that infants could not make a decision to become followers of Jesus.

Different groups over the centuries have required different levels of understanding before administering baptism. The question should arise within each group as to whether one should be baptized again as each new symbol is understood. Some require that the candidate attend special classes before baptism, implying a certain “passing grade.” Those with a standardized level of understanding fall into the “doctrinal sin” fallacy. Those which assure the baptized that their action obligates God to accept them misunderstand the relationship. God cannot be manipulated. Rather, the one who makes the commitments associated with baptism simply needs to wait for God's assurance as they see themselves experiencing superhuman character development through the indwelling Spirit.

Many have been taught that, if they accept a teaching different than the authorized list of that group, they thereby condemn their ancestors who held other teachings in the past. This makes the assumption that the group has flawless understanding of all teachings and that the ancestors had absorbed them flawlessly, even though the list of essential doctrines changed significantly in the interim. Every group evolves, some for the better, some for the worse. Also, this assumes that the ancestors would not want their descendants to fix problems. The reality is that each person will be judged by God according to that person's faith. Faith implies growth, so faith implies change.

³⁸ See *Appendix 2: Saved By*

³⁹ 1 Corinthians 5:1 – 13

⁴⁰ Titus 3:10, Jude 19

⁴¹ 3 John 7 – 11

⁴² See *Appendix 3: The Symbolism of Immersion*

Faithful people must be comfortable knowing that they do not know everything. Intentional ignorance is treated very differently from gains in faith.⁴³ Rather than avoiding the uncomfortable realization that ignorance will be a way of life on earth, each faithful person must seek to prove himself or herself wrong. Any fool can prove himself “right.” “Church-speak” must be weeded out, not only because it is unintelligible to the outsiders who are immensely important to the mission of the church, but also because it hides gaps in logic and discourages research.

Instead, investigate different explanations of the Scriptures with an open mind, looking for bits and pieces that are better ways of looking at the topic. Give credit to the outlooks that a particular group has done well, rather than focusing on the parts that they have done less well. Obviously, each individual holds to teachings sincerely assumed to be correct. Honorable people do not build their systems of life on doctrines they know to be false. If I can see problems in the beliefs of every other group, they must be able to see mine – unless I am prepared to claim flawless understanding with no further need to learn. If that were the case, personal growth would cease, eliminating one of the essential characteristics of faith. Paul wrote to Timothy to approach those with different ideas gently, patiently, and humbly.⁴⁴

Very few church-goers seek God; the vast majority seek benefits to themselves, including the fallacies of the health and wealth gospel, escaping eternal punishment, and even just pursuing eternal life. Rather, each person must start with the big picture of the nature of God, His terminal objective, and the purpose of creation.⁴⁵ Of paramount importance is the understanding that God is the collection of all the positive character traits, integrated and consistent. God’s intention was for people to be drawn to that personality just for the sake of associating with such a remarkable being. God’s terminal objective is to build a big family that will last. He has determined that two character traits must be present in each family member for this to work: mutual trust and selfless concern (faith and love). If we trust Him, He will give us the indwelling Spirit who then deposits God’s version of selflessness in the faithful.⁴⁶

The universe was created to be an incubator for faith. The spiritual beings we call angels have sight but no faith. Creation puts the physically-bound spirits (people) in a position to develop faith without sight. The angels learn faith by watching us, thereby developing faith vicariously.⁴⁷ The angels serve the faithful.⁴⁸ Having that big picture of God’s objective helps us focus on the teachings that lead in that direction and discard those teachings that mess it up. Legalism concentrates on behavior, failing to develop the faith that automatically results in good behavior. Focusing on behavior fails to account for the cure for shortcomings: character development by the indwelling Spirit. God is much more interested in the trust that prompted the action than in the precise execution of that action. As Paul put it, “All that is not of faith is sin.”⁴⁹

Understanding growth means we can celebrate progress rather than grieving flaws.

⁴³ Compare Hebrews 5:12 – 6:12 versus 2 Peter 1:2 – 11

⁴⁴ 2 Timothy 2:23 – 26

⁴⁵ See *Think as a Spirit*, chapters 1 – 3. Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

⁴⁶ Romans 5:5

⁴⁷ 1 Peter 1:10 – 12

⁴⁸ Hebrews 1:14

⁴⁹ Romans 14:23

Chapter 3. What If We Believe Without Evidence?

Amos 3:7, “Surely God does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.”

God’s terminal objective, a big family that lasts, depends on free will. Both faith and love, the two essential character traits for all family members, lose their substance without the ability to choose. Assuredly, God has made many promises to intervene in human affairs. Determining which events were a result of the nature of this creation, or the result of sin by oneself or others, or the result of direct action by God can be problematic.

Some natural events are commonly called miracles, such as the “miracle of birth.” So, a definition is in order. As used in the Bible, a miracle is a violation of natural law, not just something for which we do not have all the information. Clearly, birth happens to both faithful and unfaithful women. While the complexity of the process is staggering, the birth process has been around since creation and does not require the direct action of God every time. In contrast, the miracles recorded in the Bible were clearly contrary to what normally happens. When Jesus healed people, the results were obvious to the casual observer: raising the dead, restoring withered limbs, causing the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, and the blind to see. Not only was a malady removed, but also the skill to use the restored body part was instantly imparted. The lame did not need to learn to walk; they could walk, leap, run, and dance immediately. The same was true for the other miracles.

Sometimes, despite the best opinions of doctors, people labelled as terminally ill get better. If the healed person still requires significant treatment to return to normal life, it is more likely that the healing was not miraculous, but just beyond what the medical community knew at the moment. However, if a tumor was present on an MRI yesterday, and is gone today, something bigger than medicine was at work. Some healings are dramatically miraculous; some are questionable. We need to be comfortable not knowing into which category a particular event falls. We need to ask ourselves, “Why do I need to know?” If the physical evidence is weak, then that event is not up to God’s standards for miracles. If we confidently proclaim that the event was “the hand of God,” then we would be disseminating half-baked, weak evidence as if it had come from the ultimately powerful God.

In the Bible, several people used miraculous events to validate that they spoke for God. Since prophets are no longer with us,⁵⁰ no one needs that validation. Yet, God has promised certain things to the faithful.⁵¹ The methods by which God will accomplish those promises are not given. Inventing those methods is walking by unsupported, imaginative “sight.” Simply accepting that the promise will happen through unknown means is faith. So, we must be careful to invoke only the promise as written, not with the details of how we want to see it work out. He promised to handle it in the best way, probably not in the way I have it pictured in my mind. If a faithful person prays, God promises to listen. He does not promise to accept our short-sighted suggestions. Our ideas may be foolish or sinful or would result in a colossal mess if put into practice. If we pray that someone get well, and it happens, and we assign that event to the action of God and thank Him, we have made two serious errors. First, we should thank God for handling the desired change when we submit the request, not after we see if we get what we want. Second, we have no evidence that the desired outcome was not going to happen anyway.

⁵⁰ Zechariah 13:2, Daniel 9:24

⁵¹ See *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 5, Promises, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

Giving credit to God may be misplaced thanks, or, worse, we could be giving credit to God for something we wanted that was not what God wanted at all. Of course, some people have been taught that everything that happens was initiated by God, which makes God responsible for sin.

The universe runs on the principles of physics which God set into it at creation. Of course, our understanding of those principles is constantly changing because humanity is really not that smart when compared to the Creator. But, we can be certain that God set up the universe and set it to run according to those poorly understood rules. However, God has been known and has promised to change the way things normally would go in response to a request from a friend. The catch is that we are not promised to know which events would happen normally and which are miracles. We do not need to know because validation of messengers is no longer something God needs to do.

The Scriptures are true and communicate truth. Humans have been applying that truth very badly for many centuries. The problem is not with the communication from God but with our processing of it. The Scriptures are not too complicated for us. Specialists are not needed to explain it to us; the Scriptures were written for ordinary people.⁵² Those who cannot understand are “safe.”⁵³ The faithful on this side of Acts 2 have a tremendous advantage over those who went before. One of the many promises for the modern faithful is that of understanding through the indwelling Spirit.⁵⁴ But even that can be misapplied. I know a man who is sincerely convinced that, if he prays about something, then makes a decision, that the decision he makes will be the one God wants. Therefore, to oppose him is to oppose God’s will. Others cite the passage that promises “every good gift and every consistent gift is from above,”⁵⁵ then thank God for everything they like, assuming that what they like is both good and consistent. Others have been taught that all things that happen are the will of God, overlooking that such a principle also makes God the author of sin. As an example, an aunt of ours had an unmarried daughter who had a baby when she was a young teen. When that baby girl was 15, her mother allowed the girl’s boyfriend to move in with them. Not surprisingly, that second generation young teen was soon unmarried and pregnant. Our aunt’s comment was, “It is the will of God.” In all of the foregoing scenarios, well-meaning people were appropriating God’s endorsement without His consent. As previously stated, some things are demonstrably miraculous; some things are blatantly sinful and therefore not what God wants; for everything else, we need to be comfortable not knowing whether God had a hand in it or not.

When the 72 returned from their advance advertising tour, they rejoiced that even the demons were subject to them. Jesus replied, “Do not rejoice in this, that the demons are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven.”⁵⁶ Of course, the 72 were certain that the miracles they performed on that tour were by the power of God. The healings and exorcisms were clearly beyond human ability and contrary to our perceptions of the patterns discovered in science. Jesus’ point was that, although their actions were good and accomplished the task for which they had been sent, the important part was not that they were able to be conduits for the power of God. Rather, they should look on those events as validation that God had accepted them. If we adopt that recommended attitude, but apply it to unprovable situations, our faith will be based on wishful thinking instead of on evidence.

⁵² Deuteronomy 30:11 – 14, Romans 10:6 – 8

⁵³ John 9:41

⁵⁴ For example, 1 Corinthians 2:9 – 12, Ephesians 1:17 – 19, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 3:17, James 1:5 – 8

⁵⁵ James 1:17

⁵⁶ Luke 10:17 – 20

Unfortunately, many people have never observed themselves performing any action that could be labeled legitimately as a miracle. Most have never been taught to expect it. Sadly, some have been taught to manufacture their own pseudo-miracles (speaking in tongues, prophecy, and such like),⁵⁷ overlooking the miracles that they should be seeing. For example, Paul wrote that the sudden ability to overcome oneself after countless failures is a clear sign that the indwelling Spirit is at work, which means that God has accepted that person.⁵⁸ John wrote that superhuman consistency⁵⁹ and superhuman selflessness⁶⁰ were other forms of that physical evidence of acceptance.

Some demand that a general promise happen in the specific way in which they are able to picture that promise happening. For example, Christians are promised that they will have “all sufficiency for every good deed.”⁶¹ The context is about having the money to accomplish good things. The example in that place is famine relief for the saints in the area of Jerusalem. Some have used that line to convince people to give to the church treasury the money that should have been used for their own upkeep. However, wisdom is required to apply the promise rationally. Faithful people have responsibilities to family, including extended family and church family. They must be good stewards of the assets that pass through their hands. The point of the promise is that God will make sure the finances work out, probably in a way that no one envisioned. A central treasury to meet congregational expenses is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament. Such a treasury is a convenience and has some valid applications, but we all need to keep in mind that such a treasury is our uninspired way of handling the affairs of life.

Another promise addresses the faithful not lacking food and clothing.⁶² However, the example of a brother or sister being naked and destitute of daily food was used by James.⁶³ Paul described himself as sometimes hungry and so poorly dressed so as to be almost naked.⁶⁴ However, Jesus framed the promise carefully, specifying that God knows what we “need.” The promise is about worry, not food and clothing.⁶⁵ Using Jesus’ illustration, we may be like the flowers of grass that are thrown in the furnace. People fail to read the context and expect physical help in time of need, when the real promise is that we need not worry about it. Sometimes the faithful will have plenty, sometimes they will die. Worry will not change that, other than making death come sooner due to hypertension and ulcers.

Another set of problems arise when people do not expect God’s advice and promises to make sense. Doctrines like God knowing the future, the Rapture, “the signs of the times,” inherited sin, and total depravity are blithely accepted based on explanations that lead to conclusions that are obviously false. When the logical fallacies are questioned, the stock answer is, “God’s thinking is higher than our thinking,” which really asserts that God was not able to provide a reasonable explanation, so the speaker needed to supply one for Him.

The idea that God knows the future is contrary to the Scriptures.⁶⁶ Aside from the multitude of occasions in which God changed His mind, asserting that God knows the future

⁵⁷ See *Appendix 4: The End of Miracles*

⁵⁸ Romans 8:13

⁵⁹ 1 John 3:18 – 19

⁶⁰ 1 John 4:12 – 13

⁶¹ 2 Corinthians 8:9 – 9:11

⁶² Matthew 6:33

⁶³ James 2:15

⁶⁴ 1 Corinthians 4:11

⁶⁵ Matthew 6:25 – 34

⁶⁶ See *Calling*, chapter 8, The Will of God, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

means there is only one future. If there is only one future, then we have no free will. Not only does this destroy the concepts of faith and love, that supposition makes God the Great Deceiver for asking us to make decisions. Holding an illogical doctrine causes a structural weakness in our “house,” as in Paul’s illustration in 1 Corinthians 3, which may result in the collapse of faith when the inevitable troubles come.

Many sermons promote a non-Biblical doctrine called the Rapture, which was first taught in the 1830’s. Seeing the “signs of the times” diverts people from the point of the gospel and tries to attract outsiders with fear rather than grace, not to mention being counter to the “thief in the night” passages.

Inherited sin, which also is contrary the Scriptures, has given birth to the concept of total depravity, which required the addition of predestination. First, the Bible declares clearly that people are born upright. We are responsible for their own sin.⁶⁷ Ezekiel used all of his chapter 18 to refute the idea of inherited sin. Second, total depravity makes faith and love impossible except as a robotic response.

A good rule of thumb is, “If it sounds complicated, it’s probably wrong.” The gospel was designed for ordinary people who think, not specialists. Those who cannot logic it out are safe.⁶⁸ Yet, I have been regaled with nonsensical theories of time warps that would not even sell as science fiction. The classical diversion is to cite, “To God a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day.”⁶⁹ However, Peter’s point was about God’s patience, not about His unintelligible time sense. People who resort to that line are implying that God was unable to give a clear explanation of time, so humans were required to explain what God really meant. Plus, that assumption contradicts the many times when God gave specific timeframes for His miracles. For example, Jesus’ time in the tomb, the duration of the Babylonian Captivity, and duration of the Bondage in Egypt are all accepted as being specific time frames that would have been counted as failures if they had not happened as scheduled.

Another illogical but popular saying is, “Everything happens for a reason.” My impression has been that people who use that line are not referring to Newton’s Third Law.⁷⁰ Rather, the event in question is being re-defined as an action of God. If this attitude is used consistently, then God is the author of sin, because the vast majority of events on this planet are caused by sin. Further, this colloquialism implies that God micromanages everything, including the weather. Finally, this eliminates free will. Without free will, life has no meaning and creation has no purpose.

These several nonsensical but sadly common sayings hinder the spread of the gospel. Outsiders can see the illogic, so any claims made to representing the truth are not believed. In reality, a major appeal of the gospel is that it addresses truth head on, no excuses. Self-deception is overcome. Reality is no longer to be feared. The “Word,” in Greek, is *logos*, from which arises the English word, logic.

Christianity is the only religion on earth that is based on evidence. None of the others even try because they know that physical evidence of their assertions does not exist. Some resort to myths from pre-history, but any thinking person can see through it. So, to use unproven assertions and illogical claims in Christianity is to abandon faith itself, because Biblical faith

⁶⁷ See *Think as a Spirit*, Appendix, Total Depravity, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

⁶⁸ John 9:41

⁶⁹ 2 Peter 3:8

⁷⁰ For every action there is an opposite and equal reaction.

stands on physical evidence. If the evidence for a conclusion is not available, do not draw the conclusion. Do not just guess and call it faith. It is not. Faith is trusting the word of someone of trusted reliability (God), not speculation.

Chapter 4. Does God Micromanage?

The most important characteristic of faith is evidence.⁷¹ Based on the evidence of His predictions, miracles, and eyewitnesses, the faithful are convinced that God has intervened in human affairs, causing results that, without His intervention, would not have happened. However, this raises an important question. How much does God intervene? Faith requires the ability to make choices. If God micromanages, substantive choices are eliminated and the message of the gospel collapses. How much can God manipulate my thinking before free will becomes an illusion, or, worse, a deception?

We are certain that God is not responsible for sin, so God does not manage all outcomes. In contrast, if we are to believe His promises in the New Testament, He must cause some things. Over the centuries, a major source of division in the church has been trying to define the line between those extremes. That historical problem can be avoided by being comfortable not knowing, making logical decisions where we have sufficient evidence, and refusing to make pronouncements about the intervention of God when the evidence is lacking. As noted in the previous chapter, many unbelievers are driven away from the gospel because the claims made by many faithful are clearly without sufficient evidence, which casts a pall over the whole message. Some are fearful of abandoning unsupported assertions for fear of having nothing to say, which, sadly, may be true for them. However, if we have done our homework, we will never run out of provable interventions, so the weaker arguments are unnecessary. Physically provable interventions are far more appealing to the outsider.

As a side issue, many have resorted to the claim that a particular outcome “must” be the hand of God, and their speculation is “their evidence.” Such conjecture just turns off inquiring minds. Claiming that something is “my evidence” does not make it evidence. Rather, the method is a twisting of definitions to maintain nonsense.

Paul cited the accomplishment⁷² of the predictions of the prophets as evidence. How did God go about making those predictions come to pass? Some of the predictions obviously were accomplished by angels who were dispatched for that specific purpose, such as when the Death Angel passed over the houses in Egypt, looking for blood on the doorposts.⁷³ The angels tasked with causing King Cyrus to issue the proclamation that the captives could return to their ancestral lands was particularly difficult.⁷⁴ Did those interventions limit the ability of those alive at that time to choose?

