

Basic Christianity

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God's Greatest Glory

Genesis 50:20

But as for you, you thought evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save many people alive.

God ordains all things that come to pass. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without a specific decree from God. Even the very hairs of our head are all numbered:

Matthew 10:29,30

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

Where the sparrow falls, or the hair lies, is decreed by God, as is what happens to it afterwards. Extrapolate the ordination of one sparrow or one hair to the working of the entire universe, and we can just begin to get some idea as to how all-powerful, all-knowing and almighty God really is. This is the God that all men are duty bound to worship. He is the only God worthy of worship. Any other god who falls short of this is merely a figment of men's own imaginations:

Psalms 50:21

Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself.

Because God ordains all things that come to pass, and because God is perfect, we must conclude that all things that come to pass are working together for good:

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

The greatest good is God's glory. He is the all-powerful, all-knowing, almighty God worthy of worship, so He must get all the glory. No glory should ever go to a lesser creature such as men, or gods who are figments of men's imaginations.

Not only do all things that come to pass work out to God's glory, but God so ordains everything that it all works out to His *greatest* glory. He can't work out anything to a lesser glory, otherwise He would be less than perfect. For example, if there were, say, ten different ways to get from A to B, God would be bound to choose the one way which would lead to His greatest glory. He couldn't choose to come to pass any of the other nine ways. Extrapolate this concept to all possible events that could happen in the universe, and all interconnections between all events, and we just begin to get some idea of how God works all things to His greatest glory. There is only one path God can ever ordain, and that is the sequence and interconnection of events that actually come to pass, which is always what is to His greatest glory. All other theoretically possible ways, God will not ordain to come to pass, because it will not be to His greatest glory.

All this is very straightforward so far. However, before we can really come to believe this, there seems to be two insurmountable problems in the way:

(1.) The first one is the argument that, if God is in control of all things, then that just turns rational creatures with a will of their own, like angels and men, into robots. If we are forced to do what God decrees we do, and can't choose to do anything else, how can God account us responsible for our actions?

God has endowed rational creatures with a free will, and although the will of man has now, after the fall of Adam, lost all ability to do good (sin is the second problem which we will come to later), the choices men make are fully theirs, despite the fact that God has decreed them, as He indeed decrees all things. This might seem a difficult concept to grasp at first, but God is not only in control of all events and interconnection between events, but the wills, desires and affections of men as well. This fact just goes to show how even greater God is. Again, we only begin to see this when we start to contemplate it.

(2.) The other seemingly insurmountable problem is that of sin. If God is in control of all things, then how is it that there is so much evil in the world? Surely evil can't come from God? Well, sin *has* come into the world. God has ordained it to come to pass, so we must conclude that this is because His greatest glory can only be served by its presence. But sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God. This fact presupposes the existence of rational, created beings with positive laws having been given them by God. Sin can't exist in God alone because He's not a created being, neither is He under any law. As soon as God created rational creatures and gave them positive laws, at least the theoretical existence of sin (i.e. their breaking these laws) came into being.

Consider the following examples of evil acts:

(a.) Adam ate the forbidden fruit and brought all mankind into an estate of sin and misery. But God ordained this, as He knew it would be to His greatest glory in the end (which Adam did not and could not know). Only by there being a fall into sin can there be a plan

of redemption, which would glorify God far more than if there had been no fall, and therefore no plan of redemption, at all.

(b.) The crucifixion of Christ was at the hands of wicked men, who shall be duly punished for their wickedness. But only by the crucifixion of Christ could God's plan of redemption be brought about:

Acts 2:24

Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.

These wicked men had no idea of what God's plan was, but had their own selfish motives for crucifying Christ, so they are culpable and God is not.

(c.) Similarly, we can extrapolate this concept to the holocaust of World War II, suicide bombers, indeed every sin against God's commandments we can think of. God ordains them all to His greatest glory - otherwise He wouldn't have allowed them to come to pass in the first place. He frustrates many a plan in men's minds.

So we now see how even greater God is. Not only is He in control of all events, all interconnection between events, the wills, desires and affections of all rational creatures, but all sinful acts and thoughts of men as well.

Finally, it could be objected that if a wicked act, e.g. the crucifixion of Christ, comes to pass, and as it therefore must be to God's greatest glory; then why should such acts be called wicked and men punished for them, when, after all, God's greatest glory is being served by them?

Romans 6:1

Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?

Well, the answer lies in the fact that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, therefore He knows what to decree, and indeed has the power to decree it - all events that come to pass being only ever worked out by Him to His greatest glory. Men and other rational creatures are neither all-knowing nor all-powerful. They can neither see the future nor powerfully make sure that anything they decide to do can come to pass anyway. God can always frustrate them if what they intend is not to His greatest glory.

So, because men are not capable of knowing or effecting what is to God's greatest glory, God has given them another rule to live by instead of the rule of "whatsoever comes to pass." The rule of life given to men is the moral law, which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments. This is *always* our rule of life. However, on many occasions, e.g. the crucifixion of Christ, God does not actually decree what is in keeping with the moral law to come to pass, but what is a transgression of it (i.e. sin). This, only God has the right to do, because only He can see when it is best to decree what is (to men) evil, for the purpose of leading events to His greatest glory in the end. Men can never see or know this. God is perfectly just in consequently judging men for breaking His commandments, even though God might actually decree oftentimes for their actions to come to pass - for His greatest glory.

So we see that our rule of life is the moral law, which we are duty bound to keep; whereas God's rule of life is His greatest glory, which He is bound to decree. We can't begin to

fathom how God's greatest glory should come about. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't:

- (1.) Begin to realise all this, and therefore see how great God is.
- (2.) Love God's holy law and live our lives in the light of it, and it alone.
- (3.) Give God all the glory in all things and:

Isaiah 2:22

Cease from man whose breath is in his nostrils, for wherein is he to be accounted of?

(4.) Realise that God's greatest glory may be (and often is) displayed through unpleasant experiences for ourselves - indeed, even eventually our death. We have no right to believe that God will not bring on us unpleasant adversities; but when they come, we have the comfort of knowing that they are all working out to God's greatest glory, because He has brought them to pass. Therefore, we need never fret, in any circumstance, knowing that God is always glorified to the greatest possible extent in all things that come to pass.

What Does God Require of Us?

There is a God

Many people today deny the existence of God, but, despite their protestations, this is an untenable position to hold. All we need do is look to the Creation around us, the sky, the sea, the hills and forests, and we can do no other than come to the conclusion that there is an all-powerful Creator God who designed it all and keeps it all in being. God's eternal power and Godhead can clearly be seen from the things that are made by Him.

We are therefore without excuse

The reason that many people in our day deny this to be the case is not because science has proven otherwise, but rather it is because they don't **want** to believe it. Many people are violently against the idea that there is a God who created everything, because the consequence of admitting such a God exists must lead to the conclusion that all of us are therefore answerable to Him. We can't escape this conclusion. If God exists, then we are answerable to Him because we were created by Him. Therefore if we continue to ignore the fact that God exists, we are without excuse when it comes to the judgment to which such a God must hold all his rational, created beings accountable.

The Conscience

Creation tells us that there is a God, and by inference that we are accountable to Him. This is all that Creation can tell us in and of itself, but it is enough for us to be without excuse if we neglect to then find out what God requires of us. It is therefore our duty to find out what God requires of us, and we should not be able to sleep until we have not only found this out, but once having found it out, put it into practice in our lives. God has also given all men a conscience, which will not give them rest until they have done this. Men do all sorts of crazy things of their own invention in order to try to placate their own consciences, but in the end none of them work, because of the very fact that they have invented these stupid ideas themselves, rather than gone looking to God Himself for the revelation that He has given mankind to show us what He requires.

God's Revelation

Creation shows us that there is a God and that we are all responsible to then find out for ourselves what God requires. In fact God's revelation as to what He requires of us is not very difficult to find at all. Most people know it. At least three major religions all acknowledge what this revelation of His law is. It is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments, which are common to Christians, Muslims and Jews alike. The problem is that most people in today's world simply don't want to be told what to do and how to behave, because they are happy with making their own rules up, and not being responsible to anyone for their behaviour. So they deliberately forget God. The one thing truly needful to solve all the problems of mankind, and to create a world of good, humble, God-fearing, caring people has been lost sight of completely. Without this, the world will never get any better, rather it will get worse, and no amount of man-made ideas will change the situation, just maybe cover the problems over for a time.

The Solution

If everyone kept the Ten Commandments, the world's problems would be solved at a stroke. No longer would the world be full of people out to get what they can for themselves, living selfish lives and not bothering much about other people less well off than they. A world full of people loving God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and their neighbour as themselves would solve everything at a stroke. So why don't we do it?

A further problem

Here is the proof of the sad fact that none of us are able to keep the law of God, even when we know what it is. None of us can live up to that standard. Indeed, our natural instinct is to rebel against God's law and deliberately hate it, wanting to live for our own pleasure and invent our own morality instead. We think that we shouldn't be responsible to a God, especially one who gives us a law that demands of us more than we can do. This, we say, is the ultimate in unfairness. How can we believe in a God that is so cruel?

God's Ultimate Solution

First of all, God created man upright, but Adam, the first man (this fact is common to all three major religions. It is the evolutionist, who doesn't believe in a first man, that is out of step here), sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, and all mankind descending by ordinary

generation from him, i.e. you and me, inherited a totally corrupt nature as a result. This is why we can't keep God's law no matter how hard we try. Try keeping the Ten Commandments in thought, word and deed for a day, or an hour. All I have to say to you is the phrase "dirty thought," and you've had one. Don't pretend that you haven't. This is the wretched condition we are all in by nature.

Again, it is argued that it is unfair of God to subject all men to being born into such a condition, when it was only Adam that fell in the first place. Well, for a start it is not unfair of God. He can create a world any way He likes, and it is not up to us to complain. But more than this, God **has** provided a way of escape from our condition. So there **is** a way out. Even so, most men prefer not to believe the problem exists in the first place, than to believe a problem with a way out.

Remember what we have learned so far:

- The fact of Creation shows us there is a God.
- The fact there is a God means that we are responsible to Him.
- The fact that we are responsible to Him means that we must search out what duty this God requires of us.
- When we find what duty He requires of us we find out that we can't keep this law ourselves.
- When we find out that we can't keep this law ourselves we must search out to see whether God has a way of escape, and if so to take hold on it with all that we have, or face the consequences.

Cry for Mercy

No longer do we now have Islam and Judaism with us. Both these religions believe that, despite Adam's fall, we are still able to keep the law ourselves. They won't see that the real problem is within us, so they won't see the need to go searching any further for a solution. We need to see the depth of our own inability to keep God's law, and to cry out for Him to have mercy on us. God has no obligation to answer. If God sent you or me into eternal conscious torment in body and soul in hell fire forever, it would only be what every one of us deserves as the just punishment for our sins. God is always perfectly just, He cannot be otherwise.

But God is also a merciful God. He sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. Cry to Him for mercy. He is our only hope.

Zephaniah 2:3

Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD'S anger.

Becoming a Christian

Misconceptions

On the subject of becoming a Christian, there are a lot of misconceptions.

Many people believe that they are born a Christian. Everyone has a culture which they are born into, and this is usually based on some religion, whether it be a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist or any other religion. Many think that being a Christian is similar, and speak particularly about European and American countries being “Christian” countries, as though all those born in these places are automatically born a Christian. But we only have to take a quick look at these countries to realise that this is not so. In such countries church attendance is very low, and the vast majority believe that we all evolved from monkeys, everything happens by chance and when you are dead that is the end. This is atheism, and not Christianity at all. So we can’t say that anyone is born a Christian because of the culture they come from. The best we can say is that a few people may have had a Christian influence in their upbringing.

Some people think that becoming a Christian is like joining a club – you just become a member if you want to. But why join a church? A lot of people do join churches because they want friends or a social life. But why not join the local Women’s Institute or go to a whist drive or something else instead, if that’s what you want? Christianity is not merely a social club.

Other people think that they can give Christianity a try, as a sampler to see if it works, so they start going to church and joining in church activities. Invariably, of course, it doesn’t work for them, so they come away, give up church altogether, and become very bitter against Christianity, saying, “Well I gave it a try and it didn’t work.” But why should God bother with anyone who is not going to be genuine with Him? We can’t just “give Him a try” to see if it works, because He will make sure it doesn’t work for us.

Finally, many, many people think they can strut into heaven based on their own good works. But this attitude does not take into account the sinful nature we all inherited by the fall of Adam. We can never do enough good works to please God, our sinful nature drags us back all the time:

Romans 8:8

So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Isaiah 53:6

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way.

So, we have a problem – our sin. Consequently, becoming a Christian is far more than any of these things.

