

The Open Minded Christian

How To Engage Charitably With Fellow Sinners

Richard Bushey

Dedication:

To all of those with whom I have shared a disagreement and did not behave with the standards of charity outlined in this book.

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Preface

I fear that the term *open-minded* conjures with it a number of characterizations that I do not have in mind when composing this book. I am not saying that Christians need to compromise their faith, nor am I suggesting that Christians need to traverse the bounds of Christianity and abandon Jesus Christ. I am not saying that we need to flee from the gospel to relate to the world. That is far from my conception of what it means to be open-minded.

Rather, I am thinking of open-minded as a relational term. This is a call to help Christians to learn to relate to other people, to listen to what they have to say, and to be tolerant of others' views. Even while we may staunchly disagree with something that another person says, (whether a fellow brother in Christ or a worldly person) that ought not incline us to be intolerant of them. Hence, this book is a call to Christians to behave in a way that is loving, respectful, and relational with other individuals, even while we may strongly disagree.

I labor this point purely because I have seen the church fall short of the standard that Christ set down for his followers. I do not see a church that represents the reputation that Christ

had as being a friend of sinners. I see a church that does not want to hear what anybody says. I find a church that repels people, even parishioners within their own congregation, from the gospel. So, this is a call, not to compromise the faith, nor to decline our foundational doctrines, nor to reject the notion of sin, but rather to allow our love to be our seat at the table. I implore the church in the writing of this book to “Let your shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.” (Matthew 5:16).

I would extend this command to our relationships with other people. If we are truly going to relate to the lost sinners, to help them to find the gospel (since God does use us to bring people to the truth), we need to learn to relate to them. The evangelical church cannot decline into the fatalistic mindset that argues that we need not do anything, because God’s elect will come no matter what we do. We need to behave as Jesus did, making ourselves a friend of sinners so that they will come to know the truth about God’s love in Christ.

So I say one last time before beginning: The call to be open-minded and tolerant is not a call to permit sin in our midst. It

is not a call to compromise biblical principles or values. It is a call to understand the sinner, and even understand our brethren with whom we disagree. In this way, our open-minded disposition leads us to maneuver as open-minded Christians, within the framework of a Christian worldview. We need not compromise Christianity to be open-minded, anymore than a mathematician needs to compromise the sum of $2+2$ being 4 to be open-minded.

Introduction – A Plea For Self-Reflection

I frequently encounter people that want to strike up a conversation with me, but I find that their approach to conversation repels me. These individuals are trying to summarize my views and tell me what I believe in a way that I find uncharitable and unsympathetic. They ignore what I say or scrutinize the syntax of my sentences so as to find ways to refute what I said. They do not consider if I am right nor do they consider the argumentation that I am presenting. They only want to reveal how wrong I am. They are utterly intolerant of disagreements and are unwilling to hear any dissident view represented. It is an affront to everything they have been taught throughout their lives. This is the sort of person that I cannot stand talking to. This is the sort of person that I am. This is the sort of person that you are.

I have discovered that there are monolithic urges in many Christian denominations. We want to be around kindred spirits and we want to be around people who think just like we do. We want to be around people who will agree and affirm that we were right all along. If there is a dissident opinion, it will serve only to annoy us and there is a desire to want to stomp it out.

While the church no longer burns heretics at the stake, we can certainly in ourselves see the residual attitude toward those with whom we disagree. There is a sort of disdain among many people. There is intolerance. I do not mean intolerance in the modern usage of the word. I am not saying that we have to agree with everybody or affirm the beliefs that they are promoting. I am not writing a call into pluralism or universalism. I am not saying that all beliefs are equally valid. That is not tolerance. Tolerance is to acknowledge and accept those who have divergent views as members of society and to love them as we love ourselves despite our disagreements. Our disagreements should become secondary to our desire to serve and honor them and individuals. When divergent views arise in the body of Christ, so long as they are not heretical (see chapter 6 for a definition of heresy), we should be willing to accept them as members of our congregation and allow our differences to fade into the background.

We should flee from our monolithic tendencies. Christians do not have to agree about everything. When we develop this idea, it becomes the case that the Christian who disagrees with secondary doctrines will begin to feel like a second-class

Christian. We have developed this recipe of isolating members of the body of Christ. The recipe looks sort of like this: [1] I hold to this secondary doctrine passionately and [2] I do not know how to handle disagreements. There is nothing inherently wrong with [1], as we should be passionate. But [2] has always been prevalent because of our monolithic tendencies. Many Christian denominations are separated by secondary doctrines that do not need to separate Christians. For example, there is no ecclesiological reason that Calvinists and Arminians cannot congregate together. Yet they will separate on the basis of this difference. But this separation has trained us to be terrible at handling disagreements.

We have trained ourselves to survive in the comfortable environment wherein everybody agrees with us and is reminding us that we were right all along. In this way, when we encounter somebody who thinks that we might not be right, it is frustrating and it is not what we are used to. Of course, I would not deny that denominations make sense for purely ecclesiological purposes. That is to say that if a church's general practice is different from another, then creating different denominations makes sense. If a church believes in the baptism of infants as opposed to believer's baptism, it

makes sense that these churches would not worship together, because their practices are different. This is not to say that they condemn one another as un-Christian. It is to say that their practices are often seen as incompatible, so they separate. However, many of the differences that cause separation are not like that. Many of the differences are not ecclesiological but secondary or tertiary theological differences. In separating over these differences, the church becomes untrained in handling differences. It becomes more intolerant because everybody around them already agrees.

Leaders or teachers within our denomination are often the ones to pitch the treatment of opposing views that we receive. They do not believe in these opposing views. Now, while a responsible teacher will ensure that they are properly representing the opposing view and the objections, I am afraid that this is often not the case. The congregants will receive an understanding of the opposing view that is just subpar. If we heard an actual representative of that view speaking, it would sound different and more robust. The congregants would hold this conception of the other side that is sort of a cartoon version of the view, so that they would

have to ask themselves, “Who could believe this?” Indeed, nobody could believe that, because nobody does believe that.

But then when they encounter somebody who does hold that particular view, they will assume that this individual holds to the cartoon version of the view rather than the robust version of the view. Their objections will be aimed at the cartoon version, and conversation will be impossible because you are talking about two different things.

This is the problem that this book is addressing and that is only one angle to consider. Christians have been very unsympathetic to other Christians, and even more unsympathetic people outside of the body of Christ. In the classical sense of the word, I have encountered a lot of intolerance. I have personally been guilty of intolerance. You have personally been guilty of intolerance. This book serves as a plea and implore for self-reflection in this area.

Watch your life and doctrine closely.

The practice of self-reflection should be prevalent in the life of every Christian. We want to ensure that we are not wandering off the narrow way and that we are not wandering into false doctrine. This is one reason that it is important to

maintain fellowship with the local congregation and remain under the authority of church eldership. If you are out of reach with these provisions that God has provided for living the Christian life, then it could be said that you are your own authority. You do not have anyone in your life that is of a higher rank than you.

You might say things like, “the Bible is my authority,” or “the Holy Spirit is my guide.” Well, that is certainly true of every Christian. The Bible is our authority. But the Bible is still subject to our flawed interpretation. It is subject to everything that we bring to it. If I were wearing glasses with a red tint, then I would think that the entire world was red. So when we open the Bible, we have this red tint as we read the pages. This is one reason that it is important that we submit ourselves to church authority and to fellowship with other Christians.

After all, my own personal practice of self-reflection will always yield the result that I was right all along. We are inclined to think that we were right and we are inclined to take too much pride to allow self-reflection to bring us to admit that we were wrong. If we are behaving in a way that is immoral, we will often not be reflective enough to consider

that we might be wrong. Yet this is what Christians are called to do. The Christian who does not reflect upon his life and his doctrine will walk into immorality and heresy.

The question that you should pose to yourself as you read through this book is whether this applies to you. Reflect upon your actions. Recall the interactions that you have had with people with whom you disagree. Consider whether there is anybody in your life that holds a divergent opinion, and how you feel toward this individual. If the disagreeable premise makes you angry then perhaps it could be said that you are guilty of this. This is especially true of that premise is within the body of Christ. If you cannot hear somebody representing an alternative opinion without foaming at the mouth, you may be guilty of this. Consider the way you have represented intellectual opponents. Is it identical to how they would represent their view? Did you create a cartoon version of their belief so that it would be easier to criticize? You should be asking if your actions reflect the poor behavior that I have outlined in these pages. I think it is something that we have all been guilty of at some point. But when we do this, it isolates people. It isolates members of the body of Christ and repels people from hearing the gospel.

Thus Paul tells us, “Watch your life and your doctrine closely.” (1 Timothy 4:16). It seems to be a sign of spiritual maturity that an individual can reflect upon their actions and honestly assess whether they are behaving properly. It is a sign of maturity when a Christian can measure himself against the biblical standard and realize that they have fallen short. In watching and analyzing our behavior, we can learn where our shortcomings are and correct them so that we can have proper and loving interactions with others. We can learn where our shortcomings are so that we may be open-minded and tolerant Christians.

This is not a problem that is “out there.”

When a serious problem is outlined before people, they are usually willing to concede that it is in fact a problem. It is something that needs to be dealt with. I am reminded of the sermon given by the great reformed preacher Paul Washer. It was at a youth convention and today it is known as The Shocking Youth Message. I think the expectation was that he would preach a message that would send chills up the spine, get some applause and then send people home. Instead, he was laboring the point that people who do not live a Christian

life are not really born again. That is not to say that their works saves them, but rather that works are fruit that are brought forth from a regenerate heart. In this way, the life that a Christian lives needs to reflect the life of Christ. He said, “We’re not here to look like the world... we’re here to look like Jesus Christ.” Then the audience roared in applause. His next words quickly calmed the auditorium. “I don’t know why you’re applauding. I’m talking about you.”

Then he dwelt on the severity of the presence of ongoing sin in the Christian life. He dwelt on the necessity of repentance. He dwelt on the superficiality of Christian conventions, as the preachers just want to inspire some emotions when they should be imploring them to live like Christ. This is something that we can all agree with. This is something that when he said it in front of a group of Christians, all of the people said “Amen!” But he was talking about *them*. He was pleading for their self-reflection.

In the same way, people who read this book might be inclined to agree that it is a real problem. They might be inclined shout “Amen!” and agree that out there, in the outside world, there are a lot of people who cannot handle disagreements. There are a lot of people who isolate other

Christians and who repel non-Christians. There are a lot of brethren who create barriers to the gospel where it does not need to be. There are a lot of Christians who create barriers to discipleship and fellowship with other denominations where it does not need to be. You will applaud in agreement of these points. But I do not know why you are applauding. I am talking about you.

Chapter 1-5: How do you relate to people?

Throughout the first five chapters, I outlined some of the general missteps that people make in communicating with others. These would apply to our engagements with both Christians and non-Christians. When we have these debates or discussions with people that we disagree with, we often are not very interested in what they have to say. We are interested in what we have to say. We are interested in proving that they are wrong and we are right. So we tend to just conjure up counter-arguments without thinking through them just as a desperate measure to prove that we were right all along. Yet both parties in the discussion are often guilty of this, so this results in people just talking past each other.

Consider for example the debate between the pro-life movement and the pro-choice movement (and I am passionately pro-life). The pro-life movement focuses on the life and personhood of the fetus. If the fetus were human, then to kill it would be homicide. This general principle is the foundation for pro-life apologetics. Since the fetus is human, we know that it is homicide to kill it, and homicide is universally recognized as a moral crime and should be condemned at all costs. On the other hand, the pro-choice movement focuses on the right of the woman while ignoring the question of the personhood of the fetus. Both of these parties focus on the importance of their respective arguments while undervaluing the other one. In this way, they just talk past each other.

This is just one adversity that open and honest discussion faces. How can we leap over these barriers? Well, **in chapter one**, I indicated the need to learn about our intellectual opponents. Why do they believe the things that they do? What has led to them to that belief? We tend to assume that we already know why they believe what they believe. But it may be the case that we do not really understand what they believe. We may not understand the particular nuances of

their belief and perhaps our objections do not really work. Perhaps they have thought through the objections that we have in a more systematic and rigorous manner than we did.

That would lead us to the question of learning not only about them, but also about ourselves. This was the premise of **chapter two**. Within this chapter, I indicated that we ought to understand why we hold the particular beliefs that we do.

People always believe things for bad reasons. We are motivated by our tradition, for example, and the interpretation of certain verses that our tradition has told us to believe. Tradition is often a good thing, but it oversteps its' boundaries when it becomes an equal authority with the Bible. When the words of tradition are written between the lines of the Bible, then we know that our tradition is being misapplied. This is something that we need to consider. We need to ensure the piety and rigor and intellectual satisfaction of our justification for our beliefs.

Further, in **chapter three**, I labored the point that our representations of alternative points of view need to accurately represent those points of view. Would you trust a Muslim to teach other people about Christian theology? As a general principle, I certainly would not. However, I also would

not trust a Christian to teach about Islamic theology, as a general principle. We have rendered caricatures of the views of our opponents to make them easier to attack. Muslims often argue that Christians believe that there are three gods because of the doctrine of the trinity. This is a caricature of the trinity that no Christian would represent. Of course, this problem of misrepresenting those with whom we disagree is widespread. It is something that is evident throughout many traditions and world religions. We are so keen to misrepresent others so that our belief will have greater credibility.

Yet when we encounter somebody who holds a different view, how do we react? I labored this point in **chapter four**. We generally do become angry when somebody is criticizing or attacking beliefs that we hold to be sacred. Of course, the reason that we are offended could be simple pride. They are telling us that they are more studious than we are. So we become offended. However, our awareness of this problem is the first step to overcoming it. We need to begin to ask why we are offended and whether this person is even trying to offend us. If we do that, the yield and profit would be great.

But this would require humility. It would require us to listen to what others are saying. It would require us to consider that we may be wrong. This is what I investigated in **chapter five**. That is not to say that Christians need to consider that their faith may be wrong. Just as a mathematician does not consider alternative answers to $2+2$, so also the Christian does not think that the Christian faith is wrong. But, if they opened themselves up to an honest investigation of their faith, they would find that it stood the test of evidence. In the case of disputes between denominations and secondary doctrines, Christians should consider that they might be wrong so that they can openly and honestly examine the evidence and listen to what the individual with whom they disagree is saying.

Chapters 6-10: How do you relate to different groups?

In a stir of emotions and the inability to handle disagreements, Christians tend to throw out the word *heretic*. Even if the issue about which they are disagreeing is secondary. The very proposition that we might be wrong is deeply offensive to us. This is because their faith is sort of like a house of cards. If you remove one card, the entire house collapses. That is probably because they came to believe all of

their sacred doctrines by the same epistemological resource: their pastor told them to believe it. Their tradition taught them what is true and taught them why certain proof-texts prove that it is true. This means that if you remove one card, everything that they believe will be vulnerable to removal. The entire house will collapse. That is the conception of the Christian faith that many have.

However, perhaps the Christian faith is a bit subtler than this. Perhaps the Christian faith is flexible enough so that it would persist even if a particular secondary belief were wrong. The illustration that I used is that it is more like a spider web. There are certainly core strings within the web. If you pluck one of these core strings out, the web will fall apart. But in addition to these core strings, there are also strings that are on the outer core of the web. If you pluck one of these strings out, the web will persist.

So in **chapter six**, I outlined what it means to be a heretic. What are these core strings? What is it that the Christian faith could not persist without? I argued that the core doctrines of the Christian faith are the trinity, the death of Christ for our sins, the resurrection, the Bible as God's word, and justification apart from works and obedience to any sort of

moral code as the mechanism. These are the core elements of the Christian faith, without which, Christianity would not exist. So if somebody affirms all of these, we need not call them a heretic. Further, there is a stark difference between inconsistency and heresy. If a view logically precedes heresy that does not necessarily mean that the person is a heretic. It just means that they are inconsistent. We need to ask if their confession is orthodox, not about what their view entails. But even if the person that we encounter is an actual heretic, we still need to be kind to them. We need to be evangelistic and loving toward them. We need to keep the lines of communication open. But we also need to be careful about who we deem a heretic.

When we encounter somebody who claims to be a Christian, how do we determine if they are within the body of Christ? In **chapter seven**, I outlined the proper approach for dealing with brothers and sisters in Christ who disagree with us. We should ask them for their testimony. Within their words, we will hear how they came from death to life, how they are saved by the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. It is difficult to call somebody a heretic who is in love with Christ and who has a born again testimony, and an

orthodox confession. It is more difficult to get angry with such a person. We should ask what we could learn from them rather than how we can win arguments against them.

This extends even to the creation controversy, which I expounded upon in **chapter eight**. One of the topics that invoke heavy emotion within the body of Christ is the issue of the age of the earth. Many would go so far as to say that it is heresy to suggest that the earth is old. Many suggest that to believe in evolution is a condemnable belief. They will suggest that this conception of God that created an old earth is just evil, because he created death before the Fall of man. The original world that God created was full of death and suffering. Further, they are accused of compromising the Bible to placate modern science. They are reinterpreting the Bible on the basis of what modern science tells them. They are appealing to the word of man to override the word of God. This is the charge against the old earth creationist and it is quite potent among many Christian circles. But I argued in this chapter that the issue of the age of the earth and evolution are not worthy of condemnation. They are secondary issues with no overlap with the core doctrines of the Christian faith. At most, you could say that an old earth

creationist was being inconsistent, not heretical, but even that charge would be strained.

In **chapter nine**, I turned away from issues within the body of Christ and offered advice about how we should deal with atheists. Many atheists are genuinely unpleasant and not willing to listen to a word that we say. They are only there to prove how smart they are and how dumb religious people are. Are such people worthy of our time? Well, I argued that it depends. I appealed to Proverbs 26:4-5, which says that there are times wherein we should address a fool according to his folly, and other times that we should not. Wisdom would dictate which to use in a particular situation. There are times when we should disarm the atheistic argumentation just so they do not think they are wise in their own eyes. Further, if there is an audience, then we should shut down their arguments, not necessarily for their sake, but for the sake of those who are listening. But there are other times that we should just back off because the conversation is not going anywhere. It is also prudent that we understand and trust in the sovereignty and power of the Holy Spirit. Unless God softens their heart, they will never turn to him in faith

because they love their sin. We need to understand this and even have a measure of sympathy and patience.

The same might be said when dealing with the daunting issue of homosexuality, which I offered a treatment of in **chapter ten**. When we encounter people who are advocates of the LGBT movement, or are even homosexuals, we need to labor to understand how they became the people that they are. We need to understand how they see us so that we can overcome their preconceptions of us. For many Christians really are very bigoted and intolerant toward. By understanding them and getting to know them, and honestly recognizing their struggles, then we begin to mend the broken lines of communication between the body of Christ and the LGBT movement.

These are just a few of the groups that we will encounter and that relations and communication with are very difficult. Even within the body of Christ, communication is difficult when we disagree because of our monolithic tendencies. But if we cannot handle secondary disagreements, how can we handle those outside of the body of Christ? How can we share the gospel with anyone if we cannot communicate?

Chapters 11-13: Practical applicability

While there was certainly a measure of applicable content in the first ten chapters, I dedicated these final three chapters to offering a resolution to the problem of communication. It is not irreparable. But it starts with the individual. As an individual, you need to be willing to have the humility to say that perhaps you do not handle disagreements as well as you should and moving forward, you want to mend the lines of communication with those with whom you disagree.

Thus in **chapter eleven**, I pointed out the possibility of friendship even when we have disagreements at a fundamental level. A Christian can befriend a Muslim. A Christian can befriend a homosexual. In fact, it is within the confines of friendship that the gospel will receive a fair hearing. People are much more likely to listen to you if they know that you care about them. But if they think that you are only talking to feed your pride or to show how smart you are, they will tune you out or just look for ways to refute you. But if they think that you care about them, they will be more likely to listen to you.

That is why I argued in **chapter twelve** that we need to allow our love to be our seat at the table. People do not listen to us because of our intellectual rigor. They do not listen to us because of how studious we are. They do not listen to us even because we are right. In the case of the LGBT movement for example, people forget all of these things. They just see you as a bigot. But if you demonstrate love for them, then you will have developed a moral opinion of repute.

However, even while it is important to love, it is also important to be intelligent, as I argued in **chapter thirteen**. We can love all we want while promoting invalid logic and it will not matter. If I am demonstrating love to somebody and tell them that $2+2=5$, it will not matter. Our behavior will not change their mind about something that is patently incorrect. Thus love and intellect need to work together. They need to compliment one another. We need to be able to provide good answers to difficult questions, because there are tangible intellectual stumbling blocks that people have to faith in Christ.

My prayer is that anybody reading this book will labor to apply these principles so that we can truly exemplify the love of God. We can present a Christianity that is both loving and

intellectually acceptable. But that begins with us as individuals. Individuals need to understand how they represent Christ and how their presentations of the gospel affect other people. We need to understand the assumptions that we make about people and labor to combat them. That is the plea of this book. I implore everybody reading to exercise self-reflection.

Chapter 1 – Learn About People

I am afraid that the tragic reality has emerged that learning about people is something of a novel concept among many. While this is not an indictment solely against the church, there is some overlap in this indictment and the church's behavior. When we disagree with somebody about a certain propositional truth, there is a tendency to load a myriad of assumptions into what that person is saying. Everything that we have been told about what they believe is assumed to be what they are saying. Everything that other representatives of this position, or of a similar position, have said, is assumed to be what they are representing. There is a tendency for Christians to make assumptions about people based on a word or two.

There is an old piece of wisdom, which says that a picture is worth a thousand words. While that may be the case, it would probably be appropriate to induce another pithy saying that aligns with this point. *One word is worth a thousand words.* For in saying one word, the individual communicates entire concepts, summons forth streams of thought, calls memories and lectures about that particular word into the memory of

the person with whom they are communicating. We do this all of the time. One word is worth a thousand words.

If you do not find of this line of reasoning persuasive, just think of a giraffe. Just in reading that particular word, there has sprung forth images of a giraffe and perhaps fond or intriguing memories of science classes that you endured during your education. You may be thinking of their long neck, and the fact that they could have evolved with that particular trait as an adaption to an environment where nutrition was out of reach. Consequently, during the struggle for survival, the giraffe developed this longer neck as an adaptation to the environment. It may be the case that you are thinking all of these things, without my even saying them. Even if I did not describe the giraffe, you would have thought of it. You would have loaded your assumptions about the giraffe into my words. In this case, however, your assumptions would have been correct.

With that in mind, I concede that the example of the giraffe might be a bit mundane. I will try another example. In the previous paragraph, I used the word “evolved.” Since this is book targets Christians, I would be justified in thinking that this word triggers a certain reaction. You may be angry that I

have seemingly accepted the Theory of Evolution and implied its' truth in the very first chapter of this book. It may have left you think that this book urging Christians to be tolerant is actually a sample of liberal theology, for it promotes the Theory of Evolution and calls Christians to be open to it. Well, these assumptions that you have made far exceed what I intended. For in using the word "evolved," I was being quite consistent with what even the most adamant denies of the Theory of Evolution would propagate. I was describing the lengthening of a neck, not an instance wherein one species becomes another. Therefore, I was not advocating nor implying the truth in the Theory of Evolution. Nonetheless, you may have loaded that assumption into what I said and may have been preparing to criticize me on that basis. This should serve to underline my point that a *one word is worth a thousand words*.

Yet, if you will permit me, I will apply just one more illustration and then we will move on. Let us suppose that you encounter a Christian who tells you that they endorse the legalization of same-sex marriage. (I am an advocate of traditional marriage between a man and a woman). If somebody were to tell you that, we would instantly assume

that this individual supports the lifestyle of homosexual behavior. We would instantly assume that this person thinks that homosexual behavior is not a sin. You have probably encountered Christians in the past, and they have claimed support of same-sex marriage, and they were, in fact, supporting the lifestyle and endorsing the behavior. Thus, when we encounter somebody else who claims to endorse the legalization of same-sex marriage, we assume that they are saying the same thing that the other person said. We are loading the stance of our previous encounter into what this person is saying.