The Passover example is easier. The Israelites were presented with a somewhat nonsensical instruction. Either paint your doorposts and lintel with blood or suffer the death of your first-born. The choice was clear and each family was free to choose.

⁷¹ 1 Corinthians 15:3 – 8

⁷² Many use the word, fulfilled, to describe the accomplishment of a prediction, and that is a common English usage of that word in economic circles. But, Biblically, that is incorrect. “Fulfilled” is a figure of speech meaning “filled full,” using the illustration of a vendor’s basket which is always heaped up so the casual observer can see what the vendor has to sell. When a New Testament inspired writer describes an Old Testament passage as “fulfilled,” the author means that the Old Testament passage is serving as an illustration of something happening in the New Testament. When a prediction is being accomplished, the New Testament writers use “as is written in the prophets” or some similar introduction. Many of God’s illustrations have been declared predictions by those not understanding the difference, leading to impossibly confusing explanations. See *Appendix 5: Fulfill*, for the full analysis.

⁷³ Exodus 12:23 – 36

⁷⁴ Daniel 10:12 – 20

The example of King Cyrus and his eventual decision to allow captives from previous empires to return to their ancestral lands is more problematic. The Scriptures do not tell us how the angel tasked with that outcome, along with his back-up, Michael, accomplished it. If meddling with Cyrus' brain was an option, the first angel could have accomplished it in short order and not worked at it for three weeks before calling for help. So, whatever method they used, it was not easy. Although no further details are given, if I may speculate a reasonable scenario in which free will was not violated, then God did not necessarily force Cyrus to participate in accomplishing His prediction. The angel could have arrived at Cyrus' court as an ambassador from a far country. With no means of instant communication available, the angel's credentials could not be disproved. The angel in the story then spent three weeks dropping hints and making suggestions in Cyrus' court to get the king to see the practicality of God's option. After Michael's arrival, apparently they got it done. The edict is reproduced in 2 Chronicles 36:23 and Ezra 1:2 – 4. The more general version of that decree, which was expanded to all captive peoples in the former Assyrian and Babylonian empires, may be seen in the British Museum in London. However, I have no evidence that my proposed scenario actually happened, so I must refrain from insisting that it happened my way. Rather, I must be comfortable not knowing. My point is that many assumptions could be made, but making them discredits the proof for the gospel.

Logically, if God limits the ability to choose, He defeats His own objectives of developing faith and love for the purpose of building a big family that will last. Faith and love both require choice if they are to have any meaning. For God's terminal objective to remain intact, we must conclude that interfering with the ability to choose must be off the table.

For example, we teach children through planned developmental experiences. We give them the opportunity to choose well in a safe environment so they will be prepared to make decisions on their own in a much more hazardous environment. "Helicopter parents" rob their children of the opportunity to develop those life skills, so the child will face that first experience with high-stakes risk with no training to handle it. I suspect that God understands the concept.

Ben Franklin, who was locally famous for his gardens, was visited by a friend, who regaled Franklin with his enlightened approach to child rearing. He planned to refrain from all religious or moral training, rather allowing the child, when of age, to adopt the ethical framework of choice. Franklin nodded and listened. Later, when they toured Franklin's garden, the pair walked by a plot of ground which obviously had not been prepared or planted. The friend asked, "What will you do with this plot?" Franklin answered, "I am going to let it sit through the season and let it decide what it wants to become."

Influencing and training people does not rob them of the ability to choose, but merely prepares them to make better choices. Still, God has infinitely more power than parents, so, if the ability to choose is to be maintained, God must limit Himself. He has presented information and appears to orchestrate some experiences, but, if His objectives of faith and love are to be achieved, He cannot infringe on that right to choose badly.

From the Scriptures, God presents Himself as a master planner. The Messiah was planned before creation,⁷⁵ not after people needed rescuing. The church and the adoption of the faithful were planned before creation,⁷⁶ not after people had already messed up their relationship with God. The low response rate among Israelites to the gospel (until the fullness of the Gentiles had

⁷⁵ 1 Peter 1:20

⁷⁶ Ephesians 1:3 – 6

come in) was planned.⁷⁷ God did not do this by simply looking into the future,⁶⁶ which He cannot do without making the future static, in which choices evaporate or are just a deception perpetrated by God. God had to be careful that these were outcomes He could engineer without violating the freedom of choice He had already granted.

Examining the predictions God made all through the Scriptures, when a subject is broached for the first time, the predictions are in broad and sweeping terms. Over time, additional details are added, restricting the timing or manner of the outcome. God left Himself multitudes of options to accomplish the promised result. Sometimes, this was more difficult than anticipated as with the angel tasked with convincing Cyrus to allow the Israelites to return to their ancestral lands.⁷⁴ Some of the actions of Nebuchadnezzar were prompted by direct communication from God. The same is intimated concerning kings of Assyria. Many of the predictions seem very difficult to accomplish without suspending freedom of choice.

However, if we can suggest a possible means by which God could make it happen, while it is unlikely that that was the way God caused it to happen, the hypothesis shows that non-mind-controlling methods are plausible. For example, the prediction that Peter would deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed⁷⁸ seems very difficult. But, with many angels at His disposal and their ability to adopt human form as necessary, those who accosted Peter⁷⁹ could have been angels. Perhaps God created the situations in which Peter made his choices. Again, the point is not to prove how Peter's denials came to pass, but to show that God did not need to manipulate free will to cause the predicted outcome. We must be comfortable not knowing exactly how God orchestrated the achievement of that prediction.

Those who assume that God micromanages turn to the idea that "The plan of God cannot be thwarted."⁸⁰ However, the plan they have in mind usually is not one that has been expressed by God. Rather, they assume that the application they have in mind "must" be the will of God, therefore cannot be overturned. Certainly, when God sets out to accomplish something, He will be successful. But, He is successful not because He micromanages every event, but because He (1) does not violate free will to get it done, (2) does not lie, and (3) does not make promises that would require Him to operate contrary to His terminal objective. We need to be confident that God will accomplish His promises without insisting that His promises be accomplished in the way I conceive of them. We must be comfortable not knowing.

Because we have the ability to choose, we will choose badly many times. Those who care nothing about God will do so with even greater frequency. We will miss clear promises that should have directed our steps, much like the leaders of the Jews who had warped understandings of the nature of the Messiah. We will ignore the escape routes built into every temptation.⁸¹ We will overlook evidence. If we assume that God micromanages, we make God the author of sin.

God cannot cause us to develop faith or God's whole plan falls apart.⁸² Without free will, without the ability to choose, faith becomes a robotic response that has no intrinsic value. Further, without the ability to choose, we cannot be convicted of sin, since judgment presumes

⁷⁷ Romans 11:25

⁷⁸ Matthew 26:34, John 13:38

⁷⁹ Matthew 26:69 – 75, John 18:25 – 27

⁸⁰ Job 42:2, Isaiah 14:27, Psalm 33:11

⁸¹ 1 Corinthians 10:13

⁸² No passages describe God regenerating an individual prior to faith, but these show that faith comes first, then regeneration: Ephesians 1:13, Galatians 3:2, 5, Colossians 2:12, Acts 11:18, John 5:40, 6:53, 57, 20:31, Acts 15:9, 2 Corinthians 3:14 – 16.

voluntary action. And, God cannot be privy in advance to who will be faithful and who will not or free will evaporates. God cannot know when and how sin will happen without becoming complicit.

God expressed to Moses that He no longer wanted to be known as El-Shaddai, the God of all power, but rather wanted to be known as Jehovah, I am.⁸³ Islam is still stuck on the “God of all power” idea and has not progressed to the idea that God wants to be known as present and relationship-oriented, not rule-oriented. Relationships are built on the ability to choose in real time. A micromanaging God, or a God who knows the future, defeats that will of God.

⁸³ Exodus 6:3

Chapter 5. What Is God's Plan for Me?

1 Timothy 2:3 – 4, “For this [to pray for governmental authorities so that the faithful may live quiet and peaceable lives] is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Clearly, God will not have this desire satisfied. In our English Bibles, the same Greek word is sometimes translated “desire” and sometimes “will,” depending on the translator’s bias. Many have been regaled with, “The will of God cannot be thwarted” as proof that God orchestrates every action. In addition to eliminating free will and destroying God’s objective for creation, this theory makes God responsible for sin.

The well-documented definition of that Greek word is desire or intention,⁸⁴ not absolute certainty of accomplishment. Certainly, the desires of God should be at the forefront of the rationale of the faithful. But the unbeliever does not share that attitude. Of course, if God desires that, for example, the Assyrian Empire invade, conquer, and deport the citizens of the Northern Kingdom, He has the skills to make His desires come to fruition. However, the fact that God is powerful does not mean that He always gets His way. The case in point has been reproduced above; a large majority will not be saved despite God’s desire for that outcome.

The God of the Bible has never been subtle. Any desire of God will be clearly stated or made unmistakable through physical evidence. Speculation is condemned.⁸⁵ The Scriptures reveal God’s objective: a big family that will last. God has used specific individuals for specific jobs, such as the prophets. But each person who was given a special job had miraculous evidence that God had selected that individual for that task.⁸⁶

However, God does not have a specific plan for each individual. If He did, He would be required to communicate it clearly to each individual, not with hints. This course of action by God would be required if we were to follow our individualized plans. Even if each individual had a specific plan, the history of mankind as recorded in the Bible shows that people often fail to follow the express desires of God. These deviations would require that God constantly update every plan multiple times per day, which means the plans are not plans at all, but desires for the future that may or may not happen.

We should make choices based on our understanding of what God wants. Many times we do this badly. But, if we have made the choice with the faith we had at that moment, God is pleased and can work with it. We walk by faith, not by innuendo. The faithful are to make their life decisions based on the clear and documented promises of God found in the New Testament. Unfortunately, many try to make decisions based on “signs” and “open doors,” neither of which were promised, lack evidence, and have very poorly defined goals. God has granted free will to all, so no specific plan for each person is possible. Unfortunately, many people invent the endorsement of God for their chosen paths without His consent, thereby making God the author of their various failures.

Many cite Jeremiah 29:11, but that verse is diversely translated. The NIV says, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” But, the NKJV says, “‘For I know the thoughts that I think toward you,’ says the Lord, ‘thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a

⁸⁴ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. Kittel, ed., Volume III, pages 44 – 62.

⁸⁵ 1 Timothy 1:3 – 7, 6:4, 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:16, 4:4, Titus 3:9, Romans 12:3

⁸⁶ For example, 2 Corinthians 12:12

hope.” The eminent scholar, C.F. Keil, agrees with the second.⁸⁷ Further, the context of that verse is when God was assuring the nation of Israel that He has not abandoned them despite the calamities presently befalling them, that He would still use them to bring the Messiah, that they would be restored to the Promised Land after the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, and that they will be prosperous again. The verse has nothing to do with God having a specific plan for each individual.

The Will of God Defined

People, spirits who have been assigned physical bodies, were created and now inhabit the earth for the purpose of developing faith, the quality necessary for all members of the eternal family. God's will (desire or intention) for all humans may be found throughout the New Testament, expressly stated in the following verses:

- 1 Peter 2:15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men
- Hebrews 10:10 By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all
- 1 Timothy 2:4 Who desires (wills) all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18 Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification
- Ephesians 1:5, 9 Having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will...having made known to us the mystery of His will.

The statements in 1 Peter 2, 1 Timothy 2, and 1 Thessalonians 5 definitely are desires rather than absolutes, since not all foolish men are silenced, not all will be saved, and not all the faithful rejoice, pray, and express thankfulness as they should. Some of the desires of God depend on people agreeing to go along with that desire. Other desires of God may be executed by God independently from people, so those desires always work as planned.

Results of Harmony with His Will

The following list describes what happens when people decide to act in concert with what God wants (His will or desire or intention). Note that none of them describe being assigned a specific task or a specific place.

- 1 John 5:14 If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.
- 1 John 2:17 He who does the will of God abides forever.
- Hebrews 10:36 For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.
- Ephesians 1:11 – 12 According to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.
- Matthew 7:21 Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.
- John 7:17 If anyone wills to do His will, he will know concerning the doctrine.

⁸⁷ Keil, C.F., *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes by C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch*, Volume VIII, pages 410 – 412.

- Matthew 18:14 It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

The promise in 1 John 5 may seem daunting, since successful prayer appears to depend on knowing what the will of God is. However, a companion promise in Romans 8:26 – 27 assures us, “Likewise [in this confident expectation] the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession with groaning which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.” So, the prayers of the faithful are edited by the indwelling Spirit to conform to the desires of God. Personally, I wish that I were made aware of that edited version.

Bottom line, those who are focused on being in harmony with what God desires will be acceptable to Him and included in the eternal family, even if they do not always execute as well as they would have liked. However, the faithful are enjoined to know what the desires of God are.⁸⁸

Other Facets of His Will

Paul was quite certain that God had selected him for a specific task: the apostle to the Gentiles. The progress of the gospel, as it was spread to the whole world, was accompanied by physical miracles that verified the claims of those carrying the message.

- 2 Timothy 1:1, Colossians 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, 2 Corinthians 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God
- Acts 22:14 The God of our fathers has chosen you [Paul] that you should know His will
- Paul was told by God about this task,⁸⁹ as was Ananias. But that would not have been proof to those to whom he related the fact that God appeared to him. God also gave him proof that he could show to others.⁹⁰
- Hebrews 2:4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will.

The New Testament records that many of the early Christians suffered. Sometimes, God orchestrated the suffering as discipline (teaching, preparation). Sometimes it was the result of evil actions by unbelievers. God does not tempt anyone.⁹¹ God does not do evil.⁹² So God could not have caused all of the suffering in this world. Which suffering is caused by God and which is the result of evil is rarely clear, so the faithful should not speculate, rather, commit themselves to God.

- 1 Peter 4:19 Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good.
- 1 Peter 3:17 For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

⁸⁸ Ephesians 5:17

⁸⁹ Acts 9:3 – 30, 22:6 – 16

⁹⁰ 2 Corinthians 12:12, Acts 15:12

⁹¹ James 1:13

⁹² 1 John 1:5

Rather than speculating about what the will of God might be, God promises that the faithful can come to grips with it. However, not everything will be apparent, such as when Jesus told Peter about the longevity of John.⁹³

- Hebrews 13:20 – 21 Now may the God of peace...make you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in us what is well pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ
- Ephesians 6:5 – 6 Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters...doing the will of God from the heart
- Ephesians 5:17 Understand what the will of God is
- Colossians 1:9 For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding
- Colossians 4:12 Always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God
- Romans 12:2 Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God
- Romans 2:18 Know His will and approve the things that are excellent
- John 21:22 If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.
- Mark 3:35, Matthew 12:50 Whoever does the will of God is My brother, sister, and mother

The mission and career of the Messiah is described as the will or desire or intention of God:

- Hebrews 10:7, 9 Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God
- Galatians 1:4 Who gave Himself for our sins that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father
- John 5:30 I do not seek My own will, but the will of the Father who sent Me
- John 5:21 As the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will.

The desires of God are to be considered in all our plans, not that we must detect a pre-planned path, but that as we make choices, those choices are based on the desires of God.

- James 4:15 Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."
- 1 Corinthians 4:19 I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills
- Romans 15:32 That I may come to you by the will of God
- Romans 1:10 Now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you
- Acts 18:21 I will return to you again, God willing

A significant number of the passages about the will of God require some thought to fit the idea into the rest of the gospel.

- Romans 9:18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. (Mercy is one step beyond compassion, incorporating an unquenchable desire to fix the root problem. On some, the faithful, God provides the indwelling Spirit whose primary task is character development. But the same message causes hardening in the minds of those without faith.)

⁹³ John 21:22

- Luke 11:2, Matthew 6:10 Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (This well-known line in what we call The Lord's Prayer is actually somewhat humorous. When Jesus taught this, Satan still had free access to heaven. He was not exiled⁹⁴ until after Jesus returned victoriously to heaven, after which Jesus had to cleanse the tabernacle in heaven.⁹⁵ So, Jesus taught them to pray that God's will be done on earth to an equal degree as it was followed in heaven while Satan and his angels were still there and in open rebellion.)
- 1 Peter 4:2 He should no longer live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. (The will of God in this passage is not something that is certain to happen. Rather, people are asked to make a choice, selecting a new standard for each choice.)
- 2 Corinthians 8:5 They first gave themselves to the Lord and then to us by the will of God. (Paul asserts that listening to him and his entourage was what God wanted to happen.)
- Acts 13:22 A man after My own heart, who will do all My will. (Stephen included a postscript to his quotation of 1 Samuel 13:14, showing that being "after God's own heart" like David is the same as doing what God desires. In 1 Samuel, the counterpoint was King Saul, who failed repeatedly to do what God wanted.)
- Acts 21:14 When he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done." (Paul and company, on their way to Jerusalem with the famine-relief funds collected in Greece and Turkey, stopped at the home of Philip. During their stay, Agabus, the prophet who had first announced the general famine that would occur soon,⁹⁶ arrived from Judea and announced, somewhat symbolically, that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem. The Christians who were present advised Paul not to go. However, Paul was determined to deliver the funds himself and to go to the Temple. Agabus' message did not tell Paul not to go, but just predicted what would happen when he did. When the crowd saw that Paul was going despite the prediction, they remarked, "The will of the Lord be done." Not unlike Jesus' prayer in the Garden, they accepted the prediction and the certain result as something that was part of God's plan, since Agabus had announced it. It was not that they thought that whatever happened was the will of God. Rather, God had given them a prediction through a known prophet, presumably so that Paul and his friends would be prepared for it and not think that something had gone terribly wrong.)
- John 4:34 My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work. (Jesus had the attitude that accomplishing the desires of God was of paramount importance.)
- Matthew 26:42 If this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, Your will be done. (As in all His life, Jesus had opinions, but the desires and intentions and plans of God took precedence.)
- Matthew 12:7, 9:13 I desire (will) mercy and not sacrifice. This quote from Hosea 6:6 relayed the desires of God concerning the Israelites, which they obviously consistently ignored.)