The Problem

The sad fact is that we are all lost sinners, who not only cannot save ourselves, but by nature we do not even believe we need saving from our sins. Our hearts have been so dulled to the reality of things:

Psalm 14:2,3

The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

We need to recognise this fact before we can even begin to see the solution. Our sinful nature, of course, tries to conceal this from us, so most people in this world continue on totally oblivious to any problem. This is what Christ said would happen:

Matthew 7:13-14

Broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat; because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

This is not helped by the fact that in the church there are many false teachers who pander to this sinful nature and deny the seriousness of the situation, because immediately after the above quote, Christ warns His people to:

Matthew 7:15

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Yes, even many church leaders will say that everything is all right, we should not be negative, sin is not a problem, God will save everybody, so just feel good about yourselves and be happy. But this philosophy is the way of this present evil world. It won't work in the end, because it is totally opposed to what the Bible actually teaches us about human nature.

The Solution

Firstly we need to recognise the problem. We must see our need of a Saviour before we can come to Him. Christ said:

Mark 2:17

They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Those who think they have no need of the doctor, will never go to him. Similarly, those who think they have no need of a Saviour, who think they are righteous in themselves, will never go to Christ. Only those who see their sins and therefore their need of Christ will have a heartfelt, sincere, genuine desire to seek help from God. This is what we need. Once we see our inability to save ourselves, we can cry to God for mercy. *Then* God can begin to work in our hearts, grant us faith and repentance (both of which are gifts of God, we cannot whip them up ourselves), and bring us to a true saving knowledge of Himself.

The prophet Ezekiel spoke about a new heart which the LORD can give us:

Ezekiel 36:26

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

Christ spoke about being “*born again*” (sadly, a much misunderstood phrase today):

John 3:3

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And if we truly come to Christ for salvation, we become a “new creature”:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

This is what it is to become a Christian. Christians are all those who have truly been born again of the Spirit of God, had a new heart put within them, and have been saved from the consequence of their sins by the substitutionary blood atonement purchased by Christ on the cross.

Romans 3:24-25

Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.

Ephesians 1:7

In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.

Hebrews 9:14

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Hebrews 9:28

So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

The Christian Life

Having been given a new heart, this does not mean that we become perfect straight away. We still have the old nature within us, of which Christians are all too aware that it drags them back into their old ways time and time again. But once the new heart has been put within us, we can at least begin to please God, and the Christian life from then on is one of nurturing the new heart and mortifying the old heart as we slowly grow in the Christian faith:

Romans 8:13

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

Romans 6:12-13

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield

yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.

2 Peter 3:18

But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be glory, both now and for ever. Amen.

The Word of God

How do we do this? We must stick close to the Word of God. Only by becoming familiar with the Bible and its contents can we wean ourselves off the vain philosophies received by tradition from our fathers (1 Peter 1:18), and onto the truths of Christianity. We must be careful however. So many churches call themselves “Bible-believing,” yet they all teach different things. We should not follow men, or movements, but the Holy Spirit will teach us and lead us into all truth. Stick close to the Lord and He will not let us be led astray.

John 14:26

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

1 John 2:27

But the anointing which ye have received of Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him.

The Evil Heart

This world is full of evil. Evil everywhere. And I don't mean just in faraway places on the News bulletins. But closer to home. We experience it every day in our lives. People cheating on us. People lying to us. People trying to take advantage of us all the time. People with hatred in their hearts for one thing or another. Why do you think that is? Why do people do that? What's the answer?

The Bible tells us the problem and gives us the answer. The problem is the human heart. Every one of us has got an evil heart. That's the problem. We get told so many times, even by religious leaders, to “have faith in human nature.” But how can we, when we see the world in the mess it's in? When we see people cheating one another all the time? And we're told by psychologists that we should have a sense of our own self-esteem, self-worth, self-confidence. But we can't. We've got nothing in ourselves to esteem, nothing in ourselves to have confidence in. We're so evil, selfish and self-centred in our hearts.

Genesis 6:5

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Psalm 53:2,3

God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God. Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Ecclesiastes 9:3

The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Mark 7:21-23

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

That's it. There's the problem. The human heart. The heart of each one of us is evil. We were born like this. There nobody that does good, no not one. Can we not see that yet? Or are we stupid enough to carry on living an evil life, a selfish self-centred life, and pretending that everything's fine, when it's clearly not? That's foolish. That's stupid.

Now, that's the problem. So, you may say, where's God then? If God exists at all, why doesn't He do anything about it? Why does He let the world carry on like this? It's not fair. How can there be a God, if all this has happened to me? These are common, legitimate questions.

Well He has done something. He's solved the only problem that there is, the problem of the human heart. There isn't any other problem. No political movement can solve anything. No religious movement can solve anything. We, as individuals, simply need to recognise our part in the problem. It's not just something out there that I don't have to bother with, that's nothing to do with me. Yes, there's plenty of evil out there in the world, and that's the problem of each individual that causes it. But what about us, our own personal responsibility, our own sins? That's what we're responsible for.

Most people try to laugh this all off, and pretend their sins before God don't exist. But it's exactly the evil of our own hearts that's the problem. And we, as individuals, are responsible for our own sins, whether we accept that or not. If we don't do anything about it, God is quite rightly going to judge us, and give us whatever punishment we deserve.

But God has solved the problem. There is a way out. He sent a Saviour into the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, to save His people from their sins. That's what His name means:

Matthew 1:21

Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

God sent Jesus Christ, the Son of God, into this world for one purpose, to die on a cross in the place of all those who come to Him. It's very simple. Do you want to be saved from your sins? From your sinful nature? From the evil of your own heart? We can't change ourselves. None of us. It's impossible:

Jeremiah 13:23

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.

Have you come to realise the evil, the self-centredness, in your own heart and want to be saved from it? Well, you can be. All any of us has to do is to call on our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ for mercy. God is a merciful God. But we've got to accept the problem, and be genuine when we approach Him.

You don't have to join this church or that organisation, or do this great thing or that great thing to be accepted by God. Simply call on Him in prayer.

Isaiah 55:4,5

Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

God will answer every genuine prayer. And you'll know when He's answered, because He'll give you a new heart and a new nature. A nature that can now begin to live a good life. You know as well as I do that Christians are nowhere near perfect, and never will be in this life. But they've all been given a new heart and a new nature, a nature that can at least begin to hate the evil of their old hearts and begin to change, to become useful people in this world, and not useless and self-centred any more.

That's the answer to all the problems of the world. God changes people, one heart at a time. We all need to call on our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ for salvation, and know the heart change that only He can give.

The Emptiness of Life

What are we living for? We get up, we eat, we do what we do, we sleep, then after a few years we die. That's it. What's the point? Why bother?

And here's another thing. After we're dead, who remembers us? Yes, many of us will have family members who'll miss us, although it has to be said, that's not the case with everybody by any means. But, even the family members we've left behind will die eventually, and then we'll be completely forgotten about. Go to a graveyard. Some of the more modern graves will have flowers on them, but most are forgotten about completely. And that's going to be us one day. So what's the point living, when we're going to be forgotten?

And while we're living, what are we doing? To most people, the only reason for living is to enjoy themselves. But what's the point? So, we live for a few years, we have what we might call a "good time," and then we die. There's one question I'd like to ask about that kind of life. What good is it to anybody else? It's not. It's pointless.

And if we only ever live for ourselves, quite often we're not going to be able to get what we want, so we'll constantly be frustrated. There's no complete satisfaction in this world, no matter how hard we try to obtain it. So what's the point?

King Solomon was one of the wisest and richest men that ever lived. And this is what he said about his own life:

Ecclesiastes 2:2-11

I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, I got me servants and maidens, also I had great possessions I gathered me also silver and gold, I gat me men singers and women singers. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

At least acknowledging that there's a problem with living for self, is the first step to finding an answer. But we don't even want to acknowledge there's a problem at all. We just want to carry on living for ourselves, for what we want, for what we can get out of life. But do you know what that is? A complete waste of a life. It's done no good at all. Oh yes, we might've enjoyed ourselves, but so what?

Why shouldn't God punish us for a life like that? Why shouldn't He? It's pointless. It's empty. It's a complete waste of time. God has put every one of us on this earth for a purpose, to be useful. Not to live for ourselves and waste our time. King Solomon eventually came to this conclusion:

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

Fear God and keep His commandments. That's the whole duty of man. Not wasting our lives living for ourselves.

Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom isn't pretending God doesn't exist and living for ourselves. That's exactly the opposite, that's foolishness.

Psalms 14:1

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.

And if there is a God, we're responsible to Him. He put us here. He gave us life. He's given us every breath we have. Every one of us needs to repent of the foolish self-centred lives we've all lived in the past, and turn to Him. Yet we hate the very idea of keeping His commandments so much. What's wrong with them? His commandments are not grievous. They're delightful.

Luke 10:27

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

What's wrong with that? Nothing. It's a beautiful way of life. The only problem we've got, is that our self-centred hearts don't want to do it. In fact even if we tried, we'd find it impossible. Which is why we need a Saviour. We can't save ourselves. We can't change ourselves. We're stuck with hearts that only want to live for ourselves. And we find it impossible to change. But if we truly repent of our sins, and call on the one Saviour God has sent into the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, we can be changed. He will give us a new heart, a new nature that wants to please God, that'll be able to please Him. And we'll find we can at last begin to live useful lives.

No other religion believes in a Saviour who saves us from our selves, our own selfish natures. In every other religion, you have to do something to placate the god or gods concerned. But we can't. Whatever we're asked to do, we won't be able to do it, because we're so self-centred by nature. We're not good enough. But Christians have a Saviour, who saves His people from their sins. We don't have to do anything to placate Him. We just have to repent of our sins, genuinely want to live a new life, and call on Him to change us. He's there for the asking.

Or do you want to carry on living for yourself? Living an empty life, or maybe trying to placate some god, when you just know you can't do it. Do you know what Jesus Christ said?

Matthew 11:28-30

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

The striving can be over. Come to rest in Jesus Christ. He's yours for the asking. Free of charge. Just find somewhere quiet and pray to Him. And I guarantee you will not be disappointed.

Dirty Washing

A few years ago I looked after my aunt's house while she went into hospital. She was telling me about the neighbours, and mentioned that the lady next door was very nice, but her husband had a nasty temper. Everybody around knew about his temper. They must have heard him shouting. But nobody ever talked about it. It's as though they tried to shut it off in their minds. They didn't want their otherwise comfortable lives upset by anything unpleasant, so they just tried as best they could to pretend it wasn't there.

Some years ago, I was walking down a street and passed by a family argument outside a house. Someone got so worked up they threw a brick through the window. As soon as the

brick had been thrown, everybody suddenly went deadly quiet, and the whole family quickly disappeared together inside the house and shut the door. That gave me the impression that this happened quite regularly, and the family were embarrassed by it and wished it didn't exist. But it did.

And what about pornography? It's very popular. But everyone who engages in it, likes to keep it quiet. Their "literature" lands on the doormat in discreet, plain brown envelopes. They think to themselves, everybody else is (supposedly) doing it, so it must be harmless, it's just a bit of fun. But they'd never talk about it in polite company.

We've all got dirty washing. Something we don't want others to know about. Something we find embarrassing. Something that exists, but we never talk about it. We might even try to "normalise" it, saying to ourselves, lots of people are like this, so it must be all right. But it's there, and it's not all right.

Just because everybody else is doing something or accepts something as "normal," doesn't mean it's right at all. Even if it's just a natural reaction, a natural instinct we do without thinking, that still doesn't necessarily make it right.

So why do we all have this dirty washing that we don't like to talk about? It's because we don't want to face up to ourselves.

The Bible teaches us about human nature:

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

That's why these things go on, and we find them embarrassing. The problem is within the human heart. But we don't like that idea. It's uncomfortable. We don't want to acknowledge that there's a problem with ourselves. But it doesn't matter how uncomfortable it is, we have to deal with it. We can't live our lives pretending it doesn't exist. We can hide it from everybody around us, but it's God we have to deal with, not men, not the majority, not our natural instincts, but the one true living God, Lord of heaven and earth.

And we'll find these things impossible to get rid of from our lives by our own efforts. In fact, in a lot of cases, we won't actually want to get rid of them at all. We quite like them. We want to hang on to them. But they're still, in God's eyes, sin.

That's why we need God.

But why are these things sin? Why should we get rid of them? Well, God doesn't like them. That should be incentive enough for us to get rid of them, we shouldn't need any other reason. But we also need to get rid of them for our own benefit too.

Sin is addictive. We can't control it, like being on drugs, or dependent on alcohol. It ends up taking us where we don't want to go. I would suggest that most drug addicts do genuinely want to give up, but they just can't.

Sin is selfish. It's only there for our own selfish ends. It has no useful function whatsoever. The cub scouts have a motto that they should do one good deed a day. Of course we should be doing far more than that, but let's start there. How many of us do one good deed

to a stranger every day? We can't even do that, let alone live our entire lives being useful to others.