Yet as we begin to probe this individual, we discover that they really do think that homosexual behavior is sinful behavior. They have adopted the position that particular Christian nuances of morality should not be imposed upon the government, for we do live in a secular society. Just as we would not want to see the presence of Islamic laws in the US Constitution, this person is saying that it would be wrong to impose their religious values upon the US Constitution. This would be akin to CS Lewis's thoughts on divorce. Of course, whether they are right or wrong about this is not the point. The point is rather that we made an assumption about what

they were saying. We assumed that they were saying that homosexual behavior is not sinful. But, what they were really saying was that they did not want to impose their religious values upon the law.

These are obviously two very different statements. We do not want to be guilty of accusing somebody of the former, when they actually meant the latter, which is the case in many situations. We routinely load our assumptions onto what other people say. So, how can we combat this behavior of ours?

Learn to ask questions.

You will recall that above, I used the words “evolution,” and “same-sex marriage,” and labored to underline the reality that these tend to invoke certain assumptions. You may have even assumed that I was saying something that I was not. How can we avert these assumptions? Of course, it is impossible to avert assumptions. Assumptions are a psychological phenomenon, which I am simply not qualified to bring you to overcome.

That is not to say that they are always negative. I assume that when I turn the water on in my shower, corrosive acid

will not come out. I assume that when I talk to somebody, I will make sound and my words will be coherent (hopefully) so that they understand the words that I am saying. When I mention a giraffe, I assume that you know exactly what I am referring to. If a lecturer relays to the audience that he will be fielding questions after his lecture, he makes the assumption that audience knows what it means to ask a question. I, and everybody, makes these inductive assumptions, without which, we simply could not function in the world. We base what we encounter in the present on what we have encountered in the past. That is undeniable and often warranted.

However, when we are dealing with other people, our assumptions are often wrong. We misuse our assumptions. Just as somebody who misuses a hammer by committing murder with it, so also we misuse our assumptions. In properly applying our assumptions, we must first recognize that we are making them. If somebody utters a phrase or a word that invokes a certain mental response, we need to consider the possibility that they may mean something different than what we think they mean, lest we be guilty of the fallacy of equivocation.

The way in which we can discern what they think is quite simple. While it is one of the simplest approaches to resolving this conundrum, it will also be seen as foreign to many. For people are just too proud to exercise this alternative. Many would rather just assume that they know everything that a person is thinking and saying, as opposed to adopting a position of humility and admitting that they may be vulnerable to misunderstanding. This method will be regarded as outrageous to some and offensive to others.

If you want to know what somebody means, just ask them. Express your capacity for misunderstanding. Express how likely you are to load your assumptions into what they are saying. If you had asked me if I was peddling evolution earlier in this chapter, I would have told you that I was not (I am skeptical of the Theory of Evolution). If you had asked that hypothetical person what they meant when they said that they are in favor of same-sex marriage, they would have told you. I cannot tell you how many times I have said something, and the person to whom I say it emits a sporadic outburst of anger and accusations of heresy. They would do this when I was not even promoting the view that they accuse me of promoting. Yet they could have resolved this issue by

adopting a position of humility and just asking the question. What do you think? What is your view? Do I understand you correctly?

By simply asking somebody what they mean, you negate all of your own assumptions. You become receptive to what this person has to say and you learn to address them as an individual.

Allow them to tell their own story.

Still, as I indicated, there are many times that your assumptions about an individual will be correct. You will have discerned that it was correct by asking them and allowing them the freedom to clarify their position. When they clarify it for you, you come to realize that they really do represent this position that you thought they did. At this juncture, many of us would be inclined toward anger. If an individual communicates their support of a position that we find particularly objectionable, the move that we are inclined to make is to overload this individual with facts and argumentation so powerful that an honest seeker of truth could not possibly continue to deny what is being said. Then we become angry when they persist in their disagreement.

This is not to suggest that we can never disagree and can never express our disagreement, for obviously, there are ways for us to approach people with whom we disagree. But the first proposition that we relay need not be an expression of the latitude of our position over and against theirs. Rather, it is my thought that if we are to truly understand what a person is saying and understand why they have come to adopt a certain position, then we need to begin to understand this individual as a person, as opposed to as a representative of a corporate body. If we view them as a walking manifestation of a particular argument, we will be inclined to deliver counter-argument after counter-argument without regard to them as people. While some may be receptive to this, many will react with disdain. People do not enjoy being told that they are wrong, especially in the context of a relationship with somebody who cares nothing for you. They may think that you are just being prideful and trying to win an intellectual showdown. In fact, even if you offer a robust defense of a certain position, this individual may be likely to seek out a robust defense of their position. After all, people are not likely to abandon their beliefs, but rather they are likely to seek out answers to the question that have been posed to them.

If we truly want to have an impact upon the lives of our fellow man, we need to truly care about this person. Again, this seems to align with adopting a stance of humility. We have to assume that we do not know everything that there is know about this person. There is more to an individual than the beliefs that they are espousing. There is often more to the beliefs that they are espousing than our initial perception. There is a deeply imbedded commitment to those particular beliefs. If we want to understand what our friend is saying, we need to begin to regard them as our friend, rather than as a target.

Allow them to tell their story their way. What we have in mind about how they came to their conclusions is *our story of them*. But our story of them should not be so interesting to us. Our story of them should be held tentatively and receptive to utter refutation and abandonment. Our story of them should be measured against *their story of themselves*. Ask probing questions. Allow them to explain who they are, and why they came to believe what they believe.

If you want to tell them what you think, be willing to first listen to what they think.

People are keen to use the broaching of a particular topic as a platform for expressing their beliefs about a subject. As a blogger, I routinely post my articles on social networking websites so that people can digest my reasoning and respond to what I say. Well, this model has emerged as an ideal pie-in-the-sky, as it turns out that many people are not interested in anything that anyone, aside from themselves, have to say. Many people want to hear affirmations of what they already believe. Many people want to hear why it is that they were right all along. But they do not want to hear a reasoned and objective analysis to the relevant topic. They will crow in disgust if they hear an inkling of a criticism of what they already believe. So, rather than digesting what I have to say, people will read just the title of a blogpost, and remind me of their view.

In my interactions on the Internet, I have found that many people are just not interested in hearing views espoused with which they disagree. Rather than allowing a fair hearing, many have the mentality that the only view that should be espoused is the one that they already hold. People are

inclined to just sort of plug their ears when another view is being represented.

However, this behavior seems to sever our capacity to relate to other people or to draw them closer to the truth. If I use my disagreement with another person as a platform for preaching the reasoning behind my view, and do not allow them to speak, or refuse to listen to what they are saying and really digest it, then what I have essentially done is shut down communication between myself and that individual. They are left to ask why they should bother to listen to me when I refuse to listen to them. If you want to tell them what you think, be willing to first listen to what they think.

Yet even on this model, it would be possible for you to just sort of wait for your turn to talk. I am afraid that this style of conversation is quite pervasive. Many people are not interested in what others have to say. Christians, as well, are quite guilty of this. People just want their chance to express themselves and are not interested in the honest reflections of their fellow man. It should not be that way among Christians. Christians should be willing to listen to people and to really digest what they are saying, to try to understand the perspective of those with whom they disagree.

When we begin to understand their reasoning and how they came to their conclusions, we develop this feeling that we can relate to this individual. We begin to know and understand them. We begin to learn about who they are and where they are coming from in espousing these views. Whether we agree with their reasoning or deny their conclusions is not the relevant point here. The point is that we understand why this line of reasoning compels them. If we can develop that maturity, the implications for our future relationships and potential in evangelism will be profound.

Perhaps they really do have good reasons.

The above should not be taken as an opportunity for us to condescend down to their level. As though their line of reasoning was manifestly invalid, and we can see the error that they are just oblivious to. Rather, there are often times wherein I thought I have a sound defeater of a certain proposition, until I heard the defenders of that proposition give a rational answer to that particular question. Just think of all of the times that something similar has occurred. We thought we knew that some proposition was false until

somebody explained why our objections did not really have any merit.

For a moment, consider with me, the problem of evil and suffering in the world. This may seem to many like a very potent emotional argument against the existence of God, for if God really were good and powerful; he would not allow abundant evil as we see today in our world. This must imply that God probably does not exist. Somebody could walk around maintaining this objection, and thinking that it is a sound defeater of the existence of God. But, when they encounter a Christian, the Christian will probably offer the free will defense. They will suggest that God permits evil and suffering on the basis of his desires to allow mankind to have a free choice. Free choice implies that they would have the capacity to make the wrong choice. There are certain aspects of this world, which we could never have in Heaven. There are virtues such as courage or self-sacrifice, which we could never have in Heaven, but are granted as gifts on earth. God provided to his creatures these virtuous experiences, among them being freedom of the will. Now, when this robust defense of the providence of God over evil is provided, the

person who thought that they had a sound defeater of God's existence will be left staggering.

Likewise, when we assume that we have a sound defeater of a certain proposition, we need to adopt a position of humility, for in humility, we will come to realize that there are many things that we just do not know. Perhaps our friend with whom we disagree knows more than we do. Perhaps he is more philosophically oriented than we are. Perhaps he has a better handle on the Scripture than we do. Perhaps he has had very sophisticated teachers who walked him through the various objections, including yours, and demonstrated to him how it is that these objections fail.

Of course, he could still be wrong. But, we need to learn to approach these people with humility. It would be quite helpful if we offered to people the luxurious assumption that they have good reasons for the things that they believe. Perhaps these reasons are wrong, and there is a flaw somewhere in the logic, but that is not to say that we cannot relate to or understand why they would be compelled by it.

If I am really going to engage with somebody with whom I disagree, a good rule of thumb to apply would be to think that they know what they are talking about. They are not just

gullible simpletons who believe what they are told to believe. Rather, I can think that perhaps they have heard my objections and my reasoning and still disagree precisely because they think my objections fail. If I am going to relate to another individual, they should not be disqualified from a reasoned defense of their position by virtue of holding that position. They may really have good reasons.

Perhaps they have emotional reasons.

As we probe to understand this individual, there will be cases wherein we encounter very little intellectual resistance or a very compelling argument for their case. Perhaps when they are citing the Bible, they are demonstrating a clear lack of respect for the context of these particular verses. Perhaps glaring flaws detain their reasoning. It may become obvious to you that they have other reasons for holding the particular view that they do. They have emotional or otherwise non-intellectual reasons for holding fast to their particular stance. But these reasons are probably not even known to them. Their true motives are subconscious and subliminal.

While this is something that we might find frustrating, we should find that we very much relate to this attitude, because

there are often times when we believe things and even acts on things based on emotional reasons rather than rational reasons. If you are keen to jealousy in relationships, then you can certainly relate to this sort of behavior. Your jealousy is probably prompted by infidelity in previous relationships, and those old emotions are sprouting up and impacting your decisions, actions and current relationship in a negative manner. Your motivation for jealousy is subliminal and subconscious. Likewise, if a person is depressed or frustrated, they will turn to things that comfort them, like junk food or even cigarette smoking. But these motivations are often underlying the conscious mind. We see the same thing in our sexual desires. If a man lusts after a woman, he is consciously driven by the hope of enjoying intercourse, but the underlying and subconscious motivation is that he needs to propagate his DNA and impregnate his female companion. The underlying motivation is hidden from him and he does not need to know it for the action driven by it to succeed.

That is not to say that these behaviors are justified. Rather, it is to say that it is a natural aspect of the human psychology. We are regularly driven by non-rational motives, even if we think otherwise. Our friend may be driven by his traditional

values, or perhaps he wants to align with his parents, or his favorite teacher, or maybe he just does not like change. So he resists the view that you are propagating, in favor of fallacious reasoning that leads him to an unsavory conclusion. This is something that is to be expected, for it is prevalent in human beings. We often believe things for bad reasons because our true reasons are emotional. This is something with which everybody can sympathize.

I caution patience when dealing with such a person. One interaction will not change their mind. If all that you have is one interaction, then you may be able to plant a seed of skepticism in their mind. But this may have the adverse effect of leading them to seeking out a robust defense of their fallacious view. (If this is done properly, it will involve an objective scouring of the relevant sources, both those with which one agrees and disagrees. But people are scarcely prone to such an objective scouring.) They will do so with a heavy confirmation bias, attempting to confirm their emotionally held belief.

It is best to ensure, then, that you have more than one interaction, so that you can be patient. People need patience and they need to be slowly worked through their particular

view so that they may come to a deeper understanding of the truth.

This person is not necessarily evil.

Depending on the stance that this individual is espousing, there is an inclination to demonize them. It seems akin to the logical fallacy known as poisoning the well. This occurs when a certain individual is presented in a negative manner before an audience, so that the audience listens to them with negative presumptions in mind. As a result, the audience will always interpret everything that they say in a negative light. This is what people do when they disagree with a particular individual.

If you are having trouble grasping what I mean, consider the way the debate over same sex marriage is often framed. The Christian position is represented as bigoted even before the Christian says a word. Before we speak, we are thought of as hateful people and are perceived through that lens. In this way, we are not really offered a fair hearing, because the only thing that people understand is what they have already been told about us. The well has been poisoned. For this reason, even many Christians are beginning to disassociate

themselves with the biblical stance on same sex marriage, because they want to appease the culture.

However, this action of poisoning the well is not exclusive to our intellectual opponents. We are guilty of it as well. Consider my characterization in the above paragraph of the Christian who approves of same sex marriage just to appease the culture. If I were to say that all Christians who approve of same sex marriage are just trying to appease the culture, then I would be poisoning the well, too. I would prevent you from listening to anything that such a person had to say because they are just trying to appease the culture. That is poisoning the well, and many Christians are guilty of it.

If I were to represent a view that your denomination teaches is wrong, then you are probably listening to me with a number of preconceptions in mind. You might think that I do not care what the Bible says, that I do not believe the Bible, or that I have some hidden emotional motive. You cannot even listen to a word that I say without already assuming both that I am wrong and that I am an immoral person who is trying to distort the word of God. That is just the perception that we tend to create of people over these disagreements.

Whether the disagreement is secondary or cardinal to the faith, we need not assume that the person who is propagating the disagreement is evil. We need not demonize our intellectual opponents. Even if they do have impure motives or even if they are motivated by unbiblical principles or anti-biblical doctrines, then we do not need to poison the well. We may expose what they are saying as unbiblical or unreasonable, but we should still acknowledge that this is a person who has a history, an emotional background and a depth that we cannot see at the moment.

If we assume that everybody with whom we disagree has impure motives, then there will never develop any friendships and therefore, the potential for sharing the gospel with them will be significantly reduced. Even if we disagree with them at a fundamental level, at the level of Christianity and Islam, we still do not need to assume that they have impure motives. People deserve the benefit of the doubt by default until they demonstrate otherwise.

This is particularly true of our brothers and sister in Christ. If somebody is a Christian and espousing a view, it is not helpful for us to demonize them. That will only accomplish the shutting down of communication, neither party will listen to

each other and everybody's heart will grow colder and harder. As Christians, we need to apply these principles. We need to treat people as though they were individuals with a real history, with real reasons, and not as though they were *groups of people* but rather as *people*.

Chapter 2 – Learn About Yourself

A popular atheistic idiom relays the message that if you had been born in an Islamic country, you would be a Muslim. Likewise, if you had lived during the time of the Vikings, you would worship Odin. If you were a lifetime inhabitant of most parts of India, you would sing praises to Shiva. If you lived in a country that endorsed the project of science and spread tales about the mythical founding of religion, you would probably be an atheist. Religious belief, then, is seen as merely demographic, rather than as the result of serious logical scrutiny.

However, this flawed epistemological approach can also be seen in other areas of life. If I had been born in China, I would likely be a communist, and I would be informed about all of the demerits of democracy. Our demographics influence all of our beliefs, but that does not prove that our beliefs are false. It does, however, warrant a bit of self-reflection.

This means that so long as we do not stretch this atheistic idiom beyond the boundaries of its' logical conclusion, we may actually glean some wisdom from it. It obviously does not prove that the Christian faith is false, for if one were laboring to make that argument, they would be guilty of the *genetic*

fallacy, which is to say that we cannot determine that a belief is false by pointing out how somebody came to know that belief. We can, however, point out that the epistemological resources that were employed were, in fact, faulty. If somebody believes something merely because their parents taught it to them, and do not have a foundation of their own, then I am afraid that it is often the case that when this person leaves the home, their faith will collapse.

Yet even if they are to develop their own faith, it is often the case that their beliefs reflect very closely the beliefs of their parents and their tradition. There are very few people who objectively examine the biblical data and come to rational conclusions. Most people just adopt the view that their parents had and assume that they are right. When challenged, they will retreat to the old wisdom and one-liners that were taught to them throughout their lives to satisfy the demands of the challenger.

But, if the challenger is somebody who likewise maintains a deeply ingrained tradition, then both parties are likely to just spout off the wisdom that they have been taught since childhood, and neglect to interact with what the other person is saying. They will not listen to the arguments that the other

individual is espousing precisely because they hail from a different traditional background. They only want to hear what those with whom they already agree have to say. The question that I would pose to you is this: does this describe you? Is your tradition so ingrained that other voices are purposefully (and sorrowfully) muffled? Have you no ears to hear? You should. After all, it may be the case that your tradition is wrong.

Have you ever asked the difficult questions?

Often when people answer this question in the affirmative and say that they have been challenged by difficult questions, and sought out answers, what they really mean is that they tried to answer questions in accordance with what they already believed. Now, of course, this is not always a bad thing. If my beliefs happen to be correct, which in the case of the central tenets of Christian theology, they are, then the answers to the difficult questions will always be in accordance with the Christian faith. I am not so much talking about questioning whether the Christian tradition as a whole is true, but rather I am speaking of denominational differences. I am speaking now of differences that separates the Methodist

from the Baptist or the Church of Christ from the Lutheran, or the Calvinist from the Arminian, or the inerrantist from the infallibilist.

It should be emphasized that our brethren within different denominations deserve a fair hearing, just as your particular nuance of the faith deserves a fair hearing. If you present your beliefs to somebody else who might not share an identical picture of the Christian faith, you would not want them to try to figure out why it is that you are wrong. Likewise, when you feel challenged by a certain argument that is presented, it is not your duty to figure out *why* that argument fails. It is your duty to determine *if* that argument fails.

So, as you investigate the arguments of your intellectual opponent/friend, you should be inclined to learn how to represent their argument just as effectively as they can. When you can construct their argument accurately, in a way that they would affirm it, then you should feel free to begin the search for logical errors. Unfortunately, many Christians repudiate this model of objective, honest and rigorous investigation. People often prefer to seek out individual proof-texts or sound bites; lone verses in Scripture that seem to establish their entire argument, and this will mark the end

of the investigation. How do people of alternative viewpoints interpret your favorite proof-text against their position? Can you answer this question? If not, then it is inconceivable that you can think that their interpretation is wrong. You do not have the luxury of being right by default.

This leaves us with the question of alternative interpretations of Scripture. How do our opponents interpret the Bible? Consider Romans 4:5, which reads, “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.” As an adherent of Protestant theology, I believe that this text, properly understood in its’ context, establishes the doctrine of *justification by faith alone*. Reading chapters three through five of the book of Romans draws further support. But, the question is, how do opponents of justification by faith alone interpret this? Do I even know? If I do not know, then I would be left to think that there is a plausible alternative interpretation of this particular passage. But I do know. Many will suggest that faith entails works and a righteous lifestyle. Others will suggest that faith is just one part, and if we assemble all of the verses that speak of the different aspects of salvation, then we will have constructed a proper

soteriology. These are the different interpretations. My view is that I need to be willing to give others a fair hearing.

If I were to instead only look for answers that reaffirm what I already believe, I would not really be making any progress. I would be rendering an exercise in self-affirmation. I would be proving to myself that I was right all along, which is a trivially easy task. People are all too easily convinced that they were right all along. Thus this calls for an approach that is permeated with humility before the Scripture and an acknowledgement that we may be wrong.

That is not to impugn all tradition.

In and of themselves, traditions are not a vice. If somebody learns something by the method of tradition, they are not learning something that is inherently wrong. There are many traditions that are good. Jesus was a Jew and he maintained the traditional view of the Hebrew Bible (John 10:35). He kept the Passover (John 13:1). Likewise, Paul was a Jew who believed that the Torah was good, righteous, and holy (Romans 1:32). He taught that a true Christian will keep the Law (Romans 2:13) and that a true Jew is one who is circumcised of the heart (Romans 2:29). His letters are replete

with citations of the Hebrew Bible. Paul was a man of traditional values and taught others to do likewise.

The Bible testifies to the value of proper tradition. The old proverbs are meant to serve general principles upon which we may base our lives. Indeed, Proverbs 22:6 reads, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Thus, the Scripture is telling parents that they need to ingrain in their children virtues such as righteousness and truth. This means that it is a virtue for us to adopt proper tradition.

Of course, this raises the question of what proper tradition is. While the apostle Paul’s letters are replete with citations of the Old Testament, there are other citations of which the orthodox Jew would be unaware. He cites earlier Christian tradition, such as hymns and rabbinical oral traditions that have imported Christian theology. 1st Corinthians 15:3-8 is prime example of this citation. Paul is not writing a new teaching, but rather is appealing to the oral tradition that has circulated since the ascension of Christ. It outlines the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins, his burial and his resurrection from the dead. Paul holds fast to that tradition. Likewise, the Carmen Christi in Philippians 2:5-8 is a hymn of

the early church. It emphasizes that as Jesus, being God, yet distinct from the Father, came to earth and died on the cross. It seems that in this passage, we have the earliest inkling of the doctrine of the trinity. Further, in 1st Timothy 1:15, Paul writes, "It is a trustworthy saying, deserving full acceptance," meaning that he is citing a saying that was circulating in the early church. The saying was, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost of all."

These are traditions that Paul accepted, and yet they are clearly virtuous. It seems to me that in the core doctrine of the Christian faith, we find the boundaries for rational investigation. That is not to say that the faith is unquestionable. But rather, it is an established truth. Just as in mathematics, we do not question the validity of the sum of $2+2$ equaling 4 at every turn, because it is an established truth. We are free to ask questions. We are free to ask, "Does $2+2$ really equal 4?" and pursue the answer to that. However, once that answer has been established, then we work exclusively within the confines of that answer. That is why one of the principles of historical investigation is that a historical explanation must be in accordance with accepted beliefs. If I hypothesize that dinosaurs caused the fall of

Rome, this hypothesis would be quickly dismissed, as established truth reminds us that dinosaurs were extinct long before the fall of Rome. We work within the confines of established truth in matters of history, as well as in matters of theology.

As Christians, we have been born again, we know the power of God and the love of God in Christ. We see his regenerating work in our hearts and in our lives. That experiential data serves to establish the faith. (However, external evidence has often led people to accept the Christian faith. But to answer that question is beyond our task. I would just reference you to *I Don't Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist* by Dr. Norm Geisler and Dr Frank Turek.)

Since the core of Christianity is beyond compromise, traditions can be helpful. Traditions and creeds can keep us within the boundaries of orthodoxy. They can assist our exegesis so that it both honors God and is intellectually satisfying. If a theologian goes rogue, and breaks the boundaries, I am confident that an honest and rigorous examination of the biblical data will draw him back. Tradition, then, can be a virtue when we are talking about cardinal doctrines.

Tradition that nullifies the word of God.

While Jesus was a man of traditional values, he also spent his ministry combating the false tradition, which had crept into Judaism. When the Sadducees, who maintained that there is no resurrection from the dead, challenged him by pointing out some inconsistencies that they perceived in his theology, Jesus answered their objection, and accused them, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scripture, nor the power of God.” (Matthew 22:29). Likewise, when the Pharisees noticed that Jesus did not keep all of their observances, he told them that they nullify the word of God by the traditions that they hand down (Mark 7:13).

The development of these extra-biblical principles seems to have arisen out of misguided piety. For the Jews wanted to know how it is that the Torah could be applicable to them and how they could live the Torah out in their daily lives. So, the religious scholars would interpret it for them and explain how they can live out the precepts of the Torah in a pragmatic way.

Now, the interpretation of scholars is quite valuable. But when that interpretation is elevated so highly so that it

cannot be questioned, then you have developed a tradition that nullifies the word of God. The word of the scholar becomes the word of God. The people only hear the interpretation of the scholar rather than the word of God. So, it is impossible for them to know what God is saying without it being clouded by the voices of the scholars.