How Will I Know God's Plan for Me?

What is God's plan for me? Assuming that we all have the ability to choose (unless God is responsible for all the sinful choices made on earth), God would need to revise that plan

⁹⁴ Revelation 12:7 – 12

⁹⁵ Hebrews 9:11 – 23

⁹⁶ Acts 11:28

repeatedly as I pass the various off-ramps or make poor choices. Certainly, God has been known to set up scenarios to nudge people along His paths, or to teach a lesson (discipline⁹⁷). But the individual always has the ability to make the final decision. Therefore, God's plan or desire or intention cannot extend to the level of the individual other than for those special people to whom He also gave the ability to prove with physical evidence that they were acting under the orders of God. King Saul received the Spirit and prophesied,⁹⁸ but then had it taken away.⁹⁹ David similarly received the Spirit and was able to prophesy.¹⁰⁰ After the incident with Bathsheba, David prayed, "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me."¹⁰¹ Having a specific plan for an individual was rare, and could be rescinded.

God's will is for all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.¹⁰² Many are called but few are chosen.¹⁰³ As in Jesus' parable about the wedding feast, many were invited, but only a few actually attended. And, not even all who attended were acceptable. On a larger scale, this parable illustrates that all people on earth have been called or summoned. The gospel has gone to the whole world.¹⁰⁴ Further, God has a history of causing the message to go to individuals who need to hear it (e.g., the Ethiopian eunuch¹⁰⁵). But, only a small number choose to respond to that message in faith and be adopted into the eternal family. Unfortunately, "called" has become a religious watchword for people who claim, without evidence, to have been selected by God to specific tasks.¹⁰⁶

Certainly, a few people in Biblical history were specifically chosen by God for specific tasks.¹⁰⁷ Everyone else falls under the general plan of being adopted into the eternal family. Faith requires free will, so God cannot cause faith in individuals, usurping that free will.

God has announced some events for the faithful, not for specific faithful, but for all of them.¹⁰⁸ However, various individuals and groups have refused the roles God had for them.¹⁰⁹

God gives varying gifts to different faithful.¹¹⁰ When God chose someone for a specific task, the choosing was unmistakable (e.g., Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, Paul). No choosing was subtle or by the claim of the person. When someone exercised a gift from God, unbelieving observers understood that the power was from God, not from the individual.¹¹¹ None of those people had to agonize over what task God had assigned them. It was obvious and physically provable.

⁹⁷ Hebrews 12:5 – 11

⁹⁸ Beginning with 1 Samuel 10:1 – 13

⁹⁹ 1 Samuel 16:14

¹⁰⁰ 1 Samuel 16:13

¹⁰¹ Psalm 51:11

¹⁰² 1 Timothy 2:4

¹⁰³ Matthew 22:14

¹⁰⁴ Colossians 1:6, Romans 1:8, Jude 3

¹⁰⁵ Acts 8:26 – 40

¹⁰⁶ See *Calling*, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

¹⁰⁷ John 15:16, 15:19, Acts 1:2, 1:24, 9:15, Romans 9:11, 16:13

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 24:31, Mark 13:27, John 13:35, 17:20 – 23, Romans 11, 1 Corinthians 1:27 – 29, 1 Peter 1:2, 2:4, 2:9 – 10, 2 Corinthians 4:7, 5:20, Ephesians 1:3 – 14, Colossians 3:12 – 17, 1 Thessalonians 1:4 – 8, 2 Peter 1:2 – 11.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 19:16 – 22, Mark 10:17 – 30, Matthew 22:14, Luke 8:11 – 15, Romans 11

¹¹⁰ Romans 12:3 – 8, 1 Corinthians 12:4 – 31, Ephesians 4:7 – 16, 1 Peter 4:10 – 11, 2 Peter 3:9

¹¹¹ 2 Corinthians 4:7

How Does the Natural Man Choose God?

Many have taught that God must give the Spirit to people so that they will develop faith, that people are not capable of developing faith on their own. They passionately assert that people are so warped that they are incapable of choosing God. Of course, this makes no sense, since many messengers from God preached repentance, which is a choice. Further, if God must force faith on people, it is no longer faith, since faith implies voluntary action. Robots cannot have faith. So, this position destroys the purpose of creation and God's terminal objective. Their way of thinking makes God into the Great Deceiver, haranguing people with appeals to change when they cannot, in fact, do so. No passage in the New Testament implies that regeneration comes before faith, and at least a dozen passages specifically list faith as preceding regeneration.¹¹²

However, Paul twice wrote that the natural man or the fleshly mind cannot understand spiritual things.¹¹³ So, how can the natural or fleshly mind choose to pledge allegiance to God in baptism?¹¹⁴

First, the "natural man" was a term from Greek philosophy representing the best that this world has to offer: the honest, upright, ethical person. The "fleshly mind" also is not as ominous as has been purported by ardent but misinformed preachers. The flesh represented the physical body and was described by the ancient Greek philosophers as containing both honorable and dishonorable traits. Every person has learned everything through their physical senses, so they understand both facts and theory in physical terms. This is the meaning intended by Paul, that people whose understanding is entirely governed by what they have learned through their physical senses cannot incorporate information not from those sources because they do not know how.

So, how can a natural man be attracted to the gospel? The New Testament connects the kindness of God¹¹⁵ or Jesus' character and mastery of life¹¹⁶ as the physical understandings that the natural man can comprehend. They are not able to figure out everything, but they can determine that they want to be a part of what God proposes and promises. After that beginning of faith, the indwelling Spirit is given by God who then begins to overhaul the character to become like that of Jesus, enabling understanding of those spiritual concepts.

What subject matter did the early preachers recorded in the New Testament use in order to convince unbelievers to become believers? For Gentile audiences, the gospel message was centered on the evidence for Jesus' resurrection¹¹⁷ and the evidence of God in nature.¹¹⁸ For Jewish audiences, Jesus' resurrection¹¹⁹ and accomplishment of predictions by the prophets were the major themes.¹²⁰

Since only about 0.2% of the world's population is Jewish, encountering faithful Jews who are waiting for the Messiah is rare. But, based on conversations with an Israeli Christian, discussing the predictions about the Messiah and showing how Jesus accomplished them

¹¹² Ephesians 1:13, Galatians 3:2, 5, Colossians 2:12, Acts 11:8, Acts 15:9, 2 Corinthians 3:16, John 5:40, John 6:53, 57, John 20:31. John 1:12 – 13

¹¹³ 1 Corinthians 2:14, Romans 8:7

¹¹⁴ Appendix 3: The Symbolism of Immersion

¹¹⁵ Romans 2:4

¹¹⁶ 2 Peter 1:3

¹¹⁷ Acts 10:40, 17:31, 25:19, 26:8, 26:23

¹¹⁸ Acts 14:17, 17:24 – 29, Romans 1:19 – 23

¹¹⁹ Acts 2:24, 2:30 – 32, 3:15, 4:10:13:30 – 37, 17:3)

¹²⁰ Acts 2:16 – 21, 2:25 – 28, 2:34 – 35, 3:18, 3:22, 3:25, 4:11, 8:32, 13:29 – 41, 17:2, 18:28

(including the historicity of the resurrection) can be quite successful. For Gentile unbelievers, perhaps the most useful approach is creation itself.¹²¹ From that start, the nature of God may be deduced along with the necessity of a communication from the Creator. As with Jews, the historicity of the resurrection is a useful starting point. Before using the accomplishment of predictions from the prophets, Gentiles would first need to learn the role and historicity of the prophets. These arguments are those enumerated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3 – 8.

But, logic, evidence and accomplished predictions do not provide insight into the operation of a kingdom of spirits. Even the concept of a spirit may be quite foreign to the outsider. God has provided physical illustrations of how His kingdom operates so that unbelievers may understand that His kingdom is not of this world – a fact that escapes most church-goers.

Here are a few physical illustrations of non-physical principles provided by God:

- **Marriage between Christians** illustrates the relationship between Jesus and His church (Ephesians 5:22 – 33, Romans 7:1 – 4)
- **Physical death** (separation from physical life) was included in creation as an illustration of separation of a spirit from God. (Romans 7:9, 1 Corinthians 15:21, 2 Timothy 1:10, 1 John 3:14)
- **Sacrifice** was designed by God to remind people that justice demands the death of the spirit (not the flesh), and that no sacrifice is truly sufficient. Also, Biblical sacrifice is a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God, not a punishment or a payment to justice.
- The **unity** of believers demonstrates to unbelievers the miraculous nature of the Kingdom (John 17:21).

A More Complete List of Attractions to the Gospel

- Acts 14:3, 20:24 “The gospel of grace.” Grace is the collection of godly character traits with emphasis on the way those traits are integrated and consistent. This accurate description of the Creator is truly good news.
- Romans 2:4 “...the goodness of God leads you to repentance.” The same rationale as the previous item.
- 2 Peter 1:2 – 4 “...who called us by character and mastery of life.” People are a mess. Most want to be better, but are having great difficulty making significant advances. Jesus’ mastery of living on this broken planet through His well integrated character is appealing.
- 1 Peter 2:12 “...having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.” In addition to the successful life of Jesus, ordinary Christians demonstrate coping skills that outside observers want.
- Romans 2:15 “Their conscience also bearing witness.” God built us with a conscience. Unfortunately, we damage it along the way so it does not work correctly all the time. One of the promises concerning the indwelling Spirit is a renovated conscience.¹²²

¹²¹ See *Think as a Spirit*, chapters 1 and 2, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

¹²² Hebrews 9:14

- Romans 7:15 “What I am doing I do not understand.” Most outsiders can recognize right and wrong but have great difficulty choosing well. Overcoming self and being consistent from principle to application are attractive.
- Ecclesiastes (many times) “All is vanity and chasing after the wind.” The world can appear pointless, especially from the fleshly perspective. Escaping pointlessness is attractive.
- Acts 2:40 “Be saved from this perverse generation.” Escaping the problems of this world would be nice, but such is not in God's plan for the faithful who are still on earth. However, the faithful are promised that the broken world will not win.
- Matthew 11:5, Luke 4:18, 7:22 “The poor have the gospel preached to them.” The ordinary person often is left out in the matters of this life. Knowing that everyone is equally important in God's kingdom is an enticement.
- Romans 1:1 – 6, 1 Corinthians 15:1 – 4, 1 Thessalonians 1:5 The gospel of reality. The gospel is based in truth, a description of reality. Most outsiders exist in some degree of unreality or self-deception just to get by.
- Ephesians 6:15 Life is not intended to be a struggle with God, with others, and/or with yourself, but a life of peace. If people truly espoused this concept, the pharmaceutical industry would collapse.

What Difference Does It Make?

Church-going people have become fond of declaring that various events are the will of God, generally because that is the type of thinking that they have been taught. When challenged, many realize that their logic does not make sense, but are still not willing to abandon that belief. So, they often respond, “What difference does it make?” Their fallback position is that no harm is done by having their unfounded beliefs, so it is acceptable. With this new ammunition, they blithely continue asserting that their positions are just as valid as reality. But randomly claiming that various events and pathways are the will of God has serious repercussions.

The most damaging result is that such speculation is self-deception; the faithful are to live in reality. Reality is where we find liberty. Self-deception is slavery. The Word has told us all that we need to know. If a belief is not explicitly described in the Word, then it is not something about which God wants us to draw conclusions. If we could find answers to every question, we would have stopped trusting God and started trusting ourselves.

Many have been taught that there is a “permissive” will of God and an “explicit” will of God. The second of those descriptors may be expressed by any of several similar adjectives. The most damaging problem with this teaching is that it does not appear in Scripture. Rather, the declaration is made that some things are explicitly what God wants to happen, whereas other events are “allowed” by God. Unfortunately, this makes God guilty of sin because He does not stop the sin from happening. In general, this group of theories focuses on sin as the overriding concern, rather than recognizing that Jesus paid the debt to justice for all people. Their concern should be faith, not sin. Secondly, the supporters of this human invention claim to know which events on earth belong in which classification, meaning that they have an unexplained insight into matters God has not revealed. We need to be comfortable not knowing everything that God desires because He has not revealed everything. Faith implies that God has left us in the dark on some issues so that we have no other choice than to trust Him.

Reviewing and summarizing the complete list of “will of God” passages in the previous sections of this chapter, God desires reality, rescue, being reserved for Godly purposes, rejoicing,

thanksgiving, praying, and a confident expectation of adoption. The will of God that has been revealed does not mention specific tasks for specific people, the pre-planning of events in the lives of people, or other details of life generally governed by the randomness that results from the good and bad choices of billions of people, all acting at once. Many have been taught that, if something happens, it must be the will of God, which again makes God responsible for sin.

Logos is “the Word.” Logos is used as a suffix in many scientific words to mean “the body of thought concerning.” Logos is the origin of our word, logic. God has characterized His thinking as Logos, which implies that it is logical. Speculation is not logical. When God wanted something to be identified as the will of God, He provided miraculous physical evidence, not inuendo.

Speculation impedes evangelism. As an historical example, Muhammed came to the conclusion that the idolatry of his people (the Arabs) did not make sense. So, he went in search of a connection with the true God. To that end, he enlisted in a caravan transporting goods toward Syria. Along the way, he met a monk and had the monk tell him the principles of Christianity. In that presentation, the monk explained that Christians worshipped the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and Mary. Muhammed rightly concluded that the monk worshipped four gods, and dismissed Christianity. Having found no reasonable religion in his travels, and wanting to explain his own epilepsy, he determined that his seizures were communications from God. Had he received a logical answer from that monk, Islam would not have happened. Muhammed is one among many who have dismissed Christianity because the explanation they received made no sense. The one relating the irrational version generally hides behind an over-application of “the natural man cannot understand spiritual things.”¹²³ If that line from Paul meant that no outsider is capable of understanding anything, then Paul was wasting his time by preaching across Syria, Arabia, Turkey, Greece, and points west. Outsiders can perceive the nature of God through observing creation¹²⁴ and by logical deduction of the nature of a creator and that the creator must communicate with what has been created.¹²⁵

Determining if something is “the will of God” that is not explicitly stated in the Scriptures is a dangerous exercise in futility. We must be comfortable knowing only what God has chosen to reveal.

¹²³ 1 Corinthians 2:14

¹²⁴ Romans 1:18 – 22

¹²⁵ See *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 1, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

Chapter 6. End Times Prophecies

Introduction

Jesus, Peter, and Paul all used the “thief in the night” illustration¹²⁶ to make the point that Judgment and the end of all things will come at a time no one knows, that no signs will be given concerning when that day will be. Yet, “end times” sermons are very popular, touting signs in current events. Every era since about the fifth century has had its purveyors of doom, its visionaries of the end. One may safely conclude that all of those whose endtimes dates have passed have been absolutely wrong. But, despite thousands of failures, a confident few sincerely believe that they have finally gotten it right, although their predictions have not come to pass yet.

Many such predictions are couched in highly figurative and general terms so the application can be moved forward continually. The prophecies of William Miller that resulted in the founding of the Seventh-Day Adventist movement first placed the end in October 1844. When the day came and went, new calculations put it in 1845, which also came and went. A revised interpretation of the doctrine claimed that Jesus really had come in 1844 as predicted, but only a few faithful saw Him. The Jehovah’s Witness movement has predicted the end several times in the past. Those failures have caused them to refrain from giving exact figures but rather to rely on “soon.” In our modern era of mass media, a plethora of political figures have been identified as signs of the end.

How can people invent, spread, and absorb these obvious corruptions of the Scriptures? First, a climate of such predictions has been in full stride for nearly two centuries, so people in those groups have never heard anything else. Failed predictions no longer bother them because the next exciting prediction is already being preached. Second, hermeneutics (the science of reading comprehension) has been largely forgotten. So, people have come to expect snippets of verses rather than contexts. My saying is, “If the explanation is longer than the verse, you have added something that God did not.” Passages that the inspired writers clearly labelled as referring to specific historical nations in Old Testament history are declared to be an analysis of current politics. Third, audiences no longer expect the Scriptures to make sense to the ordinary listener. A high caste of clergy has been inserted, despite clear teaching in the Scriptures against such, and despite an earmark of the gospel being that it is understandable by ordinary people without the need for a middleman.¹²⁷

Such teaching, in addition to being a waste of time, hinders evangelism. Certainly, it collects the weak-minded and the thrill seekers. But reasonable people are driven away by the illogic and theatrics and uselessness. God’s objective for creation is thwarted. Finally, such teaching is built on inducing fear in the unsuspecting hearer; repent before it is too late, and the time is very, very soon. The point of the teachings of John the Baptist and Jesus, which centered around a “repent” theme, was not fear but preparation for the soon-to-be-established Messianic kingdom, to wake up the nation of Israel for the Messiah. John and Jesus were not preaching a one-step process to acceptability by God.

The attractions of the gospel, described in detail in the previous chapter, have to do with the goodness of God, the character of Jesus as played out in a broken world, and Jesus’ mastery of living in such a broken place. The attraction is positive and sensible, not incomprehensible and fearsome.

¹²⁶ Matthew 24:42 – 51, 1 Thessalonians 5:2 – 4, 2 Peter 3:10 – 13

¹²⁷ 1 John 3:27

The Rapture

A popular work-around for the “thief-in-the-night” argument is the Rapture, which will be shown in the following pages to be another human invention with no connection to the Scriptures. According to the theory, since the Rapture is not the end of time, signs are permitted. Of course, the logic fails because the Rapture doctrine describes a thousand-year period before the end of all things, so a sign of the Rapture is also a sign for the end. Further, the Rapture doctrine teaches that the end of all things cannot be imminent because the Rapture has not happened yet, a theory that Paul specifically targets as irresponsible.¹²⁸ Trying to fill in information which God specifically left out is negligent. Rather, the faithful must be comfortable not knowing when or how the end will come.