Sin hurts everyone around us. Think of the longsuffering wife of someone addicted to pornography. Think of the family of someone with a temper. They have to cope with it every day. Look how sin affects everybody around you. You might enjoy it, you might think it's "normal," you might try to pretend it doesn't exist, but what about them? Don't just try to sweep it under the carpet, and say it's harmless. Face it. It hurts everybody around you. Are you really happy with that?

It's not "normal" at all. God hates it, it hurts others and it's of no use whatsoever. We need to acknowledge it as sin, not shy away from it. We're addicted to it. We can't get out of it ourselves. But that doesn't make it right.

Every one of us needs to be changed. And we can't change ourselves. But there is a solution. God came into the world to do exactly that. To save us from our sinful nature, our deceitful hearts. He sent Jesus Christ into the world to save all those who see themselves as sinners, those who recognise the problem in their own hearts and turn to Him. We must recognise our problem, want to change and then come to Jesus Christ. That's the only way out.

We all need God to clean us, to renew us, to break us free from the addictive domination of sin in our lives. Only if we come to God through Jesus Christ, we can be free indeed.

John 8:36

If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

Free from bondage to our selfish natures. Don't you want that? Or do you want to destroy yourself by giving in to your sin, your self-centredness? We're our own worst enemies. We need to be saved from ourselves more than anything else.

If you just want to carry on being self-centred, selfish, living for self, doing absolutely nothing useful in your life, you can do. Go ahead. But then don't ever complain about the mess the world is in, or about your lot in life. Saying, "I don't believe in God, because He's done this to me, or that to me, or He's made me like this. It's His fault not mine."

God has provided a solution to every situation we may find ourselves in. Jesus Christ can set you free now, today. If only you call on Him, cry to Him. Ask Him to forgive your sins and change you for ever. Nobody else can help. Call on Jesus Christ in prayer today, and if you are genuine, I guarantee you will not be disappointed.

Can a Christian Lose His Salvation

2 Peter 2:20-22

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter

end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.

When we come across passages such as this in the Bible, we may get the impression that it seems to be teaching that true believers, if they are not careful in their Christian practice, can lose their salvation.

In the Christian life, for many different reasons, it is so easy to become discouraged and backslide. This is the experience of all of us at some stage in our Christian walk, and at these times it is a real concern to many genuine Christians as to whether they can backslide so much they actually lose their salvation. It really bothers them.

The subject before us is, "Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?" And the answer is that a truly born-again Christian, who has had a new heart put within him by the Lord, and who has become a new creature in Christ, and who truly has the Holy Spirit residing in him, cannot lose his salvation. Once he has been born-again, he can't be "un-born-again," he is a new creature in Christ and so is saved to eternal life and cannot be lost.

Indeed we have scriptures to this effect, and these are a great comfort to the true believer in times of trial in his life:

Romans 8:38,39

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ

John 6:37

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

John 10:27,28

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand."

Hebrews 13:5

I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

So, in the light of such promises, how do we explain texts like the one in 2 Peter, which at least appear to suggest that you can be a Christian for a while and then later completely fall away? Maybe you know some people who have seemed to have done this. They may have been your companions in the church maybe for many years, but they gave up, and are now completely back in the world with no interest in Christian things any more.

Of course, we have to explain these passages, which seem to teach that true Christians can fall away, in the light of clearer passages of Scripture. Scripture should always

interpret Scripture. There is never a contradiction in the Bible, because it is the word of God. There might appear to be a contradiction, but it can always be explained if we study the Bible hard enough. This is why Bible study is so important.

The Parable of the Sower

The parable of the sower is a story Christ taught about the different types of people who hear the gospel (Matthew 13:3-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:4-15). Christ compared types of ground into which seed is sown to the different ways people respond to the gospel. He mentions four types:

The first type of hearer is compared to the seed that fell on the path. People hear, and there is no response, they just walk away. I am sure we know many people like this, but we are not talking about these sort of people here, this is not our subject.

The fourth type of hearer is compared to the seed that fell in good soil. This is where we want to be. If the seed falls in good soil, it grows and produces fruit. This is the true believer, who has truly been born-again, had a new heart put within him by the Lord and has become a new creature in Christ. He does respond to the gospel message, the Lord saves him and, significantly, he produces fruit. What is the fruit that the true Christian produces?

Galatians 5:22,23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.

This is all very straight forward so far. At least it's clear where these two types of people stand. But there are two other types of ground, the thorny ground and the stony ground.

The thorny ground hearers hear the word, and respond to it. They have a root in themselves, so they are truly born-again. They start to produce fruit at first, but other things soon enter in and they become unfruitful. The things that enter in are the "*cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches*" which choke the word, and stop the fruit production. These are true believers but they become almost indistinguishable from unbelievers. They'll get to heaven, but only as though through the fire. All their worldly works will be burned up and they will suffer loss:

1 Corinthians 3:15

If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

This is why there are so many calls in the Bible for us to be diligent, to walk worthy, and so on. Not because we can lose our salvation, but because we can become unfruitful.

The stony ground hearers, Christ tells us, represent those who hear the word and receive it with joy. They join the church. They may be in the church for a long time. They may hold high positions in the church. But they have never been born-again. We're told there's no root in them. Therefore they do not produce fruit of any kind. They are the hypocrites in the church. They can be flushed out when tribulation or persecution comes on the church. They'll be off like a shot.

Maybe a muslim army comes into his village and one of them puts a gun to his face and tells him to convert to Islam or die. He will have no problems converting. But the truly born-again Christian just cannot deny his Lord and would rather die than say a few simple words. Yes, some, in weakness will do it, but they will be so heartbroken with what they have done afterwards. God will forgive them, and the experience will make them stronger to resist the next time something similar happens. But here we see the difference between Christians who only outwardly profess Christianity as their faith – as soon as persecution comes, they are nowhere to be seen – and truly born-again Christians who have had a new heart put within them – these are willing to die for their faith if necessary. Incidentally, this is the reason why God sometimes brings persecution on a church, namely to purge it.

Three “Falling Away” Passages

Anyway, it is hypocrites that are in mind when we come across passages which appear at first glance to teach that a believer can lose his salvation. No, a true believer cannot lose salvation, but a hypocrite, who has never been born-again, and therefore has never had salvation in the first place, can appear to be a good church member for a long time but he will eventually fall away from his profession, unless of course he is truly converted and becomes a true believer in his heart.

Let us look at the three main passages which seem to teach a falling away, and from these we can learn how far it is possible to go in outward religion without having a new heart:

2 Peter 2:20-22

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.

Here, we see that the people concerned have “*escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*” and they have “*known the way of righteousness.*” They have head-knowledge, but not heart-knowledge. They know their Bibles very well. They can pick up the way people speak in the church and copy it. But all this is just outward with no heart change. Like a pig who has had a bath. It now looks nice and clean on the outside, and it is difficult to tell the difference between it and the true believer who has been truly cleansed from the heart. But eventually, by nature, if left to itself, it will always go back to the mud and get dirty again.

But what about this passage in Hebrews 6:

Hebrews 6:4-6

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.

These people have “*tasted the heavenly gift,*” were “*made partakers of the Holy Ghost,*” and have “*tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come,*” surely these are true believers? No, they fall away. We are told in v.9 that none of these things accompany salvation:

Hebrews 6:9

But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.

It is fruit that accompanies salvation, which none of these people have, because they don't have a new heart. They have just “tasted” such things, and not embraced them fully. We can't think that we can simply “give God a try.” Many people think that they can start going to church just to give it a try to see if it works, but inevitably, they give up in the end, and afterwards they boast to their friends, “Well, I gave God a try once, but it didn't work, I didn't get anything out of it, so I've given up now.” God is not going to bother with any of us if all we are going to do is give him “a try.”

Actually, this passage says a very solemn thing about these people. It says that such people who have “tasted” these things, if they subsequently fall away, it is **impossible** to renew them again to repentance. The least we can say is that they become more hardened against the gospel, and, humanly speaking at least, it is a lot more difficult to reach them after their experience.

But what about having been “*made partakers of the Holy Ghost*”? Surely this refers to true believers?

Well, Christ said:

Matthew 7:21-23

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

This passage teaches us that it is possible to prophesy, cast out devils and do many wonderful works in Christ's name, but still not be a true believer. All twelve disciples were sent out and given power to do all sorts of miracles, and this twelve included Judas Iscariot, who was never a true believer:

Matthew 10:1

And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.

The fact that we can do these things (or at least think we can) is not evidence of a new heart.

The third passage we need to look at is in Hebrews 10:

Hebrews 10:26-29

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?

These people had “*received the knowledge of the truth,*” which of course refers to only head-knowledge, and not a change in the heart. But what about their being “*sanctified*” by “*the blood of the covenant*”?

The word “*sanctified*” means to be “set apart.” All truly born-again Christians are “set apart” in a special way, and indeed the more they grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the more they are continually being “set apart” from the world throughout their Christian life:

Christ said:

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

But the people mentioned in this passage in Hebrews are sanctified in a different way, they are set apart as Christians only outwardly. In a similar way, we have a passage in 1 Corinthians where only one person in a family is a believer, but the whole family is considered to be “set apart” at least in some outward way:

1 Corinthians 7:14

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.

Here, an unbelieving husband is said to be “*sanctified*” and the children are said to be “*holy,*” but this doesn’t mean that any of them are truly born-again because it clearly states that the husband is still an unbeliever. This must only refer to an outward separation.

In any case, in Hebrews 10:39 we are again told that these things being spoken of do not relate to true believers:

Hebrews 10:39

But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition [which is the subject of the previous verses]; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.

So we see in all three of these passages which at first appear to suggest that a Christian can lose his salvation, we find that they don’t refer to true Christians at all. They are all only talking about hypocrites, who profess the true religion outwardly, but have never had a heart change. In the end, all of these will fall away, unless the Lord intervenes, gives them a new heart and saves them.

Objection

There is one major objection that many people have to the truth that once we have been truly saved, we can't be lost. They will say that if we are saved and can never be lost, that means that we can sin all we like, and God won't mind, we'll still get to heaven. Where is righteousness in that?

Anyone who thinks this way does not have, or at least does not understand the concept of the new heart properly. If we have been truly born-again, the very idea of sinning as much as we want is horrifying to us. God has put a new heart within us. We no longer chase after the desires of the old heart. With the new heart, we now hate sin, and we love righteousness. We no longer have an inclination to "want" to sin all we like. People who have never experienced the new birth, can't understand this because all they have experience of is the old heart which is quite happy to sin all the time. With the new heart, sin is now distasteful to us. A true believer still falls into sin, because they have still got remnants of the old heart within them, but every time this happens, they hate themselves for doing so. They mourn over themselves, sin always bothers them or, which it didn't do before their conversion.

We therefore see the absolute importance of making sure we have a new heart, and are truly one of the Lord's people. Without a new heart, we can't be saved. One day this world is going to be judged. God:

Acts 17:30,31

....now commandeth all men every where to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

We are all sinners by nature and need to escape from the wrath to come. If we do nothing, we are condemned already for our sin:

John 3:18

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John 3:36

He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

The Bible teaches:

John 3:3

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him.

Romans 8:8

So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

To receive salvation from our sins at all, we need a new heart. The Bible describes this in various ways:

John 3:7

Ye must be born again.

Ezekiel 36:26

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Ephesians 1:13

Ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.

Conclusion

Renounce your self-confidence, recognise your inability, repent of your sins, cry to the Lord Jesus Christ to save you from your sins, acknowledge that you can't save yourselves, ask for the gifts of repentance and faith, ask for a new heart to be put within you. Then, and only then can you begin to produce fruit.

And, if you are a true Christian, realise this: the millionth time you fail, and sin against the Lord, yes, it will grieve you, and you will hate yourself completely for it, but you have the most wonderful comfort in the fact that you can never be lost:

John 10:28

And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

Hypercalvinism

"*Hypercalvinism*" is a term of derision that is used in evangelical circles, but when people who use it are asked for a definition, they are not so forthcoming with anything distinct, and many different answers are given. Here, we hope to clarify the several different positions taken by evangelicals, to try to ascertain the correct position on each of the main issues involved, and to ask whether the term "*Hypercalvinism*" can truly be used, and if so, to whom it really refers.

There are several issues involved, the main ones being:

[1.] Whether it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ.

[2.] Whether the gospel ought to be freely offered to all men everywhere as a promise of salvation conditioned on faith and repentance.

[3.] Whether God loves or "desires to save" or "wills to save" all men everywhere.

There are at least five different church groupings within evangelicalism that take different positions on these issues. These can be summarised as follows:

[A.] denies [1.], [2.] and [3.] = position of the Gospel Standard Baptists

[B.] affirms [1.] but denies [2.] and [3.] = position of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America

[C.] affirms [1.] and [2.] but denies [3.] = the true position.