That is the indictment that Jesus had against the scholars of that day, and that is precisely the indictment that can be charged against many Christian denominations today. For when you read a particular verse with strong doctrinal implications, the scholars of your denomination, unbeknownst to you, are whispering in your ear. A member of the Church of Christ will read John 3:5, which refers to the necessity of being born of “water,” and assume that it is referring to water baptism. They will read this between the lines despite that the text does not say it.

A member of a Oneness Pentecostal church will read Acts 2:38 and be informed that this means that one must recite the word “Jesus” as one is being baptized. These interpretations are whispered into their ears, written between the lines. While they are merely interpretations, they are regarded as the text itself.

Think of the text as an object, and the interpretations as the shadows that the object casts. If I look at the shadow, I may have a general idea of what the object is, but only when I go to the object will I understand the truth. Thus, when these various denominations read their interpretation between the lines of a certain text, making their interpretation the authority by which truth is measured, they are actually like the person who is looking at a shadow rather than the object.

Of course, it cannot be denied that everybody has an interpretation. We interpret everything that we perceive. This becomes a problem when we do not realize that we are actually interpreting. If we do not realize that we are interpreting, then we are saying that the shadow is the object itself. But when we realize that we are interpreting, then we can begin to identify where our reading of the text begins to break down, and where we have made unwarranted assumptions. Then we will develop a deeper and richer understanding of the object itself rather than just the shadow of the object. Similarly, when we understand the shadow that other people see, we can grasp a fuller understanding of the object itself. Understanding alternative interpretations can help us to grasp the text. But when we go to the text with the

knowledge that we have made an interpretation, then we will begin to understand the Bible on its' own terms.

Are you confident in your tradition?

Consider the behavior of God's chosen people throughout the generations. Read the Law and the Prophets and see how they behaved. See how they built an idol and worshipped it just as Moses turned his back (Exodus 32:1). We see in the prophets that Israel was always falling into idolatry, worshipping vile images. When they finally established a firm foundation of strict monotheism, they became obsessed with ritualism.

Ritualism is when one makes the rituals that God sets in place as the ends, rather than the means to an end. The sacrifice at the altar, the prayers, circumcision, were all meant to draw people to God. It is sort of like the person who gets married just so that they may be given a beautiful wedding ring. The ring symbolizes the marriage. But if one gets married just for the sake of the ring, then they clearly have a depraved view of marriage. Likewise, when God's people bound themselves in a covenant with him just for the sake of the rituals, they have a depraved view of religion. That is what we

see in Malachi and what Jesus encountered when he came on the scene.

Yet when these people indulged in idolatry and religious ritualism, they thought that they were doing the right thing. They were just as confident in their doctrinal stances and religious activities as many of us are. They thought that they were right and others were wrong. This means that even those with whom we disagree are assured of their stances by the very same means that we are assured. They take confidence in the traditions and in the Scripture. In the New Testament, the Pharisees would say things like, “you were born entirely in sins, and would you teach us?” (John 9:34). These scholars were so certain that they were right that they were not willing to hear anybody making a claim that stood in disharmony with their own. Likewise, in Luke 18:11, a Pharisee prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.” These men had confidence in who they were and what standing before God was.

Yet the finger of God pointed at these men and directly accused them. Despite their confidence, Jesus would say, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (Matthew 23:23). If they have as much confidence, if not more, than we

do that our stances are correct, that should raise a few questions in us. It should certainly reduce us to humility. It is possible to be as confident as we are in our doctrinal nuances, and still be wrong. It is possible to read the words that our denomination has written between the lines so closely that we cannot discern where the line is and where the words between the lines are.

I am afraid that this characterization is not far from the truth. You may be particularly guilty of this. You may have such deep confidence in doctrinal nuances that are flatly wrong, yet you cannot see it. It is important to emphasize that other traditions have this confidence as well. Everybody thinks that they are right. This is pervasive among humanity. Even relativists, who claim that there is no truth, think that they are right about relativism and the rest of us who think that truth is objective are shallow-minded.

When we look to other traditions, assuming that they are doctrinally deficient, we thereby put our proverbial hand over their mouths. We have such great confidence in our own tradition, assumptions, and interpretations that we cannot see past it. Well, perhaps the great confidence that we maintain is based not in Scripture, but in our interpretation.

Perhaps our strong opinions are based not so much on the object but on the shadow that it casts. If we truly want to come to a deeper knowledge of the truth, we need to have confidence that is based not on our tradition and words written between the lines, but on the object itself. Christians need to be freethinkers. They need to be prepared to venture into uncharted territory, to voyage into doctrinal discernment that our parents never grasped.

It is not so much a matter of confidence. Confidence in reality is a good thing. We should all be confident in mathematical or axiomatic truths. We should be confident in the risen Lord. We should have confidence. But there is a fine line between confidence and pride, and that line is often blurred. That is the behavior that the Pharisees indulge in and that is the behavior of many contemporary Christians. Their pride is disguised as confidence, and this pride prevents them from really coming to know truth.

How should we view other denominations?

Church history exposes the poor behavior of Christians throughout the generations. We see the schisms that arose over doctrinal matters, which, today, would merely separate

one denomination from another. People have always had a lot of trouble associating with those with whom they disagree and hearing another opinion expressed. While theologians of old would burn men at the stake, a certain element of this behavior carries over into contemporary church life. For very often, Christians view other denominations in a very unfavorable light.

Perhaps one of the more obvious examples of this would be the Church of Christ. Standard Church of Christ apologetic proposes that the churches throughout the generations have slowly drifted away from their apostolic root. The true church is not present in any of these denominations. The true church was lost somewhere along the way, and needed to be restored. The roots of this movement are therefore coined the Restoration Movement. The Church of Christ mentality is that any denomination is not a true Christian denomination. They do not align themselves with the apostolic succession.

Therefore, there will be endeavors, such as planting Churches of Christ in areas populated with churches of other denominations, precisely because these denominations are not true Christian denominations. They will be evangelistic toward other Christian denominations, as they view the very

concept of developing a denomination as heretical. (It should be noted that while many individual Churches of Christ do not maintain this behavior, it is a rational expectation to hold as a general principle when approaching the Church of Christ.) This behavior would serve to condemn all Christian denominations aside from themselves. That behavior is the antithesis of what it means to be an open-minded or a freethinking Christian.

While this may seem like a radical example of what appears to be a fringe group, that sort of traditional thinking embodies many of the denominations that exist today. It is quite easy for a church that associates themselves with the Reformed movement (as an example) to encase themselves in a Reformed bubble. Everyone that they know and encounter is Reformed and thinks exactly as they do. When they encounter somebody who holds a rivaling view, they are likely to think that this individual is just stiff-necked, hard-hearted and not open to the truth. They will apply the same categories to other people that should be applied to them.

When we begin to surround ourselves with only those with whom we agree, it becomes easier for us to affirm that we are right and they are wrong. For when a group of people agree about everything, there begins to develop the obvious and

foul stench of arrogance and pride. The position that I am advocating is one of humility. Christians need to learn to engage with other people, engage with other traditions and learn what they have to say. We cannot just make assumptions about people. When we surround ourselves with only those with whom we agree, we will detain our capacity for education. Our education will come solely within the confines of our particular denomination. But we will never learn alternative viewpoints and we will shut down communication with others by developing arrogant presuppositions about who they are and what they believe.

Allow others to speak for themselves.

Christians routinely present the views of other denominations in a manner that is very unsympathetic. The Church of Christ, who believes that water baptism washes away sins, will represent other denominations as though they did not care about baptism or thought that it was a folly, an old practice that we no longer need. Arminians will represent Calvinism as though it were a picture of God dragging people into Heaven against their will, and condemning people to Hell

despite their desperate pleas for repentance and faith. There are just too many caricatures.

We often hold categorical assumptions about our brethren. If somebody were to tell you, for instance, that they were Roman Catholic, this would issue a number of categories that you impose upon that individual. Recall the principles in the last chapter. A word is worth a thousand words. Just by invoking the term Roman Catholic, you have already made a number of presuppositions and assumptions about what the individual believes.

When somebody tells you that they are Roman Catholic, you instantly make a number of assumptions about their core doctrine and the conflict that exists with classical Protestantism. You probably think that they promote the heretical system of faith and works entailing justification. But in St. Joseph's New American Bible, which is "From the Vatican," the commentary is quite telling. They write of Romans 4:5, "Paul is able to argue that Abraham's faith involved receipt of the forgiveness of sins and that all believers benefit as he did through faith. ... James 2:24 appears to conflict with Paul's statement. However, James combats the error of extremists who used the doctrine of

justification through faith as a screen for moral self-determination.” It seems that these Roman Catholic theologians maintain a soteriology inconsistent with what we would assume given only their Roman Catholicism.

It is vital that we allow people to define their own terms. Even if they associate with a tradition that has defined different terms, people can be unique. If somebody associates with Roman Catholicism, they could have familial reasons for this even while that hold to beliefs that are divergent from the Roman Catholic tradition. If we want to understand what a person believes, we need to take a stance of humility. We need to acknowledge that we do not necessarily know everything about this individual. We need to drop our assumptions and just be willing to ask them what they believe. When we allow them to define their own terms, then we can transcend our own traditional understanding of what they believe.

For our tradition often informs us of what other people believe, does it not? Christians are told by their leaders about what other denominations hold to be true, and these are often staggering misrepresentations. People will render critiques of that which they do not understand, and their

audience thinks that this is an accurate critique. I think this can be attributed to the unwillingness to dialogue. Many are just unwilling to learn about the beliefs of other religious people. This implies that when a Muslims represents Christianity, or even when a Christian represents Islam, they are often representing a distorted view of these religious perspectives. They are not being fair to these belief systems. In this way, the traditional critiques that your particular denomination has submitted to you may not be entirely accurate. I pray that by now, you are beginning to understand the value in seeing the grasp that tradition has on our thinking.

Chapter 3 – On Misrepresentations

It is the duty of the Christian to preach the gospel to the poor and to even the vilest of sinners. That is why the early church often was not respected by the Roman Empire. The parishioners were of such low repute that it was assumed that Christianity must be quite a vile religion. Christians were accused of cannibalism as they participated in ordinances such as communion. They were accused of condoning sinful practices, for they allowed sinners in their midst. Jesus endured the same accusations as well. He was accused of indulging in sin as well because of his friendship with the sinners around him (Matthew 11:19).

This sort of misrepresentation has been prevalent throughout the generations. The practice of friendship with sinners chauffeurs with it the accusation of sin. Just suppose for a moment that you befriended one of your neighbors who was known to struggle with drugs and alcoholism. With pure intentions, you wanted to free your new friend from the bond of these addictions and show them the love of God in Christ. So, you are seen spending a lot of time with this individual, talking with them about recovery, counseling them through their temptations and their regressions, buying food for them,

and sharing the gospel. But as you are spending time with this individual behind closed doors, rumors begin to spread amongst your neighbors about your behavior. Someone raised the question of whether you have likewise fallen into drug addiction. That mere question rapidly evolves into an active rumor that you are, in fact, taking illicit drugs. People begin to misrepresent your motives, just as they did with Jesus and just as they did with the early Christians under the Romans Empire.

People often enjoy spreading gossip about others. It is a delight. Similarly, many folks have gossiped about the evangelical philosopher, Dr. William Lane Craig. Reformed Christians have found occasion to accuse him of an old Christological heresy, and they manage to do this without reading his work. So, they will do a few moments of research on this Christological heresy, find the flaws in it, and instantly attribute these flaws to Dr. Craig, not knowing that he also affirms in his published work that these are detrimental flaws to that particular view. But nonetheless, the whispers about his Christological views sustain even without any investigation into the primary sources. In this way, when Doctor Craig's Christological stance is attacked, they are attacking a version

of it that he does not hold. They are misrepresenting him just for the sake of developing an argument that is easier to refute, or more patently heretical.

Unfortunately, this model of misrepresentation is not contained within a small, unseen denomination. It is pervasive. People everywhere have no idea what their intellectual opponents believe. But that does not stop them from presenting an overview or an outline of their beliefs.

Perhaps I can pose the question this way. If you were to encounter somebody of a different religious affiliation, and asked him or her to characterize exactly what was wrong with Christianity, do you think that they would represent Christianity properly? Or would they represent a cartoon version of Christianity that was much easier to criticize? I am afraid that people of all religions, including Christians, do not labor to represent opposing views in a fair or honest light. The question that I would like to expound upon is why that is. Why is it that people misrepresent each other?

Simple, honest ignorance.

I do not know that ignorance would be considered a very serious indictment. There are several things of which we are

all ignorant. Many people have areas of specialization of which they have a fact or two memorized, but in other areas, they just do not really know anything. A person who is an expert in film probably does not know any theology, and the theologian does not know anything about film. Both would think that the other field is useless and a waste of time. Similarly, a scientist may have an expertise in his special field of science, but he is not an authority in matters of philosophy or in the existence of God. But that is not a crime. There is nothing wrong with being ignorant of a particular field or not understanding philosophy of religion.

However, scientists often use their credentials as scientists to smuggle in teachings on philosophy. They will use their clout that they have, which comes solely in response to their brilliance in their particular branch of science, and make people think that they are still speaking in their area of expertise. One of the most obvious examples of this is Professor Richard Dawkins.

In his book *The God Delusion*, Professor Dawkins submits arguments that philosophers find appalling. As the eminent American philosopher Dr. Alvin Plantinga put it, "I would say

that Dawkins' forays into philosophy are at best sophomoric. But that would be unfair to sophomores."

Professor Dawkins' mistake is not necessarily his ignorance of philosophy and of theology. Most people probably are ignorant of philosophy and theology, and they are not charged with any sort of irresponsible behavior. But ignorance becomes irresponsible when it is not acknowledged and the individual speaks authoritatively about a topic that they do not know anything about.

It should be noted that Professor Dawkins has a lot of company. Famous atheistic scientists routinely speak in ignorance of philosophy of religion, yet because of their eminence as scientists, the masses think that they have a worthy opinion to offer, when, in fact, they are merely speaking as laymen. Of course, a scientist may broach other fields. An individual can speak about anything that they would like. But, if you want to responsibly represent a position in front of an audience, you need to be tentative and relay that you are not an expert about the topic of which you are speaking. Just as it would be irresponsible for a chemist to speak authoritatively about cosmology, so also it is

irresponsible for a scientist to speak authoritatively about philosophy or about theology.

I do not wish to paint this as a charge that I hold exclusively against atheistic scientists. I once heard a man, whose expertise was in theology, inform his audience that there was no adequate mechanism for the range of adaptation proposed in Theory of Evolution. Whether this theologian was correct in his assessment is irrelevant. It is irresponsible to use your clout as in one field and speak authoritatively about another.

This is all to say that simple ignorance is fine. But when one ignores that ignorance and speaks authoritatively anyway, that is not fine.

Intentional Strawman

Often when representing what opponents believe to an audience, or even in a debate setting, people will begin to construct illegitimate versions of what their opponent believes, and then criticizing that illegitimate version. This is referred to on a popular level as a *strawman*. If you are setting up a strawman, then you are misrepresenting your opponent just to circumvent the more challenging and robust

version of their proposition. This sort of thing emerges regularly in dialogue. If I present a particular view with which a person disagrees, they might be keen to summarize it in a way that is more vulnerable to logical criticism and is clearly guilty of some sort of error. The strawman is actually quite a powerful rhetorical resource that many debaters or religious apologists have employed.

If a brilliant scientist presents a thorough, detailed and defensible interpretation of the data of science, a skilled rhetorician may pull a few sentences out of their presentation and re-present their interpretation in a way that is very unsympathetic. Any view that is complicated has the capacity to be oversimplified by anti-scientific rhetoricians. Of course, in this case, what I am thinking of is the conflict between the Theory of Evolution and certain creation science ministries. Since the Christian audience is hoping to find something wrong with the presentation of the evolutionary biologist, they will be quickly taken in by the oversimplification of their presentation.

It should also be noted that every stance that is in the public arena has been mischaracterized and misunderstood by people who want an easy way to refute it. The

contemporary western society is obsessed with oversimplifying sound bites, one-liners and memes, which are often meant to alleviate the desire for critical examination. The problem is that there is more latitude to a social issue, a philosophical quagmire or a theological doctrine than our favorite one-liner. Our favorite one-liner may make us laugh, but we cannot think that because we have this sound bite memorized, that we understand the issue. There is depth to these issues.

We can use a one-liner as, perhaps, an introduction to a particular issue. But it should be tentative and open to correction. The discovery of a one-liner that seems to expose a certain proposition should not incline us to think that we now understand the issue. It should ignite in us a desire for understanding. Does this particular line accurately represent what our intellectual opponents really believe? Is it an accurate summation of their beliefs, or is it a strawman?

As a general principle, I tend to think that it is better to only represent a particular belief in the way that the adherents to the belief would represent it. However, there may be exceptions to this rule. If I follow a proposition to its' logical conclusion, and the adherent find the conclusion unsavory,

then obviously I would represent it in a way that differs from their treatment of the issue. That is not a strawman, so much as it is honest research and logical thought. On the other hand, if I take that proposition and distort it so that it no longer reflects what the adherent to the proposition says, then I am constructing a strawman.

Thus there is value in critical research and scrutiny. They help us to avoid misrepresentations of opposing positions. Until this point, I am afraid that I have spoken primarily of propositional logic rather than applying examples of these misrepresentations. We see these misrepresentations in other religions, in Christendom, and even within the body of Christ.

How do Muslims represent Christianity?

If you were to encounter a Muslim who lived in an Islamic country or even an Islamic community here in the United States, you would probably be correct in thinking that he has never encountered an educated Christian who could properly summarize Christian theology for him. That is not to say that this is a demerit exclusive to Islam. Christians, too, often find themselves in Christian bubbles and do not have an accurate

representation of Islamic theology. So if you were to encounter such a man, he would probably pose questions to you that presupposed fundamental misunderstandings about what we believe concerning the deity of Christ and the trinity. For Muslims believe that Jesus was not God. They revere him as a prophet and a messenger of God who was called to restore the Jews to proper worship. Just as the duty of any prophet is to restore the people to whom they are preaching to proper worship, so also Jesus was trying to restore the Jews to proper worship. But, he was just a man. He was not divine. He was not God.

In fact, the Islamic conception of the deity of Christ would be akin to Pagan deities. As Christians, we are worshipping something that is here on earth, turning our attention away from God, and to that which is of the earth. We are worshipping the creature rather than the Creator, in Islamic thought. After all, Jesus claimed and represented the fullness of a human being. This is where Islam and Christianity meet. They converge at the humanity of Jesus, and Islam poses these questions to Christians. They pose these challenges, which, in Islamic thought, uproot Christian theology.

The line of reasoning will usually look something like this. If Jesus was God, how is it that he could get hungry? God could not become hungry. God has no need of anything. He is God. Further, if Jesus is God, how is it that he could be lacking in knowledge? He did not, after all, know the day of his second coming (Mark 13:32). He could not perform any miracles in his hometown (Mark 6:5). Further, and this is probably the most critical point: Jesus died. *How could God die?* Essential attributes of God are that he is both omniscient (he knows everything) and omnipotent (he can do anything), meaning that one could not kill God or prevent him from performing miracles. So how could Jesus not know everything? How can he not perform miracles? How could he become hungry?

The error in this sort of thinking is that it does not define the deity of Christ in Christian terms. It defines them in Islamic terms. It assumes that if Jesus is God, then *Docetism* is true. Docetism is an ancient Christological heresy, which asserts that Jesus was fully God, but did not have any human attributes. Thus, he did not get hungry. He was never tempted. He never died. But that is not the classical Christian belief about Jesus. Rather, when we characterize Jesus, we maintain that he was both fully man and fully God. Thus, he

became hungry and he was susceptible to death because he was entirely a man. He had a full human nature. That is orthodox and traditional Christian belief.

While he was on earth, it was often the case that much of his person was subliminal, underlying his conscious life. The majority of human knowledge and memory is subliminal and not present in the conscious life. If it were not subliminal, we would probably be overwhelmed with knowledge and lose our sanity. So, the divine aspects of Jesus, while he still possessed them, were subliminal.

I am afraid that this misrepresentation, while not intentional, stifles communication between Christians and Muslims. Christians and Muslims are forced to talk past each other because they do not understand what the other person is saying. When the Christian says that Jesus is God, the Muslim thinks that he is asserting some form of Docetism.

The Oneness Pentecostal understanding of the trinity.

You may have never even encountered this group or know who they are. I am not writing now about Pentecostalism, that is, the broad group within the body of Christ of charismatic believers. Rather, I am writing about Oneness

Pentecostalism. Oneness Pentecostalism is very unique in their denial of the trinity, for they affirm the deity of Christ. They do this by employing what is known as *modalism*.

Modalism is another ancient Christological heresy, which states that God is not three persons, but rather is one person. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are just manifestations or modes that God takes, and they are all named Jesus. Just as a man can be a father, a son, and an employee, so also Jesus is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is a strong emphasis on unitarianism in these congregations.

In fact, if one has been baptized in the Trinitarian formula, “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” (Matthew 28:19), they insist that one must be re-baptized to exclude the trinity, by reciting the words, “in the name of Jesus,” (Acts 2:38). In this way, the alignment of the believer with the body of Christ comes with the embrace of modalism, and the denial of the trinity. Further, if one is not baptized into modalism, then one is not really saved. If when you are baptized, the words “in the name of Jesus,” were not recited over the baptismal tank, you are still in your sins.

The reason for this emphasis upon denying the trinity is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of what the trinity is. The Oneness Pentecostal church regards the trinity as akin to Pagan idolatry. So when Isaiah called apostate Israel into submission to God and to leave their idols behind, he was indicting Israel with a crime that is similar to what Trinitarians are guilty of. That is to say that the trinity is seen as a form of idolatry. It is seen as akin to the worship of multiple gods. Indeed, in Oneness Pentecostal thought, it is the worship of multiple gods.

If you were to ask a typical Oneness Pentecostal how they could prove their position biblically, they would appeal to the *shema*, the thesis statement on the paper of Judaism. Deuteronomy 6:4, which reads, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" Or Isaiah 43:10, which reads, "Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me."

On page 18 of The Oneness of God by Dr. David Bernard, the President of the United Pentecostal Church, he argues that these declarations of monotheism are denials of the trinity, and on page 16, draws a distinction between monotheism and the trinity. With this mindset at the height

of the Oneness Pentecostal church, one can see how it seeps down into the presuppositions of the parishioners. Most Oneness Pentecostals that we encounter will think that the doctrine of the trinity is the view that there are three gods.

This would seem to also shut down discussion, for there is no Trinitarian who believes that there are three gods. Dr. Bernard is simply not allowing the Trinitarian to define their terms. He is constructing a strawman. He has rendered a cartoon version of the doctrine that is easier to refute than the doctrine of the trinity. Unfortunately, this has caused us to have conversation with our Oneness Pentecostal friends wherein we are simply talking past each other. When they say *trinity* and we say *trinity*, we are intending to communicate different things. Progress is never made because nobody is willing to listen to the other person or understand what our intellectual opponents mean.

The Arminian Understanding of Calvinism

I do not want to use too much space writing about these very thorough and nuanced theological stances, so I will present the most concise summaries that I can while still respectfully representing both position. At its' core, Calvinist

theology teaches that God alone is responsible for salvation. God chooses who will be saved and draws his people to him, and everybody who he chooses will come to him inevitably. In contrast, the core of Arminian theology teaches that God is actively trying to save everybody, but only some people respond to him. Salvation, then, is the responsibility of both God, who initiates salvation, and man, who must respond. I note again that these are very thorough and nuanced views containing deep expositions and I simply do not have the space to deeply expound upon them.

But there are several misguided conceptions of and objections to Calvinist theology that Arminians maintain, and they are often surface level objections. These objections are based on the initial moral reflex that people will have. After all, how is it that God could impugn our freedom of the will and drag us into Heaven, kicking and screaming? How could he override our free will in such a way? Common wisdom maintains that we cannot have love without freedom of the will. So if Calvinism denies freedom of the will, then it has a serious problem, because one cannot love unless it is freely chosen.