The origin of the Rapture doctrine is problematic. The teaching was invented in the 1830’s by an Episcopalian priest in Ireland, John Danby. Of course, since that time, proponents of the theory have searched teachings in the first few centuries of the church to unearth early Christian Rapture ideas. They have been unsuccessful, finding no more than word choices that they claim to indicate that their doctrine was taught in the fourth or fifth century, but the contexts of their citations do not support their allegations. The word, rapture, means “to express extreme pleasure or enthusiasm.” Upon finding the word, in Greek, in the Christian writings of that period, the ancient author is immediately labeled a forerunner of the Rapture doctrine. However, the proponents of the modern theory have re-defined the word as “snatched away” without any linguistic support. So, ancient authors are declared proponents of a phrase, “snatched away,” despite having never heard of that definition.

Danby’s teaching gained traction mostly because it was exciting and the audiences had very limited access to the Scriptures. The predominantly Catholic population was still being taught not to read the Scriptures for themselves, but rather to let the priests tell them what it meant. The Protestants knew a little more, but the dependence on clergy was stifling to independent thinking. The Episcopalians were between those two, being very much like the Roman Catholics, not so radical as the Protestants, with a label of Church of England in a country where all things English were despised. But, Danby’s entertainment value caused the acceptance of the doctrine to rise.

Danby’s ideas became known to the churches in the fledgling United States, on the tail end of the Great Awakening and in parallel with the Restoration Movement. He was invited to travel to this fertile and volatile religious market to describe his ideas in more detail. The fundamental idea was accepted into a few groups which then developed it much further.

In my research of numerous explanations of the Rapture doctrine, I have found that every Scripture cited was either taken out of context or missed a verb tense (past, present, future) which allowed the passage to be made future when the inspired writer said it was past. Another favorite method is called “double fulfillment,” in which the original statement by the inspired writer is acknowledged, but the claim is made that such predictions can have more than one application. So, for example, the Babylonians conquering the Assyrians also predicted the conquest of the Kurds by Saddam Hussein. Of course, the concept of double fulfillment is not found anywhere in the Scriptures. Further, it allows the inspired writings to be applied to whatever time and place of the preacher’s choosing without God’s endorsement.

Many claim inspiration for themselves with the assertion that “the Lord told me...” However, they have no evidence that they speak for God and overlook that prophets were

¹²⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:3

predicted to end with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple which happened in 70 AD.¹²⁹

The doctrine has many variations and is generally confusing to the listener. However, Moses,¹³⁰ Paul,¹³¹ and John¹³² wrote that all such explanations should be simple enough for the common person without the aid of a specialist.

A common citation in Rapture teaching is 1 Thessalonians 4:16 – 17, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

The context extends from 4:13 – 5:11. Paul’s express point was for the comfort of first-century Thessalonian Christians concerning faithful people who had already died, so he does not mention the disposition of unbelievers. The “thief in the night” image is in 5:2, indicating that there would be no signs. And, 5:3 specifically squashes the “peace and safety” position that those “left behind” would have, knowing that the end of the universe would not happen until the thousand years was completed.

The Rapture theory has the faithful raised a thousand years before the “left behind.” Paul has everyone being raised together¹³³ as does John.¹³⁴

In the many variations of the Rapture doctrines, the Antichrist, the “man of lawlessness,” the false prophet, and the beasts of Revelation are mixed together so the proponent can merge their respective contexts to make a scene nowhere described in the Scriptures. But each character has its own context and application. The Antichrist is mentioned only by John, and only three times.¹³⁵ Antichrists were present in John’s day. Their characteristics were that they did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, that they did not follow Jesus, and they taught that Jesus did not come in the flesh. The man of lawlessness¹³⁶ existed in Paul’s day and the Thessalonian Christians knew who he was. The false prophet in Revelation¹³⁷ is also called the second beast,¹³⁸ but is never compared with the antichrist or the man of lawlessness.

In some Rapture variations, a great tribulation precedes the Rapture itself and is a sign of it, while in others, the Rapture happens first with the tribulation being experienced only by those “left behind.” However, all the tribulations in the New Testament are clearly in reference to the period just before the destruction of the Temple (which occurred in 70 AD). The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple shortly after the earthly time of the Messiah was predicted by Daniel and Zechariah. Faithful Jews of the period after the Maccabean Revolt until the time of the New Testament all knew that the sole remaining prediction from the prophets was that destruction. This understanding was the reason that literally millions of Jews who had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah crowded into Jerusalem when the Roman legions arrived in approximately 68 AD, believing it to be the safest place on earth since, in the view of the Sanhedrin, the Messiah had

¹²⁹ Daniel 9:24, Zechariah 13:2

¹³⁰ Deuteronomy 30:11 – 14

¹³¹ Romans 10:8

¹³² 1 John 2:27

¹³³ 1 Corinthians 15:50 – 53

¹³⁴ Revelation 20:11 – 15

¹³⁵ 1 John 2:18 – 22, 4:3, 2 John 7

¹³⁶ 2 Thessalonians 2:3 – 10

¹³⁷ Revelation 19:20 – 21

¹³⁸ Introduced in Revelation 13:11 – 18

not yet come. Some Christians were swept up in the hysteria. But, when the Roman general Titus declared a unilateral cease-fire for three days to allow non-combatants to clear the area, the Christians left but the Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah stayed and died.

Among the most common tribulation passages are in Matthew 24, especially verses 21 and 29. However, these verses do not exist in isolation. The context must govern the application. The section from verse 4 to 34 is in response to a question posed by the disciples in verse 3 concerning the timing of the predicted destruction of the Temple. Verse 34 set that destruction within the lifetimes of some alive at that time. Of course, proponents of the Rapture doctrine re-define the word, “generation,” to mean the period until people no longer exist, which defeats their own argument, putting the “great tribulation” at Judgment Day. More importantly, there is no linguistic support for the definition.

Also in verse 3, the disciples asked about the end of all things. Jesus began to answer that second question in verse 35, after completing His answer to the first question.

Jesus described the period just prior to the destruction of the Temple as the worst period in human history, before or since.¹³⁹ Of course, that ranking has been questioned by many, citing many of the horrors perpetrated by man upon man in history as being worse. Generally, Jesus’ description is presented as hyperbole. But, as a comparison, Hitler’s program to exterminate Jews in Europe killed six million in 10 years. The Roman legions exceeded that number by a wide margin in three years.

Some make a distinction between “tribulation” and “great tribulation.” But comparison of the parallel passages in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 show that “great tribulation,” “tribulation,” and “distresses” are equivalent descriptions. The apostle John considered himself to be in the tribulation, along with many other faithful people.¹⁴⁰

A group in one of John’s visions had come out of the “great tribulation,”¹⁴¹ so that application occurred before John wrote. Of course, those who want to move an application to a different place on the timeline of history simply invoke the “prophetic perfect” verb tense in which an inspired writer can speak of something in the past which actually is in the future. Greek grammar knows nothing of this verb tense.

Revelation 11:2 mentions 42 months which is commonly attributed to the duration of the supposed great tribulation. But, reading the context, this is the period over which the two witnesses preach, and the location is “where their Lord was crucified.”¹⁴²

John identified in eight places that the applications of his visions, except from 20:7 – 22:5, would happen shortly to his time.¹⁴³

The Rapture doctrine often is connected with “one-world government” theories. The only world-wide government mentioned in the Scriptures is that headed by the Messiah, which has been in place since shortly after Jesus’ return to heaven (His ascension).¹⁴⁴

The number of the beast,¹⁴⁵ 666, is often applied to current events. However, John’s point was to let the people know that this second beast, later called the false prophet, had the number of a man – that this beast, despite his miraculous abilities, was just a man. The purpose of the paragraph was to comfort the Christians of that era who were undergoing tremendous problems,

¹³⁹ Matthew 24:21

¹⁴⁰ Revelation 1:9

¹⁴¹ Revelation 7:14

¹⁴² Revelation 11:8

¹⁴³ 1:1, 1:3, 12:12, 22:6, 22:7, 22:10, 22:12, 22:20

¹⁴⁴ Daniel 7:13 – 14

¹⁴⁵ Revelation 13:11 – 18

to assure them that they had not chosen badly, but that all this was part of the plan and that the eternal kingdom was secure.

The seven churches of Asia in chapters 2 and 3 are seven real places in western Turkey. No hint is given in the Scriptures that these congregations were to represent sequential eras in the history of the church. Rather, they are seven short letters to congregations that were geographically close to John.

In the Bible, the “coming of the Lord” in the Scriptures has been used to refer to the ministry of John the Baptist,¹⁴⁶ the earthly ministry of Jesus,¹⁴⁷ the beginning of the Kingdom (the church),¹⁴⁸ the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD along with the completion of the Kingdom going to the whole world,¹⁴⁹ and the end of time.¹⁵⁰ The context reveals which one the inspired writer intended. Unfortunately, Rapture enthusiasts classify all of them as the end of time, overlooking the havoc that plays with Old Testament history.

The Rapture doctrine is an exercise in absent hermeneutics: ignoring context, inventing definitions, and rearranging history. The purpose is to generate excitement by making unfounded applications of inspired descriptions to modern political events with a total disregard of their failure rate, which remains at 100%. The faithful need to be comfortable not knowing when the end will come. Instead, as encouraged by Jesus, Paul, and Peter,¹⁵¹ just be prepared all the time. Further, the Rapture doctrine is designed to stimulate unbelievers to become believers through fear. That is not the appeal of the gospel.

Signs and the Thief in the Night

As stated above, Jesus, Peter, and Paul each used the figure of speech, “like a thief in the night,”¹⁵¹ to describe the end of time. Giving signs of the end defeats the point being made by all three. Yet, many find such predictions. The quantity of such uninspired guesses is far greater than could be covered in a chapter of a book. Just the ones that have already failed would fill many volumes. So, instead of defeating such arguments one at a time, just assume that any prediction of the end is false simply because Jesus, Paul, and Peter said so. If a sign of a “coming of the Lord” is given in the Scriptures, rest assured that it refers to something in the past to us.

However, the three “thief in the night” passages provide positive information, albeit not in the way of signs. The following paragraphs describe each in turn.

Matthew 24 - 25

Matthew 24 and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21 address both the destruction of the Temple (which happened in 70 AD) and the end of time. In verses 1 and 2, Jesus commented that the Temple in which they were standing would be destroyed. Although Jesus did not mention it, that prediction may be found in both Daniel 9:24 – 26 and Zechariah 13. In response, the disciples asked two questions (verse 3). Jesus responded to each in turn. The first answer is

¹⁴⁶ Malachi 3:1 – 3

¹⁴⁷ Acts 7:52, 2 Peter 1:16

¹⁴⁸ Matthew 16:28, 26:64, Daniel 7:13 – 14, Mark 13:26, 14:62, Luke 21:27

¹⁴⁹ Matthew 23:3, 27, 30, 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2:8, James 5:7 – 8, 1 John 2:28

¹⁵⁰ Matthew 24:37, 39, 1 Corinthians 15:23, 1 Thessalonians 2:19, 4:15, 5:3, 2 Peter 3:4, 3:12

¹⁵¹ Matthew 24:42 – 44, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Peter 3:10

clearly separated from the second answer in verse 34, that all the signs predicted by Jesus in verses 4 – 34 were to be accomplished before the generation alive at that time passed away. The second answer, about Judgment Day and the end of all things, starts in 24:35 and extends through chapter 25.

In His answer about the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus made some specific predictions:

- Many false Christs would arise (4 – 5, 23 – 26).
- Wars, famines, and earthquakes (6 – 8).
- Severe persecution of Christians (9 – 10).
- False prophets (11).
- Lawlessness would increase while love decreased (12).
- The gospel would be preached to the whole world (14).
- Jesus declared that Daniel 9:23 – 26 was about to be accomplished (15).
- Christians were to persevere. Further, when Jerusalem was attacked (the literal description is in Luke 21:20 – 21), the Christians were to get out of town. Also, they were to pray for good timing for this escape (13, 16 – 20). Historically, the Roman general, Titus, declared a unilateral, three-day cease fire to allow non-combatants to leave because he wanted to reduce the number of civilian casualties. The Christians left; the unbelieving Jews stayed and died because they believed that the Messiah had not yet come, so the Temple was the safest place to be. They understood Daniel 9:24 – 26, so they knew that the Temple could not be destroyed until after the Messiah had come.
- Jesus predicted that the destruction would be the worst time in all of history (21 – 22). But, God would shorten it as much as possible so that the faithful would not face more temptation than they could endure (1 Corinthians 10:13).
- Some of the false teachers, false prophets, and false Christs would be able to perform miracles (23 – 26).
- Compared to the usual length of sieges, which generally lasted two to three years, this one would be quick (less than 5 months), but the death toll would be huge.
- In verse 29, Jesus seemed to be citing Joel 2:30 – 32, much as Peter did in Acts 2.
- Referencing Daniel 7:13 – 14 in verse 30, Jesus would receive His kingdom when he returned to heaven (the Ascension).
- The gathering of the elect from the four winds (31) is a figurative way of saying that the faithful would be gathered from the whole world into the church, since the gospel would reach the whole world before the destruction of Jerusalem.
- The hearers (the disciples) were to pay attention (32 – 34) because all these predictions would happen before the generation alive at that time passed away.

From 24:35 through chapter 25 is a description of the end of all things and the eternal kingdom.

- Verse 35 is the transition to the second answer.
- No one but the Father, not even Jesus when He was on earth, knew when the end would come (36). Certainly, when Jesus unrolled the scroll in Revelation 6 through 8, He then knew the plan. But, no humans on earth have that knowledge.
- Like the Flood, the end would be a total surprise (37 – 39).
- When the end came, one's location would be unimportant (40 – 41).

- The parable of the faithful servant reminded the hearers that they needed to be prepared at all times, because they had no clues concerning when the end would come. (42 – 51).
- Chapter 25 continues with more information about the eternal kingdom, the church.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11

Paul introduced the topic of Judgment Day because some were concerned about the disposition of faithful people who physically died before the end of all things (4:13). Deceased Christians will return with Jesus and be joined by physically living Christians in the air (4:14 – 17). Everyone gets their resurrection bodies together (1 Corinthians 15:35 – 53). The Thessalonian Christians were well aware that the end would come unexpectedly (5:1 – 2). The end would come when predictors were saying that it would not (5:3). The faithful must be comfortable not knowing when the end will be, but rather be prepared at all times.

2 Peter 3:3 – 12

Some will ridicule the concept of the end of the physical realm, claiming that the laws of physics don't change (3 – 4). The skeptics overlook Noah's flood (5 – 6). Catastrophic changes have happened. Judgment Day will come with fire (7). The promise of Judgment will not be slow in coming. The delay is due to God's patience (8 – 9). The physical realm will be consumed without warning (10). Use this fact as a reminder to be prepared at all times (11 – 12).

Chapter 7. Leadership, Authority, and Liberty

An entire volume has been devoted to leadership in the church, along with the concepts of authority and liberty.¹⁵² A short summary follows that focuses on the dangers of “filling in the blanks,” as opposed to being comfortable not knowing.

The church after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD was designed to be “leaderless.” Everyone was to seek out those who were more mature than themselves and follow that faith (not the person, but the faith). This would result in different people in the same congregation following different representations of faith. In government or in the business world, this would never work. Most church-goers cannot fathom such a system with no authority figures, so they fill in the blanks with a worldly system. But all the faithful are parts of the body and contribute such as God has given them.

The faithful are all responsible for themselves. But only the arrogant would try to go it alone. So, the motivation to find someone with greater faith should be normal. Unfortunately, such has not been the case. Church-goers overlook that their religious authority figures will have no input on their disposition at Judgment. Trying to avoid responsibility by following authority figures is a worldly model, much like socialism.

Calvinism has influenced many denominations to the point that their members are convinced that God has orchestrated every earthly event. As previously explained,¹⁵³ such an attitude leads to untenable conclusions. Our choices are ours to make, plus we have responsibility for the repercussions of those choices. We cannot abdicate our liberty in hopes that someone else will take the consequences.

Claims to authority in the church arise from many different theories, all of which have the same obvious flaw; none of them have any evidence that God has granted them that authority. If we follow the self-proclaimed leader, we will be following the self-deceived or the power-monger. Some groups, early in their histories, managed to develop a benevolent guidance model which sought to develop their followers. Unfortunately, authority-minded people eventually move in and seek leadership because they sincerely believe that the authoritarian model is right. Once authority is in place, it cannot be dislodged because those in power are willing to make demands whereas the gentle guiders are not.

The New Testament enjoins each faithful person to follow those of greater faith than themselves, and actually follow. Leadership in modern Christianity is exceedingly easy to do. The problems we see come from filling in the blanks with worldly systems.

¹⁵² *Hegemonies*, Rhys Thomas. Available free at [ThomasTheologyHub.org /books/](http://ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/)

¹⁵³ Chapter 4. Does God Micromanage?

Chapter 8. Is My Salvation Valid If My List is Incomplete?

The various manifestations of Christianity have struggled to assure their followers that they are acceptable to God. Some have assured their adherents that they are “good enough” because of their behavior. But Paul’s contrasts between faith and Law¹⁵⁴ upset the confidence of many. Others are assured that they are acceptable because they performed a ritual or had a feeling or made a declaration, but people cannot assert their own acceptability, rather God must let them know when they are acceptable.¹⁵⁵ Eventually, those who think recognize that they are learning. This implies that they knew less yesterday (or less accurately), and more today (or more accurately). Many question how much understanding is required for one to reach God’s threshold of acceptability. In response, many groups have built finite lists so the adherents can feel acceptable upon reaching the end of the list. Obviously, the length of the list is arbitrary and the confidence such lists generate is self-deception.