[D.] affirms [1.], [2.] and [3.] = position of John Murray, Banner of Truth.

[E.] affirms [1.], [2.] and [3.] = position of John Wesley, Arminianism.

Now let us look at these positions in turn:

[A.]

This position denies all the above points 1-3. This is the position of the Gospel Standard Baptists and many Dutch Reformed churches. No less than six of the thirty-five Articles of the Gospel Standard Baptists are relevant here. Let's take a look at them:

“Article 24. We believe that the invitations of the gospel, being spirit and life (that is, under the influence of the Holy Spirit), are intended only for those who have been made by the blessed Spirit to feel their lost state as sinners and their need of Christ as their Saviour, and to repent of and forsake their sins.”

Here we are told that the “*invitations of the gospel*” are only to be preached to those who have already been regenerated by the Holy Ghost **before** they hear the gospel. This regeneration is manifested by the fact that they are “thirsting,” “hungering,” “heavy-laden” etc. These people are known as “sensible sinners” and will always respond to the gospel when they hear it because God has already regenerated them and therefore granted them the repentance and faith necessary to savingly embrace Christ. Therefore, in this system, no-one is ever condemned for rejecting the gospel.

Passages such as Isaiah 55:1 or Matthew 11:28 are thought of as only applying to those already regenerate and thirsting after spiritual things, i.e. only the elect:

Isaiah 55:1

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Matthew 11:28

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

These passages, however, are referring to *unregenerate* people thirsting after *carnal* things, i.e. things that are not bread and that satisfy not (Isaiah 55:2). Indeed the call is to the wicked (v.7). The call is therefore to these people to thirst, buy and eat good things, spiritual things (which by nature they can't do).

How then are the elect saved from amongst this mass of people thirsting after all sorts of things but the truth? It is **through** the hearing of the gospel that they are saved. In the preaching of the gospel, the elect come to embrace the promises and the reprobate come

to harden themselves against the promises. This is the true preaching of the gospel. It is the door to the house of salvation. The elect will enter, because God regenerates them and grants them the conditions required (i.e. faith and repentance) **at the time of hearing**. The reprobate may hang around for a while but will always end up walking away.

Only **in the way of** duty is salvation to be received. All men have the duty to repent and believe in Christ. Only **in the way of** doing this are they saved. Of course they could come to Christ many years **after** hearing the gospel, so we should never give up on anyone, but never is it possible to come to Christ **before** or **without** hearing it (the case of elect infants and imbeciles excluded, as these are a special case incapable of being outwardly called, and will be dealt with later).

The man with the withered hand is our example here:

Mark 3:5

And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other.

To stretch forth his hand was something physically impossible for him to do. Yet upon Christ's command, he does so and is healed **in the way of doing so**. Similarly, it is **in the way of repentance and faith** – something impossible for the natural man to do – that we are saved. i.e. only **in the way of** repentance and faith do the elect find that God gives them the repentance and faith necessary to fulfil the command, and not before. The reprobate are condemned by the same gospel because God displays their inability as they reject it accordingly.

The gospel **IS** the power of God unto salvation, not regeneration at an earlier point in time.

Romans 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

People who believe that regeneration is **before** the preaching of the gospel would call any other position than their own "mediate regeneration," i.e. regeneration through something other than a direct act of God on the soul (e.g. a response in the sinner to a gospel call), which they would repudiate. But so would we. This would be the position of [D.] and [E.] to be dealt with below, and is the opposite error. We agree that regeneration is immediate, performed directly by God alone, but, ordinarily, **only at the moment of hearing the gospel**, not **before** and not **after**.

"Article 26. We deny duty-faith and duty-repentance - these terms signifying that it is every man's duty spiritually and savingly to repent and believe. We deny also that there is any capability in man by nature to any spiritual good whatever. So that we reject the doctrine that men in a state of nature should be exhorted to believe in or turn to God."

This is the denial of what they term "duty-faith" and "duty-repentance" – that is the truth that it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ for salvation (i.e. point [1.] in the introduction above).

It is rightly pointed out that there is no “*capability in man by nature to any spiritual good whatever,*” but it is wrongly concluded from this that men in a state of nature should therefore **not** be exhorted to believe in or turn to God. Just like the Arminian (position [E.] below), they equate responsibility with ability. In this case, they say that natural man **is not** capable of responding to the gospel therefore he **is not** responsible for doing so, whereas the Arminian says that natural man **is** capable of responding therefore he **is** responsible.

However, the truth is that God **can** command men to do things they have not got the ability to perform. Just because the non-elect have no ability in themselves to repent and believe in Christ (and for that matter neither has God decreed that they should ever repent and believe in Christ), nevertheless they are still commanded to repent and believe in Christ **despite their inability**. It is argued that God would never command men to do something that they have not got the ability to perform as this would make God a mocker of men, but this does not follow because:

Ecclesiastes 7:29

God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

When God created the world He made man upright, but man fell in Adam his federal head.

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.16

The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression.

Just because man has made himself unable any longer to keep the law of God (let alone repent and believe in Christ), that does not change his duty towards God:

Acts 17:24-27

God that made the world and all things therein, hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, That they should seek the Lord.

Acts 17:30

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent....

Acts 20:21

And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

For example, if we were given some money by a rich landowner to build a house, and instead of building the house we spent it all on a luxurious holiday somewhere and had no money left afterwards to build the house, it would still be our duty to build it with what we had been given, even if we had squandered all those resources elsewhere.

All men are responsible for their not being able to repent and believe in Christ despite their current inability to do these things. It is not God that is at fault in any way for this, because He originally made man upright (even though Adam's fall was within God's eternal decree). Unregenerate men will be punished by God justly for their unbelief and unrepentant ways.

“Article 29. While we believe the gospel is to be preached in or proclaimed to all the world, we deny offers of grace; that is to say, that the gospel is to be offered indiscriminately to all.”

Here we see that not only are **commands** to all men to repent and believe denied, but **offers** are as well.

They argue that:

- (1.) God only loves the elect (which is a true statement)
- (2.) God has not provided salvation for the non-elect (which is also a true statement); *therefore* (they falsely conclude) the non-elect can't be offered a salvation that is not available for them.

As we shall be talking more of the “offer” of the gospel when speaking about point [B.] below, we shall forego it here and pass on.

“Article 32. We believe that it would be unsafe, from the brief records we have of the way in which the apostles, under the immediate direction of the Lord, addressed their hearers in certain special cases and circumstances, to derive absolute and universal rules for ministerial addresses in the present day under widely different circumstances. And we further believe that an assumption that others have been inspired as the apostles were has led to the grossest errors among both Romanists and professed Protestants.

Article 33. Therefore, that for ministers in the present day to address unconverted persons, or indiscriminately all in a mixed congregation, calling upon them to savingly repent, believe, and receive Christ, or perform any other acts dependent upon the new creative power of the Holy Ghost, is, on the one hand, to imply creature power, and, on the other, to deny the doctrine of special redemption.

Article 34. We believe that any such expressions as convey to the hearers the belief that they possess a certain power to flee to the Saviour, to close in with Christ, to receive Christ, while in an unregenerate state, so that unless they do thus close with Christ, etc., they shall perish, are untrue, and must therefore be rejected. And we further believe that we have no Scripture warrant to take the exhortations in the Old Testament intended for the Jews in national covenant with God, and apply them in a spiritual and saving sense to unregenerate men.”

All these three Articles hang together. Again we see a denial that the gospel is to be preached to unregenerate men (or indiscriminately to a mixed congregation) because, to holders of this position, it implies “creature-power,” i.e. it implies that it is within the power of the creature to respond, and would be dismissed by them as Arminianism. This implication is not true, as explained above.

The really worrying aspect seen here though, is the denial of the use of Scripture as a guide to how we should live our lives today. In this particular instance it is the preaching of the gospel which is in view, but the danger is that this argument could be used with regards almost anything, and so all the major truths of the Bible could be denied thereby. We would agree thoroughly that God doesn't work in men any more by direct inspiration. Now we have a complete canon of Scripture, any direct way of God's revealing His will to

men is no longer necessary. However, it is very dangerous to then use this truth to say that vast areas of Scripture are not relevant to us any more. We can't use the argument that all direct means of communication by God have now ceased to deny that Scripture is our guide and example in life, because, on the contrary, we have nothing else to guide us – because all other direct means have now ceased. To use this argument to conclude that we can no longer preach the gospel in the way the apostles did, is just an excuse to get rid of the clear passages in Scripture where the apostles command all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ for salvation.

[B.]

This position affirms point [1.] but denies points [2.] and [3.]. This is the position of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America (PRC). Seeing the error of position [A.] in denying “duty-faith” and “duty-repentance,” they would indeed preach that it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ, and their gospel consists of the command that all men everywhere should do so. They see no problem with **commanding** men to do something they do not have the ability to perform, for the reasons given above. However, they would not preach the gospel as a “**well-meant offer**” of salvation to all men, because they again believe that there is no salvation available for the non-elect, and therefore any offer would not be “well-meant” to them.

Consequently we see that, according to the holders of position [B.], **an offer** to repent and believe in Christ implies (to them) power in the creature to respond, which would immediately be classed by them as Arminianism and dismissed accordingly. A **command**, however, is seen by them to be quite orthodox.

This whole position actually sounds very plausible, as on the one hand the denial of “duty-faith” and “duty-repentance” is rejected, yet at the same time the awkward idea of “offering” salvation to men whom it is not for (i.e. the non-elect) is also solved by denying that the gospel is a “well-meant” offer to them, but rather a bare command instead. To make this argument more powerful, it is true that the Bible nowhere uses the word “offer” or “invitation” with regards the gospel. There are passages that may appear as such on first glance, but actually are bare commands:

Isaiah 45:22

Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.

Isaiah 55:6,7

Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Ecclesiastes 12:13

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

Matthew 11:28

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Acts 2:38.39

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Acts 3:19

Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.

None of these are “invitations” or “offers” but commands. The words “offer” and “invitation” are not wrong if used properly, but it is best not to use them because they immediately produce wrong thoughts of God in people’s minds. When we **invite** people to a party, for example, we automatically assume without thinking that we **want** all those we invite to come. This is the usual use of the word “invite” in modern English. Similarly with the word **offer**. Therefore to use these words in relation to God is misleading, not because the words in and of themselves are wrong – the invitation of a king for example is a command: you had better attend or you get your head chopped off! – but because of the implication the use of them produces in people’s minds today. People will automatically think that all those God **invites** to salvation He **wants** to come, in line with the modern everyday use of the word. This is the mistake. We must not present God as an impotent being who either wants to save all men but doesn’t (which is position [D.] below) or, one who cannot or will not save them unless they respond, which is Arminianism (position [E.], below).

This position [B.] therefore is very convincing, and a breath of fresh air for anyone who has become disillusioned with mainstream Evangelicalism and its quasi-Arminianism. It is so close to the truth. But there is a problem with it.

The PRC suffered a split in 1953, when nearly two-thirds of the total membership left the church. In 1950, before the split, the PRC Synod provisionally adopted a “*Brief Declaration of Principles*,” which was fully adopted at the Synod of 1951. The relevant passages of interest are as follows:

“That the preaching of the gospel is not a gracious offer of salvation on the part of God to all men, nor a conditional offer to all that are born in the historical dispensation of the covenant, that is, to all that are baptised, but an oath of God that He will infallibly lead all the elect unto salvation and eternal glory through faith.”

“This preaching of the particular promise is promiscuous to all that hear the gospel, with the command, not a condition, to repent and believe.”

In April 1951 a PRC minister said from the pulpit to a mixed congregation of elect and non-elect alike: “God promises every one of you that if you believe, you will be saved.” This caused turmoil in the church and eventually in 1953 those who took the side of this minister were put out of the church, and those who remained kept the name “Protestant Reformed Churches.”

The result of all this is such that, for the PRC today to justify their separate position, they have to take a stand that denies that the gospel is a **general conditional promise of salvation** to all men. This would be their definition of an **offer**.

Therefore the PRC would be able to say to an indiscriminate audience “*Repent and believe the gospel*” (which would be a **command**), but they cannot say “*If you repent and believe, you will be saved*” (which is a **general conditional promise**, i.e. an **offer**), because, to them, this implies power in the creature to perform the conditions.

In truth, there is actually no difference between a command and a general conditional promise. Both are legitimate expressions of the same gospel message, because it is ***in the way of*** repenting and believing in Christ that God saves His elect by granting them the faith and repentance required ***at the moment of hearing***. So the proclaiming of a general conditional promise to all men everywhere is not wrong as it doesn’t imply that God has a salvation waiting for the non-elect if only they would respond, neither does it imply they have the ability to do so. It merely calls them to do their duty despite their inability.