Considering how nuanced and careful these doctrines are constructed, it is important that we not find ourselves guilty over-simplification, for that will be likely to shut down the lines of communication. Calvinism does not suggest that God drags people into Heaven, kicking and screaming against their will. It also does not suggest that God denies people freedom of the will. Rather, it suggests that mankind is totally depraved (Romans 3:10), and would never seek after God. They have freedom of the will to choose God. They have that option available to them. But they find it repugnant. We will always choose a plate of cookies instead of a plate of liver and onions. Liver and onions are repugnant to us. So the same, the natural man hates the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14). Calvinist theology suggests that the natural man would never freely choose God. While he has free will, he never uses it for God's glory, but for his own lustful pursuits.

This might seem to lend support to the meme of God dragging people into Heaven, kicking and screaming, against their will. For how can slaves of sin (John 8:34) become slaves of righteousness? If man will never freely choose God, how does God bring them into his presence? Well, Calvinist theology certainly does not suggest that God does it against

their will. Rather, God changes their will. He changes them. He gives them a new heart. This new heart is inclined to love him.

If the Arminian and the Calvinist are going to dialogue, they need to understand the nuances of their respective views. They need to listen to each other. Calvinism does not deny freedom of the will. It does not suggest that God drags people into Heaven, kicking and screaming, against their will. These are caricatures. They are the cartoon version of reality. They are unhelpful, and we truly need to avoid that sort of characterization and allow our intellectual opponents to define their own terms.

Christians tend to misrepresent evolution.

Scientists have a proclivity toward wielding their expertise to show that the Christian faith has been mistaken. The secular world will rig this match, posturing it as *faith versus reason* or *Christianity versus science*. It turns out that this has proven to be a stroke of genius if their aim was to discredit the Christian faith, for Christians tends to fall right in line with this model. When the secular scientist says, “it is faith versus science, and science wins,” the Christian just accepts this

dichotomy. They affirm that it is faith versus science. They just say that faith wins. Well, I am afraid that this is not too helpful.

While there are very sophisticated treatments criticizing the Theory of Evolution, many Christians just do not know how to deal with it. They will cling onto little one-liners that they think are just so devastating to this theory. They point out observations that are so obvious that it is a wonder, or even a miracle, that any scientist could possibly miss it. A sixteen-year-old, pondering the Theory of Evolution, alone in his bedroom could think of this objection, and yet the specialists in this field have missed it.

You may already know what I am going to write. But many Christians think that they can refute the Theory of Evolution simply by pointing to the monkeys in the zoo. If we evolved from monkeys, then why in the world do monkeys still exist today? Why have the monkeys in the zoo not evolved into human beings yet? Do they await their transformation? Are the monkeys in the zoo going to evolve into human beings at some point in the future? Many Christians think that this line of reasoning is detrimental to the Theory of Evolution.

The answer is quite simple. The reason that there are still monkeys in the zoo is that the Theory of Evolution does not propose that we evolved from monkeys in the zoo. Rather, it proposes that we evolved *monkey-like* creatures, which were similar to our modern monkeys. Our modern monkeys just come from a different strain. So the existence of contemporary monkeys is quite consistent with the Theory of Evolution.

This is not an endorsement of the Theory of Evolution. This is to point out that Christians are doing themselves a disservice by plunging into ignorance and clinging to their favorite one-liner. They are doing a disservice to anybody who has a scientific education and yet is considering the Christian faith. Christians need to disassociate themselves with ignorance. Christians need to repudiate anti-intellectualism. They need to flee from the rhetoric and vain bleating of critics who do not know what they are talking about. If you want to represent a scientific theory, read a book about it. Seek to understand it, and then seek to understand the problems with it. Do not just assume that you know everything because you have memorized a one-liner.

Christopher Hitchens misrepresents the moral argument.

The late Christopher Hitchens would regularly engage with theists of all stripes in debates throughout the latter portion of his career. He would sometimes emit disdain for his intellectual opponent, and other times, he would seem to emit charity or even an inkling of praise. Often throughout the course of the debates, the theist would present what is known as the moral argument for the existence of God. The moral argument, if I may be as concise as possible, suggests that if God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist. If atheism is true, then all morality is just based on personal opinion. Men such as Professor Richard Dawkins and other popular level atheists concede this point. They just maintain that morality is an illusion. It is helpful, but not objective or deeply meaningful.

Hitchens, on the other hand, was resolute in his desperate clinging to his moral precepts. He would not surrender that territory to his theistic counterpart. But when he challenged the premise that if God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist, he seemed to misrepresent and misunderstand the argument. He did this in several of his debates. He said something along the lines of, "Name a moral

action that a theist can do that an atheist cannot do.” His implication was that atheists can be good people, too, which would seem to shut down the argument.

But this is just to misunderstand the argument. For the argument is not suggesting that atheists cannot be good people. Most Christians affirm that atheists can be good people. Rather, it is to suggest that they cannot justify why they are good people. For if there is no God, then there is no standard of morality that is beyond humanity. The merit of this argument is irrelevant, for our purposes.

Ours is purely a conceptual question. Mr. Hitchens propagated a confused interpretation of that argument, and this is something that is often represented among atheists. Atheists are very keen to respond to the moral argument by saying that they can be good people. In this way, the theist and the atheist are just talking past each other. The atheist is not really making an effort to understand the view that is presented before them.

Conclusion

I offer this overview of a few of the misrepresentations that occur within the realm of religious dialogue so that you may

understand how prevalent this problem is. We need to ensure that we understand what other people are saying to us. It is not sufficient for us to just appeal to our favorite one-liner. If we do that, then no progress is being made and we are just talking past each other. Secondly, we need to ensure that the other person understand what we are saying, for in the case of the Oneness Pentecostal, we would be using the same word, *trinity*, and conveying different meaning. It is important for us to examine our approach in dealing with people of various views, lest we repel them from the Christian faith in our ignorance.

Chapter 4 – Should we be offended by disagreements?

If somebody came into your home and started lecturing you about all of the demerits of your wife and your marriage, how would you react? This individual informs you that your wife is unattractive, has gained weight throughout the last few years and that you must certainly be disappointed in the person that she has developed into. When you married her, you did not expect that she would become the person that she has, so this individual accuses.

As you sit there listening to him, you are patiently taking notes as he begins to tell you about how insufferable her personality is. She is quick to anger and has poor comprehension. You listen quietly, nodding all the while, not necessarily in affirmation of the propositions that they are submitting, but to let them know that you are following along.

Then this individual tells you that your wife is a harlot. She is radically unfaithful to you and everything that she tells you is a lie. She does not even have a job, as she claims. She just uses that as a cover to visit her boyfriends, who give her money so that she can fool you into thinking that she has a job. Then this person lets you know that you are not the first person he has relayed this information to. He has let all of

your friends know about these discoveries of his. Would the discussion that ensues with that person be devoid of emotional leanings? Would you be rational, calm and collected? Would you not be offended?

I think that most people would be offended, and this would be justified. This individual is lying about somebody who you care for and ruining her reputation. They have some sort of personal problem with her and have set out on a smear campaign, laboring to destroy her friendships, her reputation, and even her marriage. I think that anybody would invariably be offended even if it were not a spouse. Even if were a friend or a neighbor, it is just offensive material.

Suppose with me for a moment though, that this individual was not trying to smear your wife. He was telling you these things out of sincerity. He actually believed that they were true, and he thought that he was helping you by exposing this problem so that you can deal with it. While many people would still emit the same anger, it might be the case that a calmer and more reasoned approach would be warranted. If this person is being sincere, then they are still wrong and behaving irresponsibly, and you would still be justified in

taking offense, but at the same time, that would warrant a bit of a different response.

You might be more inclined to discuss their reasoning with them and help them to understand what they have perceived and why they are incorrect. You might also urge them to be more careful in their musings, impulses and especially their gossip. This person was certainly irresponsible and immoral, but it was not as severe as the person who was malevolently smearing your wife. However, in both cases, you were still offended.

This might be a picture of the religious mindset when people believe that God is under attack. If an individual were to assert that Jesus is not really God, or that he was out of his mind, or that he was a liar, or a sinner, the Christian would perceive that as an affront upon the character of God. This is offensive to the Christian because central to the Christian faith is the relationship that we have with Christ. Christ is the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:8), he has a name that is above every name, and to him, every knee will bow and tongue will confess that he is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). He is the Creator of all things (John 1:3). He is God Almighty. At the same time, he is a friend of sinners (Matthew 9:10-13) and he has called

us, as individuals, into personal relationship with himself. For that reason, the Christian loves him. The Christian wants to do his will.

As the Westminster Catechism says, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” One of the central tenets of Protestant theology is *Soli Deo Gloria* – Glory to God alone. We want Christ to be esteemed and loved and revered, for that is what he is worth. So when people smear him, this strikes the Christian as deeply offensive. Hence, we develop *righteous indignation* when people smear Christ. That is why many people are offended about religious matters. It is an affront to the character of God.

Is This Person Trying To Offend You?

People throughout the world and even within Christendom have divergent views about who God is. The subject of *theology proper*, that is, studying the nature of God, is quite broad and there are a number of different schools of thought. There are even more schools of thought concerning how God relates to the world and what he has done. I touched upon a few of these divergences in the last chapter. Some think that God has endowed man with the capacity to turn to him in

saving faith, while others think that man is totally depraved and incapable of turning to God. People have different views and different interpretation of the biblical data. Also, in some cases, people draw their views from other sources that they regard as authoritative, and disregard the authority of the biblical data. This would classify somebody as an adherent of a different religion (or at the very least, a rendition of Christianity that is far outside of the mainstream and is not worth the name).

This is just to say that there are people who have different views, drawn from a range of different sources. We should expect that there would be people who disagree with us even about crucial and central topics that are near to our heart. We need to expect that people would be critical of the authority of the Bible. There may even be Christians who think that God is a moral monster in the Bible. We should expect that people would challenge doctrines that we have held firmly throughout the course of our lives, and have been taught since childhood.

What we need to understand, though, is that often the people who promote these views are not actively trying to be offensive. They are not the person who is smearing your wife

out of malevolence. They are the person who is smearing your wife out of ignorance and misunderstanding. They are not trying to be offensive. At the very least, they deserve a calm and reasoned response to the issues. They deserve to be engaged with on an intellectual level, and even to allow their voice to be heard.

Most western Christians affirm the social precepts known as *freedom of speech* and *freedom of religion*. These entail that there will exist people who want to have alternative religious expressions. That is even presupposed in the preaching of the gospel. We are called to preach the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:19). This presupposes that we will encounter those with whom we disagree. Such an individual is often not trying to be offensive. They are just expressing their religion or denomination reflective of what they think is correct. In this way, we need to demonstrate a measure of tolerance and understanding.

Is this righteous indignation or pride?

I applied the illustration of the wife being criticized to underline the point that there is an occasion for taking offense and for having righteous indignation. There is really

nothing wrong with that when it is in the correct context. Jesus had righteous indignation as well. There is, however, a firm but often overlooked line between righteous indignation and pride. When we are engaging in religious discourse, it is often the case that we are offended that somebody would suggest that we were wrong, and they are right.

If somebody is suggesting that we are wrong, and they are right, then they are impugning our knowledge of the Bible. They are calling into question the many years that we have spent in thorough study of the relevant issues. They are challenging the teachers of the Scripture that we have known for years, and who we trust and have come to love. This is the way that people think about religious issues. This discourse may not be at the forefront of their minds, but doctrines are often undergirded by this emotional pride.

For people tend to identify themselves with their particular nuances of the Christian faith. They are advocates of a particular view. If an intellectual opponent is to call that view into question, then they are also questioning their duty and their stance in the body of Christ. It is not so much an issue of righteous indignation. You have crossed over from righteous indignation into pride. You are now sinfully angry and

unwilling to listen, not because God is being criticized. Not because there is an affront against the Almighty. But you are offended because somebody has called your credentials and your standing into question.

But, by taking the stance of pride and not allowing a view that you espouse to be questioned, you have made yourself impossible to be reasoned with. You are akin to the man who will not listen when your friends gather and tell you that they found your wife having an affair. This is an affront to your pride and you just will not comply.

If you find yourself offended by opposing views, then there are two fundamental questions that need to be asked, and both of these questions have spiritual overtones. First, are you motivated by pride, or are you motivated by righteous indignation? Second, is your pride preventing you from honestly examining the biblical data and listening to what people have to say? I do not want you to think that the majority of people have righteous indignation while only a scarce few are prideful in their resistance. I suggest that many are prideful. Many are unwilling to listen because it is a challenge to them and to their beliefs. The question is whether you are among their number.

Other people are offended too.

While we sympathize with ourselves, and worry about how offended we are by a particular proposition, it should be noted that the people with whom we are communicating are probably offended too. Both parties are engaging in this dialogue with one another and growing more offended as each moment passes. Both desperately want to convince the other person that their perspective is the correct one, and as each logical argument proves limited in its' persuasive capacity, they become more offended. That is why people often begin applying derogatory names to their intellectual opponent. They find themselves frustrated by the fact that this person will not budge. Yet they are also unaware that the other person is equally frustrated.

I have engaged in dialogue with Muslims who I knew were offended by the things that I was saying. I was not trying to be offensive, and I was not maintaining a mean-spirited disposition. I was just expressing classical Christian theology, and that is offensive because it challenges the very core of Islamic theology. Likewise, Islamic theology challenges the very core of Christian theology. There are certainly things

about which we agree, but we also disagree at a fundamental level.

For me to propose that my interpretation of this disagreement is correct, is offensive, and is likely to cause people to be angry. At the same time, it will cause the Christian to become angry as well. The Christian perceives the Muslims as one who is just so stiff-necked and closed to the truth. Their traditional values and assumptions impale their ability to hear the gospel. They are blinded. At the same time, the Muslim is looking to the Christian and thinking that they are wrapped up in idolatry, worshipping a created thing, and encouraging the Muslim to do likewise. Both of these parties are offended and angry at the proposition that they need to alter their religious beliefs to align more closely with what their respective intellectual opponent is suggesting. Both may have what they think is righteous indignation.

As we have these dialogues and as we work through our own emotional struggle, we need to recognize that the person with whom we are speaking is having their own personal emotional struggle as well. They are frustrated. They are offended. When I say that we should recognize that, I do not

mean that we should taunt them with it in an effort to score debate points.

Rather, I am suggesting that we need to be sympathetic with what other people are thinking and feeling. If we do not, then we are likely to repel them from our perspective. In the case of adherents to other religions, this would be detrimental, for we want to help them to hear the gospel. The offense that you take at a proposition is parallel to the offense that your intellectual opponent takes at the same proposition.

Some people really are intentionally trying to be offensive.

The illustration of the individual who is smearing your wife out of malevolence may run parallel to some of the people who we may encounter. There really are people out there who dislike the Christian faith, who hate God, hate everything that Christians stand for, or perhaps even merely hates your particular denominational nuances, and they express that hatred to you. They smear your conception of God in a way that is blatantly offensive. We have all encountered people like this. The picture of the angry atheist comes to mind (but I

will write about the angry atheist at length in another chapter).

The question of how we should react to such a person might provoke a number of different responses. There are certainly different approaches for different situations. As Proverbs 26:4-5 reads, “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” These are clearly different precepts meant for different situations, and the wise man will know which situation these principles apply to.

There are times wherein, as verse four indicates, we should just walk away from the situation. There is no point in arguing with a person and following every train of thought that they might conjure up. If an individual repeatedly comes to you with accusations about your wife, you would not be likely to stand on your porch and argue with him every single time. Wisdom would dictate that you shut the proverbial door on him and simply deny the invitation to argue. You are getting nowhere with that individual.

On the other hand, verse five suggests that there are situations where we should argue with such an individual. Perhaps we would want to argue with this individual the first

time that they broached the subject. Why? The text reads, “lest they be wise in their own eyes.” The foolish person needs to have their folly exposed. We need to disarm them. If this individual tells you that your wife does not really have a job, then you would tell them that you sometimes visit her at work and you have evidence that this employer has deposited money into her account on a regular basis. You would shut down these arguments and disarm this individual so that he does not think that he is wise for parading nonsense at your door.

Similarly, when somebody approaches you and is angrily attacking Christian theology, and is just trying to be offensive, there are occasions to walk away from the argument, but there are also occasions to shut down their argument and disarm the skeptic. As Paul wrote, “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

It is sufficient to destroy an argument so that we can prevent the fool from being wise in his own eyes. On the other hand, we would not continually waste our time destroying the argument, over and over again, lest we be like

the fool. Wisdom and discernment need to be our guides as to how we deal with the situation. Do not allow your wisdom and discernment be detained by the fact that the material being presented is offensive.

Your personal education.

As we learn that disagreements are part of life, and learn to engage with offensive material without being personally offended, I think that we will find our intellect will be nurtured. We will begin to learn more about the various nuances of the views being presented. However, I am not sure how we can apply this angle to the illustration of the man smearing your wife, for obviously we are not interested in learning about such things. But in the case of religious dialogue, if we can really step back and be objective, not taking everything so personally, we will discover that there is tremendous intellectual ground to be covered.

Recall the frequent misrepresentations that were covered in Chapter 3. We would never even realize that the individual was operating under a faulty understanding of Christian theology if we did not talk with them. If we just became offended and stormed off, or closed the dialogue, we would

never have the opportunity to realize that that Oneness Pentecostal is operating with a different definition of the trinity. We would never realize that the Muslim is assuming that we have Docetic Christology. We impair not only ability to converse with these individuals and to share the gospel with them, but also our own minds. We are stifling our education.

Education of the various religious stances often comes as a consequence of speaking with individuals about their beliefs. If I allow a Oneness Pentecostal to fully outline their beliefs about God and about the Trinitarian baptism, then I am learning what this particular group believes about God.

Likewise, a Muslim could teach me a lot about the way they view the hadith literature. Do they believe all of it? How do they discern what is true and what is not true? Further, a Muslim could teach me what the classical Islamic responses to Christian challenges are. There is a lot that can be gleaned by having conversations with other people and putting aside our emotion.

One might be inclined to suggest that they already know all of these things. They have read what Oneness Pentecostals believe in books. They have heard what Muslims believe

about the hadith literature, and they are not impressed. They know all of these things. Well, when you begin to take a stance of arrogance, and assume that you know everything, then you are truly impairing your education. The person who knows everything has nothing else to learn. But the person who admits that they know little has an entire world of knowledge and insight to be explored. Which are you? The people out there with different views of religion are the carriers of that knowledge and insight. Do not let your emotions rule over you and determine what you are willing to learn.

Teach others about the controversy.

If I were to send a group of evangelists into an Islamic community to just share the gospel, it would be expected of me that I explain to them what they should expect when they go there. I should explain what sort of objections they will raise and beliefs they would encounter. That is not to say that they can speak authoritatively about what every single person will believe, but rather that I can make a general estimation based on my knowledge of Islam and interactions with Muslims.

They can expect an alternative view of Jesus, and challenges that pertain to the humanity of Jesus, such as asking how it is that God could die. They might be told that the Bible has been corrupted, and while the original gospels were inspired of God, the Qur'an has abrogated those documents. These are things that I would want my team of evangelists to know before setting off. Now, they certainly could go into that village blind. They could go in not knowing anything about what they believed. But, I can say that they would probably reach more people if they knew how to answer these objections.

They will know how to answer these objections if I teach them how to answer these objections. They are drawing from the experiential knowledge that I have in interacting with Islam. When I become vulnerable to these discussions, and when I put aside my personal emotions, when I stop being offended, then I can learn from these people. When I learn what these individuals believe and what their objections are, then I may teach others what I learned. Now, when my team encounters Muslims, they have a general idea of what the manner of objections will be, and this is because I did not

allow myself to be offended. If I was offended, then I put it aside and just listened.

This is to say that my capacity to interact with other people will stand for the benefit of other Christians. My capacity to read books with which I disagree can benefit the body of Christ as I teach other people about these views and how they can interact with them, witness to them, and draw them to saving faith in Christ, under the providence of the Holy Spirit. The Christian who is willing to listen to those with whom they disagree will also be the leader and the teacher in the church. They will be the one who is equipping other Christians. If I talk to atheists often, my friends will turn to me when they are struggling with a question pertaining to atheism. If I want to be an asset to Christians, then I need to do nothing less than talk and listen and read.

You will be able to curdle doubt.

Christians sometimes find that they have nagging questions in their mind. They find that they have doubts about their faith. When those questions go unanswered, they are sometimes tragically catastrophic to the faith. Christians lose their faith and lose their way because they did not know the

answer to a particular question. On the other hand, if you know the answer to the question, then doubt about that question simply will not arise. One does not worry about questions to which they have the answer. Just as a physicist will not stay up all night vigorously trying to solve a problem that he already has an answer to, so also the Christian will not worry about the question for which they already have an answer.

But the method for obtaining the answers to these questions is simply to talk to people with whom we disagree and to read books with which we disagree. Not only opponents of the Christian faith, but also members of other denominations. We can learn about our own faith and our own beliefs by understanding the objections that people have to them, and then coming to understand the answers to these objections.

If we are to understand the objections, however, we need to understand them in their proper context. We need to hear our intellectual opponents represent their own objections. Only when we truly understand what they are saying will we understand how to answer this objection. For example, if a person believes that water baptism washes away sins, they

might object to the doctrine of *justification by faith alone* because they think that it implies that one need not be baptized, or that it is not a command. However, only by taking to the classical Protestant will they come to understand they do believe that one does need to be baptized in water. But they simply deny that this baptism washes away sins. It is still necessary, but only necessary in the context of obedience.

But the proponent of the former view will not understand that justification by faith alone is a very nuanced and careful doctrine that makes provision for all of the text of Scripture to speak and speak in its' context. If one wants to truly address justification by faith alone, one needs to seek out one of its' advocates and allow them to explain the doctrine on their own terms. Even if it is offensive to you that somebody would challenge your beliefs that you have held throughout your lifetime, it is important to put that emotion aside and let people speak. Only when you understand these various views will you understand how to answer questions and objections pertaining to them.

How else will we reach people?

If I allow everything that an individual says to offend me, and shut down the conversation, it seems unthinkable that I would be able to communicate with them. If I do not want to hear what they say, then certainly, they will not want to hear what I say. We are mutually offended by one another and mutually unable to communicate. This annuls our ability to share the gospel or help our brother in Christ to come to adopt a biblical view. If a proponent of justification by faith alone is to help their friend who thinks that water baptism washes away sins, they need to be willing to listen to them. If I allow my emotional reaction this offensive material to interrupt the conversation, I will not be able to reach this individual.

If I want to share the gospel with somebody, I need to listen to what they have to say. I cannot just wait for my turn to speak. I cannot just tell them to keep quiet. That repels people. People think that you are just being prideful, even though you may be motivated by piety. Despite that some material and some content really is offensive, we need to remember that an individual who has been made in the image of God is espousing this offensive material.

This offensive material is the product of a lifetime of thought, tradition, and development. It is deeply held and clung to. We need to remember that we are reaching *individuals*, not responding to propositions. So while a certain proposition may be offensive to us, we need to wade through that. We need to have the strength to put our emotional endeavors aside and listen to them, even if it may be difficult. As Christians, we need to persist through difficult content so that we may relate to the emotional struggles that people have, understand who they are and share the gospel.

Chapter 5 – You may be wrong.

Thanksgiving dinner and other major holidays where the extended family congregates often provides ample opportunity for argumentation about a range of issues. After all, extended family encompasses those with whom we engage every now and then, but we do not necessarily share similar traditional values or discourses of thought. In extended family, there may be people who hold firmly to a political disposition that you happen to find repugnant. You look forward to the encounter so that you might make an off-handed comment about President Barack Obama, and that will inevitably spark the flames of argumentation.

You will sit there arguing for three hours over pie about whether Obama was born in the great nation of Kenya or whether he is an American citizen. From this, there will emerge other topics, such as gun control. You will cite your favorite region where gun control is enforced, and crime is high, and he will cite his favorite region where gun control is enforced and crime is low. The rest of the family will have migrated to another room in the house because they are tired of the bickering, but both of you find it exhilarating. You are engaging with each other's arguments, trying to remember

the talking points that were recited on that radio show that covers the relevant issues.