For example, Christian immersion contains ten symbols to which the one being immersed should be illustrating to God, the acceptance of all of those promises. But the one being immersed rarely has a working knowledge of all ten. In fact, rarely do they know more than one, assuming they do not see it as magical and understand none of the symbols and to what they are dedicating themselves. Should one be immersed again upon understanding each new facet of the practice? Obviously not, since that question was not raised in the New Testament. Assuming that teaching was much better in the first century also is obviously untrue, based on the multitudes of doctrinal problems encountered in the first century. Rather than setting an arbitrary minimum requirement, all those who are learning about the gospel, both before and after they come to faith, must be convinced of the Biblical requirement of growth in faith.¹⁵⁶ The same problem may be resolved for the required levels of faith, repentance, confession, or good works.

Understanding growth obviates the “minimum requirements” attitude held by so many. A lack of growth results in stagnation and spiritual death. The silly pronouncements of “once saved always saved” camps on the several verses which promise that no outside force can remove us from God,¹⁵⁷ but ignores the several examples of people who walked away from God by their own choice.¹⁵⁸

Finally, translators have done a great disservice by translating τελειος as “perfect.”¹⁵⁹ The Greek word means “consistent,” which fits in every context in which it is used in the Bible. God describes people as acceptable if their faith is growing, not when it reaches a certain level, and when the faith at the current level is consistently translated into action.

¹⁵⁴ *Hegemonies*, Chapter 3, All Things Are Lawful, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

¹⁵⁵ *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 4, The Faith Economy and Chapter 6, The Work of the Spirit, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

¹⁵⁶ *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 6, The Work of the Spirit, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

¹⁵⁷ John 6:37, 10:27 – 29, Romans 8:38 – 39, Hebrews 13:5, 1 Peter 1:5

¹⁵⁸ Luke 8:3, Romans 11:20 – 23, 1 Corinthians 10:12, 2 Corinthians 6:1, Galatians 5:4, 1 Timothy 4:1 – 2, 2 Timothy 2:17 – 18, Hebrews 3:12, 6:4 – 6, 10:26 – 29, 2 Peter 1:10 – 11, 2:20, Revelation 3:5, 3:11, 22:19

¹⁵⁹ See Appendix 6: Perfect

Chapter 9. How Does Unity Work?

Introduction

Most church-goers have experienced only authority-based unity. The New Testament does not support this arrangement.¹⁶⁰ But, because the New Testament is not a rule book so does not spell out all the procedures, most have read into the New Testament what is really not there. Their reaction to the proposal that a congregation should be without authority figures is disbelief that anything so radical could work.

The “doctrinal sin” theory addressed in chapters 1 and 2 requires agreement with an arbitrary list of “essential” doctrines as necessary for salvation, although the New Testament knows nothing of such a theory. In fact, the New Testament letters to congregations address many doctrinal errors among the original audiences, all the while calling them saints and brethren.

Church unity has been approached from a number of directions. Some require unanimity, identical beliefs. The “essential” doctrines are spelled out in an essay ranging from a page to a short book. To be counted a member of the “true” church, one must assert that this essay is correct and the foundation for faith. Those who do not agree are labeled, by default, unbelievers. Other groups are less rigorous, demanding only uniformity, identical organization or ritual. Some degree of latitude in understanding the meanings in the New Testament is tolerated as long as the “necessary” practices are performed. A third tier of groups define unity as union, almost like a political affiliation with no doctrinal or ritual demands. Unity in the New Testament, however, is based on having the same heart and purpose despite differences between individual paths. Perhaps the best explanation is in Jesus’ prayer in the Garden.

Jesus’ Idea of Oneness

Jesus described unity as being one. Perhaps the most succinct description is in Jesus’ prayer in the Garden regarding future believers, those who would believe on the basis of the words of the apostles.¹⁶¹ “That they may be one, as You Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us. The glory which You have given Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one. I in them and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one.”

The oneness of future believers was to be like the oneness of the Father and the Son. Jesus gave the characteristics of this oneness as His miraculous works, that He was the recipient of the word of life, and that He was sanctified (reserved for godly purposes). Future believers were to be united on this basis: the miraculous transformation through the indwelling Spirit, being ambassadors for Christ, and being similarly reserved for godly purposes (one of the symbols in baptism and also in the Lord’s Supper).

The characteristics of the faith that they would have were (1) acceptance of the resurrection as evidence, (2) acceptance of the need for a sacrifice, (3) acceptance of the Word of God as true, (4) a realistic hope of heaven, (5) acting on the promises of God, (6) taking on the divine nature, and (7) evangelism.¹⁶² Those believers are described in the New Testament as those who

¹⁶⁰ *Hegemonies*, Chapter 4, Leadership, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

¹⁶¹ John 17:20 – 21

¹⁶² *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 4. The Faith Economy, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

commit themselves to (1) being reserved for godly purposes,¹⁶³ (2) being a sacrifice like Jesus,¹⁶⁴ (3) walking a new life,¹⁶⁵ (4) being freed from slavery to sin,¹⁶⁶ (5) being dedicated to miraculous unity,¹⁶⁷ and (6) being transformed.¹⁶⁸ They assert to God that they understand that they (1) have been washed,¹⁶⁹ (2) will be raised on Judgment Day,¹⁷⁰ (3) have been reconnected,¹⁷¹ (4) have been rescued from an evil world,¹⁷² and (5) have received the Holy Spirit.¹⁷³

The result of this oneness, as described by Jesus in John 17:23 is that they will be consistent between their ethics and their actions, and that they will be living proof that Jesus was God come to earth and that God deals with His people graciously, doing what is best for them. Further, the individuals will become consistent,¹⁷⁴ which makes oneness possible. Further, maturity and growth of faith fosters unity.¹⁷⁵ Unfortunately, many church-goers and few church leaders trust that growth in faith will result in unity, so they adopt worldly authority structures and try to “protect” the “weaker” members from exposure to other ideas, which makes the erroneous assumption that the doctrines of one’s own denomination are absolutely complete and true, rather than acknowledging the obvious history that no denomination agrees with itself after 50 years.

Example of Disunity: Israelites and Gentiles

The Israelites tended to overlook the promise to Abraham,¹⁷⁶ which was repeated many times in the Old Testament, that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The promise that all nations would come together in the Messianic kingdom was repeated by many prophets.¹⁷⁷ Paul wrote¹⁷⁸ that Jesus broke down the wall between Israelites and the rest of the world.

The Law of Moses was given only to the nation of Israel.¹⁷⁹ God condemned many of the behaviors of the surrounding nations, but never asked them to follow the Law nor condemned them for not following it. Further, Israelites were enjoined not to intermarry with those of other nations. So, the Law became the cause of separation between Israelites and Gentiles. Further, Moabites and Ammonites could never be included;¹⁸⁰ Egyptians and Edomites not until the third generation.¹⁸¹ But, all the faithful are included in the one body, the church.¹⁸² The gospel was

¹⁶³ 1 Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 5:26

¹⁶⁴ Romans 6:3-4, 12:1

¹⁶⁵ Romans 6:4, Titus 3:5

¹⁶⁶ Romans 6:6

¹⁶⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:13

¹⁶⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:18, Galatians 3:27

¹⁶⁹ Acts 22:16, Hebrews 10:22

¹⁷⁰ Romans 6:5

¹⁷¹ Romans 6:4, Titus 3:5, Colossians 2:12

¹⁷² 1 Peter 3:21

¹⁷³ Acts 2:38

¹⁷⁴ John 17:23, 1 Corinthians 2:6, Hebrews 12:23, 10:14

¹⁷⁵ Ephesians 4:13

¹⁷⁶ Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14 *et al*

¹⁷⁷ Psalm 33:8, 47:1 – 2, 67:1 – 7, 72:8 – 17, 82:8, 86:8 – 10, Isaiah 49:6, Jeremiah 3:17, Daniel 7:14, *et al*

¹⁷⁸ Ephesians 2:14 – 22

¹⁷⁹ Exodus 19:3 – 6, Deuteronomy 5:1 – 3

¹⁸⁰ Deuteronomy 23:3

¹⁸¹ Deuteronomy 23:7 – 8

¹⁸² Ephesians 2:16, 3:6

preached to both Jew and Gentile.¹⁸³ They were to be of one Spirit.¹⁸⁴ No faithful people were excluded, but were all of the household or family of God.¹⁸⁵

This example of the difficulties faced by the first-century church of building the kingdom from “all nations” teaches us that, despite our doubts that unity based on oneness could ever work, this impossible model is what God designed.

Attitudes that Produce Unity

Paul listed certain character traits that are necessary for God’s version of unity to work: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love, and peace.¹⁸⁶ All of these character traits are promised to the faithful through the indwelling Spirit.¹⁸⁷ Further, in Ephesians alone, Paul reminds his audience they had been sealed with the Spirit,¹⁸⁸ that they had been given wisdom and knowledge and godly character,¹⁸⁹ that they had access to God,¹⁹⁰ and they were constantly being strengthened.¹⁹¹ Unity is produced by those character traits, not by authority nor by office; not be sameness but by diversity. Unity is a natural result of taking on the divine nature; it is not a goal of enforcement.

In all authority relationships in the world, leaders do not trust followers. If they did, they would not need authority. That attitude is dragged into the church with many other cultural traits, causing the mess we see today. But, that same problem prompted most of the inspired letters written in the first century and preserved as the New Testament.

Concepts that Produce Unity

Paul’s first result of understanding grace was unity.¹⁹²

His short list of concepts started with the understanding that there is one church, which includes not only those with whom one assembles, but faithful people world-wide, both physically alive and physically dead, plus the angels.¹⁹³ Within that group we should expect diversity, since those people have experienced widely different cultures and may have lived in different centuries. Of course, differences indicate that at least one side has something askew, but God has promised that, if we stick it out and keep talking, a resolution will occur.¹⁹⁴ An authority figure is not necessary because we have all the tools we need. Unfortunately, many have been taught that their group has reached the pinnacle of understanding, so differences are unacceptable. Rather, we should see differences as an opportunity to reveal my own biases as well as theirs.

Paul’s second concept was that all faithful Christians have been given the same indwelling Spirit. So, as our characters are transformed into that of Jesus,¹⁹⁵ we will become more and more

¹⁸³ Ephesians 2:17

¹⁸⁴ Ephesians 2:18, 4:4

¹⁸⁵ John 1:12, Galatians 3:10, 3:28, Colossians 3:11, 1 Timothy 3:15, 1 John 3:1 – 2

¹⁸⁶ Ephesians 4:2 – 3

¹⁸⁷ *Think as a Spirit*, Chapters 5 and 6, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

¹⁸⁸ Ephesians 1:13

¹⁸⁹ Ephesians 1:17 – 20

¹⁹⁰ Ephesians 2:18

¹⁹¹ Ephesians 3:16

¹⁹² Ephesians 4:1 – 16

¹⁹³ Hebrews 12:22 – 24

¹⁹⁴ Philippians 3:15

¹⁹⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:18

alike. However, since growth is an essential component of acceptable faith, we should not expect that my small group will reach the optimum understanding, since that would end growth. The Spirit is responsible for our diversity through diverse gifts.¹⁹⁶ But those gifts will always be in harmony.

Paul's third concept that produces unity is the realization that all faithful Christians have only one Lord, Jesus, and that leadership is through His service, not His authority.¹⁹⁷ No lesser authorities are mentioned in the New Testament.¹⁹⁸ His lordship is through being a sacrificial husband,¹⁹⁹ not a commander or slave-master.

Paul's fourth concept that produces unity is that we have one set of promises in which we trust (one faith). Further, we view the distribution of the effects of those promises as being at God's discretion. Not everyone gets the same gifts and this is acceptable to each one. Unity cannot exist without an understanding of those promises because, without them, we have only human effort which has failed countless times in the history of the world.

Paul's fifth concept that produces unity is summarized as "one baptism," one level of commitment. Many have been taught a legalistic view, that unity is produced if all members have been immersed in water. Certainly, God gave the illustration and wants to see that practice, but the point here is that our unity emerges from what baptism symbolizes: accepting redemption, accepting forgiveness, depending on the promises about the indwelling Spirit, acting out being reserved for godly purposes, accepting transformation, becoming a sacrifice (a celebration of forgiveness), walking a new life rather than continuing with the best I can do, being confident of a good result at Judgment, breaking the bonds of sin through the indwelling Spirit, being dedicated to miraculous unity, announcing that my spirit is alive again, connected to God, and being confident that I have been rescued from the evils of this world.²⁰⁰

In the Garden, Jesus prayed specifically for future Christians.²⁰¹ Disunity demonstrates that Jesus is not the Messiah. A part of that unity is demonstrating a parade of godly character traits (glory). The consistency of the faithful (acting out what they profess – badly translated "perfect" – proves the love God has for the faithful because, through this demonstration, Christians prove that God is in process of fixing them (mercy).

In his second letter to the congregations in Corinth, Paul concluded that unity demands that the faithful assess others using the same rubric as they use on themselves.²⁰² God has been patient with me, so I can be patient with others. I have corrected many of my own misconceptions, all the while considering myself faithful, so I can consider you faithful as you work through yours.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is all about fellowship, a connection between spirits. Those connections are the foundation of unity. This simple fact is overlooked because, in general, people cannot fathom an organization without authoritative leadership, so they invent one with bits and pieces, overlooking the passages that would contradict their assumptions.

In Philippians 1, Paul expresses the relationship of fellowship both to encourage and build up the Philippian Christians and to teach them how to reproduce it. Paul does not approach them as an authority figure but as someone who cares for them and has confidence in them. Even

¹⁹⁶ e.g., Romans 12:3 – 16, 1 Peter 4:7 – 11

¹⁹⁷ John 13:1 – 20

¹⁹⁸ See *Hegemonies*, Chapter 4, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

¹⁹⁹ Ephesians 5:15 – 33

²⁰⁰ *Family Gathering*, Chapter 7, Baptism, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

²⁰¹ John 17:20 – 23

²⁰² 2 Corinthians 10:7

though Paul was experiencing some negative events, he did not consider them overwhelming or threatening, but an opportunity. Their response to adversity was proof of their acceptance by God. He expressed his confidence that they had the ability to succeed through the indwelling Spirit, and that he fully expected that result.

In Philippians 2, Paul taught them how to develop the unity that leads to peace. The encouragement we derive from Christ drives away the self-centeredness that destroys unity in the world. The comfort derived from doing what is best for one another enables a working relationship between disparate peoples. Recognizing the work of the indwelling Spirit in one another encourages and builds bonds. Giving joy to those far away through their display of unity incentivizes them to continue in it. Positive emotions drive fellowship; focusing on shortcomings isolates. Fellowship is developed indirectly, through faith, rather than by authority. The faithful should have more confidence in the Word than in their individual understanding of it. Fear of choosing badly leads to the desire for authority.

In Philippians 3, Paul builds them up by insisting that the Philippian Christians are approaching acceptability from a different direction. Authority-minded people turn to works for that demonstration, whereas Paul focuses on understanding Jesus' gracious character, by developing the viewpoint of a Spirit rather than of a physical being, resulting in understanding of why Jesus did what He did and endeavoring to operate through the same mindset. Authority requires flawless execution, which is always disappointing, and cements the desire for that authority. Conversely, God's promise that differing viewpoints will be resolved allows each faithful person to maintain liberty while building fellowship. Because Jesus already paid the debt to justice for all, our focus is on developing the character of Jesus through the indwelling Spirit, so authority has no function.

In Philippians 4, Paul reminds the audience of the attitudes of fellowship and its other-centered mentality for the purpose of the joy of others. Getting involved in one another's lives brings unity that lasts. If joy is not our fundamental outlook, something went terribly wrong. This joyous outlook emerges from thinking about good things rather than joy-killers like shortcomings, failures, differences, and anxiety. Understanding is good, but peace is better because it moderates both emotions and intellect, resulting in unity without the "need" for authority.

Chapter 10. How Do I Know If I Am Doing Enough?

Various groups propose different methods for determining acceptability with God. Some prefer to keep their members worried. In another volume,²⁰³ various contrasts are explored, such as Faith versus Works, Grace versus Works, Grace versus Wrath, Grace versus Law, Faith versus Law, Spirit versus Law, and Liberty versus Law. No matter which one's group emphasizes, the question always lurks, "Am I doing enough? How do I know?"

Whatever benchmarks are put in place by the traditions or leadership of one's group, absolutes are not found in the New Testament. "How much is enough" is simply not addressed directly. I suspect that God's reason was because times change and because humanity has demonstrated a tremendous capacity for self-deception. So, God approaches the question from a different direction. In another volume,²⁰⁴ the question of "How much faith is enough?" is explored. The only standard for acceptability found in the New Testament is a faith that grows. Growth does not lend itself to absolute benchmarks, since all faithful people are at different stages of growth. The faithful will not reach the pinnacle of faithfulness, or growth would stop. This observation leads to the conclusion that, even in the permanent heaven after Judgment Day, the spirits of the faithful will not get everything exactly right. Fortunately, Jesus already paid the penalty to justice for all those poor choices. So, even in heaven, the only question is whether faith is still growing, since faith without growth is not faith.

In the following paragraphs, some of the more common benchmarks are explored and debunked. The criterion for acceptance into God's family is God's version of faith, not physical benchmarks.²⁰⁴

Giving

As explained in detail elsewhere,²⁰⁵ tithes are better termed religious extortion and have no place in the church. However, Christian sharing often appears in the New Testament. In an unfortunate twist of legalism, many congregations view the weekly collection as an essential "act of worship," although such a collection cannot be defended and is never associated with worship. The practice is upheld by quoting 1 Corinthians 16:1 – 4 out of context.