So, we see again, like holders of position [A.], they make the mistake of believing that God grants regeneration (and therefore the faith and repentance required) in the elect **before** giving them the gospel at a later date:

Herman Hoeksema, founder of the PRC, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, chapter on Regeneration explaining 1 Peter 1:23, says:

“And when the apostle teaches here that regeneration takes place through the living Word itself, that is, through Christ, it certainly is not proper to replace that living Word simply by the preaching of the gospel. It is true that the preaching of the Word stands in connection with regeneration in the broader sense of the word: for without the proclamation of the gospel it is impossible that regeneration will ever become conscious in the people of God.”

He also says in the same chapter:

“In that deepest sense, regeneration is not even as such a matter of his own experience, seeing that it does not take place within, but below the threshold of his consciousness. It is therefore independent of age and can take place in the smallest infants. We may even take for granted that in the sphere of the covenant of God He usually regenerates His elect children from infancy.”

Here we also see that the PRC believe that it is actually God’s ordinary way of working to regenerate His elect from the womb or infancy, particularly those born in the line of the Covenant. However, in the Bible, the ordinary way of regeneration is rather through the preaching of the gospel, otherwise, why bother preaching it at all if most believers are saved before hearing it anyway? Of course the particular cases of infants and imbeciles are mentioned by the Westminster Confession:

Westminster Confession of Faith 10:3

Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.

The special case is for those **incapable** of being called by the ministry of the Word, not the other way around, as the PRC would have us believe if most of the elect are actually regenerated in the womb or as infant children of believers. Ordinarily, gospel preaching is the usual means of salvation. We are saved as truth is revealed and comes home to us as we embrace it. We can of course only embrace it by God’s Spirit working in us.

Romans 10:14,15

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.

Another objection is that when such general conditional promises are used, it is very likely for the hearer to conclude that he has got the ability to fulfil the conditions required in and of himself, without grace. This is indeed the case and many people do think that they are saved when they are not. This is what the parable of the sower indicates will happen. The natural man in and of himself will never truly repent or truly believe, just as he will never keep the law of God, but he could well fool himself into thinking that he has done these things. The command to repent and believe is good, but if people believe they can do these things in their own strength they have got it wrong.

Gospel preaching will therefore manifest three types of persons:

- (1.) those who don't respond,
- (2.) those who seem to respond outwardly, but think they can do these things in their own strength,
- (3.) those who respond fully and properly, because God has given them the faith and repentance required to do so.

We need to distinguish those in group (2.) from those in group (3.). Hence it is always a very useful exercise to look for marks of grace to discern true believers from hypocrites, something the PRC seem very reluctant to do. Experimental religion is not practised in their circles.

So we see that there is no problem as such with proclaiming the gospel as a general conditional promise to all men, so long as we neither imply **ability** in man to respond by himself [E.], nor present a God **longing** or **desiring** salvation in any way without doing anything about it [D.]. The PRC believe that this is not possible using general conditional promises, but only possible using a command.

[C.]

This position is what I consider is the true position. It affirms [1.] and [2.] but denies [3.] above. This position sits firmly between the two "railway tracks" of, on the one hand denying general conditional promises and believing in a regeneration **before** hearing the gospel (i.e. [A.] and [B.]), and on the other hand believing that the only way we can preach a free offer of salvation to all men properly is to believe that God has some sort of desire for the salvation of all men (i.e. [D.] and [E.]). We must stay within these "railway tracks" or we will go astray.

God has His elect. They are a fixed number, and God knows who they are. We don't. We must preach commands or general conditional promises freely to all men indiscriminately, and all the elect (and no more and no less) will be saved **through** responding to this, by God's regenerating them and granting them faith and repentance, which is the only way they can respond. This is the true "free offer of the gospel," and is the ordinary means of salvation. It is an offer free to all men. If they believe, they surely shall be saved. Indeed if they **could** and **would** believe of their own strength (which they can't and won't, because

of their inability and unwillingness to do so due to their fallen nature in Adam) they would indeed be saved. So the gospel, in and of itself taken in isolation, is genuine good news to all men, if they would fulfil the conditions. The non-elect will never be willing or able to fulfil these conditions, and God knows that. The elect will fulfil them, because God will regenerate them and grant them the faith and repentance to do so. The PRC say that the gospel is a “*savour of death unto death*” to the reprobate (quoting 2 Corinthians 2:16), but that’s not quite true as such. In and of itself the gospel is always a conditional promise of good news – however, the **effect** in the reprobate will always be of death unto death, because they can never fulfil the conditions, neither will God ever grant the conditions to them.

The important point to note here (to distinguish position [C.] from position [D.]), is that the true free offer of the gospel is not based in any way on a perceived desire of God for the salvation of all men, but it is rather based solely on the command to preach the gospel to every creature.

[D.]

This position, just like Arminianism [E.], affirms points [1.], [2.] and [3.], and is the predominant view in most general so-called “Calvinistic” evangelical churches today. People who hold to this position are Calvinists in name, but in reality their theology is wrong because they base it on a desire, or at the very least a “delight” within God for the salvation of all men. They can’t bear to believe the truth that God does not actually love all men or desire the salvation of all men, so they invent ways of trying to pretend that God does have some sort of love for them all, even though they are constrained by their lip service to Calvinism to believe in a limited atonement. They would have God pleading with sinners to come to him. They would say that God “is willing” and able to save sinners, the onus being on the sinner to come. They would invent a “love” in God that embraces the non-elect. These things cannot be. God is indeed **able** to save all men if He wants to. This fact is not in doubt. However, God has decreed that only a fixed number shall display His mercy by being saved, whereas the rest display His justice by going to hell, which is the perfect punishment for their sins - indeed we should all be in hell if justice was the only attribute God wished to display. If one sinner is kept from hell, it is a marvellous thing. But to say that God “wills” or “is willing” that all men are saved is not true, because we know that there is a fixed number only who are saved, a number which can neither be increased or decreased.

Westminster Confession of Faith 3:3,4

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

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

As God decrees all things in this world that come to pass to His greatest glory, so fixed is the number of the elect that if one more or one less than this number were saved, His glory would not be displayed as much in them as a total body as in the fixed number that He *has* decreed. The fact that not all men are saved means that God either is unable to save them (which cannot be as He is Almighty) or is unwilling. God therefore **must be unwilling** to save the ones He has decreed not to save. That is the bottom line. To say

that He “wills” all to be saved, but that His holy nature must (reluctantly) punish them in hell if they do not repent and believe makes God a schizophrenic (“*schizophrenia*” from the Greek “*split mind*”) with a will opposed to His nature.

A popular way of trying to get Calvinists to believe that God wants all men to be saved is to attribute two “wills” to God. Now there is a correct way of looking at this, although the use of the word “will” is rather misleading. Firstly it is said that God has a “*decretive will*” or “*secret will*,” which is what He decrees, one aspect of which is that there is a fixed number of elect and no more that will be saved (although this fact is not secret, because we know about it. Only the number and names of the elect are hidden from us). This we are all agreed upon. Secondly it is said that God has a “*preceptive will*” or “*revealed will*,” which is simply the rule of life for the believer, which is the moral law, which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments. This also includes the commandment given to all men to repent and believe in Christ. Now it is argued that because God has given this rule to all men, He therefore “delights” when men keep this law, i.e. He “delights” that men repent and turn to him, i.e. He “wants” or “desires” all men to do so, hence it is said that God “wants” all men to be saved. This is not a logical train of thought, and takes what was originally the correct concept (although poor terminology) of a “*preceptive will*” in God too far. God indeed has given all men a rule of life, which is the moral law, and indeed all men are commanded to repent and turn to Christ. But God knows what He wants, and performs all His pleasure (“desire”), sometimes overruling “right” with “wrong.” For example, the crucifixion of Christ was truly a wicked act for which the perpetrators are fully responsible and will be punished accordingly; but God allowed it to come to pass because He ordained such an evil act to be the means of salvation for His people. In any case, to say that God “desires” or “delights in” anything is really a misnomer because He does not have like passions as we have (Acts 14:15, Westminster Confession of Faith 2:1), but it is possible to use the word when talking about the will of God in that God “desires” all that He wills. He cannot will anything that He does not “desire.”

Isaiah 46:9,10

Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

Job 23:13

But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth.

God wants some men to display His wrath, e.g. Pharaoh:

Romans 9:17,18

For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.

Romans 9:22-24

What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

Another twist that is attempted by proponents of position [D.] is to say that Christ has two wills, a divine and a human; in His divine nature He only wants the elect to be saved, but in His human nature He wants all men to be saved. However, that's not true either. Christ, being one Person, only has one will. It is a separate will from God the Father and from God the Holy Spirit, otherwise His sacrifice would not have been voluntary. However, in every point at all times (even in Gethsemane), all three wills of all three Persons of the Trinity work in complete harmony. Christ was no schizophrenic with two opposing wills struggling inside Him.

God cannot have a "desire" that He does not fulfil. This may be possible with men, but can't be so with God. God commands the reprobate to repent and turn to him (indeed genuinely offering them salvation if they should do so), knowing full well that they don't have the ability to do so themselves, neither is He ever going to give them that ability (even though He could if He wanted to). Therefore the whole purpose of preaching the gospel to the reprobate is purely to show, display or magnify their guilt before God. This is the effect of what is otherwise a general conditional promise of good news for them. Similarly He says to them, "Keep the law and you will be saved," knowing that they cannot keep the law and that He is not going to give them the ability to do that either.

Again, many people may object by saying that this is God "mocking" men by commanding them to do something knowing that they will never be able to do it. However nothing could be further from the truth. Man is fallen and no man deserves to be saved from:

Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 29

...most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire for ever.

If God sent all of us into hell for ever it would be just and perfect and right for Him to do so, without demanding anything from us or doing anything unjust at all. By nature we are all fallen in Adam. So anyone who is saved from hell is saved by grace alone, they certainly don't deserve it. In fact it is the people who say that God desires the salvation of all men that are the ones who make God a mocker. If God does desire the salvation of all men then the reprobate are mocked by God because He supposedly "desires" their salvation, but knows they can't save themselves and neither is He going to save them. The truth is that those who refuse the gospel are not mocked by God at all because He has no "desire" to save them in the first place, neither have they any desire to be saved. They get exactly what they justly deserve.

Another argument used is that there are passages in the Bible that appear to have God longing for the repentance of sinners, e.g.

Psalm 81:13

Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways.

However, we run into serious difficulties if we start to think that God "longs" for anything when He has the power to do something about it but doesn't use that power. God will perform all His pleasure. All things work in His own providence to His greatest glory. Nothing happens in this world without it being decreed of God for His own glory. So He can't "long" for anything that He doesn't immediately bring to pass to fulfil that "longing." There are no unfulfilled longings in God.

Isaiah 46:10

My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

Also it is argued that there are passages in the Bible which state that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, e.g.:

Ezekiel 33:11

Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

It is commonly thought that the opposite of God's pleasure is His sadness. God can't be sad for the same reason that He can't have unfulfilled longings. The opposite of God's pleasure is His anger, not His sadness.

This position also effectively puts God's act of regeneration **after** the sinner's choice to repent and believe, which is really Arminianism (i.e. [E.]) in disguise. Holders of this position would deny this of course, and call themselves "Calvinists," trying to make us believe that their position is the same as [C.], i.e. that God regenerates **in the way of** faith and repentance. However, in practice, in their preaching of the gospel, they go too far in emphasising the sinner's required response in order to try to push the sinner into the kingdom of God; to urge him, plead with him and beseech him with earnest overtures to embrace Christ. In this, they aren't relying on the power of the Holy Ghost to regenerate at all, but, conversely, the more they urge and plead, the more they are persuading all who hear to believe that it is within their own power to embrace or reject Christ as they will. This view therefore tends towards filling the church with hypocrites who outwardly respond in their own power, without having inwardly responded through the power of the Holy Ghost working in them. The reprobate trying to please God in their own efforts is more abominable to God than if they hadn't bothered, even though it is always their duty to perform good works.

Understanding these simple principles shows clearly that position [D.] is wrong.

[E.]

This is Arminianism. It affirms points [1.], [2.] and [3.], but unlike [D.] it goes further in that it denies Calvinism completely, believing in a universal atonement, which "makes salvation possible" for everyone, now giving all men the "opportunity for salvation" if only they exercise their free will to repent and believe in Christ. The idea is, that God deliberately restricts His power with regards the salvation of men, and leaves them completely free to choose or reject Him as they will. God really wants everyone to be saved (again an identical position to [D.]) but has left it up to them whether they choose him or not. So, regeneration in this case is again only ever granted by God **after** the hearing of the gospel and responding to it. This is wrong, simply because if God had left us to our own supposed "free will," no-one would ever be saved. Not one of us would choose God, we would always choose our sin. We are all slaves to sin. All we can do is sin. We are vile. God has not left us with "free will" to choose the good at all. Our own experience proves this to us if we are honest with ourselves. Salvation must be of the Lord, God must be the one who grants faith and repentance, there is no other way.