You wait for the moment that you would leave your relative with nothing to say. You would mount such a potent argument that logic dictates that he abandons his liberalism and concede to you that perhaps it is more reasonable to be a conservative. He would tell you that you exposed all of his flawed argumentation, and that he surrenders his pride and his intellectual standing to you. Then he ventures into the room where the rest of your family is and declares that you won the argument, and they offer a round of applause, for all of them have employed their intellectual wits against this individual and have always fallen short. But you decisively won the argument.

That conclusion to the discussion might strike you as a fantasy. For people scarcely are willing to admit that they were wrong. People are scarcely left speechless. If you are very quick on your feet, then perhaps you might be able to leave another person speechless. But that often just does not happen.

Typically, if somebody is wrong, it emerges as they begin to repeat their initial argument, rephrasing it in a way that is

confusing, so that it is difficult to understand what they are saying. They might summon a few devices, such as a red herring, where they just change the topic to something minor to get you off the scent of the original argument. Either way, it is very unlikely that an individual would be left stumped. Even farther out there, we would find an individual admitting that they were wrong, and you were right.

After vociferously defending their position for hours, or even expressing a dissident view for a few moments, most people would not be willing to admit that they were wrong about a particular issue. However, I would like to suggest that the reason for this is not necessarily because of the strength of their particular stance. There would certainly be an element of that. But there comes to a point where if you express a view and relay with all of your might that it is a robust view, and understand what your intellectual opponent is saying, there comes to a point where the argument may as well dwindle down. But there is a very specific reason that they do not.

It is not an issue of competing views. Rather, it is an issue of competing individuals. It is you against me, and I am not going to allow you to think that you are smarter than I, or that you

have researched more than I have. A flood of emotions and pride begin to overtake both individuals, and both find it inconceivable to admit that perhaps they were wrong.

Yet, let's suppose together for a moment that a few weeks after this discussion, you came across certain information revealing that the President was not born in Kenya. In this situation, the evidence that is revealed to you is irrefutable, beyond all possible conspiracy theories that one might be inclined toward.

You are forced to the conclusion that he was not born in Kenya. But in this situation, you would have the additional consideration. It is no longer an issue of examining the data. You are confronted with the reality that this relative was right and you were wrong. You are humbled before this man, for this is no longer an issue over whether Obama was born in Kenya. Prior to engaging with this relative of yours, you could have easily dropped that belief and it would not matter. Now, it is a matter of your pride.

Your problem is that this discourse is no longer a quest for truth and understanding. You may have an inkling of that in the deep recesses of your mind, but at the forefront, you are

asserting your intellectual prowess before another individual. You are confronted by your own pride.

Combat pride with humility.

Consider for a moment the scope of the damage of pride. If you want to enforce your intellectual standing or your strength as an individual, the most common approach is by contrast. You contrast yourself against somebody else and reveal how much better you are than they. In the example above, you were trying to contrast your intelligence against that of another individual.

In the case of adultery, a man may feel pride over the husband of his new girlfriend. She has decided that he is a better man. That is also why workingmen feel spite toward their supervisor. By virtue of being their supervisor, they have assumed a stance of superiority. Thus, the workingman will be keen to elevate himself in other ways, by revealing the incompetence of the boss in contrast with him. People do not want to be shamed. They want the world to know that they have something of value to contribute. Indeed, bosses will likewise indulge in pride as they condescend the workingman, contrasting their standing in the workplace. Pride is

manifested most commonly in the form of a contrast. That contrast will involve shaming other individuals by showing them how much better you are.

It seems to me, though, that pride has insatiable appetite. As an individual indulges in pride more, they continue to climb the ladder of ambition, hoping that their pride will finally be satisfied when they get to the top. But as they climb higher and higher, the top seems further away, and they never reach it. The prideful person always wants more. They always want to set themselves up as the best. If they cannot set themselves up as the best, then they will mock and ridicule the best so that they can feel like in some hidden ways, they truly are the best.

We see this attitude in the New Testament among the disciples as well. As they are following Jesus, they began arguing amongst themselves, trying to determine whom among them was the greatest disciple. Who healed the most people? Who summoned more faith of the masses? Who identified Jesus as the Christ, when everyone else was faithless? Who walked on water? Who was given the keys to the kingdom of heaven? It seems to me that Peter was probably winning this argument.

But then Jesus turned to them and replied what we find in Luke 9:48, “The one who is least among you, this is the one who will be great.” Jesus rendered this call to humility and spiritual maturity. The one who reduces himself to the service of others, who thinks nothing of himself, who concedes all of his pride and all of his worth to another, this is the one who is truly great.

Perhaps the clearest example of this reality is in the character and behavior of Christ. Philippians 2:9-10 tells us that he has a name that is highly exalted so that every knee will bow and tongue confess that he is Lord. Psalm 24:1, “The earth and all it contains is the Lord’s.” Verse 10, “Who is this King of glory? The Lord of Hosts, YHWH, he is the King of Glory.” Jesus is likewise called this Lord of Glory in 1 Corinthians 2:8. The one who created the heavens and the earth (John 1:3), the one who owns them, who is the king of glory, who is the lord of glory, the one who explains the Father (John 1:18), how did he interact in the world? When this lord of glory was born, took on human flesh, how did he interact in the world?

He did not come as one who inherits the world’s largest kingdom. He could have come as the son of Caesar, to turn

the Romans and the Gentiles to God. He could have come into a family of wealth, and taught about God surrounded by armed guards, wearing beautiful robes and then returning to his life of luxury. He could have done that, and he would not have been doing anything wrong, because he is God, he is the lord of glory and he can do anything he wants. Everything is his. He owns everything.

Instead, what do we see? When somebody asked Jesus if they could join him in Matthew chapter eight, what do we see? They want to follow Jesus wherever he goes and preach the message of kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming. What did he say in verse twenty? “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” I’m sorry, **what?** The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head? He is God almighty. The world and everything in it belongs to him. He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his nature (Hebrews 1:3). He is the lord of glory, the king of glory, and he has nowhere to lay his head?

He submitted all of his pride to the will of Father so that he could save his people to the uttermost (Hebrews 7:25). If Christ, who is worth infinitely more than we are, could submit

his pride and have this mind of humility, how is it that we cannot do the same? Thus Paul commands us, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was in Christ Jesus,” (Philippians 2:5) and he outlines the humility of Christ, the condescension of God to man.

If we are to adopt this model of humility, we must “do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.” In our discussions with one another, we need to put pride aside. Submit our pride to the worth of this other individual. That is not to say that our stance is wrong. But it will free us from the emotional grasp that pride has over us.

Pride is a virus. It will prevent you from considering the possibility that you might be wrong and incapacitate your research and thinking. You will no longer be able to think about the data objectively, but will be plagued with the notion that you might be wrong. But perhaps you are wrong. Submit yourself to humility and to the attitude that was also in Christ Jesus.

Try to prove yourself wrong.

We are naturally inclined to adopt a position of non-objectivity, and search for ways to affirm that we were right all along. If we have believed throughout the course of his presidency that President Obama was born in Kenya, then we will look for evidence to prove that he was, in fact, born in Kenya. When we encounter evidence to the contrary, we will either ignore it, question the credibility of it, or find a way in which that strand of evidence can be interpreted so that it fits into our paradigm. This is what we see when we encounter people who believe that the earth is flat. Satellite images are the product of a conspiracy meant to conceal the true shape of the earth. The advocate will labor to present contrived explanations of how it all makes sense.

This mindset is not unique to the flat earth movement. It just happens to be the case that when we see this behavior in these individuals, we instantly recognize what they are doing. But when we apply identical tactics, we do not realize what we are doing. People frequently do research that do not meet the canons of objectivity. They have what is known as a confirmation bias. This is to say that they do research in a way

that conforms to what they already believe to be true. The same sort of thing happens when examining the biblical data.

Within many denominations, people are told what to believe about the Bible before they ever open it. They are told that the Bible teaches certain precepts, so that when they do open it to see what it says, they have these notions already established in their mind. But these notions are strictly not derived from the text. As we struggle to exegete the text the guardian of tradition that lurks within our subconscious tells us how to contort this to what we already believe.

A person who believes that water baptism washes away sins, for example, will read Romans 3-5, and struggle to determine what Paul was talking about. They will load concepts into Paul's words that he never intended. When he said, "Faith is credited as righteousness," (Romans 4:5) they will contrive a definition of faith that corresponds to something like, "faith and obedience." Such an individual would then be guilty of confirmation bias. They are looking for ways to contort the text to fit their preconceived views.

When they are practicing their exegesis, they have two tasks in mind. First, they are trying to fit everything into their paradigm. Second, they are trying to prove that their

paradigm is true. Then they find ways to do it, because anybody who treats the Bible as a source for confirming their views will succeed. It is easy enough to take a line out of context. Such a person is interpreting the Bible through the lens of their preconceptions. Instead, they need to interpret their preconceptions through the lens of the Bible. The former leads to a reformation of the biblical data. The latter leads to a reformation of our preconceptions. We have to allow the text to work on us, for it is powerful and active (Hebrews 4:12). But we have to let God speak. If we force God to say what we are already saying, then it is no longer God who is speaking, but us.

Thus, a truly objective investigation of the data is not one that labors to prove the preconceptions of the individual. Yet, it seems to me that this is unavoidable. People cannot help but look into the Bible with this sort of mentality. Even if we are aware of the baggage that we are loading into the text, it is inconceivable that we drop that baggage. A fundamental aspect to humanity is that we interpret everything through the lens of previous experiences.

Perhaps it is not enough to say that we are aware of these preconceptions. Perhaps if we want to even the scales of

objectivity, we need to do an investigation of relevant texts and try to prove ourselves wrong. The person who believes that water baptism washes away sins should dive into Romans 3-5 and try to prove that their view is wrong. They should do a word study and read the text closely with the end in mind of proving that salvation comes by faith alone to the exclusion of water baptism. If you can get yourself into that mindset and approach the text with that goal in mind, you will find yourself learning new things and noticing what the text says, and what you may have ignored or missed.

It will also teach you consistency. If you come across a difficult concept, such as “faith is credited as righteousness,” and you labor to redefine what faith is so that it fits into your doctrine, then you will have to equally and consistently redefine words as you work on this project to prove that you are wrong. In practicing this consistency, it will emerge that the way that you interpret Scripture is very contrived, for any time you encounter a troubling passage, you try to contort it or interpret it so that it aligns with your preconceived beliefs.

It is not enough to know the rules of interpretation. You may already know that in understanding the Bible, we have to understand what the author originally intended. You may

already know that. But if you do not practice that, the rules of interpretation become useless. It becomes applicable to you that you nullify the word of God by your traditions (Mark 7:13). When you try to prove yourself wrong, you will begin to see all of the errors in the way that you approach Scripture. Your confirmation bias will emerge before your eyes and you will see the need to overhaul your approach and reverence to the Bible. You will desire to submit all of your beliefs to God, by contrasting your beliefs against his word.

Understand yourself and understand how much you want your beliefs to be true. Your commitment to them may be guiding your interpretative maneuvers. Measure your interpretative maneuvers. Employ them to prove that you were wrong. Choose some denominational difference within the body of Christ and prove that you were wrong. You will see the confirmation bias and the errors in the way that you approach the Bible.

Seek out theologians.

How do people of opposing views come to their conclusions? You may have had the opportunity to ask one of them and you have found their responses unsophisticated or

lacking in some way. That is often the case, as we cannot expect everybody around us to be theologians or experts in the field. This may offer the impression that our position is quite robust, because we have never encountered anybody who knows what questions to ask, nor how to properly articulate the particular view.

Mormons missionaries, likewise, often do not encounter much resistance. I spoke with a few Mormons who told me that they really have never had their faith challenged nor ever heard arguments against their position that were particularly overwhelming. Now, this may be a simple case of confirmation bias. But I think this is a believable story. Many Christians have no idea how to articulate basic Christian theology. So, if you have never been challenged with resistance, you are sort of like the Mormon missionary. It might not be that this is attributed to the strength of your position, but rather to the simple fact that many Christians do not know how to outline what they believe and why they believe it.

Consequently, again, I would implore you to adopt a stance of humility and acknowledge that there are apologists out there who may be able to answer your questions and even

pose questions that you do not know the answer to. The question is whether we should bother to seek them out. For the sake of understanding other people, we should allow them to define their own terms and to listen to them as they represent their very nuanced and careful view. That is true. However, for the sake of discovering the most thorough defense of a particular view, we need to seek out the most armed apologist of that view.

If I want to hear a robust defense of why Calvinism is true, I would not listen to Norm Geisler's summary of Calvinism. I would not seek out a guy on the Internet to fill in my gaps of knowledge. I would read Dr. RC Sproul's book *Chosen By God* or Dr. James White's book *The Potter's Freedom*. I would allow men such as these to stand as representatives of Calvinist thought. As they stand as some of the most armed examples of apologists who defend Calvinism, it would serve me well to bring my understanding of Calvinism and my objections to them. I would want to read their books and watch their lectures. The proper enunciation of a view needs to be from the expert defenders of that view. It would be a mistake for us to think that we understand something just because we encountered a friend who outlined it.

Further, listening to what experts have to say would usher in feelings of humility for many of us. We would come to realize that there are many things that we just do not know. They can handle our objections more soundly and easily than we would have imagined. They will point out that what we thought were detrimental objections were really surface level misunderstandings.

Will the Christian faith unravel?

I extinguished much space in relaying the point that people do not want to be proven wrong because they are proud. But in the realm of religious discourse, another motive emerges that prevents people from admitting that they might be wrong about something. In compromising a certain element of their faith, they begin to worry that they will see the entire system of faith collapse around them. It would be viewed as sort of like a house of cards. If you remove one card, the entire house will collapse. In this way, everything is viewed as an essential element.

I think that anybody who has spent their life in a traditional mindset can find that they relate closely to this fear. This can be attribute to the fact that people came to believe every

tenet of their faith in precisely the same way. They came to believe in the trinity, which is a cardinal doctrine, in the same way that they believe in a certain tenet of eschatology, which is not a cardinal doctrine, in the same way. Their epistemology was identical in both cases. They learned about these doctrines because somebody told them, and they made an emotional commitment to them. They found them in the Bible (via confirmation bias) and feel compelled to defend them. If one of their views is challenged, it becomes inexplicable why all of them would not be challenged. For their various beliefs did not come about slowly, as they learned more, but rather, quite rapidly, as they adopted the tradition that they found themselves in.

This means that if one belief is proven to be wrong, then there is no reason that the others cannot be proven to be wrong as well. They are all established by traditional values and precepts rather than by the biblical data. Their tradition and their past inform all of their beliefs. In this way, it might be said that the beliefs of a person come as a unified whole. Without one, everything else collapses with it. Thus a person brought up in a particular system that is not derived from the

biblical data will find that their beliefs are sort of like a house of cards. If one is plucked out, the entire house collapses.

But I think that a more adequate model of Christian theology is more of like a spider's web. There are certain strands of the web in the very center that if they are plucked out, everything will come apart. But, there are also beliefs on the outer layer, which if they are plucked out, the core of Christianity will still be there. Thus, the core of Christianity is not contingent upon all of our particular beliefs being true.

I could believe in what is known as *amillennialism*, which often maintains that the eschatological events outlined in the book of Revelation were actually fulfilled in AD 70 at the destruction of Jerusalem. But if I find that this belief is wrong, and that some other eschatological view is true, my Christian faith would not unravel. It would just be that one strand on the outer layer had been plucked out, and this does not really challenge anything.

On the other hand, we would find fundamental beliefs at the core of the web. We would find beliefs such as the deity of Christ, or salvation by faith alone, or Jesus's death on the cross for our sins. These are strands, which if plucked out, would uproot the Christian faith and leave you with

something that is very different from what the apostles left behind. You would no longer be advocating a conception of Christianity. You would be advocating something different from Christianity. But the supermajority of our Christian theology is not at the core of the web, but is on the outer layer. So we need not fear that we are betraying the Christian faith by considering that one of these outer strands may be incorrect.

Within that framework, Christians should feel free to explore the Bible and to determine what it reveals. That is not to say that we should not test out the core doctrines. We certainly should. But, if the core doctrines of the faith are removed, we will be left with something that is less than Christianity. The Christian faith would be proven to be false. That is not the case with most of our beliefs. Most of our beliefs are secondary.

When we misunderstand the difference between secondary beliefs and core beliefs, we will be led to vigorously defend all of our beliefs as though they were all core beliefs. We will never listen to other people and never wonder if we might be wrong. Indeed, it seems like this approach may lead people into apostasy. For if you have the mindset that all of your

beliefs are core beliefs, then everything challenges your faith. Your faith will be shaken every time you open up the Bible, and every time you engage in a light conversation about religion. One can see how this approach would become frustrating.

Further, it severely impairs our capacity to engage with other people and to objectively analyze the evidence. If the biblical data suggests that we are wrong, we need to be receptive to hearing that. We cannot be so defensive and angry about our particular traditional values that we do not hear anything that other people are saying. Since our faith is as weak as a house of cards, we just cannot listen to others.

But, if your faith is more like a spider's web, then you will be inclined to listen to others. You will be inclined to think rationally about the beliefs that you hold. You will be inclined to think that perhaps your views on eschatology, or water baptism washing away sins, could be compromised, and the Christian faith would not collapse. The Christian faith is one that is nuanced very carefully so that it will withstand the criticisms that are out there. When we redefine the Christian faith so that it is identical to our traditional values, we weaken it. This is because the tradition that God established is much

stronger than the tradition that we have established. We need to understand the distinction between secondary beliefs and core beliefs. If we do that, we will be more receptive to criticism, more likely to understand when we are mistaken.

Chapter 6 - What Is A Heretic?

A month after your discussion about the President over Thanksgiving dinner, you are confronted with the prospect of having family over to celebrate the old tradition of winter solstice, emerging as Christmas for the westerners. Of course, you know that you need not worry about continuing the argument with the relative from Thanksgiving, as he announced that he would be attending the feast at another relative's home. But there is a relative of yours who is a fellow Christian who you have not seen for awhile and you look forward to engaging this individual in conversation about the Bible and the Christian life.

However, as you begin to dialogue with him, you find yourself curling your nose in disgust at his assumptions, for he apparently reveals himself to be a Calvinist. You have spoken with several Calvinists on the Internet, and they are always quite frustrating. The frustration that you have had in previous conversations erupts as you hear him speaking. He reveals that he does not have the same conception of free will as you do. He reveals that he thinks that God chooses the one who will be saved.

As your response spills out of your mouth, you do not even realize that you are actively displaying more disdain and more anger than you were for the liberal that you encountered at Thanksgiving. After all, that was just intellectual jousting. But this person is saying things about God that are foreign to your ears and that you do not understand. He is citing passages from the Bible and developing a theological treatment of the issues that you have just never heard of before. It is not so much that it is new as much as your distaste for the moral implications of what this person is saying.

This leads you to make several off-handed comments about how you want to throw up, or how foolish of a system this was. At this juncture, if this individual were heeding wisdom, he would probably just stop engaging with you. But he does not, as that can be a difficult thing to do, especially when the option to walk away from the conversation is not really available, such as in the case of the dinner table. It is at this point that you throw out the word *heretic*. You point your index finger in his direction and declare that he is espousing a view that is heretical.

This manner in which you have employed this word is not a characterization that we do not see within Christendom

today. While the word heretic is a powerful weapon, it is also a heavy sword, and most do not know how to wield it or how to swing it. It is a very particular category that cannot just be applied to anyone with whom you disagree. It cannot be used as an expression of emotion. It cannot be used as an insult, akin to calling somebody an idiot. That is not what a heretic is. A heretic is not a person that you dislike nor is it a person who has treated you poorly. A heretic is not a person with whom you disagree about a secondary theological issue.

While there are Christians that I have encountered who use the word heresy as freely, there are also Christians who do not even know what the word means. They have never heard it before. Now, the fact that somebody has never heard the word heresy before is indicative that they have not studied church history in any capacity. If they had, this basic term would have emerged. But I will not digress into that. The dictation of wisdom will lead us to abstain from both of these severities. It is important to know what the ancient heresies were so that when they arise, we will be able to identify them and recall how the church of previous generations reacted to them. Likewise, we need to ensure that we are not employing the word as an emotional insult. So, what is heresy, then?

Heresy is a departure from the Christian faith in a very fundamental way. Recall our spider's web. The core doctrines are at the center of the web. If you pluck out any of those core doctrines, the entire web will unravel and you will no longer have the Christian faith. But, if you pluck out one of the secondary doctrines on the outer layer of the thread, the entire web will not collapse. The Christian faith will maintain. A heretic is an individual who plucks out one of the core doctrines of the faith and hence unravels the entire web.

If we encounter a Christian with whom we disagree, we need to ensure that we have a proper understanding of what a heretic is. The gravity of that charge needs to be felt. For in accusing an individual of heresy, we are denying their Christian testimony. We are telling them that God has not worked in their life. We are telling them they are bound for Hell because their beliefs are not representative of Christianity. It is not that they have a divergent teaching. It is that they stand outside of the Christian faith. The question becomes, how can we properly identify such an individual? How can we identify heresy when we see it? What is heresy? What are the core doctrines?

The Trinity

As individuals, our identity in the world is important. Who we are matters to us. Our standing in society matters to us. But as you climb the ladder of sovereignty, the value of your identity will increase. For in human affairs, a sovereign only has power if the people recognize his power. If the people begin to declare that the king is not really the king, that is a rebellion and he needs to stomp it out. If the masses begin to believe that he is not really the king, his power evaporates. The sovereignty of God is a bit different, for his sovereignty and power is such that it transcends human perception. God is God even if nobody agrees.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize who God is. The first of the Ten Commandments is, "You shall have no other gods before me," (Exodus 20:3). When the people of Israel broke that commandment, he told them, "I am the LORD, Beside Me there is no other God." (Isaiah 45:5). God's identity is so important that when his people failed to recognize it, he brought his wrath down upon them. As Romans 1:25 says, "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever."

The Bible tells us that God is a trinity (Matthew 28:19). This means that there is one God who is eternally present in three persons. That is who God is. Thus, for us to properly worship God for who he is, we need to worship him in trinity. If we are keeping for ourselves any other conception of God, we are guilty of compromising God's identity and worshipping a figment of our own imagination. Any non-Trinitarian conceptions of God are idolatrous.

For most who deny the trinity also compromise the person and character of Jesus, who is God (Mark 1:2-3, John 1:1, 8:58). In denying that Jesus is God, such an individual is denying God (1 John 2:23). For they are denying whom God is. In the same way that a king stomps out the rebels who deny his kingship, so also will those who deny the deity of the Son face his wrath. As Psalm 2:12 reads, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (ESV).

Thus, the trinity is a core doctrine, at the center of the spider's web of the Christian faith. If you remove it, then you have removed God from the Christian faith, and we need him. It is appropriate, then, to label as heresy any conception of God that denies his Trinitarian essence.

Jesus died for my sins.

If you were to encounter a Muslim, he would tell you that not only did Jesus not die for your sins, but also, he did not die at all. If you were to encounter a secular historian, they would tell you that Jesus most certainly died, but they would deny the theological additive that he died *for your sins*. It is even attested to by Jewish tradition that they executed someone named Jesus who claimed to be the Messiah. But they obviously deny that this death was for anybody's sins. When the Romans executed Jesus, they clearly did not think that he was dying for anybody's sins. He was just a condemned man that they were charged with executing and had the freedom to treat with cruelty.

As Christians, we affirm that Jesus not only died, but also died *for our sins*. Paul writes in Romans 4:25 that Jesus was "Delivered over because of our transgressions and was raised because of our justification." Isaiah 53:5 reads that "He was pierced through for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The chastening for our well-being fell upon him. And by his scourging we are healed." Thus, after the death of Jesus, Paul informs us that his death was for our sins. Before

the death of Jesus, Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would die for our sins.

This means that the death of Jesus was propitiatory (Romans 3:25). All of sins that we have committed throughout our lifetime were nailed to the cross. He bore the sins that his people committed. He absorbed the wrath of his Father because he knew that his people would have to spend an eternity in Hell for what he could do on the cross.