The practice described there began when the prophet Agabus prophesied in Antioch of Syria, where Saul and Barnabas were preaching the gospel, that a great famine would spread across the world during the reign of Claudius Caesar (41 – 54 AD).²⁰⁶ Herod Agrippa died²⁰⁷ in 44 AD, after the announcement by Agabus, so, since Acts is chronological, Agabus prophesied before 44 AD. The Christians in Antioch collected money for famine relief in Judea before the famine began, even though they themselves would be affected. Saul and Barnabas labored in

²⁰³ *Hegemonies*, Chapter 3, All Things are Lawful, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

²⁰⁴ *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 4, The Faith Economy, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

²⁰⁵ *Family Gathering*, Chapter 8, Tithes, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

²⁰⁶ Acts 11:28 – 30

²⁰⁷ Acts 12:23

Antioch a full year before taking the money that had been raised to Jerusalem,²⁰⁸ which was three years after Saul's conversion.²⁰⁹ Therefore, the prophecy was given in 42 or 43 AD.

Paul encouraged the congregations of Turkey and Greece to participate in this famine relief effort, as evidenced by his stopping by several congregations on his way to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey. Since 1 Corinthians was written right at the end of the reign of Claudius (53 – 54 AD), the famine was already in progress by that time. Although many use 1 Corinthians 16 to teach that the weekly collection is commanded, this is not the case. The first verse of this passage appears to be a command, but Paul denies that interpretation in 2 Corinthians 8:8. Secondly, since he told them to save (not necessarily collect into one place) the money weekly, this probably was not their usual practice. So, if this is a command for all Christians in all ages, then it was added to the gospel more than 20 years after the gospel was first preached. Thirdly, it is unlikely that these congregations continued to store up famine relief funds after Paul had departed with their gift.

As mentioned above, the early Christians did share in remarkable ways, although not in response to commands or weekly collections. The longest description is in 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, but several other, shorter passages are included in the following list.

- The Macedonian congregations gave liberally despite their present affliction because they wanted to be spiritually connected to Christians they had never met.²¹⁰
- Sharing was a test of sincerity of love.²¹¹
- Sharing is acceptable according to what one has, not what one does not have, for equality.²¹²
- Sharing is cheerful, not grudging or of necessity.²¹³
- God promises that we will have an abundance for every good work.²¹⁴
- God promises that we will be enriched in everything for all liberality.²¹⁵
- Sharing not only meets physical needs, but also results in thanksgiving to God.²¹⁶
- The earliest Christians took care of each other.²¹⁷ To those who place great importance on the examples of the early church, has this been repealed?
- Some were particularly gifted in liberality, perhaps miraculously.²¹⁸
- Former thieves are commanded to hard work for the purpose of sharing.²¹⁹
- The church at Philippi shared with Paul on several occasions. Paul likened their gifts to a sacrifice (a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God).²²⁰
- James attributed a lack of sharing to dead faith.²²¹
- John attributed a lack of sharing to a hard heart.²²²

²⁰⁸ Acts 11:26

²⁰⁹ Galatians 1:18

²¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 8:2 – 5

²¹¹ 2 Corinthians 8:8

²¹² 2 Corinthians 8:12 – 15

²¹³ 2 Corinthians 9:7

²¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 9:8

²¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 9:11

²¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 9:12

²¹⁷ Acts 2:44 – 45, 4:34 – 35

²¹⁸ Romans 12:6, 8

²¹⁹ Ephesians 4:28

²²⁰ Philippians 4:10 – 19

²²¹ James 2:16

No benchmark for giving may be found. Early Christians did not contribute to a central treasury controlled by certain members. So, how do I know if I am sharing enough? How do I know to what to contribute? First, wisdom is necessary. At one extreme, we can be generous to the point that we force others to support us. If every Christian were to divest of all assets and distribute those assets to the poor, the plight of the poor would not be significantly altered, other than adding many more to that class. At the other extreme are those who rationalize their meager giving because they “must” take care of their own families first, which generally excuses a significant level of luxury. Without wisdom, we will not feel good about sharing because it is never enough, or we will deceive ourselves into sincerely believing that my comfort level is a necessity.

Secondly, current methods of church finance are a great hindrance to faith in which the faithful trust that God will provide a abundance for every good deed. Congregational overhead generally consumes 90% of the contributions and individual sharing is discouraged. On a personal note, tithing is held up as a benchmark by many, and viewed as a level attainable only by those with great faith. I see that man-made bar as shooting sharing in the foot. For example, in the US, charitable contributions are tax-deductible. But very few are even aware that there is an upper limit to the percentage one may declare, so, obviously, they have never reached the level of sharing considered remarkable by the IRS. Certainly the church can exceed the perception of generosity of the IRS.

Thirdly, a disheartening fraction of the population fails to plan their financial lives. As an example, in West Africa, people spend whatever is in their possession, then try to borrow from relatives and friends when a routine expense arises (such as rent or food). The government of Ghana estimates that three times the Gross National Product is circulating in their economy as family-and-friends debt. So, sharing and capitalism have become impossible. On a lesser scale, the same is true in America. Failure to plan makes sharing impossible because the money is already gone when the need arises.

The answer is reasonably simple. All Christians must manage the assets that pass through their hands with the attitude that those assets are theirs to use in the Kingdom of God. Food, shelter, and clothing are necessities. But our “needs” are often overestimated. Further, in the developed part of the world, we have the opportunity to plan for the future so that we can approach retirement with the goal of spending all our time on Kingdom business, finally wise enough to have something to say.

Certainly, the congregational collection has its place. We have certain cultural expectations of our times together, so we have facility payments, facility maintenance, salaries, utilities, and such like because we want those things. None of them are necessary, but, culturally, they make us comfortable. If we want to have those comforts and conveniences, we need to pay our fair share. But, none of those items are part of Christian sharing. Of the 10% of the typical collection that actually does kingdom business, we could do it individually much more efficiently. But, as one who manages funds for missionaries, getting a few large support checks each month is much easier than getting a hundred small ones. But, again, that is just a convenience.

So, how do I know if I am giving “enough”? Be comfortable not knowing. No benchmark exists. Instead, seek wisdom. See needs that are right in front of you and handle them. Some needs are bigger than my wallet can handle. But, I can find others to pitch in or find government

programs or other sources of funding. God promised an abundance for every good deed. We need to believe Him and be open to ways and means that we never envisioned.

Attendance

The necessity of attendance at congregational gatherings has been a matter of debate for many centuries. Unfortunately, the legalistic tendency of the church has caused attendance to become the focus, neglecting the purposes for gathering given by inspired writers. Those purposes are the subject of an entire volume.²²³ Nevertheless, the fact of attendance has caused many to debate within themselves the necessary frequency required to remain on God's good side. The question cannot be answered directly for several reasons, so we need to be comfortable not knowing.

First, those congregational leaders who teach that attendance is essential fail to validate that the meetings to which they demand such attendance actually accomplish the purposes for which the faithful meet.

Second, life happens. Sometimes good opportunities arise that conflict with meeting times. The set meeting times themselves are not from the Scriptures, rather are at the tradition or convenience of the leadership. Further, the early church met before sunrise or after sunset because Sunday was a normal workday. And, a significant fraction of the early Christians were slaves who had little control over their schedules. Of course, the choices people make about how to spend their time illustrate what they find important. But, the fact that the assembly is of low priority may be due to weak faith or due to the assembly failing in its Biblical mission.

So, in answer to the question of whether one is attending enough assemblies, classes, or other events, one must turn to the purposes for meeting and ensure that those functions are being accomplished. Using the wisdom supplied by the indwelling Spirit, allocate time according to the needs of the Kingdom.

Good Works

As Paul noted, the faithful are created for good works.²²⁴ Many options for good works exist and are accessible to each faithful person. And, the faithful are promised the financial resources to accomplish those things.²²⁵ However, the question should arise as to what is actually good, not just what we would like to see happen. Further, determining from where the funding and time and labor will come can be daunting. Again, wisdom is the key. After making choices as to which opportunities to take up and which to let pass, the faithful need to be comfortable with the choices they made. Certainly, in hindsight, some choices will turn out to be not the best. But, that needs to be acceptable rather than a hindrance to future decisions. Learn, grow, and trust God.

In making those decision, we must consider the overall financial and time commitment as related to one's other responsibilities such as family time, work, congregational support, and such like. Devoting time to finding others who might fund the good work may be the answer. Doing a good thing by oneself may be best, or rounding up a group to share the labor may be

²²³ *Family Gathering*, Rhys Thomas. Available free at ThomasTheologyHub.org/books/

²²⁴ Ephesians 2:10

²²⁵ 2 Corinthians 9:8 – 11

best. Again, wisdom is the key. Plus, we must be comfortable with the decision at the time or we will not enjoy anything, squashing the “good” part of good works.

Evangelism

Some groups dictate expectations for time spent on evangelism. Others pass that task off to those specially trained to do it. Both practices fail miserably. The most succinct expression of evangelism comes from Psalm 116:10, repeated in 2 Corinthians 4:13, “I believed, therefore I spoke.” If the faithful do not find themselves naturally sharing the gospel with others, something went wrong. Most likely, the definition of evangelism was made far too complex. The gospel was intended for ordinary people and was intended to be carried by ordinary people. Faithful people need to spend time sorting through their beliefs and organizing them into a simple, logical sequence. If the message sounds complicated, it is probably wrong. If it does not sound logical to the hearer, it is certainly wrong.

Some groups instruct their members to tell others “what Jesus means to me,” which is entirely self-centered and completely misses the selfless attitude of a faithful person. Other groups insist on a one-size-fits-all message, which tramples liberty. Rather, the gospel is spread from person to person, not by a professional to a group. When a faithful person interacts with an outsider, the faithful person should be listening for the felt needs of the outsider, then suggesting facets of the gospel that can help with what is important to that outsider. This is not the end of the message, but just gives the hearer a reason to keep listening. The “natural man,” the best the outside world has to offer, cannot understand spiritual things.²²⁶ So, we need to stick to evidence and logic, as Paul did when speaking to non-Jewish outsiders. Spouting Scripture to someone who has not accepted that the Scriptures are true is pointless.

So, how much evangelism is enough? Again, wisdom is the answer. First, each faithful person must assess how interactions with outsiders have been going. Think about all interactions, not just ones where the objective was to do evangelism. We deal with people many times each day. In some of those interactions, the opportunity for conversation exists. Each faithful person must be so engrossed in the needs of others that the conversation goes that direction. If the assessment shows a lack of listening to the needs of others, an attitude change is necessary. Peter’s seven-step sequence²²⁷ is a good place to review to find out where love (doing what is best for another without regard to the effect on me) has been underdeveloped.

Once someone has a vague interest that the gospel may be useful, only then does teaching begin. The first step must be evidences. If the outsider already has accepted the Scriptures as true, this step may be skipped. Show the outsider where one may find physical evidence. Show them the time-scale of the Bible and how it fits into the history of the world. Resources for such evidences are commonly available. Second, introduce Jesus by reading through a gospel together and talk about both what Jesus said and the character He demonstrated. Most outsiders do not really know the story. The approach is non-threatening and easy to understand. Do not draw conclusions for them. The outsider can figure it out. Then, move on to Acts, followed by short letters, again letting the outsider draw all the conclusions.

How much time will evangelism take out of your already busy schedule? That will depend on family and work constraints. Again, wisdom is the key. Use time wisely. And, be comfortable with where you are. Seek growth responsibly, not collapsing the rest of life in the

²²⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:14

²²⁷ 2 Peter 1:5 – 9

process. Retirement should be an ultimate goal, having finally accumulated a little wisdom and having the time to spend all your time introducing outsiders to the gospel.

Knowledge

The faithful are promised understanding,²²⁸ but each must develop a knowledge base upon which that understanding operates. As Peter put it, “long for the pure milk of the Word.”²²⁹ How much knowledge is necessary? The question itself is born of legalism; no benchmark has been given. However, if the faithful are interacting with outsiders and introducing them to the Scriptures, the faithful will absorb something along with the outsider. As those opportunities pile up across decades, you start remembering where things are.

Just reading the Scriptures as one would read any good literature is a necessary habit. For many centuries, the faithful have been encouraged to take a short-cut and memorize key verses. The problem is that the knowledge thus gained has no context. Many bad doctrines are promulgated through that method, with a string of out-of-context Scriptures that make the proposed doctrine sound Biblical when it actually contradicts the Bible. Calvinism, the Rapture, and legalism are examples. By reading whole letters in one pass, the author’s point is manifest. Reading the whole Bible three or four times each year generates a remarkable knowledge base for understanding. Find a translation that is easy to read. The weak points of the various translations can be addressed later.

How much of a time commitment is necessary? An hour a day is not too much. Evaluating one’s schedule can find the time.

Time for Me

The subtitle was chosen specifically to make it sound selfish, because vacations and entertainment are often targeted by churches as unnecessary and contrary to good spiritual development. First, we do need down time. Even Jesus did so. Second, merge decompression time into the schedule intentionally. Many people need a vacation to recover from their vacation. Instead, choose decompression times and locations to satisfy multiple needs. For example, getting out of town may do double duty as a visit to a family member or friend with whom a discussion about the gospel may develop. If such discussions are stressful, you are doing them wrong. The objective is to spend time with someone for the purpose of getting close to them and understanding them. Suggesting that the gospel might have some answers for them is not high pressure or requiring of careful planning and study. You are just talking about their needs and you are suggesting things that might help.

Entertainment, another decompression technique, should be chosen so as to be in keeping with godly character. So, your entertainment should be events at which you would not be embarrassed for Jesus to show up. But, a sporting event can be used as a personal bonding time. A movie can spark discussion. Again, be intentional. Pick entertainments that might lead to the gospel. If they don’t, all is not lost. You enjoyed yourself and are ready to meet someone else.

In summary, a faithful person will never know when enough is enough. Accept that fact. Continually develop time management skills without feeling guilty about the past. Guilt just messes up the present. Seek to grow. Be happy when you do.

²²⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:9 – 12, Ephesians 1:17 – 19, 2 Corinthians 3:18

²²⁹ 1 Peter 2:2

Chapter 11. What Is My Relationship with Government

All governments have problems. Governmental leaders generally suffer from a personality disorder or two that were at the heart of why they aspired to that leadership position. So, since early in the history of the church, how to deal with government has been debated. I classify government with other natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes, and volcanic eruptions. They are just a part of the world God created.

At various times in history, church teachings have led to war, sometimes with armies raised by an organization which identified itself as a church. Whether the claim to being a church was valid or not is not the issue. Governments have been upheld and overthrown by people motivated, albeit probably inaccurately, by the Scriptures. The Crusades were advertised as an effort by Christians to re-take the Holy Land, although the rationale for doing so is a bit murky. Sincere church-goers in the American Revolution had to come to grips with some knotty issues, deciding at what point it was permissible to defy the government and create a new one.

Within an existing government, laws, regulations, and how tax money is spent can create many a crisis of conscience. The laws of many countries favor one religion or another. Of course, if the favored religion is yours, the favoritism seems just. But those not favored feel slighted. Tax money is spent for many things to which the faithful are opposed. Many have questioned whether the faithful should continue to obey such governments.

Three passages in three different letters address the issue of obedience to the government. The governmental reference is the Roman government, notoriously immoral, corrupt, and pagan.

- Titus 3:1 Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient . . .
- Romans 13:1 – 7 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore, it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.
- 1 Peter 2:13 – 17 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

Yet, the book of Acts records an interaction between Peter and John versus the Sanhedrin:

- Acts 4:19 – 20 But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."

- Acts 5:29 But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. . . .”

How do we reconcile these passages? First, in Acts, Peter was opposing a religious authority, not a civil one. Peter’s example shows us that it is proper to oppose religious authorities who demand that the truth be suppressed. The dilemma of the apostles in Acts 4 and 5 was due to Jesus’ clear command to obey their Jewish leaders.²³⁰ The church came together and prayed fervently for direction²³¹ concerning the order from the Sanhedrin to stop speaking about the quality of Jesus.²³² They received a miraculous response.²³³ In the New Testament, there is no record of Christians opposing the civil government despite severe persecution and injustice, including imprisonment, torture, and execution.

So, why have so many defied governments on the basis of their faith? First, most have failed to seek a better answer. For example, many boasted of smuggling Bibles into the Soviet Union, clearly an illegal activity. They overlooked that it was not illegal to write the Scriptures from memory. I know four brothers in Ghana who, had they been available in that era, could have traveled to the Soviet Union, crossed the border legally, and written the entire New Testament from memory. Certainly, the method for staying within the law would have been laborious, but the problem would have been solved. A second example is from Cuba. Castro banned the assembly of more than two families at one time. Most churches went underground and met illegally. One group thought a little harder. Early Sunday morning, Family A visited Family B. They did all the things normally done in a church service. Then Family B visited Family C. This was repeated all day long. The strings of visitors were mixed each week so everyone was able to meet with everyone. They accomplished their purpose without breaking the law. A third example from the People’s Republic of China, the order went out to all churches that all sermon and lesson materials had to go to the local Communist Party authority to be reviewed before being presented. Most churches declared this an odious intrusion and went underground. A better answer would have been, “How many copies would you like?” They had an opportunity to convert Party officials through weekly exposure to the Word. The Party officials were concerned about revolution being developed through religion, which has happened many times in history. Instead, those same officials would be poring over lessons on evidences, redemption, forgiveness, grace, peace, and love.