What is Hypercalvinism?

Now we have seen all five views, we return to the question at the beginning: How do we define Hypercalvinism? Well, the fact is that:

1. Holders of position [E.] define [A.], [B.], [C.] and [D.] as all being *Hypercalvinism*.
2. Holders of position [D.] define [A.], [B.] and [C.] as *Hypercalvinism* and [E.] as *Arminianism*.
3. Holders of position [C.] define [A.] and [B.] as *Hypercalvinism* and [D.] and [E.] as *Arminianism* (This is the correct position).
4. Holders of position [B.] define [A.] as *Hypercalvinism* and [C.], [D.] and [E.] as *Arminianism*.
5. Holders of position [A.] define [B.], [C.], [D.] and [E.] as all being *Arminianism*.

So one's definition of *Hypercalvinism* (and *Arminianism* for that matter) is different depending on where one is on the above spectrum. So when one hears someone using either of these words, we must make sure we know where the person stands on these issues beforehand in order to know what they are talking about.

However, if we embrace the true position, i.e. [C.], we do have a marker that we can use, in that we can look for where regeneration logically comes (ordinarily) in each scheme of things. If regeneration is found to come **before** the preaching of the gospel (as in [A.] and [B.]) we can safely use the term *Hypercalvinism*; whereas if regeneration is found to come **after** the preaching of the gospel upon man's response to it (as in [D.] and [E.]), we can safely use the term *Arminianism*. Only if regeneration ordinarily comes **upon** the preaching of the gospel, as a gift from God granting men faith and repentance to respond, do we begin to have a correct view of things.

Should we Impose Christian Standards on Others?

There is a right and wrong in this world. The Ten Commandments are a summary of God's moral law. This defines right and wrong in an absolute sense.

Christians should love and do righteousness and hate and avoid wickedness. Christians should, with the help of the Holy Spirit within them, try to keep themselves from sin.

But unbelievers don't have the Holy Spirit, so they can't keep themselves from sin.

Romans 8:7

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

So why should we try to force them to stop sinning, by passing laws? We should tell them what's right and wrong in God's sight. We should flee from sin ourselves. We should be an example to them of living a godly life. We should tell them the danger, that if they continue in sin they will justly end up in hell fire. But if they just laugh at us and continue to sin

anyway, we can't stop them. Should we even try to stop them? Should we legislate against sin and force that legislation on others, who have no ability to keep it?

Revelation 22:11

He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.

There are several Bible texts to examine on this subject.

Romans 13:1-7

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

Every government, even the most wicked, is ordained of God. And Christians should always obey the government, except when it tries to force us to sin against God. Then, and then only, we should refuse and take the (unjust) consequences. It's never up to us to fight the government, or try to replace it.

For example, Christians today do not like legislation being passed in some countries legalising same-sex marriages. They are against the law of God, but these nations have decided it is not against their law. Let them pass these laws, even though we don't approve. But if a nation's government then says to us that we must allow same-sex marriages to be performed in our churches, then they are trying to force us to sin, so we must refuse and take the consequences. Maybe our church will be fined, or closed down altogether, or we would be put in jail. This is totally unjust in God's eyes, but we must put up with it.

We're told here that all governments, even the most evil, are there for our good. So we're not to rebel against any authority, no matter how bad they are, because God has put them there. We're told that if we do good works, the government shouldn't be a terror to us. We're told that only if we want to do evil, should we be worried about the government. A government's job is to keep the peace, stop anarchy, and to "*execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*"

But what is meant by "*good*" and "*evil*" here? God's laws and the nation's laws will not necessarily coincide. We're probably going to be agreed that murder, theft and lying should be against the law. Everybody wants to live in a society with these laws, they make our lives more comfortable. But not worshipping the one true God is "*evil*" in God's sight, but not necessarily in the government's sight. Adultery is "*evil*" in God's sight, but

not necessarily in the government's. Christians get their morality from God's law, which will differ from the law of the land. The government gets its morality from other sources.

We're told here that a government's duty is to promote "good" and punish "evil." But if the government defines "good" and "evil" differently from God, what do we do? We should let them. We should never rebel and should continue ourselves defining "good" and "evil" in God's way. But this means that we should be prepared at any time to become subjects of unjust punishment. The government is still ordained of God.

So, if, for example, the Christian church is banned by the government, we still meet underground, and be prepared to take the consequences. Daniel didn't even bother trying to be discreet about it:

Daniel 6:10

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.

Consequently, he was thrown into a den of lions. And on another occasion, his three friends would not bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's statue, and they told him exactly why:

Daniel 3:16-18

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

But, the question is, If we Christians were in power, should we try to pass laws legislating against sins against God? If we were in a position to do so, should we try to change the laws of the land, to be more in keeping with God's Commandments? Should we, for example, pass laws against Sunday trading? Or, what about passing laws forcing people to attend church? Well, the good kings of Israel did so, and they were commended by God for it. But the fact is that, in reality, not many of us are going to be in the position where we have the opportunity to change laws anyway. So it shouldn't worry most of us.

1 Timothy 2:1-2

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

Notice here that Paul didn't say that the Christians should campaign to stop the Roman authority's atrocities. The Romans were cruel. They were evil. But we're not to fight them or demonstrate in the streets against them. Instead, Paul asked prayer for kings that we, that is the Christians, "may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty."

Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon the same thing:

Jeremiah 29:7

And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.

Our spiritual life is the most important thing we Christians are to be concerned about. As long as Christians can be free to live good Christian lives, that's all we need to pray for. We don't need to pray for the government in anything else, other than the salvation of their souls of course.

1 Timothy 1:8-9

But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers....

Here we're told, "*the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient.*" But this doesn't mean we should pass laws in keeping with God's commandments and force the lawless and disobedient to keep them. That is a misunderstanding of this passage.

God's written laws are not for true believers because they have the law written on their hearts. They have the ability to keep God's law as long as they stick closely to the Holy Spirit. The unbeliever doesn't have this. When we are told here that the law was made for the lawless and disobedient, it means that God's written law is particularly for them, but only in order to show them they can't keep it. Consequently, they realise they are sinners, and that should lead them to Christ to save them from their sins:

Galatians 3:21-25

Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither

with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

God will judge those outside the church. It is not up to us to judge them or impose laws on them in any way. But what about inside the church? If anybody is practising evil inside the church, and it's "*reported commonly*" (v.1), in other words people outside the church hear about it, giving the church a bad name, then it does come under our jurisdiction. In that case, we are to throw the perpetrator out of the church and keep away from them. That's all we can do, that's where our responsibility ends. We are not here to impose laws on anyone outside the church. We're here simply to make sure we keep ourselves unspotted from the world.

James 1:27

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

We throw people out of the church only if they are bringing the church into disrepute. We don't throw people out of the church just because we disagree with them. For example, we may believe that 1 Corinthians 11 teaches that ladies should cover their heads in public worship, and that men shouldn't. But we're not to force women to wear head coverings in church, even though we may believe 1 Corinthians 11 says they should. It is up to the individual to come to the Biblical conclusion on things, not for us to impose what we believe to be right on others.

If we did try to force them to wear head coverings before they've come to a right opinion about it *for themselves*, then we are no longer walking charitably:

Romans 14:15,16

But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of.

Romans 14:20-21

For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.

We are told:

Romans 14:23

whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

It has to be the faith of the individual that approves any action, not the faith of the church officers, otherwise the church officers are forcing someone to do something against their conscience, which here is called "*sin.*"

Only in serious cases, where the reputation of the church is at stake, should we hand someone over to Satan, i.e. throw them out of the church, until they repent:

There are two such situations mentioned in the Bible. That of blasphemy:

1 Timothy 1:19-20

Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

And incest:

1 Corinthians 5:4-5

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

But, you may say, the pope blasphemes God every day in every Mass. And the Archbishop of Canterbury breaks the seventh Commandment by allowing brazen, open homosexuals to get into high positions in his church. Surely, these are just the sort of serious crimes that the Bible talks about in these passages. So they should be thrown out, and delivered to Satan that they may learn to repent. Yes, in an ideal world, they should. But they've taken over the ruling power in their respective churches, so we can't get rid of them.

The apostle John had this problem in a church:

3 John 1:9-10

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.

John wrote his third epistle to solve a problem. He wrote this epistle to Gaius, a man in the church who was a true believer, and told him what the problem was. He asked Gaius personally to receive these brethren that Diotrephes, the evil leader in the church, wouldn't receive. He also told Gaius of Demetrius (v.11), indicating that he was also a trustworthy brother in the Lord, and that he could help him in this matter. See what John is doing. No call to come out and form a new denomination, but rather calling the true believers to stay in the current one, despite the evil in the leadership, and organising them to operate like a church within a church. This is the Biblical pattern.

Not only is the government going to persecute the believer, but the church is as well. In fact Christ Himself had nearly all of His opposition from the visible church of His day. They eventually handed Him over to the civil powers to kill Him. So, we can expect no different:

John 15:18-19

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

Christians are going to be hated by everybody:

Mark 13:12-13

Now the brother shall betray the brother to death, and the father the son; and children shall rise up against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

So, should we impose Christian standards on others? It's really a hypothetical question, like, "What would the world be like if Adam had never sinned?" Or, "How many angels can you get on the end of a pin?" We are not to bother ourselves with these things:

2 Timothy 2:23

But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.

Titus 3:9

But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.

The subject of whether we should impose Christian standards on others, is not a concern to the Christian at all. We're never really going to get the opportunity. From both the secular and religious leaders, we're more likely to be on the receiving end of unjust laws, not making laws ourselves:

Mark 13:9

But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them.

Christian Hatred

Most people would find this title an oxymoron, a figure of speech with a seeming contradiction in it. Christians, they say, should not hate at all, but love everyone, unconditionally, all the time – as God (supposedly) does. But is this really so? As we look closer into things, we find that this is not at all the correct response we should have, because we find that God hates certain things, indeed certain people, and that to all eternity:

Psalms 11:5

The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth.

Isaiah 30:30

And the LORD shall cause his glorious voice to be heard, and shall shew the lighting down of his arm, with the indignation of his anger, and with the flame of a devouring fire, with scattering, and tempest, and hailstones.

Malachi 1:4

Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever.

If the Christian is someone who is growing in the faith in order to become more and more like Christ, then should he not also be growing in the grace of **godly hatred** as well as everything else?

A common, almost universal, belief in the church today is the idea that God has some kind of love for all men everywhere. And hatred is often spoken of as being split into three distinct kinds: "*malevolent hatred*," "*priority hatred*," and "*judicial hatred*."

"*Malevolent hatred*" is that hatred which Cain showed toward Abel by murdering him, and a kind that God can't possibly have in Himself. This "*malevolent hatred*" is simply hatred in which the wrong object is hated. Cain's evil was that he killed a man because that man had performed a righteous act. In other words, Cain hated the wrong object, namely Abel. God can never have this hatred within Himself because He never hates the wrong thing. But that doesn't mean to say that God never hates anything. God hates, but He only ever hates that which is hateful, namely the wicked walking in their wickedness. Incidentally, Cain also took vengeance into his own hands, which is also wrong:

Romans 12:19

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

It is for God alone to repay the wicked fully, although in this world, for the punishment of evildoers and the good of society in general, He has vested the civil magistrate with the power of the sword (Romans 13:1-5).

"*Priority hatred*," is what we are supposed to show when Christ says we should hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters and life:

Luke 14:26

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

This, God is supposed to have had when He blessed Ishmael but showed "*priority*" for Isaac. But this idea of "*priority hatred*" is wrong. If our father, mother, wife, children, brothers etc. are wicked unbelievers, they are therefore rightful objects of hatred, and we must truly hate them while they are in that state, just as we must hate all the wicked. A common belief is that the word "*hate*" doesn't mean "hate" but "love less." But that's the same thing. If I tell my wife I love another woman more than her, I just love my wife less, it's not going to impress her. Of course we can lawfully pray for their salvation and pray that they may be brought into the light of the truth of God, but as long as they are in such a state we must hate them and their ways.

We must hasten to add that this doesn't mean we should be nasty to them in any way. Nastiness is not hatred. Rather, we should rightly resist going along with their wickedness and indeed we should rebuke their sinful ways. If people call that hatred, and call us hateful for believing such, then we can't do much about it. They are wrong. As long as we

are not nasty or vindictive in any way towards anyone, we must stick to what is right, even if it means losing all our family and friends, for the kingdom's sake.

Jeremiah 12:8

Mine heritage is unto me as a lion in the forest; it crieth out against me: therefore have I hated it.