This discussion is centralized by the righteousness and the judgment of God. Throughout the Bible, we see God's people reconciling themselves to him through the shedding of blood. They slaughter animals in the Temple, over and over again so that they could be made right with God. All of that blood must have wearied the people and the priests. They must have looked to the slaughtered animals and thought that this was the price for their sin. God was helping his people to understand that a sinful man cannot come into his presence. There needs to be atonement. The sacrifices throughout the generations must have made them weary and tired. All of the blood ingrained into the floor and the priests could only look to it and say, "this is the price for my sins."

Perhaps it might be said that these sacrifices were a foreshadowing. They were meant to show what was to come. Perhaps they were meant to remind Israel of her guilt before a righteous God. Then Christ came as a perfect sacrifice, fulfilling what the blood of animals could not (Hebrews 10:4). The slaughter of animals was not the price of our sins. The slaughter of the Son of God was the price of our sins.

If a Christian denies that, then they are denying that a price was paid for their sins. If a price was not paid for their sins, then it follows that they are still in their sins. It follows that all people are dead in their sins. The death of Jesus on the cross for our sins is then at the core of the web. It is a central doctrine, without which, the Christian faith is rendered pointless.

The resurrection.

After hearing this outline of the death on the cross, people are sometimes inclined to ask why it is that Jesus needed to rise from the dead. If he had just died for the sins of the world on the cross, he could have just remained dead and we would still have the atonement for our sins. One might be inclined to think that he rose from the dead just to teach his disciples

certain things, to provide the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19). While it is certainly true that he needed to do that, the resurrection is at the core of the Christian faith.

Jesus was not the only Messiah claimant during that era. There were a plethora of false messiahs, and the state always dealt with them in the same way: by crucifixion. If such an individual really were the Messiah, it would never be the case that they were crucified, because in Jewish thought, they would be considered to be a heretic and a blasphemer. By nailing Jesus to the cross, that is what the Jewish authorities thought that they were revealing. When Jesus was executed, that is what his followers had in mind. He was being exposed, just as all of the other false messiahs were exposed.

That is what the disciples had in mind after Jesus was murdered. This man who they had dedicated their lives to, for whom they left everything behind was exposed as a liar. They would be left to stare unflinchingly in the face at the truth that the prophecies had failed. Any doubt that they might have had throughout the course of Jesus' ministry had emerged victorious. It is very much akin to if you were given undeniable proof tomorrow that your religion was a lie. That heartbreak and turmoil was what the disciples were enduring.

The difference is that these men walked with Jesus and based on his character, his love, and everything they knew about him, they thought that he was the Messiah. They thought that he was God in the flesh. But that was proven by the state to be a lie.

That is where we are. Jesus was just another false messiah who is crucified and abandoned. His resurrection was thus a vindication of who he was. When he arose, he defeated not only death, but he declared a mighty triumph over whom the authorities said that he was. They said that he was a liar and a heretic. But when he rose from the dead, he revealed that the crucifixion that he endured was not to his detriment. While he was under the curse of God, that was because he became a curse for us, in our place (Galatians 3:13). He redeemed his people. But if he did not rise from the dead, then, as the apostle Paul says, we are still in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:14). To suggest that Christ did not rise from the dead is to pluck out a core doctrine.

We do not merit our salvation.

That is an outline of how Christ achieved salvation in the past, in a particular moment 2000 years ago. But how does

one apply that salvation today? As Christians, we deny the doctrine of universalism, which states that all people, everywhere, will be saved (Matthew 7:14). How, then, is the salvation that Christ provided attributed to us as individuals and how will we know it?

Throughout the world religions, most people hold to a model of *works-salvation*, which is to say that when we do enough good deeds and live a righteous enough lifestyle, then God will recognize our righteousness and give us eternal life in return. This likewise appears throughout many sects within Christendom, however, they often deny the title of works-salvation. Instead, they will suggest that they believe that faith is complimented by obedience and action, and this obedience progressively justifies us throughout the course of our lives. Obedience would be a subset of faith, on this view. But such an individual would deny the title or category of *works-salvation*, and while we can appreciate their desire to abstain from this category, by making justification an ongoing process that is progressively applied to an individual, they are teaching salvation by works.

This is significant because if we are progressively earning or meriting our salvation, that entails that Jesus did not really

need to die on the cross. Why would he? We can do the work ourselves. But since Christ died on the cross, for our sins, it is inconceivable that we would need to continue to work for our justification. Christ already did the work for us. He died on the cross. He died for our sins. He abolished the record of sin that was held against us. By working for our justification, then we implicitly maintain that Christ's death on the cross was not enough, and we need to pick up the slack and do what he could not. **In this way, the person who practices salvation by works is not trusting in Christ. They are trusting in themselves.**

Further, the one who suggests that they are working for their salvation must have a very high self-image. They think that they are capable of doing enough good works to satisfy the demands that the righteousness of God entails. But who can honestly look at the human heart and say such a thing? The human heart is wicked above all things (Jeremiah 17:9). There is nobody who is righteous (Romans 3:10). If we are practicing works salvation, the question is whether we are truly measuring up.

It seems, though, that the art of measuring up would entail that one leads an immaculate life, from the time they are

born until the time that they die. If an individual commits a single sin, they are still worthy of God's wrath. If you were to go before a court judge, guilty of a particular crime, and you told him that you have led a basically moral life, aside from this crime, that would not acquit you. You still need to endure the punishment for the crime that you committed. In the same way, when God charges us with sin, it does not matter what sort of life we have led aside from that sin. He cannot just let us go. His justice entails that he must punish the guilty.

Therefore, unless we are proposing that we have lived our entire lives with no sin whatsoever, we cannot earn our salvation. Salvation is the free gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9) and is applied to us the moment that we put our trust in the death of Jesus for our sins. But by making it something that we work for, we impugn his death and resurrection and trust more in ourselves than in him.

The Bible is God's word.

The foundation for all of these core beliefs is the authority of Scripture and our high view of it as being God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We might be able to reason to some of these conclusions *a priori*, and we might be able to treat the

Scripture as a historical document, and conclude that Jesus rose from the dead. We might be able to arrive at these doctrines in this way. But they really would not be firmly planted. They would be open to question and speculation. Just as any other historical event, we could call the resurrection into question. But if our foundation is in the authority of the word of God, then we cannot call it into question.

The Christian who leaves the Bible aside deprives himself of the spiritual nourishment with which Jesus regularly sustained himself. For he said that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). If Jesus was the Son of God, and he thought of the word of God as his sustenance, how much more do we need to sustain ourselves by consuming the word of God?

It seems that it emerges as not only words on a page in a dusty old book, but rather as something that is potent. The words of the Bible are something that has an impact on the individual's life, which the Holy Spirit uses to edify us and lead us into all righteousness. We open it and search for a word from God. We seek to understand the context in which it was written because we want to understand precisely what God

was relaying through these authors. Every syllable is important. Paul's usage of a period or Greek syntax will boggle the mind of the theologian. It is God's revelation to us. Within it, we find the message of salvation that we are to proclaim to others and we appeal to it for wisdom and guidance in our daily life.

Throughout the psalms, we see the deep recesses of human emotion. We see the struggles of David that mirror the struggles of Jesus. In the Law, we see the righteousness of God (Psalm 19:7). In the proverbs, we see God's wisdom. In the prophets, we see God's justice and his mercy. These are truths that Jesus meditated upon. That is why the word of God was always on his lips.

But if we were to remove biblical authority from the spider's web, what would happen? There are some theologians who suggest that the core of the web could remain intact. But that seems unthinkable to me. What sort of argument for the trinity or the deity of Christ could be mounted in the absence of the Bible? How could I make more than a historian's assessment of Jesus' death on the cross? I could say that he died, but I could not say that he died for our

sins. It seems to me that biblical authority is an essential element of the Christian faith.

There is a difference between heresy and inconsistency.

Now that we understand what a heretic is, it seems important to also enunciate what a heretic is not. Many people have been accused of heresy because they hold a particular view that *logically entails* heresy. While they deny the heresy, and hold to an orthodox position, the doctrine that they hold, if followed to its' logical conclusion, implies heresy. But they do not follow that doctrine to its' logical conclusion. Such a person would not be a heretic. They would be inconsistent.

If I were an adherent to what is known as *kenotic Christology*, I would be somebody who was inconsistent, but I would not be a heretic. Kenotic Christology states that when Jesus became a man, he laid aside his divine attributes. He emptied himself of them. This means that he was no longer all-powerful, all-knowing, and so forth. Instead, God transferred his consciousness into human flesh. However, since Jesus is God, that would mean that it is logically possible for God to lack divine attributes such as omnipotence and

omniscience. But if he were to lack these attributes, he would no longer be God. For God necessarily is the greatest conceivable being. If you can conceive of anything greater than God, than that being would be God. Hence, since Jesus lacked these divine attributes, he would not really be God. But, the proponent of kenotic Christology maintains that he is God. You see, the proponent of kenotic Christology is maintaining a view that logically entails a denial of the deity of Christ. But, he affirms the deity of Christ. In this way, he is being inconsistent in these views. Yet he is not guilty of heresy because he is maintaining that Jesus really was God.

Such an individual avoids heresy by remaining within the confessional lines. Similarly, consider the view known as the *hypostatic union*. The hypostatic union states that Jesus had two natures, one being divine, and the other being human. But if there are two natures, both possessing fully functioning cognitive faculties, how would there not be two persons within the person of Christ? Indeed, that is proposed by the Christological heresy known as Nestorianism. In the case of the hypostatic union, adherents deny that there are two persons within Christ, even though their view logically entails it. This would not be a heresy. It would be an inconsistency.

Dr. William Lane Craig tried to solve this philosophical problem by developing a Christological model that remained within confessional lines of the full deity and full humanity of Christ. But he, also, was called a heretic where should have been accused, at most, of inconsistency. Doctor Craig proposes a model known as *monophysitism*. This is the position that within the person of Christ, there is both a totally divine and totally human nature, and they must have some sort of common element or link. This means that from eternity, God was an archetypical man. Just imagine your mind with no limits. That would be God, on this model. So God is, in himself, a rational soul. This would avert the problems of kenotic Christology and the hypostatic union. Yet some people will look at Dr. Craig's model and accuse him of heresy because they think that his view implies that Jesus was not fully human. But, whether that is true or not, Craig confesses that Jesus was fully human. Thus he remains within the confessional lines. If you had any charge to bring against Dr. Craig, it would only be one of inconsistency. It would be heresy only if he claimed that Jesus was not fully human.

This means that a person is guilty of heresy by their confession, not by the logical implications of their confession.

That is important for us to remember as we engage with our brethren. For we will often find people who hold views that are logically inconsistent. You might find people who hold two views that contradict each other. But you would not think to accuse them of denying the inerrancy of Scripture. The error is simply inconsistency, and not heresy.

What if somebody really is a heretic?

If we encounter an individual that really is a heretic, how do we react? Do we use the word *heretic* as an insult that we can lodge against them? I am not inclined to think that. If this person has influence in the church, then they should be exposed and anybody that they have influenced should be educated properly about the things that they have taught, for teachers are judged harshly (James 3:1).

But aside from that, this individual should be treated evangelistically. If somebody denies the trinity, or that Jesus died for our sins, or that he rose from the dead, or that salvation comes by grace alone through faith alone, or that that Bible is the word of God, we should treat this person evangelistically. We should pray for them to come to faith in Christ. We should lead them to saving faith and help them to

understand their errors. But we should not use the word *heresy* as an insult against them.

Just as we desire any lost person to come to faith in Christ, so also we should desire for them to come to faith. We should employ all of the intellectual and spiritual resources that God has given us to draw this person into faith, and we should have patience, knowing that God works in his own time. Heresy is a difficult thing to deal with. Especially when this individual is claiming to be a Christian. It is hard and emotionally troubling for us to say that they are not.

On the other hand, sometimes people are eager to call somebody a heretic for the sake of their pride. Wisdom dictates that we should not be carried away by our emotions in these ways. If somebody is truly a heretic, we need to treat them evangelistically and share the gospel with them and be loving toward them.

Chapter 7 – How do we treat brothers in Christ?

There a universal love for mankind that Christians are called to maintain. Even while Jesus was being murdered, he called his Father to forgive the sins of these who were crucifying him (Luke 23:24). The reprobate and the people who were of little social and moral repute were called to dine with Jesus (Matthew 9:10-13). He traversed barriers that were unthinkable, so that even the minds of the professors of theology would boggle as Jesus engaged with immoral individuals (Luke 7:39). Profoundly, he called his followers to do likewise. He said in Matthew 5:43-48 that we are to love not only those who love us. We are to be kind not only to those who are kind to us. We are to be kind to our enemies. We are to bless those who curse us. This is perhaps the most obvious evidence of the universal love of God. For the reasoning that he provides is that we need to be perfect, just as our Father in Heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). The reason for our universal love is to reflect the universal love of God.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to love our enemies. This means that those who hate us, those who persecute us for our faith, those who kidnap hoards of schoolgirls in Africa to be the recipients of universal Christian love. David exemplified

this when he forgave Saul even after a bout of unjustified persecution. Saul was so overcome by this kindness that the evil in his heart temporarily subsided and he said in 1 Samuel 24:17, "You are more righteous than I, for you have dealt well with me, while I have dealt wickedly with you." Thus David showed this general love for the universal class of the world. This is the sort of love that the disciple of Jesus is commanded to demonstrate.

Yet even as we have a general love for the world, there are people in our lives for whom we have a special love. A man will have affection and love for his wife in a way that he does not for the rest of the world. He will love his children and desire their well-being in an incomparable way. This means that while he has a general love for everybody, there are people in life for whom he has a special love, as a consequence of his special relationship.

This breed of love, this special love, that the disciples of Jesus demonstrate, is directed at the body of Christ. There is a certain love for our Christians that is meant to transcend the love that we have for the rest of the world. There is a deeper affection and unity with those who are in Christ. We desire to share with them and desire that they be edified and come

into a deeper understanding of the truth. We desire to commune with them and understand them as individuals. We desire to serve them. We desire to show love for them in such a way that the outsiders will know that we are disciples of Jesus solely on the basis of the love that we show. Jesus tells his disciples in John 13:34, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you.”

In the last chapter, I outlined what a heretic is. Based on outline, we know that if an individual is not a heretic, and they have not been excommunicated because of immoral behavior, then they are members of the visible church and hence brothers and sisters in Christ. They are to be the recipient of the special sort of love that we have for other Christians. This love is not exclusive to our denomination or people that we know very well. It is not exclusive to those that agree with all our secondary propositions. This love is for the body of Christ as a whole. It is for the visible church.

If we encounter somebody who does not fall into the perimeter of heresy, and we find ourselves getting frustrated with them, we need to remember that they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are members of the same body, and they will one day be perfected in Christ, brought to glory and

immortality. They are being sanctified just as we are being sanctified. If we want to edify the Christian church, we need to remember who is in the Christian church. We must not treat people as though they were heretics just because they disagree about something minor. We must also not be driven by pride so as to shame somebody else by accusing such a person of heresy as an insult. A heretic is somebody who violates the central tenets of the Christian faith. They are not somebody who makes you angry nor are these individuals people who disagree about secondary denominational differences. Thus if we are to love the body of Christ, we need to recognize their standing in the body of Christ and treat them with the special love that we are called to have for our fellow Christians.

Ask them for their testimony.

Often when we encounter somebody who is quite unpleasant and seems insufferable to be around, we are quite quick to judge that individual on the basis of what we see in front of us. We do not want to be around them and we might make snide remarks to relay our disdain. We will talk about them in to our friends so that we can express our frustration

and discomfort when around that individual. There are some people that just submit to us impressions that are less than favorable. Sometimes, that is even intentional. As a psychological maneuver, this individual is unpleasant just as a rejection of the rest of the world before they are rejected. But when we begin to learn that this individual has a tragic past that has developed them into the person that they are today, an inkling of sympathy may arise and we may want to befriend this person and repent of our negative disposition.

When our sympathy arises, it is not because anything has really changed. It is not because they have resisted their unpleasant tactics. It is rather than we understand what it is that has driven them to employ these unpleasant tactics. They have been rejected so many times in their life that they are now rejecting us before we have the opportunity to reject them. This will often give us sympathy for an individual.

We may even feel this sympathy for a vicious criminal when we learn of the background and history that has honed him into the person that he is today. He still deserves to be punished, but we begin to wish the best for him and desire for him to reform his life. There is a certain reminder that they are people when we learn about what happened in their past.

They are humanized. They become more than a source of discomfort. They are people who are just like us who have gone through bad things and have consequently made bad decisions. That will not justify the bad decisions, but it will lead us to gain a certain sympathy for them, because they are just like us and we can understand the circumstances that led them to this position.

Similarly, when we learn the testimony of a fellow Christian, we begin to relate to who they are as believers. We see the story of every other Christian that we know reflected in them. We see the biblical promise of salvation coming to life before our eyes. This person tells us that they were once an enemy of God. They were dead in their sins, dead in their trespasses. They tell us of their former beliefs. Perhaps they did not have any. Perhaps they worked for their entire lives to merit their salvation and it all amounted to naught. Perhaps they were hostile to religion, angry with God. But then, in a flash of insight, God emerged and drew near to them. In the blink of an eye, they knew their Savior. They knew that while they were dead in their sins, God had made them alive in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:5). They know that their Savior bore their sins, and they testified to you that, as the hymn says, their sin,

not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and they bear it no more. They tell you that the old man is dead and it is no longer they who live, but Christ who lives in them (Galatians 2:20). They have put their trust in Christ alone for their salvation.

It seems to me that this testimony is the great equalizer. It is unthinkable that we would condemn a person who is overflowing with joy, rejoicing that their Savior lives. It is unthinkable that we would allow ourselves to be frustrated with them. Instead, we instantly will be overcome with the desire to love them with the special love that Christ commanded.

What can I learn from them?

Even in the case of a dissident of the Christian faith, there is much that we can glean from those who are more learned than we. Many professors may be non-Christians, and yet they are qualified educators and worthy of our attention and diligent note taking. You may ask a tax expert a certain question about how to fill out your taxes, but you probably do not qualify that question by asking about their religious affiliation. There is much that we can learn from secular folks

who do not identify as Christians. But there is a second level of edification that can be wrought from those who are in Christ. That is not to say that Christians are inherently more intelligent, for that is obviously not so. Rather, it is to say that the spiritually mature can relay spiritual truths to other.

If you find yourself engaged in a debate with a fellow Christian, and they confess their love for Christ and their joy in the gospel, you may begin to ask yourself not necessarily what it is that you disagree about. That disagreement may seem to fade into irrelevancy as you learn their identity in Christ. Instead, you will find yourself asking what sort of spiritual trials this person has endured, and what they can tell you about them. How has the Holy Spirit guided their study of the Scripture? How have they overcome the qualms that you struggle with?

After all, while we are all united in Christ, we have different backgrounds and different experiences. So there is spiritual edification that can be drawn from all other Christians. They are certainly not infallible, and the years have revealed that to them as well, but just as we have something to provide to other Christians, so also do they have something of value to

offer to us. It is a matter of mutual and equal learning from the spiritual maturity and development of our fellow believer.

They may have been confronted with addictions or proclivities that we are today, or they may have endured temptations and know how to deal with them and teach others to deal with them. If a fellow Christian has struggled with pornography in the past and it is something that we struggle with today, then we may ask them for a guiding hand in pulling us from the clutches of this sinful behavior. In this way, the question that is before us is less of what we disagree about. While that may be an interesting question, that is should not be the primary focus of our attention. As Christians, we should desire to learn from each other and teach each other what we can.

As we have developed this respect for the spiritual testimony of our fellow Christian, and the respect for their trials and adversities, and what they can share with us, then perhaps it would be appropriate to ask what they can teach us about the doctrine about which we happen to diverge. After all, if you were to pluck out this particular doctrine, the Christian faith would not collapse. Therefore, you may have misinterpreted the relevant passages. Since the Holy Spirit

guides into all truth, it may be the case that the Holy Spirit has guided them to properly understand the passage under question. Ask yourself whether this is even possible. Examine the text. Examine the biblical data. Ask yourself if they are being reverent to the text and perhaps it is you who needs to be called into submission. In this way, we are exemplifying a desire to learn from our brethren. If we find that we still disagree with what they are saying, then at the very least, we can say that we understand what they are saying and understand what led them to that particular interpretation.

Are you just trying to win the argument?

When a Christian is insecure about the beliefs that they hold, they will sometimes go in search of passages that prove that their position is biblically viable and that the alternative is non-viable. If you were to look at their personal notes scribbled into the Bible, you would see that there was a lot of mention of refuting, disproving, or proving and establishing. Such a person seems to be more interested in the academic element of faith as opposed to the reverent element of faith. They may also be insecure about the beliefs that they hold, so they are always looking for something establishes their belief

or refutes alternative beliefs. Of course, it should be pointed out that an honest and reverent study of the Scripture will establish certain truths or refute certain propositions, but that should not be your goal every time you open the Bible. In the case of such people, their study of the Scripture will often degenerate into an exercise of winning an argument with a hypothetical intellectual opponent. Yet when somebody holds this disposition, this will spill over into their conversations with individuals with whom they disagree.

When we are interested in refuting certain propositions, then our conversations about the issues will probably not look like an open and honest engagement with what the other person is saying. They will look like exercises in refutation. They will look like you are just trying to win the argument with them. But as you engage in that sort of activity, as you try to win the argument about secondary denominational issues, it seems to me that you would be maintaining an attitude wherein you are not interested in what the other person has to say. You are just trying to pound their points into the ground.

It should be noted that there is nothing wrong with a good and healthy debate. Everybody enjoys debates. People tend

to learn more from a debate than from a lecture, because in a debate, you dive into the specific nuances that separate one position from another and learn why it is that somebody thinks that their interpretation of some piece of data is correct and superior to the alternative. Debates can be quite useful. But in the context of a personal conversation, debates are only useful when they end in determining truth or modifying your interpretation of truth. If you are just trying to win the debate or pound the other person into the ground, then neither party is really gaining anything from that exercise.

The two of you would just sort of be talking past each other and getting frustrated as you try to defeat the other points that are raised as opposed to understand the points that are raised and develop your understanding of truth on the basis of what is being said.

It seems to me that the proper method of debating in the context of a personal one-on-one conversation is not one that is trying to win the argument. This reality emerges especially in the context of this relationship between brothers in Christ. For we already agree on the core of the Christian faith. The person to whom we are speaking has a testimony that

corresponds with orthodoxy. They love the Lord and are laboring to do his will. The question that we should ask is not how we can win the argument. The question that we should ask is rather how we, as Christians, can edify each other and use our divergent views and different experiences to come to a more profound understanding of the truth. One of us is obviously right. Truth is not relative. But we need to focus on that question. The question is, “what is the truth?” The question is not, “Am I right, and is he wrong?”

What if they are just trying to win the argument?

You may find that you are employing proper conversational etiquette. You are resolving to find truth and not necessarily trying to pound your brother or sister in Christ into the ground. You are properly applying what I have outlined. But suppose that they are not applying conversation etiquette. Suppose that this individual is not listening to you and is just trying to win the argument.

Well, you will recall that in chapter 4, I explained the wisdom in Proverbs 26:4-5, which essentially informs us that in some situations, we should engage in debate with this individual so as to disarm and expose them, while in others, it

is best to just walk away. That principle is certainly applicable here. We should apply wisdom and discernment to determine what the appropriate response is.

I would like to suggest that there might be an alternative. We may not necessarily have to combat a negative situation. Instead, we can reconstruct the situation so that it is no longer negative. We can transcend the debate that we are having with our friend and inform them of the different approaches to conversational ethics that the two of you are applying.

While you want to relay truth and understand what they are relaying, it seems as though they are more interested in winning the argument. Let them know that you are not really interested in determining who would win this particular argument. That is just not an interesting question. Adopt a stance of humility by conceding that you think that they would win the argument. But that does not lead you to any particular conclusion about the truth-value of their proposition.