A second reason that various church organizations have resisted government control is overconfidence in one’s own discernment of the will of God. Wars between competing religious organizations, each proclaiming itself to be in possession of the “truth,” raged across Europe for centuries. Early in church history, after Christianity had become fashionable through the endorsement of Constantine, church leaders in Italy, Turkey, and Egypt each had a different way of explaining the nature of God. The debates became so rancorous that the church leaders excommunicated each other and forbade trade between those regions. Constantine reacted to the disruption in commerce, not the religious arguments. So, he ordered the leaders to meet and come to a compromise. Failure to meet or to reach a compromise would result in death. As one might expect, a consensus was reached by a majority, who then excommunicated the minority, restoring commerce at the price of liberty. The faithful tend to forget that, in each generation, we fix a few things, and we break a few things. So, the collective understanding of the gospel

²³⁰ Matthew 23:2 – 3

²³¹ Acts 4:23 – 30

²³² Acts 4:18

²³³ Acts 4:31

circles the truth but gets no closer. But that is the system God set up. The faithful are to grow constantly. Without growth, Biblical faith does not exist. Every faction calling itself “church” has a way they look at the gospel that sets them apart from the others. As a result, how to deal with government is in a state of constant flux.

Thirdly, each faction tends to read their own culture into the gospel. Political freedoms are assumed to be part of Christianity. Modes of dress are declared acceptable or unacceptable. Technology is embraced or abhorred. Of course, there are the charlatans who appeal to the masses using self-interest rather than selflessness.

So, coming back to the original question, what is the relationship of a faithful person with government? The Scriptures are clear; follow the law of the land. However, be creative in that following. Governments in every era have had ridiculous or unjust laws. Fortunately, they have never been very good at defining them. Use the objectionable laws against them, much like Paul escaped physical punishment by using his Roman citizenship. The faithful are allowed to be clever. Further, what people say about laws is rarely accurate. For example, in public schools in the US, school officials are not allowed to promote a particular religious viewpoint. I agree. I would not want a Hindu blessing the cafeteria food. Using myself as an example, I was hired to teach math and science, not religion. So, to use class time for religion would be stealing the taxpayers’ money. However, if a student asked a religion question in class, I could answer briefly and let them know that I would be happy to answer more fully after school if they were interested. Many students came to me before or after school with such questions. Humorously, one of our grandsons (along with the school district) was sued by the Humanist Society for having a Fellowship of Christian Athletes club that met before school in a classroom. When it finally got to court, the judge threw out the case and ordered the Humanist Society to pay the district’s legal fees. People run scared of the law, assuming that the law can only hurt them. But, knowing what the law actually says usually gives a reasonable path in which faith and law can co-exist.

If, however, after researching all the options and understanding the governmental edict, there seems no way to follow the gospel and the law at the same time, do not assume that the gospel allows the faithful to violate the law. Instead, apologize to God for being a little dense and not seeing the way out of the quandary. Then, go ahead and defy the government by presenting oneself for arrest and prosecution. The faithful are never above the law. But, sometimes, the best we can see at the moment is to make the government prosecute their best citizens and feel like fools while doing it.

Appendix 1: Promises from God concerning Life on Earth

Difficulties:

- Tribulation produces good character and the peaceful fruit of righteousness and endurance (Romans 5:3 – 4, Hebrews 12:11, James 1:3)
- God causes all things to work together for good for those who love God (Romans 8:28)
- God comforts the downcast (2 Corinthians 1:3 – 7, 7:6)
- Believing results in suffering (Philippians 1:29, 2 Timothy 3:12)
- We can find contentment in any situation (Philippians 4:11 – 13)
- Peace of mind (Philippians 4:6 – 9, 2 Thessalonians 3:16, 2 Peter 1:2, 2 John 3)
- Rescued from this present evil age (Acts 2:40, Galatians 1:4, 2 Peter 1:4)

Character development:

- Godly love has been poured out in our hearts (Romans 5:5)
- Overcome through Jesus and the Spirit (Romans 7:25, 8:9 – 14, Galatians 5:16, 1 John 5:4)
- Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23 – 24)
- Maturity, growth, and unity (Ephesians 4:13 – 16, 1 Peter 2:2)
- Love, discernment, and the fruit of righteousness (Philippians 1:9 – 11, Colossians 1:9 – 11, 2:2, Titus 1:1 – 2, John 7:16 – 17, 7:37 – 38)
- Increasing love for others (1 Thessalonians 3:12)
- No fear (1 John 4:18)
- We have peace and joy (Romans 5:1 – 2, Colossians 1:11)
- Renewing of your mind makes you able (Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:14 – 18, 2 Corinthians 4:16, Colossians 3:10)
- Strengthened (Ephesians 3:16)
- Be filled with the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19)
- Partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4)

Understanding:

- Understanding (1 Corinthians 2:9 – 12, Ephesians 1:17 – 19, 2 Corinthians 3:18)
- Comprehend the love of Christ (Ephesians 3:17)
- Wisdom (James 1:5 – 8)

Importance:

- Temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19, Ephesians 2:19 – 22, Hebrews 3:6, 1 Peter 2:5 – 10)
- Kings and priests (Revelation 1:6, 5:10, 11:15, 20: 4 – 6, Romans 5:17, 1 Peter 2:9 – 10)

Realistic success:

- Unbelief is not necessarily terminal (Romans 11:23)
- Useful and prepared (2 Timothy 2:21)
- Clean conscience (Hebrews 9:14, 1 Peter 3:21)

Other assistance:

- The Spirit helps our weak prayers (Romans 8:26 – 27)
- Grant you to be like-minded, resolve differences (Romans 15:5, Philippians 3:15)

- Not in word but in power (1 Corinthians 4:20)
- Each has his own gift from God (1 Corinthians 7:7, 12:7, 12:18, Ephesians 4:7, 1 Peter 4:11, 2 Corinthians 4:7)
- No temptation too great (1 Corinthians 10:13)
- All sufficiency for every good deed (2 Corinthians 8:9 – 9:11)
- Food and clothing (Matthew 6:33)
-

Appendix 2: Saved By

Save: heal, preserve, make whole

How are we healed of the damage done by sin?
How are we preserved from the wrath to come?
How are we made whole again?

Past tense:

Romans 8:24	We were saved in this hope.
Ephesians 2:4-8	By grace you have been saved.
2 Timothy 1:8-9	[God] has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.
Titus 3:5	Not by works of righteousness we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Future tense:

Romans 5:8-11	Shall be saved from wrath through Him. Shall be saved by His life.
Romans 10:9-13	If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved...Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Non-specific time frame:

Romans 1:16	I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.
1 Corinthians 1:21	It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.
1 Corinthians 15:1-4	I declare the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved.
2 Corinthians 7:10	For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation.
Philippians 2:12	Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.
2 Thessalonians 2:10	They did not receive the love of the truth that they may be saved.
2 Thessalonians 2:13	God, from the beginning, chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.
2 Timothy 3:15	The Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.
Hebrews 7:25	He is also able to save forever those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.
James 1:21	Receive the implanted Word, which is able to save your souls.
James 2:14	What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?
1 Peter 1:9	Receiving the end of your faith – the salvation of your souls.
1 Peter 3:21	Which now saves us – baptism.

Compilation

God	People
Grace	Hope
Called	Not works to earn favor
Purpose	Washing of regeneration
Mercy	Confession
Renewing	Faith
No wrath	Calling on the name of the Lord
Jesus' life	Love of the truth
Gospel, Scriptures, Word	Come to God through Jesus
Repentance	Works as part of faith
Sanctification by the Spirit	Baptism

Question: Is salvation a rescue or an escape or both?

Appendix 3: The Symbolism of Immersion

- Acts 22:16, Hebrews 10:22 Sins washed away; bodies washed with pure water.
 - Jesus was sacrificed once (Romans 5:6 – 8, 6:10, 2 Corinthians 5:14 – 15, Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 9:26 – 28, 10:10, 1 Peter 3:18) for the sins of all people, not just for the faithful (1 John 2:2).
 - From God’s point of view, the right-and-wrong system has been paid off, so no accumulation of sins has needed to be washed away since Jesus completed His sacrifice by offering His blood in the original tabernacle in heaven. If the action of baptism causes sins to be washed away, then Jesus’ offering was ineffective, and we are capable of manipulating God into accepting us.
 - Rather, the washing away of sin must be from the point of view of the one being baptized, that the person is accepting the fact that Jesus already washed sins away. Many people travel through life with a burden of guilt for their bad choices. Baptism is a symbol of releasing that baggage.
- Acts 2:38, baptized into the forgiveness of sins and receiving the Holy Spirit
 - The preposition has been translated in various ways for the purpose of supporting various doctrines. The literal word is “into.” Translators have made the ridiculous claim that this preposition could be represented by a half-dozen different English words, leading to the conclusion that the Scriptures are entirely unclear.
 - To be immersed “into” forgiveness yields a picture that the individual is accepting that God will move the bad choices of the past out of the line of sight (forgiveness) so that a relationship may be built without hindrance, so that trust by God of that individual may be established.
 - Since we are to ask for the Spirit (Luke 11:13) and endeavor to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), one must acknowledge the work of the Spirit to make it functional. The gift of the Spirit and baptism in the Spirit are the same thing.
- 1 Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 5:26 I am declaring that I am reserved for godly purposes (sanctified). I have been declared debt-free with regard to justice (justified).
- Galatians 3:27 I am declaring that I am being transformed into the image of Jesus (put on Christ)
- Romans 6:3, 12:1 I am declaring that I become a sacrifice like Jesus.
- Romans 6:4 I am declaring that I walk in newness of life.
- Romans 6:5 I am declaring that I will be raised on Judgment Day.
- Romans 6:6 I am declaring that I am freed from slavery to sin.
- 1 Corinthians 12:13 I am declaring that I am dedicated to miraculous unity.
- Colossians 2:11 – 14 I am declaring that I am buried with Him and raised, redeemed, forgiven.
- Titus 3:5 I am declaring that I am being renewed by the Holy Spirit
- 1 Peter 3:21 The water rescued Noah from an evil world as baptism rescues me.

When I choose to be baptized, I am announcing that I will live according to these miraculous promises and am fully assured (have faith) that God will do all of these spiritual things for me.

Appendix 4: The End of Miracles

Introduction

A miracle occurs any time God alters the way things would have turned out if left untouched. We pray and ask God to do things. If God responds actively to our requests, then He is doing miracles. If God is not doing miracles any more, then there is no point to our supplications. God told various prophets about the termination of certain types of miracles, not all types of miracles.

Daniel 9:24 – 27 (~536 BC)

When Daniel wrote, Jerusalem was in ruins, having been destroyed by the Babylonians. The decree to begin its rebuilding would be issued shortly after Daniel wrote. Daniel gave benchmarks for this period of 70 weeks, at 7, 69, 69.5, and 70 weeks. The events were (week 7) the decree to rebuild, (69) the death of the Messiah, (69.5) the second destruction of the Temple, and (70) the destruction of the one who destroyed the Temple. The time periods do not seem to be proportionate, but approximate. Many applications have been made to many periods of time. One event anchors the correct understanding in history, the death of Jesus. The death of the Messiah is described in the same way in Isaiah 53:8. Jesus quoted this prophecy and applied it to Himself (Matthew 24:15), and included two additional details: that the gospel would go to the whole world first (Matthew 24:14) and that it would take place before the people of that time all died (Matthew 24:34). Some have tried to apply Matthew 24 to the end of time, claiming that the gospel has not gone to everyone, or there would be no need for missionaries. But Paul claims that the gospel had gone to the whole world by 62 AD (Colossians 1:23). Luke's parallel description of the destruction of Jerusalem removes the figures of speech used by Matthew and makes it quite literal (Luke 21:20). As a part of this sequence of history, Daniel prophesied the end of vision and prophecy in connection with the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

Zechariah 13:1 – 6 (~520 BC)

The first verse sets the time frame for the accomplishment of this prophecy, in the time of the Messiah. Three types of power will end at that time: the power of pagan idols, prophecy, and demon possession. Until that time, God allowed Satan to give some sort of power to some pagan gods (*e.g.*, Exodus 7:11, 7:22, 8:7; Revelation 13:13). After that time, God will send no more prophets. And demon possession, described so often in the Gospels and Acts, will not be allowed.

1 Corinthians 13:8 – 10

Those who desire to retain prophesy, tongues, and miraculous knowledge apply this passage to the end of time. If that were true, the description becomes useless. Paul does not need to tell us that prophecy, tongues, and miraculous knowledge will not be used in heaven. When Paul wrote this letter, the whole message of God had not yet been delivered. Paul wrote many letters after this one that contained more, new information. So did Peter and John. The 'perfect' is the completed gospel, the crowning event of which was the destruction of Jerusalem (or perhaps the fall of the destroyer of Jerusalem).

Ephesians 4:11 – 16

Paul listed five classifications of people who were “given” by God, implying that all of them were specially appointed, miraculously. This was certainly true of apostles and prophets. The only evangelists of whom we have knowledge were miraculously appointed. At least some pastors and teachers received miraculous wisdom or knowledge, as described in 1 Corinthians 12:8. These special appointments had a termination date, specified in verses 13 – 16. Jesus prayed (John 17:20 – 24) that unity, perfection, and glory (godly character) be a sign to the world that He was truly from the Father. If Ephesians 4:11 – 16, which uses the same descriptions, takes place only at the end of time, then Jesus’ prayer failed and He is not the Messiah. Further, suggesting that evangelists, pastors, and teachers are with us still would require that we have apostles and prophets until the end of time. Zechariah and Daniel described the end of prophecy in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem. Only a few groups today claim to have apostles. Therefore, Paul must be describing the time when the gospel was to be fully revealed, after which time church leaders must obtain their wisdom and knowledge through prayer (James 1:5-6) and study (2 Timothy 2:15) with the power of the indwelling Spirit.

Revelation 11:1 – 13

The miraculous powers entrusted to these two witnesses would leave them “when they have finished their testimony.” At that time, their enemies would be able to destroy them. (An interesting sidelight is the statement that they would be resurrected and would ascend to heaven in the sight of unbelievers. No inspired writer recorded the accomplishment of this prophecy, probably because they had all died.) This scene certainly happens before the end of time, since there are survivors. It cannot be a future sign of the end times because there will be no signs (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3, 2 Peter 3:9-10, Mark 13:32, Matthew 24, 36, 24:44).

Conclusion

Miracles still happen. However, these miracles are no longer performed by God as proof of His messengers or His message. We have the promise of God that He will respond to our prayers. He has, in the past, changed the course of human events on the basis of a request by one of his friends. Today, when we ask God to do a miracle, we have no visual or measurable evidence that He has done anything. We cannot tell whether God did it or whether it would have happened anyway. We cannot point to a current event and say confidently that God caused it. God has not provided that evidence. We simply trust that He has done and will continue to do what is in our best interests, including miracles. We walk by faith, not by sight.

Appendix 5: Fulfill**πληρωω**

Approximately twenty Greek words are translated “fulfill” in the New Testament. The dominant one is number 4137 in the Strong’s system, which appears about 61 times, usually as fulfill, fulfilled, or fulfilling, but also as full, fully, accomplish, complete, ended, expire, perfect, and supply, once or twice each. The general idea is the image of loading a basket to its top, which can be applied figuratively in many situations.

Not connected to the result of a specific passage in the Old Testament

- Matthew 3:15 Permit is to be so now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.
- Matthew 13:48 When it was full, they drew to shore.
- Mark 1:15 The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.
- Luke 1:20 You will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.
- Luke 9:31 ...Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to fulfill at Jerusalem.
- John 3:29 Therefore, this joy of mine is fulfilled.
- John 7:8 My time is not yet fulfilled
- John 15:11 These things I have spoken that My joy may remain in you, that your joy may be fulfilled.
- John 16:24 Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be fulfilled.
- John 17:13 That they may have My joy fulfilled in them
- Acts 2:28 (Psalm 16:11) In Your presence is fullness of joy.
- Acts 7:23 When he had fulfilled forty years...
- Acts 7:30 And when forty years were fulfilled, and angel of the Lord appeared to him
- Acts 9:23 After many days were fulfilled
- Acts 12:25 When they had fulfilled their ministry
- Acts 13:25 As John was fulfilling his course
- Acts 14:26 ...Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God to the work which they had fulfilled
- Acts 19:20 – 21 The word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed. When these things were fulfilled, Paul purposed in the Spirit...to go to Jerusalem.
- Romans 15:19 From Jerusalem round about to Illyricum I have fulfilled the preaching of the gospel of Christ.
- 2 Corinthians 10:6 ...being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled
- Philippians 2:2 Fulfill my joy by being likeminded
- Philippians 4:18 I have all and am fulfilled, having received...the things from you
- Colossians 1:25 To fulfill the Word of God (v27, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.)
- Colossians 2:10 You are fulfilled in Him
- Colossians 4:12 That you may stand perfect and fulfilled in all the will of God.
- Colossians 4:17 Take heed of the ministry you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.

- 2 Thessalonians 1:11 Fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power
- 1 John 1:4 These things we write to you that our joy may be fulfilled.
- 2 John 12 I hope to come to you and speak face to face that our joy may be fulfilled.
- Revelation 3:2 For I have not found your works fulfilled before God.
- Revelation 6:11 ...that they should rest a little longer until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was fulfilled

Connected to specific passages in the Old Testament

- Matthew 1:22 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet
- Matthew 2:15 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet
- Matthew 2:17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet
- Matthew 4:13 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet
- Matthew 8:17 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet
- Matthew 12:17 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet
- Matthew 13:35 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet
- Matthew 21:4 All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet
- Matthew 27:9 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet
- Matthew 27:35 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet
- Luke 4:21 Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.
- John 12:38 That the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled
- John 13:18 That the Scripture may be fulfilled
- John 15:25 That the word might be fulfilled which is written in their Law
- John 19:24 That the Scripture might be fulfilled
- John 19:26 For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled
- Acts 1:16 This Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas
- Galatians 5:14 For the Law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
- James 2:23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness."

Connected to unquoted passages in the Old Testament

- Matthew 5:17 Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.
- Matthew 26:54 How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?
- Matthew 26:56 But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.
- Mark 14:49 But the Scriptures must be fulfilled
- Luke 21:22 For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.
- Luke 21:24 Until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled
- Luke 22:16 I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.