Following on from this, notice in Luke 14:26, we are to hate our "own life also." Not because flesh is hateful of itself, but rather, every sin that we commit in thought and word and deed, we must hate. It is right to hate sin, even, and especially, when it emanates from ourselves. Since the fall, our very natures are sin, so we should hate ourselves for our very wretchedness. This is a far cry from modern psychology that says we ought to have a sense of "self-worth" and "self-esteem."

Needless to say, God can never have this "priority hatred" in Himself, because:

Acts 10:34

God is no respecter of persons.

God judges all men equally. He may indeed "bless" wicked men, such as Ishmael, for a time, by giving them plenty in this world, although God knows that they won't be thankful and misuse His "blessings," so He later justly judges them for their sins.

Thirdly, "judicial hatred" is that which a judge exercises when, for example, he hands a criminal over for execution. This is the hatred that God has. But it is very often described as a reluctant punishment whereby, against the nature of the judge (in this case, God), he has to condemn and send someone to punishment (in this case, hell fire) when he doesn't really want to. This is not like God at all.

If we love righteousness and hate sin, as God does (except that He does it perfectly and we don't), we will be glad when the wicked are cast into hell. Only, I hasten to add, because it is just and righteous punishment for their totally depraved natures. If the punishment was not just, i.e. if it were too little or too much punishment, it would be a terrible thing, and God would be a monster to punish a man unjustly in that way. But God is just, perfectly just, and that is why we must have no time for the idea that God *reluctantly* punishes anyone. He justly punishes the wicked with exactly the right punishment to fit the crime, so we must rejoice in such punishment, as God himself indeed does.

Deuteronomy 28:63

And it shall come to pass, that as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought; and ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goest to possess it.

Psalms 35:8,9

Let destruction come upon him at unawares; and let his net that he hath hid catch himself: into that very destruction let him fall. And my soul shall be joyful in the LORD: it shall rejoice in his salvation.

Psalms 137:8,9

O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

Today in the church, many want to deny the biblical doctrine of hell altogether. "How can a god of love send anyone to a place like hell?" they would say. On the other hand, many recognise that if they want to be Biblical they can't get away from the doctrine of hell (as it is so clearly taught by Christ in plain, simple words that cannot be mistaken), but they distort the truth by portraying God as being reluctant to send anyone there; in other words, God has got to send some people to hell in His justice, but He doesn't really want to.

Both of these views are mistaken. If the first view is true, Christ's plain teachings in Scripture about hell are being ignored and there would be no justice in God with all the wicked getting away with their wickedness. If the second view is correct, God would be eternally frustrated that people are in hell. God cannot be frustrated, otherwise he would not be God.

Genesis 18:25

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Isaiah 46:10

My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

By far the main reason why people find the doctrine of hell unpalatable is because they can't believe that it is a just punishment for their own sins. This is described as:

Westminster Larger Catechism Q.29

Most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire for ever.

This doctrine is offensive to most people because they can't come to believe that any man, apart maybe from a few like Adolf Hitler, really deserves such punishment, particularly for eternity. However we can't escape the simple teachings of Christ:

Mark 9:45,46

And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.

Luke 12:5

But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.

Luke 16:23

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

Christ teaches that hell, with its eternal torments, is a real place. How is it then that man deserves such a dreadful punishment? After all, most men are not that bad, are they? People would rather invent doctrines such as purgatory, where men are punished for a time but not forever, rather than believe in a place of eternal torment where all men deserve to go. This whole attitude is wrong because it exalts man far too highly. Man is

indeed that bad. This is the doctrine of total depravity. The Bible is clear about the state of man since the fall of Adam:

Genesis 6:5,6

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

The whole reason God brought the flood on Noah's world was that man was utterly depraved. And the flood did not change a thing:

Genesis 8:21

I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth....

Jeremiah 13:23

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.

The doctrine of total depravity is the one truth that man will do anything to disbelieve about himself. Indeed he can't believe it, without the Holy Spirit bringing to a man the knowledge of his own sin and his own natural state before God.

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Psalms 51:5

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

If the doctrine of total depravity is true, which it is, then man has a nature that is totally depraved and he can't help but sin, in which case the doctrine of hell makes perfect sense. It will seem too harsh a punishment only if we have an exalted view of the human condition.

Therefore, eternal punishment in hell is a beautiful doctrine because, and only because, it is justly deserved, or merited, by our totally depraved natures. We will, and God does, joy in the doctrine of hell rather than wince at it, knowing that those who go there will only ever be those who deserve to be there. If we don't rejoice in the doctrine of hell, then we are saying effectively that God has got it wrong.

We must also thank God of course that he has chosen some from eternity to display his mercy rather than his justice, by graciously saving them from hell fire, where they deserve to go. All men will glorify either God's mercy or God's justice in eternity. The elect should therefore be humbled to the dust, because they know that but for the grace of God, they would be in hell with all the others. If anyone claiming to be a Christian is not humbled to the dust in this way, we must seriously doubt their salvation. Our attitude at all times must be that if we did end up in hell after all, then we would know it would be perfect justice and we would not have any reason to complain against God. Indeed, we would still be saying:

Revelation 16:7

Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.

But, are we not being too “hard” and “unloving” when we say that we should rejoice in the doctrine of hell? Should we not be saddened by the fact that people are going there? Not at all. If we did have pangs of sadness at anyone going to hell, then we would be forever miserable in heaven. This cannot be, because we are promised that there will be no more tears there. Heaven will be a place where we will be perfectly satisfied with the justice of God, just as we are not satisfied with all the injustice the wicked perpetrate in this world at present, where they seem to get away with it all. We know that God will judge all men justly and we joy in that, and are not saddened by it at all.

Jeremiah 16:5

For thus saith the LORD, Enter not into the house of mourning, neither go to lament nor bemoan them: for I have taken away my peace from this people, saith the LORD, even lovingkindness and mercies.

As an example, I heard a well-respected “Christian” author and ex-missionary, tell the following story once at a meeting. She said that on Judgment Day, those who never heard the gospel will be going into hell, and as they descend, they will be turning around at those going into heaven shouting “Why didn't you tell us about Jesus?” According to this theory, those going to hell will be under the impression that it is the fault of those in heaven that they going to hell (for not telling them the gospel), and those going to heaven, presumably, will be eternally miserable because they think it was their fault that they did not tell the people going to hell the gospel. The truth is exactly the opposite. Those in hell will be in eternal torment, and everyone will know it will be a just punishment for their sins, just as everyone will know the eternal bliss of those in heaven will be all of grace.

Philippians 2:10,11

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

People find it difficult to believe that God can be so “unfeeling” towards the wicked, but he is not being “unfeeling” at all. Firstly, in any case, God is not “*of like passions*” as we are:

Acts 14:15

Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein.

Secondly, again, the problem is that, because of our arrogance, we find it difficult to see the human condition properly from God’s perspective.

Thirdly, people have ingrained into them that there is a love of God for all men, which is simply not true. Nowhere in the Bible does it say this, yet it is a common teaching. However, it is noteworthy that people who believe this, always find it awkward to talk about hell. They hardly ever read the imprecatory psalms, the judicial law, and the slaughters that God commanded in the Old Testament for example. These are “embarrassments” to them. Most of these people tend to jettison most of the Old Testament anyway, saying it was for the Israelites at the time but not for us in this “enlightened” gospel age. They do not realise that it was, and still is, God’s Word and therefore perfect, just and good.

If we say, as we are doing, that we rejoice in hell, then we are compared to fundamentalists of other religions such as Islam. However the hatred that some mullahs

whip up in Islam is an unjust hatred, a hatred that hates the wrong objects (i.e. non-muslims). God's hatred is always perfectly just and clean, always hating that which is hateful, i.e. that which is against His holy law, and nothing else. This is the only type of hatred that we should ever have. There is no excuse at all for hating the wrong object. That is truly sin.

Some people say that God "hates the sin but loves the sinner." This can't possibly be true. It is like saying, for example, "I hate the sound of a trumpet but love trumpets." It is nonsense, because the sole purpose of a trumpet's existence is to make that one distinctive sound. So if I hate the sound it makes, I must hate the object because it is good for nothing else. Similarly with God. He hates the sin and therefore justly hates the sinner too, because all the sinner can do is sin, it is his only function, he is good for nothing else. Therefore he must be hated and punished justly for it, unless God has elected him unto salvation to the praise of His glorious mercy.

But are we not to weep over the lost, after all, Jeremiah lamented over Jerusalem and Christ Himself wept over it? Are we not to have a "burden for souls" or a "compassion for the lost?" It is a popular misconception that Jeremiah and Christ were weeping over the lost going to hell in these examples. This is not so. They were weeping over the state of Jerusalem, i.e. the visible church, and the fact that truth had been corrupted and God's glory was no longer displayed in it.

Matthew 23:37

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not.

Christ does not want to gather the whole of Jerusalem, as this verse is often misquoted as saying. Rather it is Jerusalem's children who are the object of His gathering, i.e. the elect within the visible church, whom He does indeed effectually call and save. He does not want to save Jerusalem (i.e. the visible church) itself as an institution, which had been completely taken over by hypocrites who "*would not.*" Although apostasy in the visible church is all under God's providential control, which we should always rejoice in, nevertheless it is also right to love truth and righteousness. We therefore never despair, but we still mourn whenever we see truth and righteousness cast to the ground and God's honour being usurped by men, especially in the visible church that outwardly has His name.

Psalms 119:136

Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.

In fact in some places in Scripture, God rebukes those who weep for the lost:

Exodus 32:32,33

Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin... and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written. And the LORD said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book.

Ezekiel 9:8-10

And it came to pass, while they were slaying them, and I was left, that I fell upon my face, and cried, and said, Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou destroy all the residue of Israel in thy pouring out of thy fury upon Jerusalem? Then said he unto me, The iniquity of the house of Israel

and Judah is exceeding great, and the land is full of blood, and the city full of perverseness: for they say, The LORD hath forsaken the earth, and the LORD seeth not. And as for me also, mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity, but I will recompense their way upon their head.

Ezekiel 11:13-15, 21

And it came to pass, when I prophesied, that Pelatiah the son of Benaiah died. Then fell I down upon my face, and cried with a loud voice, and said, Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou make a full end of the remnant of Israel? Again the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, thy brethren, even thy brethren, the men of thy kindred, and all the house of Israel wholly, are they unto whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, Get you far from the LORD: unto us is this land given in possession. But as for them whose heart walketh after the heart of their detestable things and their abominations, I will recompense their way upon their own heads, saith the Lord GOD.

In some places we are commanded not to pray for them:

Numbers 16:22,26

And they fell upon their faces, and said, O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with all the congregation?.... And he spake unto the congregation, saying, Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest ye be consumed in all their sins.

Jeremiah 7:16

Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee.

Jeremiah 11:14

Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up a cry or prayer for them: for I will not hear them in the time that they cry unto me for their trouble.

Jeremiah 14:11

Then said the LORD unto me, Pray not for this people for their good.

But are we not commanded to “love our enemies”? Of course we should. There are three reasons for this:

(1.) We don't know who amongst our enemies are elect, God does. The *fact* that there are elect and non-elect is a revealed truth:

Romans 9:22,23

What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory.

Who they are is one of the secret things of God that we are not told. So we are commanded to “love our enemies.” This involves outward acts. It does not involve being like them, thinking like them etc. That would not be “love” at all. We must see to their outward welfare, just as Jesus did while on earth, healing and feeding many more people than were elect, and also just as God does when He gives all men, elect and reprobate alike, rain and sunshine, health and all things for life on this earth:

Matthew 5:44,45

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

But this “love” is completely different from any kind of “love” that wants them to be saved. God can’t possibly think that way towards the non-elect without desiring something that He does not will to come to pass. This would result in a frustrated God, which cannot be. Here we have two definitions of “love,” one is a general compassion for all men, and the other, that love which God has for His elect only.

The “love” with which we are to “love our enemies,” is in an outward expression of care for the outward estate of others. The Bible tends to call this “compassion.” This is not to be confused with true electing “love.” “Compassion” is a caring for the outward estate of others, which we are all called to do in the eighth commandment:

Westminster Shorter Catechism

Q. 74. What is required in the eighth commandment ?

A. The eighth commandment requireth the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.

Q. 75. What is forbidden in the eighth commandment ?

A. The eighth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever doth or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbour's wealth or outward estate.

Christ did this in the feeding of the five thousand for example. This doesn’t mean He wanted them all to be saved, but He had “compassion” on them in that He looked after their outward estate. The fact He did this miraculously was a sign that He was the Messiah, a fact that most of the people did not care about – all they cared about was being fed:

John 6:26

Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.