Explain to this person the value in edifying dialogue. Explain to them that by trying to understand each other, you can come into a greater knowledge of not only each other, but

also what the Bible says. Alternative interpretations can certainly lead us to a greater wealth of understanding of the text of Scripture. Explain that when the two of you are just trying to win the argument, you end up talking past each other. You end up exercising less thought. For rather than truly considering the points that are raised, you merely look for ways to refute it and point out the first thing that comes to mind, or point out something that you have heard before without considering that what they are saying might be true. Debaters who just want to win the argument will invariably talk past each other and be denied the opportunity for an open and honest friendship, as you will find yourself frustrated with this individual.

If a person is just trying to win the argument that they are having with you, then call them to examine their behavior. Perhaps there is a way to do this without being accusing or reflecting an aura of self-satisfaction. Suggest that the *conversation*, rather than the *person*, is of a tone that seems like it is angled toward one side winning the argument rather than both parties engaging in mutual edification. In calling this individual to reflect on their approach to the dialogue, you can escape this negative situation while also turning it into a

positive one. As Christians, we should be able to have positive and edifying conversations with our brethren. We should desire to learn from each other and should finely tune our approach to conversation so that we will learn from each other. If, however, they reject that, then you would exercise Proverbs 26:4-5, and decide whether you should disarm them, lest they be wise in their own eyes, or walk away from the conversation, lest you be just as foolish as they.

Social Networking

The flourishing of scientific naturalism has ushered in an age of technological advancement, so much so that this generation is known as the *Digital Age*. All of our information has been computerized. Our most efficient resources are on computers. Our primary mode of communication with other people is on the computer. Yet this chauffeurs with it certain difficulties that would have been utterly unknown to the apostles.

If I tried to explain the concept of a blog or a website to the apostle Paul, he would be bewildered by the bizarre language that I would be using. If I told him that I could write 60 words per minute, while that may not be impressive to many

readers, it would be mind boggling to he who could only write in what we now call longhand with writing utensils that are less than efficient. How would he react if I told him that I could communicate with somebody across the world in an instant? How would he react if I told him that I could distribute his letters to thousands of people in just a few moments? How would he react to things like the printing press? While these modern innovations are certainly one of the most impressive accomplishments in the history of mankind, they also host certain difficulties that were unknown to the Christians of history.

When I have an individual with whom I disagree in front of me, it is quite easy to be sympathetic with them and kind to them. I am much more careful to filter my words so that I do not offend them or say something that comes off as mean-spirited. On the other hand, if I were on the Internet, communicating with brethren, it is easy to avoid personifying them. They have just become a picture with a few words next to it. Sometimes they might even have a little cartoon, so in their anonymity, they seem less human. It is sort of like driving. It is easy to get angry with somebody in traffic because they are just a vague, “that guy,” or “that slow car.”

They are not personified. Similarly, when we engage in dialogue with people on these social networks, they are just not personified and it is difficult for many to see them as such. This means that I may be inclined to just say whatever is on my mind, whether that entails calling them a heretic, calling them un-thoughtful, or anything else that might come to mind.

But when we are communicating with our fellow Christians on these social networking sites, it is my position that we need to be more reserved. We need to watch ourselves more closely than we normally would. We need to filter what we are saying. If we find ourselves typing up a response while we are angry, we should analyze it before pressing send and ask ourselves if we would say that to somebody if they were in person. We should weigh our words more carefully than we would in the most usual contexts. Everything we want to say should be qualified by the reality that this person is a brother or sister in Christ and they deserve your respect. We should exemplify the principles that I have outlined, but be more vigilant in our self-assessment because when we are talking on social networks, it is so impersonal that it is easy for us to allow ourselves to get so lost in the argumentation that we

forget ourselves. Remember their testimony. If you have not heard it, remember that they have one. If they do not have one, if they are not born again Christians, then pointing that out as an emotional insult is unhelpful. Everything you say on social networks should be mentally qualified and carefully orchestrated so that you do not direct all of your frustration to this person.

Unified for evangelism.

There is a certain effort and task that is central to the Christian life. It is the purpose for living in the world rather than having been hoisted into Heaven the moment we became Christians. God has so ordained that people would come to faith by our sharing the gospel with them. It is our duty as Christians to relay the death of Christ for our sins to other people. But we do not do practice this as lone wolves. Instead, we unite as the body of Christ to share the gospel with the world. This means that we unite even with those with whom we have secondary differences.

How can we do that, though? Suppose then that if we join in the evangelistic effort of somebody with a difference of opinion. That means that when they draw somebody into the

faith under the providence and leading of God, then they will relay their secondary difference to this individual. They will teach them something that you regard as an error. Well, this means that you will have a new brother or sister in Christ with whom you disagree. Is it not better to have a brother in Christ with whom you disagree than to see that person die in their sins?

There are times that we need to leave our differences aside. We cannot make our differences into everything. They matter to an extent. But in the central mission of the Christian church, it could be argued that so long as they are not heretical, these differences do not really matter.

Arminians and Calvinists should work in the mission field together to preach the gospel despite their disagreements. Though they may disagree with each other, they need to agree that neither position compromised the central Christian message. If an Arminian lead someone to faith and convinces them of the doctrine of libertarian freedom of the will, then you will have another brother in Christ who happens to be an Arminian. Similarly, if a Calvinist leads somebody to faith and convinces them to believe in the doctrines of grace and

compatibilistic freedom, then you will have a brother in Christ who believes Calvinistic theology.

We need to understand that our differences may be important, but they are not everything. Our differences do not compromise the Christian faith. Our differences need to be set aside in most cases for the edification of the body of Christ. Then as we win people to faith in Christ, as we see these new testimonies emerging, wrought by someone who maintains a theological system that we disagree with, we will understand the value of unity despite our disagreements. As Saint Augustine said, *in essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty, in all things, charity.*

Chapter 8 – Can Christians Believe In An Old Earth?

In the last few centuries with the rise of modern science, there has erupted a storm of controversy over the age of the earth and what sort of synergism could exist between modern science and the biblical data. Just as Christians have thought that the sun revolves around the earth and that the universe is eternal on the basis of Aristotelian philosophy, so also have Christians throughout history believed that the earth is just a few thousands years old on the basis of a particular interpretation of the first eleven books of the Bible. This interpretation has extended into the modern day over and against the scientific consensus.

Despite the theological motivation for the endeavor of science, secularists have labored to paint the discovery of scientific data that reveals that the earth is old as one that compromises the Christian faith. This campaign promulgates the portrayal of the Christian faith as one that opposes science. We are sold the meme that says that we have to choose between faith and science. But we cannot have both. However, rather than challenging the paradigm, folks have been inclined to accept this radical misrepresentation, and

simply choose faith over science. Thus we are told to accept faith and reject modern science.

Throughout the centuries, Christians have always maintained on the basis of the biblical data that the universe is finite in the past, while the secularists would maintain that the universe is eternal, and uncaused, so as to circumvent the theological implications of a finite universe. But with the discovery of the Big Bang, the Christian position of a finite past is vindicated. Alas, in a stroke of irony, Christians have come to reject the Big Bang precisely because it is part in parcel to the scientific paradigm. We have been sold this meme of the Christian faith wherein we either have to accept Christianity or accept the pursuits of science.

Unfortunately, many Christians maintain this meme. There are large and well-funded organizations that promote views that are inherently unscientific because they believe that their interpretation of the Bible is fundamental to the Christian faith and anything else would be a compromise to biblical authority. Since it is a compromise to biblical authority, anybody who promotes such a view becomes a compromiser.

With that last sentence, it may become clear why it is that I thought it important to include a chapter about the creation

controversy in this book. Many Christians stand poised to point the finger at those with whom they disagree over the age of the earth. If a Christian believes that the earth is old, they are hastily labeled a compromiser, somebody who does not care about biblical authority and somebody who is more interested in the word of man than the word of God. The proponent of old earth creation is told that they are twisting the Scripture, assuming that the earth is old and loading their scientific effort into the biblical data.

Others will maintain that the Christian who believes in an old earth is not really saved. They deny the authority of Scripture, and hence uproot the foundation for the deity of Christ, his death on the cross, or his resurrection from the dead. The Christians who believe in an old earth are thought of as heretics, who stand outside of the body of Christ. At the very least, they are thought of as second-class Christians who maintain this sinful disposition of twisting the Scripture to fit their scientific agenda.

Faith or education?

Lacking the time or the resources to home-school their children, most parents are quite satisfied to send them to the

public school system. Within the public school system, they are typically taught the theories of scientific data, including an overview of human evolution, or the age of the earth, or carbon dating and how it reveals that the age of certain fossils. The child who diligently pays attention in these classes will find that they are challenged by the opposing view that is presented by their local church, if their local church teaches a brand of young earth creationism. Since the child does not know anything about Christian theology, they will assume that the clergy is speaking authoritatively in representing what the Bible teaches.

They will be left to contemplate precisely the dilemma that the secularist advocates. They are left to choose between their education and their faith. They may, for a time, continue in their scientific pursuit and not worry about how it aligns with the Christian faith. But eventually, the contradiction will emerge and will be prevalent in their lives. At some point, they will have to determine whether faith or science will drive them.

Since people in the western culture are children of Descartes, emergent of the Renaissance, we are quite rationalistic and apt to shun anti-intellectualism. If we have to

take a stance that forces us to shut our brains off, that is quite difficult to do, especially with the era of information. We are just not keen to deny the pursuit of science. We want to know what is true. The child who is choosing between their faith and what is being taught in the classroom will want to know what is true.

Further, it seems to be quite a dangerous endeavor that tells children to cast doubt upon what they are learning in the classroom. Perhaps we can begin to tell them that they should heed a divine theory of mathematics as opposed to what their teachers are relaying to them. In teaching them young earth creationism, parents will find that their children are isolated from their education. Their education will be compromised, and they will not know what to believe. When they finally do decide to believe their education, their faith will be compromised.

This is to say that we should sympathize with why it is that people would desire to find a suitable synergism between the biblical data and the scientific data. People are just not interested in anti-intellectualism. By teaching that the scientific data is wrong, that all of their classes and education need to be overthrown in favor of young earth creationism,

we are setting up a dichotomy between education and faith. It seems the intelligent person would deny that dichotomy. The intelligent person would suggest that there could be a synergy between science and faith, and we need not commit ourselves to young earth creationism to be a pious Christian.

Sharing the gospel with a scientist.

If there were a popular world religion that taught that the earth was flat, and they approached you to share their message, you would reject it out of hand because you know that they claim to have divine revelation about something that is manifestly false. It is an element of an ancient scheme of interpreting the natural realm, which we know today to be false. In our day of scientific naturalism, we know that the earth is not flat. We know this. This is testable and discernable instantly to anybody who can look through a telescope knows that the earth is round.

But let's suppose that these individuals told us that we have started with the presupposition that the earth is round, and interpreted the evidence in light of that presupposition. So anytime we look at the evidence, we would have to fit it into our paradigm. The evidence does not matter so much.

Instead, what matters is what we have assumed to be true. They tell us that if you start instead with the assumption that the earth is flat, and interpret the evidence in light of that assumption, then everything will begin to fall into place.

We might pose the question of why we would start with that assumption. They reply that God has revealed it in holy writ. So we appeal to a greater authority than the scientific pursuit. We appeal to God, and on the basis of his revelation, we interpret the evidence in light of our assumption that the earth is flat. Would you find this compelling? Suppose this group approached somebody who had a background in science. Would they find it compelling?

A very close parallel is to be drawn to the young earth movement. For they inform us that the only way to be faithful to the scientific data is to interpret it in light of biblical revelation. They suggest that secularists start with the assumption that the earth is old and thus interpret everything within that assumption, while Christians start with the assumption that the earth is young and interpret everything within that assumption. The problem is that this is not how somebody approaches science. One does not assume that the

earth is old. They examine the data and conclude that the earth is old on that basis.

If we are telling a scientist that they need to start with the assumption that the earth is young and interpret the data within that framework, we are telling them to abandon the scientific method. We are telling them that they have to abandon their work as a scientist, for if they want to examine the data, they need to start with an assumption about what the data will say. That is in stark contrast with the scientific method.

We can scarcely condemn the scientist who rejects this approach to Christian theism. The Christian who tells the scientist that they have freedom to pursue God's revelation in nature without presuppositional constraints is the Christian who will have more success in evangelism.

There are different interpretations.

Those who adhere to the young earth creationist model will often accuse alternative models of compromising the text and forcing God to submit to the scientific endeavor. But this charge unsympathetically seems akin to accusing anybody with any interpretation of compromising Scripture. If any

person has any interpretation with which I disagree, I have the option of accusing them of loading their tradition or their desires into the text without honestly examining it. I can always do that. But as a general principle, I choose to give people the benefit of the doubt and assume that they are being honest in their exegesis and their desire to understand what the Bible says.

This is a luxury that needs to be granted to those who hold alternative interpretations of creation narrative in the Bible. For it is not as though they are just rejecting the Bible in favor of science. It is not as though these folks are saying that these chapters of the Bible are false. Instead there are legitimate literal interpretations of the first chapter of the Bible that maintain biblical authority.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a literal interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis would be the *day-age* interpretation, which suggests that the days in Genesis 1 are literal epochs, they are long periods of time. This would not be taken as a metaphorical day though, because the word *day* is often used in Scripture to denote a long period of time, such as in the very next chapter, in Genesis 2:4. This view would draw support from the fact that

24 hour days were created in the fourth creation epoch, in was Genesis 1:14. If 24 hour days were created during the fourth day, how could it be so that the first 3 were 24-hour days? Similarly, it draws support from the extension of the 7th epoch into the present day, according to Hebrews 4:4-5. If the 7th day is an epoch, this seems quite suggestive of the rest of the chapter.

This should not be taken as a statement of support of the day-age model. But rather, it is to say that this is a possible approach to interpreting Scripture, and there is no reason to think that somebody who looks at this biblical data that I have presented is being dishonest. They may even be wrong. But just because they are wrong, that does not lead us to question their motives or to suggest that they do not care what the Bible says or that they just want to load modern science into the text. We should give people the benefit of the doubt, especially considering that the alternative interpretations are not implausible.

Further, if we want to relate to our brothers in Christ, we should respect them enough to not question their motives, and acknowledge that there are different interpretations. Just as I would not be inclined to question the motives of

somebody who believed in infant baptism, so also we should not be inclined to question the motives of somebody who believes in an old earth.

What guides our interpretation?

Suppose you encountered an atheist or a non-believer who told you that there were all of these inconsistencies within the Bible. The Bible is not only self-contradictory, but it also contradicts known facts about the world. They might even accuse the Bible of being the flat earth book that I mentioned above. In rendering this charge, they would appeal to things such as statements like the *four corners of the earth*. They might charge it against the Bible that it maintains that the sun revolves around the earth, citing statements such as *the setting sun*.

These are known facts about the natural world that the Bible seems to contradict. In response you would be right to point out that the Bible often uses *phenomenal language*. This means that the author is just writing what they see and what is going on from their perspective. But they are not teaching a science class. We see the same thing in modern news outlets,

which would inform us about the time of the sunset or the sunrise. But we do not accuse these outlets of inaccuracy.

Well, what you have done in this case is to take your knowledge of the physical world and load it into the Bible. You have presumed that the scientific record is true and found a suitable interpretation that corresponds with the scientific record. The question is whether you are guilty of compromising the Scripture.

The obvious answer is that of course you are not. For the scientific record is true. That is not to say that everything that science reveals is true. But everything that the natural world reveals is true. It is upon this foundation that science is built. The universe is rational. That notion has been challenged a few times in history, such as when young and healthy individuals were infected with the Black Plague while the sickly and decrepit were not. In our rationalistic society, we acknowledge that the universe is comprehensible. It is not nonsense. What we draw from the natural world is accurate.

Thus when we discern truth in the natural world, and there is a biblical text that seems to contradict that, what is the proper approach? Since what the natural world reveals is true, and what the Bible reveals is true, it seems to me to be

appropriate to question our interpretation of both. Our interpretation of either the natural world or the biblical data is wrong. It may just be that our interpretation of the biblical data is wrong while our interpretation of the natural world is correct. But we need to discern which of these is the case.

This means that when a person is trying to understand the biblical data in light of some scientific revelation, they are not uprooting biblical authority. Rather, they are challenging their interpretation of the Bible. The Bible is still authoritative and inerrant even if my interpretation of the Bible happens to be flawed.

This is not foundational.

In an attempt to raise the stakes, many adherents to the young earth model have suggested that the issue of interpreting Genesis 1 in correspondence with a young earth is a foundational issue. That is to say that to compromise it leaves us to question anything that we find in the Bible. Any biblical data that reveals a miraculous event is called into question. If we can say that Genesis 1 corresponds with modern science, then perhaps we can say that the

resurrection of Jesus did not happen, because science claims that men do not rise from the dead.

Well, as alarming as it would be to suggest that Jesus did not really rise from the dead, I am afraid that this fear is quite misguided. For modern science makes no claims about whether God is capable of raising men from the dead. Science does not tell us that God does not exist. Science does not tell us that miracles do not occur. It makes no claims about such things.

What science tells us is that men do not rise from the dead *naturally*. On the basis of this scientific data, I would be convinced that Jesus did not rise from the dead by natural means. He rose from the dead by supernatural means; namely, God raised Jesus from the dead. So this claim that an alternative interpretation of Genesis 1 compromises the resurrection is just misguided.

For us to be compelled to follow the scientific data where it leads is not something that should be frightening to Christians. It should be exciting to Christians. God created this world, and because of that, there is a wealth of knowledge and latitude for us to discover. We must not worry that somewhere out there, hidden under a rock or at the top of a

mountain or in the distant cosmos, we will find something that contradicts the Bible. As faithful Christians, we can simply trust God and continue to follow the scientific evidence wherever it may lead with full assurance that God's word will stand firmly and unshakably when challenged. We can be confident and have faith in God and in his word that nothing will emerge that will contradict our faith.

For our faith is based in not the natural world but in the supernatural world. The central claims of the Christian faith are theological claims. If I were to compromise them, I would have to conjure up a theological heresy. I would have to say that God does not exist, or that God did not raise Jesus from the dead, or that Jesus did not die for the sins of his people, or that salvation does not come by faith.

These are not claims with which science has any overlap with at all. These are theological propositions. If I say that the rocks on the ground exceed what the young earth model indicates, I have not compromised any of these core beliefs. The age of the earth is a secondary belief. If you pluck that thread from the spider's web, nothing unravels.

Was there death before the Fall?

Within a young earth model, Adam and Eve were the first two human beings and they only consumed fruit and vegetables. Similarly, the animals only consumed fruit and vegetables. There were dinosaurs, alligators, dogs, and they were all friendly. They were tame animals that did not consume each other. But, when Adam and Eve sinned against God, the entire world was accursed because of them. Animals began to eat each other. The ground produces thorns and thistles. Prior to this point, there was no death. Animals did not die. Animals were immortal until the Fall. This would draw support from Romans 5:12, which informs us that death came as a consequence of sin.

This is contrasted against the old earth model, which will often suggest that human beings did not die before the Fall of Adam and Eve. The old earth creationist will often suggest that while animals died, human beings did not die. They would interpret Romans 5:12 as referring to the death of human beings rather than the death of animals. This contrasts with it an assumption that young earth creationists find disturbing. God's original creation had animals eating

each other. Does this impugn the goodness of God? Why did God say that the earth was “very good” (Genesis 1:31)?

I would call the reader to recall the theodicy that we learn in the book of Job. Job endured several hardships, including the loss of his land, his servants, his family, and his health. His friends tell him that he must have committed some sin for which God is punishing him. But Job persists in certainty of his innocence. In that respect, he is correct. It was not for sin that God punished Job. So he questioned God. He multiplied words against God, demanding an explanation.

When God finally appeared to him in chapter 38, Job was overwhelmed by God’s presence. The righteousness and holiness and wisdom of God were probably instantly apparent to him. He may have said something similar to when the prophet Isaiah saw God. “Woe to me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!” (Isaiah 6:5). The divine response to Job was, “Who is it that darkens my counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2).

Then he posed several dozen rhetorical questions to Job demonstrating that he was a mere human, and could not question God. God is more righteous and wise and loving than

we are. As Christians, we need to just follow him and assume that he knows more than we do.

Imagine that you had a gorgeous carpet. But it is flipped over. You can only see the underside of the carpet. From that limited perspective, you might be inclined to think that it was an ugly carpet. But when it is flipped over, you will understand why the underside had to look like that. Likewise, when the rug of this world is flipped over, we will understand what God had in mind. You could spend your life worrying about every single thread, or you could just put your trust in God, who is wiser than we.

The young earth creationist who wants to propose that God is evil for creating a world where animals eat each other is acting out of impiety. He is not trusting in the wisdom of God. But they might pose the additional question of why God called it good with these conditions.

Well, God did call it good. But he did not call it perfect. There were certainly flaws in the world. That is why God had to put Adam and Eve in a garden – to isolate them from the world. When they sinned, they were exposed to the real world. The real world contained death and suffering. This is because God established a sufficient ecosystem so that life

could flourish. Thus, it may be said that the world was *very good*.

I do not think it can be charged against the old earth creationist that they have a conception of God that is evil. Rather, it can be said that they trust in the righteousness of God even if they do not understand how everything works out.

What about original sin?

Genesis 1 is often thought of as the foundation of the doctrine of original sin. If we undermine original sin, then we undermine the fallen state of humanity. In undermining the fallen state of humanity, we undermine our need for a Savior. Hence, we undermine the cross itself. This would centralize the creation controversy as an essential doctrine.

Well, it is first worth noting that Genesis is not the only place in the Bible that speaks of the state of humanity. Indeed, we could suggest that the psalms speak with more clarity than Genesis 1, as they tell us that “Nobody is good,” (Psalm 14:2), or that we are born in sin, even at the time of conception (Psalm 51:5). Paul enforces this doctrine as he tells us, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

(Romans 3:23). Even if Genesis were removed from the canon of Scripture, we would have a foundation for believing in the sinful state of humanity.

Second, by adopting a view known as *Federal Headship*, we can take Genesis literally and avert the proposed problem. Even if Adam were not the first human being, he would still stand as the representative of humanity before God. God knew that all men, if put in his position, would behave exactly as he did. Thus Adam serves as the Federal Head of all men, even those who lived before him and those who are not descended directly from him. In this way, even on an evolutionary paradigm, we may take seriously the words that “through [Adam’s] disobedience, the many were made sinners.” (Romans 5:19a).

I am simply pointing out that there are alternative interpretations available. That is not to say that there are interpretations are correct. But it is to say that we should given our brethren the benefit of the doubt and assume that they want to fear God and honor Scripture as much as we do.

Are we committed to a literal Adam?

As I pointed out, it is possible to maintain the doctrine of original sin even if Adam were a sort of literary device rather than an actual human being rooted in history. There is nothing about this that compromises that particular doctrine. But even if there were, the most we could do was charge our friend with inconsistency. We could say that he believes something that logically implies that the doctrine of original sin would be undermined, but that is not to say that he is a heretic. He believes in original sin. He just does so inconsistently.

Further, a metaphorical interpretation of the account of Adam and Eve would likewise serve as a foundation for the doctrine of original sin. For a parable is not a lie. If they think that the story of Adam and Eve is a parable, that means that while they make no claim about its' historicity, they do think that it has theological significance. In the case of Adam and Eve, the theological significance would simply be that the doctrine of original sin emerges. We would maintain, on the basis of that parable that man is in a sinful state and in need of redemption. The point of a parable is to communicate theological truth.

That is not to say that this is an interpretation that I accept. But it is one that serves as a foundation for the sinful state of humanity without making any claims about the historicity of the story. It seems to me that the Christian is free to adopt this sort of interpretation and maintain an orthodox confession.

This is important for us to acknowledge because it restores the barriers that exist between our brothers and sisters in Christ who happen to believe in evolution or who believe in an old earth. We do not have to be hostile to these concepts or assume that they are being dishonest. We need to learn to understand people who have a different view than our own without making assumptions about what they believe. The approach to resolving the creation controversy is evidence that Christians have failed in that regard.

Chapter 9 – Engaging With Atheists

Since they represent such a slim fraction of the population, many people will be inclined to overlook the atheist. In the United States, one would be much more like to encounter a Sikh, a Buddhist, a Hindu, or somebody who claims to be a witch. Insofar as population is concerned, atheism seems to be quite insignificant. But the so-called *New Atheists* seem to encompass a loud minority. College students probably encounter rebellious freshman that have recently become atheists at their university. In our dialogues on the Internet, we may often encounter people who pose questions such as “who created God?” and often congratulate themselves about their intellectual sophistication.