- Luke 22:44 These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.
- John 17:12 None of them is lost except the son of perdition that the Scripture might be fulfilled
- Acts 3:18 But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled.
- Acts 13:27 Those who dwell in Jerusalem...have fulfilled them in condemning Him
- Romans 8:4 That the righteous requirements of the Law might be fulfilled in us
- Romans 13:8 He who loves has fulfilled the Law

Connected to the words of Jesus

- Luke 7:1 When He fulfilled all His sayings in the hearing of the people...
- John 18:9 That the saying might be fulfilled which He spoke
- John 18:32 That the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.

Connected to unknown passages in the Old Testament

- Matthew 2:23 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets

Observations

- The vast majority of the contexts are connected to the activity of God.
- A few passages appear to be ordinary, but the implication could be included that the seemingly ordinary event was part of a bigger plan orchestrated by God (Matthew 13:48, Acts 7:23, Acts 7:30, Acts 9:23)
- Several passages relate to fulfilling joy, perhaps summarized in Psalm 16:11.
- A generic definition of the word is needed that fits all of the contexts, whether literally or figuratively applied.
- The “fulfillment” of prophecy only sometimes could be read to mean that a specific prediction was accomplished, and always may be understood not to imply that a prediction was satisfied. Most of the cited fulfillments would not be anticipated by a concerned reader of the Old Testament before the time of Jesus. Predictions are not valid unless they were understood before the supposedly predicted event took place. The word, fulfilled, rather paints the picture that the history is being used to illustrate and explain new events. The original prediction applied to a specific historical event in the past (*e.g.*, Isaiah 7:14). The application to Jesus birth was intended to explain the attitude of the people of the time: hopeless and fearful of losing their country. (Yes, the virgin birth is safe; see Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:26 – 35.) In the time of Jesus and the church, the history of Israel was used as an allegory, “filling up” the meaning of the special history of Israel and is taken to a new level as illustrations of New Testament events. This definition eliminates the problems of “double fulfillment” and applications that were not anticipated by the original audience. The literal accomplishment of the prediction happened. The fulfillment uses the scenario of the accomplished prediction to illustrate a new thought, and implies that God built that illustration into the history of Israel for the purpose of teaching the church.

- Commentators have had to work too hard to explain how a “fulfilled” Old Testament Scripture was a satisfied prediction. “Fulfilled” means “illustrated by.” The meaning should be understandable by average people. As an example, consider four passages at the beginning of Matthew: 1:24, 2:5, 2:17, and 3:3. Two of them recount when a clear prediction was being satisfied. Two of them are applications of an illustration that God set up well in advance. Plenty of predictions were satisfied in the New Testament. The “fulfilled” Scriptures are not among them; those are illustrations.

Many events of the Old Testament are cited in the New Testament.

- Which events did God engineer as examples of spiritual principles?
- Which events were natural events that God used as examples?
- How can we tell the difference?

Romans 15:4 For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

- The point of the statement is in a context stretching back to 12:1, concerning behavior.
- The immediate reference is the behavior of Jesus, who suffered for doing the right thing
- The example of things “written before” is from Psalm 69:9, which is cited at least four times.
 - John 15:25 But this happened that the word might be fulfilled...
 - Matthew 27:34, 48 No specific application given
 - Romans 11:9 – 10 Just as it is written...
 - Acts 1:20 For it is written...
- The original context concerned the life of David.
- God reveals that He engineered this psalm to be fulfilled in Jesus.
- Paul implies that this and other Old Testament events were engineered by God centuries in advance in order to be teaching tools for Christians.
- Which events did God engineer and which did God just use?

1 Corinthians 10:11 Now these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

- The specific references:
 - The cloud that lead and protected the Israelites after the exodus and in the wilderness
 - The dividing of the Red Sea
 - The manna
 - Miraculously supplied water from a rock
 - The golden calf
 - Immorality and (or as a part of) paganism on the Plains of Moab
 - Grumbling at difficulties and Moses
 - The ten spies died shortly after their bad report
- The specific applications:
 - The danger of unbelief
 - The danger of lust
 - The danger of idolatry
 - The danger of immorality
 - The danger of testing Christ

- Paul implies that these events were engineered by God for the purpose of being examples for the church
- Which events did God engineer and which did God just use? Prudence dictates limiting the correspondences to the great number revealed by inspired writers, restricting ourselves to the specifics given in the Word. And, we must include the logical progression for each application so as not to contribute to the confusions of the past.

Specific events labeled as “fulfilled” in Jesus and in the church:

- Matthew 1:22 – 23 In Isaiah 7, Ahaz (representing the people of God) was fearful that the Kingdom would be destroyed by foreign invaders and that an outside king would replace the line of David. The fulfillment found in the virgin birth of Jesus was the same promise that the Kingdom would not pass from David (Herod was an Idumean), that the foreigners would no longer be a threat, and that the apostate Northern Kingdom would be taken away within 65 years. Jesus became the everlasting king of the everlasting kingdom; the kingdom would no longer be threatened; and that apostate Israel would be utterly destroyed.
- Matthew 2:15 In Hosea 11:1, the prophet lists many events in which God lovingly cared for, rescued, and guided His people, only to have them revert to paganism. The specific event of the quotation refers to the release from slavery in Egypt, which is repeatedly used in the New Testament as an image of release from bondage to sin. The rest of Hosea 11 also expands on the refusal to repent by those whom He “healed.” Those who did not know that they had been healed would be taken captive. Christians who do not realize that they have been granted the power to overcome will be taken captive again.
- Matthew 2:17 – 18 Jeremiah 31:15 gave hope to Judah that captive Israel would one day return. Matthew applied this to those who mourned the loss of infants in Bethlehem, that they would be reunited. And, since the story in Matthew 2 concerns the birth of the Messiah, the extended application is that the church would suffer terrible things, but would be reunited.
- Matthew 4:13 Isaiah 9:1 – 2 is the counterpoint of a comparison that starts in 8:11. The specific comparison in 9:1 – 2 is to the tribal territories of Zebulun and Naphtali which were often overrun by adjacent countries. Isaiah used them as an example that even those who have had the worst history will be rescued. Joseph settling in Galilee illustrates that God rescues even those who have been far from God and have no good history of being faithful.
- Matthew 8:17 Isaiah 53:4 is in a section long held to be Messianic, although the original application was to Judah in Hezekiah’s time (see next paragraph). This character trait of the Messiah that was described by Isaiah was further illustrated by the healings that Jesus performed. Isaiah, in this section, was largely poetic and general. Matthew illustrates spiritual healing with physical healing. Jesus did not just cure people; a debt was paid, He took our sin. The image is that of Jesus taking the illnesses and demons into Himself.
- Matthew 12:17 – 21 The context of Isaiah 42:1 – 4 begins in Isaiah 40:1 and continues at least through chapter 59 if not the end of the book. Many portions of this long prophecy are cited in the New Testament. Many have assumed that this quotation was for the purpose of revealing the accomplishment of a prediction, which arises from the assumption that Isaiah’s purpose was to speak of the Messiah. It was not. His original audience was Judah of Hezekiah’s time. Isaiah announced that Judah would be saved by God (40:1).

Reading the whole passage surfaces several comments that show that the original meaning was to comfort and admonish those in Judah around 700 BC (40:27, 41:2, 41:8, 41:25, 42:23 – 43:7, 43:14, *et al*). Fulfillments in the New Testament are numerous, meaning that God built this illustration of division, captivity, rescue, restoration, and help as an historical illustration of Christ and the church. The specific application for Matthew 12:17 is the character of Jesus which would be nonviolent “until He sends forth justice to victory.”

- Matthew 13:35 Psalm 78 is a recounting of the history of Israel at least up to the time of David if not the Divided Kingdom (v9 and v 67). The author’s point was not about hiding God’s teaching, but revealing it and passing it on (v3 – 4). Matthew used the psalm to explain why Jesus used parables. He was not using Jesus’ teaching style to redefine the psalm. Matthew’s point was that Jesus’ parables were a means of recounting the interactions of God with humans so that that history could be passed along to future generations. The psalmist’s point about parables and dark saying (which were heard and known) was that prophets often used parables and similar illustrations, which the people understood. Jesus “filled up” the illustration God built with the prophets. The prophets could have issued literal warnings, but God chose to use figurative language to set the stage for Jesus’ style of presentation. Both Jesus and the prophets were effective because their illustrations were easily remembered and passed along.
- Matthew 21:5 The quotation is from the middle of a prophecy extending from Zechariah 9:1 – 11:3, from early in the Restoration period, when things were not going well for the Israelites returning from Babylon, along with some from Assyria and Egypt. The prophecy begins with judgments against surrounding countries. The quoted line (9:9) is a description of the joy of Israel because of their deliverance. Zechariah was delivering a message of hope to those who were struggling (Ezra 5), which was accomplished in the re-establishment of Israel over the next century, predominantly during the time of Nehemiah. The people at that time, although taking great risks to return to their ancestral lands, were facing huge opposition from entrenched residents of the region who had moved in after the various deportations. God promised them victory, which was slow in coming due to their frequent lapses in faith. Jesus made a point of riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to “fill up” the illustration of Zechariah. God’s kingdom would be victorious, limited only by the faith of its citizens.
- Matthew 27:9 The citation comes from Zechariah 11:12 – 13, the same passage as the paragraph above. It is unlikely that Matthew forgot which prophet said this in the space of a few pages. Many have offered creative explanation of why this citation is attributed to Jeremiah. The simplest is that “Jeremiah” was not in the original text, but was inadvertently added by a later copyist (who didn’t know his prophets very well). This is confirmed by the fact that the oldest Syriac versions do not contain the name of a prophet. Zechariah’s point was that God was finished with those who inhabited the land during the Captivity. Apparently, God had established some sort of relationship with them (covenant, 11:10) during that period, but now God was done with them, so they would be slaughtered like a herd of livestock (which is a normal process). Despite the fact that God had cared for these faithless people for centuries, they had no gratitude and offered an insulting amount as compensation for His services. Matthew’s point was that God “filled up” the odd illustration in Zechariah with the price paid to Judas, implying that the leadership of Israel in the time of Jesus was of the same nature as the pagan inhabitants of Palestine when the Israelites began to return from captivity.

- Matthew 27:35 Psalm 22, a song by David concerning his own difficult times, was “filled up” in the crucifixion (*cf.* Matthew 27:43, 46, John 19:24, Hebrews 2:12). The figures of speech used by David concerned his own difficulties. Because Matthew used the term, fulfilled, we are to understand that God intentionally used these images so that they could be applied to what appeared to be the abandonment of Jesus. The application was that, just as David was persecuted and brought low, he was made king and ruled a mighty and wealthy nation. Despite events of the present for each of them, both had in their hearts the sentiments of v22 – 31. Matthew offers this fulfillment to explain the attitude of Jesus at His death.
- Luke 4:21 Jesus said that Isaiah 61:1 - 2 was fulfilled in His earthly ministry. Isaiah wrote the original as a word of encouragement to the people of his own time (*e.g.*, v4), bringing hope to those who saw the devastation of the Northern Kingdom and the predicted fall of Judah. Jesus filled up this image for spiritual Israel. God engineered the history of Israel to be an illustration of the Kingdom of God, that although the “cities” of the faithless were being destroyed (Judaism of the first century), the faithful would be consoled and receive beauty, joy, praise, and righteousness (v3) as they rebuilt the ruined religion.
- John 12:38 John applied the words of Isaiah 53:1 to Jesus’ ministry. The original application was to the Northern Kingdom, recently taken into captivity by Assyria (52:4) and to Judah, recently devastated yet rescued from the same (52:9). The people did not heed the servants sent to them and considered Hezekiah to be stricken. This piece of history was manufactured by God to illustrate how the people of God would be in captivity to the world (the Hellenistic Jews), be rescued from seeming destruction (Roman occupation), yet be redeemed by one considered stricken, Jesus.
- John 13:18 Jesus quotes Psalm 41:9 to describe Judas. The psalm is a cry for help by a faithful person who is betrayed. Historically, the scene is Absalom’s rebellion (2 Samuel 18). The betrayer was Ahithophel, David’s counselor who defected to Absalom. Jesus applies that scene to His own situation.
- John 15:25 Jesus quoted either Psalm 35:19 or 69:4. Psalm 69 may be more likely since it is quoted six times in the New Testament for different portions, whereas this would be the only one for Psalm 35. Either psalm fits the occasion, although Psalm 69 may have more points of contact with Jesus’ point expressed in John 15:18 – 24. Jesus brought the psalm to its ultimate application.
- John 19:24 See Matthew 27:35
- John 19:28 The quotation is uncertain, but probably refers to Psalm 22:15.
- Acts 1:16 The psalm referenced by Peter is uncertain. The more probable source is Psalm 41:9, quoted by Jesus in John 13:18.
- Galatians 5:14 Paul quotes Leviticus 19:18. Certainly the meaning of fulfilled cannot be that of a prediction, since the quote is part of the Law of Moses and was a command to Israel. Rather, the concept of Leviticus 19:18 was the generalization of the Law. Paul’s point is in verse 13, do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh. People are inclined to use law codes to their own ends. Paul points out that the Law of Moses was governed by the principle of love (doing what is best for the other person). So, the ultimate application of the law is love.
- James 2:23 James quotes Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.” The use of “fulfilled” cannot mean “satisfying a prediction,” since this

is an historical example, not a prediction. Rather, the idea is that faith is brought to its fullest application when it results in works.

- Luke 23:46 This passage does not use the word, fulfilled. However, Jesus used a phrase from Psalm 31:5. The idea of fulfillment is obvious.
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Appendix 6: Perfect

Τελειος (along with the same root word plus various endings) is translated perfect, mature, and complete in the various translations. But having three completely different English words for one Greek word is a problem, as though the translators were deciding the meaning according to what they believed the passage to be saying. But, having three different meanings implies that something was missed. A single definition, “consistent,” works in every context.

Matthew 5:48 “Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In the previous 30 verses, Jesus reviewed many of the ways in which people rationalize self-righteousness. So, this perfection has to do with being consistent in all parts of life. Further, since God is Spirit, this perfection is not addressing physical behaviors. Rather, we are to be consistent in our godly character. Of course, that godly character will spill over into our behaviors. Jesus presented this conclusion as though it were an achievable goal.

Passages that associate perfection and people:

- John 17:20 – 23 Jesus prayed that His future followers “be τετελειωμένοι into unity.” Jesus says that He has given them His “glory,” which is His character. This character leads Christians to being consistent. One way this consistent character manifests itself is unity, which is to be evidence that Jesus is the Son of God.
- Hebrews 12:23 The church is populated by “the spirits of righteous men made τετελειωμένων.” The implication is that God made these spirits consistent because they were not consistent.
- Hebrews 10:14 “For by one offering He has τετελείωκεν for all time those who are sanctified.” The sanctified have been made consistent.
- Hebrews 6:1 “Let us press on upon τελειότητα.” Due to the image of babies and milk in 5:12 – 14, this appears to be a figure of speech for the objective of growing up, becoming consistent.
- Colossians 4:12 Epaphras prayed that his friends in Colossae “stand τέλειοι and fully assured in all the will of God.” The subjectivity of maturity does not fit with the absolute statements of Epaphras’ prayer. Rather, he prayed for their consistency.
- 1 Corinthians 2:6 “Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are τελείοις.” Verses 10 – 16 describes these consistent people as those who have “the mind of Christ,” referring to believers living on earth.
- Ephesians 4:13 Miraculously appointed leaders were provided “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a τέλειον man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” “Grow up” (verse 15) is a different word, describing a process. Consistency is the objective. If this consistency does not occur until Judgment Day, then Jesus’ prayer in John 17:20 – 23 failed.
- Philippians 3:12 – 15 Paul uses a play on words, describing himself as having “not already become τετελειώμαι,” but in the conclusion of the paragraph, includes himself in the group of those who are “τέλειοι.”
- Colossians 1:28 “That we may present every man τέλειον in Christ.”

- Hebrews 11:40 “Apart from us they should not be made **τελειωθῶσιν**.”
- James 1:4 “And let endurance have its **τέλειον** result, that you may be made **τέλειοι** and complete, lacking in nothing.”
- James 2:22 “As a result of the works, faith was **ἐτελειώθη**.”
- James 3:2 “If anyone does not stumble is what he says, he is a **τέλειος** man, able to bridle the whole body as well.”
- 1 John 4:17 – 18 “By this, the love of God is **τετελείωται** with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but **τελεία** love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears in not **τετελείωται** in love.”

Passages that attribute perfection to God:

- Romans 12:2 Through our behavior (being living sacrifices) we prove what the **τέλειον** will of God is.
- 1 Corinthians 13:10 “When the **τέλειον** comes, the partial will be done away.” The completed Word is described as consistent.
- Hebrews 2:10 “To **τελειῶσαι** the author of their salvation through suffering.” Consistency can be expanded, whereas perfection cannot.
- Hebrews 5:9 “And having been made **τελειωθεὶς**, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.”

Other passages about perfection:

- 2 Corinthians 12:9 “Power is **τελειῖται** in weakness.”
- Colossians 3:14 “Now beyond all these things, put on love, which is the **τελειότητος** bond of unity.”
- Hebrews 7:11 “Now if **τελειῶσις** were through the Levitical priesthood...”
- Hebrews 7:19 “For the Law made nothing **ἐτελείωσεν**.”
- Hebrews 9:9 “Gifts and sacrifices were offered which cannot make the worshipper **τελειῶσαι** in conscience.”
- Hebrews 9:11 “He entered through the greater and more **τελειοτέρας** tabernacle.”
- Hebrews 10:1 The Law cannot “make **τελειῶσαι** those who draw near.”
- James 1:17 “Every **τέλειον** gift is from above.”
- James 1:25 “The **τέλειον** law, the law of liberty.”
- 1 John 2:5 “Whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been **τετελείωται**.”
- 1 John 4:12 “If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is **τετελειωμένη** in us.”