We are called to follow Christ in showing this sort of “compassion” to all men. To “love our enemies,” we are called to be good to them, show compassion, looking after their outward estate as best we can. We trust in God to either save them if they are one of His elect, or damn them if they are not, but we should be glad whatever God does with them, not miserable if, for example, God should send them to hell. We ought to know from our own hearts what “total depravity” really is, and we should be content that those that are damned to hell have been punished justly. Indeed we should fear God and be ever thankful that we will not suffer such an end as they because God has chosen us from the foundation of the world.

(2.) So really when Christ tells us to “love our enemies,” He is not telling us to never hate anyone. It is right to hate someone who is justly hateful. When we are called to “love our enemies,” it means we must never do any harm to anyone. In other words, we should leave vengeance to God:

Romans 12:19-21

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

So this “*showing compassion*” is the opposite of being nasty or doing harm, not the opposite of hatred. We should still rightly hate them because their deeds are evil:

John 7:7

The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil.

If we started trying to take vengeance on anyone ourselves, we would either be unjust or end up hating the wrong object. God knows everyone’s hearts, we do not. So God should be the only one to take vengeance because He alone can judge justly, we can’t.

Matthew 5:22

But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

Note here that we are only in danger of the judgment if we are angry with our brother *without a cause*. Therefore if we are angry with him *with a cause* then that is just and good and right and true.

(3.) Another reason we are told to “*love our enemies*” is because we have a hard gospel message in the world’s eyes, and we are never to let it seem that we ourselves are hard or not compassionate in our practice of the truth. The only offence we give should be the offence of the cross:

Galatians 5:11

And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased.

Our offence should never be our hardness or unfeeling attitude towards anyone:

2 Corinthians 6:3

Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed.

To summarise, we must do good to all: (1.) because we do not know who the elect are, (2.) because we trust in God to have vengeance on our enemies and we are never to take vengeance into our own hands, and (3.) so that the only offence is that of the gospel, not of ourselves.

God does good to all in the sense of giving all men useful and pleasant things in this life such as rain and sunshine, knowing that these things, whilst helping the elect, will merely harden the non-elect because they will be unthankful for them, not seeing the hand of God in them at all. We should rejoice in this, just as we should rejoice in everything God does. Christ “*rejoiced in spirit*” that God had hidden truth from the wise and prudent and only revealed it to babes:

Luke 10:21

In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight."

Therefore, when, in Proverbs 10:12 for example, Scripture seems to condemn all hatred, it much be seen in context with those passages which positively condone it.

Proverbs 10:12

Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.

This verse is only talking of unjust hatred, i.e. where the object of the hatred is hated unjustly. Just as "love" in this verse means a just love – the verse indicates this when it speaks of the covering of sins. Loving the wicked in their wickedness does not cover their sins, on the contrary it displays them, as though heaping coals of fire on their head:

Romans 12:20

Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

We will have the honour of executing God's judgement at the appropriate time:

Psalm 149:8,9

To bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; To execute upon them the judgment written: this honour have all his saints. Praise ye the LORD.

Finally, note:

Psalm 92:11

Mine eye also shall see my desire on mine enemies, and mine ears shall hear my desire of the wicked that rise up against me.

Psalm 112:8

His heart is established, he shall not be afraid, until he see his desire upon his enemies.

Psalm 118:7

The LORD taketh my part with them that help me: therefore shall I see my desire upon them that hate me.

We should desire the defeat and destruction of all our enemies, if they are God's enemies too. Any other attitude of heart towards them is unbiblical and therefore un-Christian.

Psalm 58:10

The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance: he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.

Revelation 18:20

Rejoice over her, thou heaven, and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her.

Praise the LORD!!

Healing Ministries in the Church Today

On the church scene today are many, many so-called “healing ministries,” which claim to offer miraculous physical healing in the name of Jesus Christ to anyone who want to avail themselves of it. Sadly, this would include many weak, vulnerable people for whom the usual channels, such as a doctor or hospital, have not worked for them.

The people who set up these “ministries” get their ideas mainly from personal experience, and they get what Biblical basis they have for their ministries from the following verses:

Isaiah 53:4,5

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

They believe, wrongly, that this talks about physical healing rather than spiritual healing from the burden of our sins.

I have a problem with all these so-called “healing ministries” in the church.

Firstly, it is important to note that every time we are healed, it is a miracle. I had a cold last week, but it cleared up. That in itself is a miracle, and we should be thankful.

Psalms 139:14

I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.

However, when we talk about miracles in the context of a healing ministry, we are talking about extraordinary healing above and beyond the usual, natural means God normally uses. Of course, only God is free to do this:

Westminster Confession of Faith 5:3

God in His ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at His pleasure.

Secondly, we must realise that no-one anywhere has miraculous powers to heal in this way, despite many churches claiming that people do. Jesus Christ had this power. Upon Christ healing a man born blind, the man said:

John 9:32

Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind.

Men having the power to physically heal miraculously was unheard of up to that point. Christ coming along and really having these powers was such a wonder. In fact, Christ

called these abilities of His, “*signs and wonders,*” which were only there for one purpose, namely to point to Him as being the Messiah:

John 6:26

Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles [i.e. what the miracles were pointing to, i.e. that He was the Messiah], but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.

For most people who came to Christ, all they wanted was the physical healing. They couldn't care less about His teaching. Of ten lepers Christ cleansed, only one came back to give thanks:

Luke 17:15-18

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan. And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.

In Matthew chapter 10, Christ delegates some of His miraculous powers to His disciples, but it was only for a short evangelistic campaign to the lost sheep of the house of Israel:

Matthew 10:1,5-8

And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease....These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.

Note their main task was to preach “*The kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” and the miracles were a sign that this was the case. Very many Christians today think this power to miraculously heal is for us today, but this is nowhere spoken of in Scripture, it was just given to the disciples for this short campaign. In fact in a later campaign, when Christ sent out seventy into all the villages where He Himself would later come, the disciples were again given some miraculous powers, but Christ rebuked them afterwards for boasting of them:

Luke 10:19-20

Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

After Christ's ascension, some of the apostles were also given power to heal, but this was limited to the apostles only, as they were specifically called the “*signs of an apostle*”:

2 Corinthians 12:12

Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

But in the last letter that Paul ever wrote, to Timothy, we see that even the miraculous powers that he had, had disappeared by that time, because he couldn't even heal his friend:

2 Timothy 4:20

Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.

After that, no more men performing miracles. Just enough around the time of Christ coming to this world to prove that He was the Messiah, and to point to the fact that it was His teachings that we need to follow.

So, no-one has magic powers to heal today, in fact no-one has ever had magic powers to heal at all, apart from Christ and some of His disciples for a short period of time. So Benny Hinn, Peter Popoff, Morris Cerullo and the like, not to mention all the Nigerian and African so-called faith-healers conning vulnerable people out of lots of money, are all fake.

Having said all that, of course God can heal. So, if aunt Bessie is sick in bed, one thing we should not be doing is laying hands on her and saying "Be healed, in the name of Jesus." Such action won't work. However, we *can* sit beside her and pray. The Lord *can* heal. We are powerless to do anything, but the Lord can heal if He so wishes, and as Christians, we have access to His throne of grace:

Hebrews 4:16

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

But we must remember that we shouldn't presume on the Lord to heal every time.

Many times, it is NOT God's will for someone to be physically healed. This is a shocking thing to say to people in these "healing ministry" circles, but it is true. The man born blind was born blind....:

John 9:3

....that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

This doesn't only refer to the moment Christ healed him, but to all of his life while he was blind.

Also, Paul prayed three times that a "*thorn in the flesh*" (what this was we don't know exactly) should be removed from him, but God did not remove it, but rather said:

2 Corinthians 12:9

My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Paul acquiesced to God's will after the third time of praying, and did not bother the Lord about it any more after that.

The Psalmist too says that there was a very good reason for him to be afflicted:

Psalm 119:67

Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.

Many times the Lord is gracious and will heal us when we ask, but even then, there is only one thing certain about life:

Hebrews 9:27

it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.

We must always be aware that maybe, in the Lord's will, it is aunt Bessie's time to die. We all die. Death the only thing certain about life. Only Enoch, Elijah and all those who will be on the earth at Christ's second coming won't die. That is not most of us. We should all ordinarily expect one day to die. We should prepare for it. We need to embrace Christ as our only Saviour from the consequences of our sins, and make sure we are His, before it's too late. In other words, we shouldn't be obsessed with a "healing ministry," thinking that if only we have enough faith we can be healed every time and live for ever. That is stupidity at its greatest. Who wants to live in this awful, sad, depressing world, full of suffering and trials, for ever, anyway?

John 16:33

In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

The Christian's true home is in heaven. That is what we should be preparing for, not a long, comfortable life on this earth:

Colossians 3:1,2

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.

This is why I have no time for so-called "healing ministries" in the church. However, if a ministry is offering prayer for the sick, of course that is good and useful and should be encouraged. But when people presume on God to heal every time, we have crossed the line. We should be thankful for anything the Lord brings upon us, even death.

1 Thessalonians 5:18

In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

Christmas: Satan's Greatest Festival

The Incarnation is the most wonderful thing this world has ever experienced:

John 1:14

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

1 Timothy 3:16

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

Luke 1:35

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

God becoming man. How can this be? Why did the Lord of glory ever see fit to bother with us, sinful men? But He did:

1 Timothy 1:15

This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

God is altogether worthy of all our worship for coming into this world and saving sinners such as we are. So let's honour the incarnation. Let's speak about it and think upon it.

But Christmas is altogether different.

In the church we are continually being told that Christmas is the biggest Christian festival of the year, and one of the best opportunities for evangelism, because many people who would not normally come to church enter its doors. So, we are told to embrace it and make it as joyous a festival as possible. I'm sorry but I don't agree.

Firstly, Christmas is a mass, "Christ's mass." It was invented by the Roman Catholic church and has no place in Protestantism.

We don't know the date of Christ's birth. The winter solstice seemed like a good date to hang this festival on, so that's what they did. It is very unlikely to be the middle of winter, because we are told the sheep were in the fields at night:

Luke 2:8

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

I've heard autumn mentioned as a possible time for Christ's birth, but my favourite possibility is early spring, because Christ is the Lamb of God:

John 1:29

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

We don't really know the time of His birth, and even if we did, we are not told anywhere in the Bible to have a special day to celebrate it. On the other hand, we do have instructions to celebrate the Lord's death, in the Lord's Supper:

1 Corinthians 11:26

For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.

These are the basic Scriptural reasons for not celebrating Christmas. But there are many more practical ones:

There are so many people out there who absolutely hate Christmas. The suicide rate increases fivefold at this time of year. The pressure gets to some poor souls so much that they at least attempt to end their lives.

People are desperately lonely, especially around this time. Not because they particularly want to be invited to a party, but because either they have no family at all to go home to, or they have problems with the one they've got. They're just looking for one or two real friends.

I knew someone once who was thrown out of his lodgings over Christmas, because the supposedly "Christian" family he was lodging with needed his room to put up visiting family members. He ended up on Christmas Day sitting on a bench in the local bus station reading his Bible. Of course God will not forsake us like that.

Psalm 27:10

When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up.

Many years ago, I remember hearing the actress Thora Hird on the radio programme Desert Island Discs, saying that she was saddened that she got so many letters from people who didn't even have, as she said, a "second cousin three times removed." Hers was the only friendly face they ever saw (on their television sets), so they wrote to her.

That's the reality of Christmas. But what do we do about it? Well, the world piles the pressure on, and makes things even worse. Happy smiling faces, happy families celebrating Christmas parties is all we see on our television screens. And if we're not as happy as they are, the problem must be with us, not them. That's all the world can do. The world hasn't got the answer, it is the cause of the problem.

So what do the churches do instead? Sadly, too many of them join in with all the frivolity, and have Christmas parties themselves.

Most churches, in Christmas week, would either shorten their sermons, dispense with them altogether, or even dispense with whole services altogether. Prayer meetings and Bible studies are cancelled. The preaching of the gospel, sermons and all the usual church activity are stopped for a week so that the regular church-goers can go and worship their families instead. Surely, Satan is so very happy with all this. It's just what he wants.

And simply inviting lonely people to parties at the church is not really the answer either. The best thing we could do is to tell them that they don't have to do all this, the pressure's off.

Yes, you can live with a clear conscience by not joining in with what everyone else is doing at this time of year. The burden is removed. Of course we can then go on to tell these poor people that the far greater burden of their sins can also be removed in Christ. That's the true message we should be proclaiming, not trying to force people to celebrate a worldly festival in the name of Christ, but telling people about the freedom from our sins that can be found in Him. This is true freedom and true joy.

The churches themselves are under pressure to conform to the world's festival of Christmas, because, after all, isn't it a "Christian" festival? But whether we hold Christmas events or not, our greatest concern should be to make sure we too are not burdened by any pressure to conform, but rather that we should be a beacon of hope at a particularly

dark time of year for many people. Then the churches could become a real light to the nations around them:

Acts 13:47

For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.