But Christians often found themselves taken aback by these individuals. They are quite unique in their assertions and their resolute unbelief. Most people that we encounter show an inkling of an open mind or a desire to hear what we have to say. Atheists, on the other hand, do not demonstrate this.

Thus the Christian will feel compassion for them and will desire to lead them to faith and to persist in preaching the gospel to them. As we communicate with them, though, we are left to wonder if this is just a waste of our time. How can

we deal with such an individual? Why should we bother talking to somebody who is just out to refute everything that we say without seriously engaging us? Further, many of us are just not equipped to answer the talking points that they have memorized.

It is also the case that many atheists are rude and mean-spirited individuals. They take their cue from Professor Richard Dawkins, who declared at the Reason Rally in 2012 that atheists should “Mock [religious people]. Ridicule them in public.” This is quite a welcome commission, for it offers an outlet for the atheist to feed their pride. They can show other people how intelligent they are by putting them to shame. This takes me back to what I said in a previous chapter. Pride is best exercised by contrast.

When the atheist contrasts themselves against the stupid religious people, they reveal how intelligent they truly are. So Professor Dawkins’ commission is met not with a sound rebuke (as would be the case in any Christian convention) but with applause and cheers. It is also met with unwavering obedience. Anybody who has spoken with atheists knows that it is a serious challenge to engage in civil discourse. Many are patently and intentionally rude and insulting.

The Christian desire, of course, is to share the gospel with these people. But people generally only have the capacity to tolerate so much condescension and bigotry. It is difficult to continue to talk to somebody who is being rude to you. It raises questions about whether you could spend your time elsewhere. Time is valuable, and to spend it on those who are being rude to you is often to waste it.

Yet Christians are called to preach the gospel to *all* of creation (Mark 16:15, Matthew 28:19). That entails preaching the gospel to atheists. The question is how it is that we can determine whether somebody is worth our persistent effort.

Some atheists really are not worth our time.

Some of the New Atheists have even come to style themselves as *Brights*. The implication is obvious. By virtue of being atheists, they are bright or intelligent or free-thinking. They have thrown off the shackles of religion that have constrained their mind for such a long time. Now they are at a point wherein they can see through this old way of thinking. They look at all religious people and assume that they know how they are thinking. They have transcended your shallow

and small-minded approach to the world, and now they are moving on to more rigorous intellectual investigation.

This means that before you speak, they assume that they already know what you are going to say. Even if they are right, they assume because they once held that particular belief and have abandoned it that they have subjected it to an intellectual rigor that is beyond yours.

As you relay the Christian conception of the world or certain aspects of it, many atheists think that they have a more thorough understanding of what you are saying than you do. They know your thought process. They know why you are saying what you are saying and they know all of the problems with it. They also know that you have never heard any of the objections that they will raise. If you were to hear them, you would reply with something simplistic like, "I have faith," or "God is beyond all human comprehension."

This means that you have no answers. You are just like everyone else. You have not sufficiently examined your beliefs or the objections. They have, though, and they have rejected it.

They will also have a number of assumptions about how you have come to believe what you believe. It is certainly not

out of intellectual fortitude. It is not because you think it is true. It is because you believe everything that you are told to believe. You have blind faith in something that you can never know to be true. You have no answers to these questions because you have never seriously asked these questions.

You have also not read the Bible. As atheists, they have read the Bible and they understand it much better than you do. You only read what the clergymen read to you. You interpret it how people tell you to interpret it. But you really do not have any knowledge of it. The moment the atheist started to read the Bible, so they will say, they realized that it was an evil book and not really the word of God.

They will cite things such as the slaughter of the Canaanites or God's judgment in the Old Testament, which you have never read, and say that these things persuaded them that the Bible could not really be the word of God. It could only be the word of God if God met their expectations and approved of sin. (Ironically, when God brings judgment upon evil men, as in the Old Testament, he is being cruel. When he allows men to continue in their sin, atheists say that a good God is allowing evil in the world and that is impossible. Well, which is

it? Is God immoral for allowing evil or for bringing judgment upon evil?)

It seems obvious to me that such a person is not worth our time to engage. They have already decided that they know more than you. They have loaded past experiences into everything that you say and do and think. This is arrogant and makes dialogue impossible. This is a picture of many New Atheists and they are just not worth spending a significant amount of time on.

What about those who may be affected by a conversation with an atheist?

It should be underlined that you are not the only person who will have conversations with atheists. Other people will. Christians who have backslidden and are no longer practicing may be confronted by it. When teenagers leave the home and separate from their parents, they often will set out on a journey of finding themselves. They will reassess everything in their lives so that they can determine who they are and who they want to be in the world. Often this will bring with it the skepticism about their religious background. Some may find that there are empowered in their Christianity, in that they

now have a faith of their own rather than one that is dependent upon their parents. Others will find that they do not really believe at all, or they have nagging questions about what they believe that nobody can seem to answer.

Atheism will seem like a plausible resolution to these problems. The atheist will employ philosophical terms and theological challenges in a way that is very under-developed, but yet the backslidden Christian will find that they are taken in by it. If there is nobody around who can answer the atheists' questions or to resolve their intellectual tension, the backslidden Christian will find that their doubts have been reinforced. This will begin a process that eventually leads a phone call placed from a child to their parent where they tell them, "I don't believe in God anymore."

This situation could have been averted had there been somebody there who could answer these difficult questions. Even while it may be uncomfortable for us to engage with people who are condescending, it is better that we do sometimes precisely because we have an audience. If there are people who can hear what is being said, it is best to disarm the atheist and expose them. It is best to provide good answers to difficult questions so that other Christians who are

struggling with these questions may see the strength in the Christian faith. Rather than having their doubts reinforced, they will see their faith reinforced as it has the capacity to stand even in the face of these difficult challenges.

The apostle Paul said, “I have become all things to all men so that I may by all means save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:22b). This means that when he was with the Jews, he would eat in a way that would not offend them. He became Jewish. When he was with the Greeks, he was Greek. In our rationalistic culture wherein people value scientific inquiry and logical reasoning, we need to show the strength of the Christian faith from that perspective. We need to become apologists – defenders of the Christian faith, so that we may bring people into saving faith with Christ.

When we are able to present a robust defense of the faith and provide these good answers to the atheists’ questions, while the atheist will probably not be convinced (they never are), it will expose them as hosting an implausible alternative. One of the primary reasons for having a debate with anybody is not to reach the person with whom you are debating. Their mind has been made up. Instead, we are trying to reach the

audience. We are trying to reach the people who struggle with atheism and struggle with these difficult questions.

What about your own doubts?

Even while we should engage with atheists just for the purpose of exposing them and helping to curdle the doubt of our fellow Christians, we should also not forget our own capacity for doubt. If we persist in talking to this unpleasant individual over a long period of time, then it will be the case that we also have doubts. That is not necessarily a sign of the strength of the atheistic position nor is it to say that if you study the faith more, you will have doubt. Instead, it is to say that if we are told several times that we are deluded, or we endure the clamoring insults that the atheist puts forth, we will get to a point where we wonder if it is true. We may wonder if we really are deluded.

This doubt would not necessarily have to come as a consequence of the intellectual fortitude of the atheist. But rather it would come as a consequence of being told the same thing several times and contemplating it in different ways. We may come to think that we have just imagined our relationship with God and that our religious experiences are

akin to the religious experiences that people of various religions have around the world.

This means that if we are going to engage with atheists (especially disrespectful atheists) over a long period of time, we need to seriously examine ourselves to ensure that we are in the faith and that we are rooted in Christ. If we are not, then I am afraid that every wind of doctrine that sounds compelling will blow you away. If you are not grounded in biblical truth, then whatever sounds reasonable will cause you to stray away from the faith.

This means that if you are not in the faith, it is very unlikely that you will be able to bring somebody else to faith (although God may use you in some indirect fashion). An assessment of your spiritual condition and whether you are in Christ may be warranted prior to engaging with the atheists. Lest you become either an atheist or another arrogant person trying to prove that they are right.

For there is very little need of Christian apologists who just want to prove that they are right. There is very little need of individuals who want to show everybody how smart they are by handling atheistic objections. There is very little need for the apologist who does not want to lead people to Christ.

Although, the unloving apologist might want to lead someone to Christ just so that they can hear the atheist admit that he was right all along. But the body of Christ just does not need this sort of apologist.

Instead, we need to be Christians who want to share the gospel with all of creation. But, we need to be prepared for the sort of objections that we will raise. If we were going to China, we would prepare to engage with the Buddhists' objections. Similarly, if we talk with an atheist, we prepare for atheistic objections to the gospel. But this apologetic method is subservient the evangelistic process. In this way, we know that we are laboring not to prove that we are right, but to share the gospel and in the process of doing that, we are ready to provide a defense of the hope that we have, but to do so with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

Understand the sort of Christianity that atheists have been exposed to.

I mentioned above that atheists tend to make assumptions about Christians. They will come to the conversation assuming that already know what the Christian is thinking and what they are going to say. This is because in the western culture,

most people have been exposed to some sort of Christian belief. Most atheists hold these expectations because they are what they have experienced throughout their lives. They hold these expectations because these are the things that they previously believed. But, in many cases, the things that the atheist previously believed are not representative of the gospel or of Christianity. The defense of the Christian faith that they were presented with was less than impressive. Christians who in their misguided piety wanted to answer the question of the atheist misapplied the role of faith.

This will emerge if you simply ask the atheist what they think faith is. They will provide a definition of faith that is very unsympathetic. They will say something like, "Faith is believing in mystical woo even while you know that it is false because the evidence proves that it is false but you believe it anyway."

This is the sort of faith that they have been exposed to. Of course, in Christian theology, faith will take a few different forms. Mental assent (believing that Christianity is true) certainly has a role. But that is not the faith that saves. Even the demons give mental assent (James 2:19). The atheist is

describing a breed of faith that the Bible explicitly says cannot save. They are describing a dead faith.

But saving faith that we find in Romans 4:5 literally means *trust*. We put our trust in the atonement of Jesus. In this way, it is not so much that our faith has saved us, as much as our faith has applied salvation to us. It was the cross that saved us. But our trust in the promise of God on the basis of that atonement is what saved us.

This means that the atheist has rejected a form of Christianity that is simply not biblical. What we need to understand about this sort of atheist is that they will load their negative experiences of Christianity onto you. If they had blind faith as a believer, then they will assume that all believers have blind faith. When they would ask the clergymen about their nagging doubts, the response that they received would be a simple plea for them to have faith, and for obvious reasons, this is not intellectually satisfying.

But if we let the atheist know that they are working with a faulty definition of faith, they will find it very frustrating. The implication is that while they did not find answers to their questions, there were actually answers out there that they happened to miss. But, you see, they already closed that door.

They made the decision that Christianity was not true. That is settled in their mind. For them to admit that they could have been wrong about this would be to retreat. They would have to open that door as reassess Christianity as it is accurately represented. Many find that prospect frustrating. It entails [1] you know more than they do about Christianity, which is an unacceptable proposition and [2] the foundation of their objections to Christian theology are collapsing, and these objections were the basis of their de-conversion.

If we tell them that their original objections to Christian theology were objections to a rendition of Christian belief that is not biblical, this will undercut their entire de-conversion, for their de-conversion was based upon these objections. So as we explain Christianity to our atheistic friends, we should have it in mind that they may come to be frustrated with us for these reasons. But this is something that we should be willing to sympathize with. We understand why they are frustrated and if we were in a similar position, we might be frustrated as well.

Understand the emotional reasons that people become atheists.

If you were to ask an atheist why they adopted their position, they will often provide a number of intellectually sophisticated reasons. They will tell you that they examined the evidence. They poured over the Scripture, night after night, studying philosophy of religion, theology, and natural theology. After this long and rigorous scrutiny of the faith, they found it lacking and thus unsustainable as a system of belief.

While there is certainly a desire to give people the benefit of the doubt, and assume that they are telling the truth, and while we certainly want to allow people to tell their own story (as I indicated in a previous chapter), when we discover the objections that are raised by many atheists, we may find ourselves appalled at how trivial and unsophisticated they are.

They will ask us things like, “who created God?” which is an argument that is criticized even by atheist philosophers. For obviously nobody created God. As the cause of space and time, God necessarily exists beyond space and time, which makes him eternal and uncaused. Yet these trivial questions

are what sustains their atheism. This invariably leads me to question whether they have emotional and spiritual reasons for denying their Christian faith.

Just as many people will use Christianity as a crutch, so also people will use atheism as a crutch. In his *book The Faith of The Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*, Professor Paul Vitz explained that many people come to adopt atheistic beliefs because of their revulsion that comes in response to trusting in a father figure. They may have had a father that was absent, passed away early in their life, or otherwise insufficient, and as a consequence of this, they are repelled by the idea of trusting a father. This would be similar to somebody who has difficulty in relationships because of past infidelities. This is typical psychological phenomenon.

Since God is pictured throughout the Bible as a father figure, the atheist will find that they are repelled by it. Their mistrust of a human father is transferred to their trust of their Heavenly Father. Now, this is obviously not universal. Some atheists were raised in happy homes with both of their parents. But Dr. Vitz is explaining a *general* psychological phenomenon. In this way, atheism serves as a crutch for them.

Second, many people abandon religious belief when they endure some calamity in their lives. Throughout their lives, they generally knew and intellectually accepted the theological responses to the problem of evil. They were not thought of as unsophisticated or lacking. But when the problem of evil and suffering struck them personally, their faith was shaken at its' core. Everything collapsed. Today, the atheist persists in fervent unbelief, and their foundation for that is the suffering that they have endured while they were believers.

Perhaps the most obvious psychological crutch would be the comfort in knowing that life will end at the grave. They will not have to face the judgment seat of God, precisely because there is no judgment seat. They no longer have to be confronted with the burden of their sin. They may live in total self-interest, however they like, and never worry about whether they will stand before a just and holy God. For they have proposed that there is no just and holy God. They did this because the reality of God's existence and his righteousness is overwhelmingly terrifying, and they cannot bear it.

These psychological maneuvers are something that Christians should keep in mind when talking with atheists. When we see them getting angry or frustrated, we need to keep in mind that there is a lot of depth to that anger. It is heavily rooted, at their core. That should be kept in mind and we should use wisdom to determine whether we should have patience with this individual, or spend our time elsewhere.

They will not listen because they love their sin.

Much like a slave who grows to love their chains, that cannot see a life outside of their imprisonment, so also does the slave of sin come to love their sin. They cannot imagine how they could live their life without constant indulgence in sin. That is not to say that I am a better person than anybody else. The testimony of every Christian is that by default, we are children of wrath, doomed for destruction. We are enemies of God and we are bent on self-autonomy. Everything that we do is meant to preserve our sin.

That is the state of humanity. We are totally depraved (Romans 3:10) and opposed to God's righteousness. Yet people do generally have some conception of judgment. Of course, atheists do not. But people who have a generic

background in Christianity, who grew up in western culture and have went to church a few times generally believe that good people go to Heaven and bad people go to Hell. That is a correct assessment. But we all fall short (Romans 3:23). We are all evil and we are all worthy of God's wrath and condemnation.

This is because we live in this state wherein we love our sin. We cannot stand the prospect of being robbed of our sin. So when we hear about God and his righteousness, the only thing that we see is a legalistic cage that a person steps into, arbitrary strictures that they impose upon themselves, and why would they do that? Why would anybody want a list of arbitrary rules that they have to follow?

All of us know this mindset, for such were some of you (1 Corinthians 6:11). They cannot conceive of laboring for righteousness out of an overflow of the joy that we have (Psalm 37:4). They cannot conceive of keeping God's Law not because it is an arbitrary stricture but because we love him. That is utterly unthinkable.

So when the Christian proposes that the atheist repents and believes the gospel, this is met with disdain. They hate it, because they love their sin. The suggestion that they must

leave their sin behind is much like the suggestion that a pirate must leave his chest of treasure behind. The natural man will simply never make this concession. As one preacher said, he cannot turn to God because he will not turn to God, and he will not turn to God because he hates him. That is the state of mankind. That is why the call to change your mind about sin is met with repugnance.

We need to keep this in our minds as we interact with our atheist friends. If we find that they are constantly contriving answers to avoid our points, we must not get frustrated or impatient. We need to keep in mind that just as we once did, they love their sin and they are fighting with everything that they have to preserve it.

Every intellectual attack that you render will always be met with both disdain and rejection, because it is not merely an intellectual proposition. It is a spiritual proposition. Any time you try to answer their objections, you are making it more reasonable for them to repent of their sins and believe in Christ, and that is unthinkable. They will not do it. It is impossible for the natural man to do that.

How can these arguments even help if the atheist will always reject them?

This raises the question of why we should even bother. If nobody will respond anyway, then why should we talk to atheists? They are dead in their sins, slaves of sin, and will do everything that they can to avert the consequences of what we are saying. They will preserve their sin by desperately seeking out intellectual ways for them to deny the existence of God. They will deny everything that you are saying for the sake of their sin. So why should we even bother?

We should bother because God will work on the heart of the unbeliever, and he will use us to do it. God will call the atheist to see how offensive sin is. He will reveal his gospel to him and reveal the answers to the objections that the atheist has. He will reveal all of the evidence that the atheist needs to become a believer, and he will use our apologetics and our conversations to do it.

So while it may seem a hopeless endeavor, and it may seem like we should not bother, God can use us. Even if our one interaction seems particularly unfruitful, we do not know how God will use it and how it has impacted their thinking and their future. While God is the one who moves on the heart of

the unbeliever and begins to soften and change them, he uses the ministry of his people to bring others into saving faith.

While it is true that the atheist is a slave of sin, it is also true that if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36). This means that when we approach our atheist friends, we are relying not on our own capacity to convince someone of the existence of God. We are instead relying on God to work on the heart of the unbeliever so that they can set aside their love for sin and hear the gospel with an open mind and an open heart. God may soften their heart as their intellectual objections to the gospel vanish and we preach Christ crucified.

When the love and the glory of the Son is revealed to them, the very concept of loving sin will be thrown off and they will heave themselves onto the Son. The righteousness of God will seem not as something that they must flee from but as a free gift granted to them. For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed (Romans 1:27). Thus we should persist in our dialogues with atheists despite their hard hearts because God is using us to reach his people. We should take heart because those who are his people will hear his voice (John 10:27).

Chapter 10 – Engaging With Homosexuals

As of a few months prior to this writing, same-sex marriage was legalized throughout the United States. For supporters of same-sex marriage and the LGBT movement, that day was marked with joy and what they thought to be social triumph. In their minds, humanity is beginning to overcome its' oppressive roots and the old and prejudice ways of thinking are beginning to wane. It may have been a brutal, straining, and sometimes even fatal process, but for them, this movement is nothing but progressive. It is akin to abolishing the shame of the United States, the slavery of the imported Africans during the early years of our history.

Just as thinking men and women overcame that abomination, so thinking men and women also overcome the condemnation of same-sex marriage. It is a way of thinking that is seen as outdated and can no longer be applied to the contemporary situation. The protest against same-sex marriage is thought of as a dying influence against which later generations will snarl their nose in disgust.

In contrast, the Christian reaction to the legalization of same-sex marriage has been one of frenzy. There is a lot of trouble to formulate our thoughts. Radical solutions are being

proposed to resolve this problem. Firm adversarial lines are being drawn, as we cry out that this is a sign that the end of days has come upon us.

Just as societies throughout history have gathered in affirmation of sinful practices, so also does the United States. Just as the Greeks and the Romans nodded in approval of monogamous same-sex relationships, so also does the United States. The Christians argue that it need not be thought of as an advance in human history any more than the Platonic approval of same-sex relations were a marked advance in human history. It is just a sinful practice by a sinful society that will eventually be reduced to rubble.

The question that I am zooming in upon though is the behavior of Christians within the crumbling society. I am contemplating the relationships that Christians should have with other individuals and how we should treat them. When same-sex marriage was legalized, that ignited a perennial debate across the world and both sides think that they are correct and that the other side is not only incorrect, but is behaving immorally. In this way, it seems that the lines of communication between both sides have been shut down.

Christians and proponents of the LGBT movement tend to treat each other with such animosity that it renders our capacity to communicate completely inert. Indeed, I suspect that as you are reading this, you began to think something along the lines of, “well that is because they...”

People are so keen to point the finger at one another that they will begin to overlook their own crimes. What you have done begins to hide itself into the background and instead you focus on what *they* have done. Anything that you might say in vengeance or flowing out of a mean-spirited disposition is justifiable on the basis of what *they* have done. Of course, this is not speaking of individuals. This is speaking of the corporate *they*, which apparently represents all adherents to side that you are not on.

Yet both sides are thinking this way. Both sides are thinking about what *they* have done and how these particular actions justify their own. Yet these actions that are justified in their own mind are precisely what drives the other side to this stance of hatred. It is a cyclic exchange of negativity and poor behavior that leads us to compromise the virtue of communication and kindness.

As Christians, we need to get a point where we say [1] “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?” (1 Corinthians 6:7) and [2] a corporate body is composed of individuals, the majority of whom have never wronged us. How can we repair communication?

Understand where the individuals are coming from.

It can be difficult for us to imagine the struggles that other people have had. It is sometimes even thought of as offensive for us to say that we understand what they are going through. This is especially true of a persona that we have developed into an adversary. We may even be inclined to deny or downplay the emotional struggles that they have had.

For if the reason that they think the way they do has been wrought by an emotionally laden testimony, full of guilt, anger, and being wronged, it is difficult for us to maintain our stance of judgment over them. How can we say that a person is wrong when this position that they are wrong about is so heavy? How can we say that a person is wrong when behind them, there is a trail of public shaming, of the loss of friendships, of disfellowship from religious communities, of their parents disowning them?

If we accept that this testimony is true, then it seems almost virtuous and courageous for them to live the very lives that they have. But if it is virtuous and courageous, then it is unthinkable for us to say that they are wrong.

I think that is part of the mindset of denying the testimony of another individual. It is not just a testimony. It is not just their relaying how they came to be the person that they are. It is rather that they are justifying themselves, making themselves out to be a hero. But if they are the heroes, then we are the villains. This leads Christians to downplay the struggles that homosexuals tend to have throughout their lives. But this seems to be a mistake. For this shatters our capacity to communicate with them.

I think it would be prudent to invite you onto a brief thought experiment so that you might be more apt to relate to people in that position. That is not to relate to them in the sense that you are justifying their behavior, but that you begin to understand them. Just imagine for a few moments with me that you were a homosexual and that you grew up as one in western society. This has honed your behavior and who you are today.

You are in middle school or perhaps in your first year of high school and you have several friends. You hang out and you have fun. While it may be on a superficial level, there is a certain bond and a certain trust that begins to develop within your inner-circle of friends. You come to care about each other and look out for each other. You develop friendships. Perhaps you have been friends throughout your entire lives.

Then you begin to go through puberty and you precipitously realize the potency of sexual attraction that you are beginning to experience. However, that sexual attraction is not for those to whom it should be. But rather, it is for people of the same gender as you. You do not really understand why this is happening or why you feel this way, but you know what it is. You have heard of this before. It is homosexuality. You are confronted with the reality that you are a homosexual.

Considering that you have developed this trust and love with all of your friends, you decide that you will bring it to them. You reveal it to them that you are a homosexual. The first response is a few snickers, as your friends think that you are joking. After your persistence, they begin to tell you that it is not funny, and you come to acknowledge a faint tone of hostility in their voice.

But you press on and you firmly tell them that you are not joking and that you are, in fact, a homosexual. Teenagers are characteristically bad at handling people who are different, especially this particular difference. Many react derogatorily. The people who you thought were your friends begin making fun of you and are afraid to be near you because you might touch them. If you look at them, they accuse you of checking them out. Your friends can no longer see you as who you are. They see you as a homosexual. They make that your identity, and everything that they think about you is derived from that label. Your past relationships with your friends instantly vanish.

With your heart broken, you take this problem instantly to your parents. While your friends may never talk to you again, certainly the love of your own parents is everlasting. You reveal to your parents that you have had a falling out with your friends, and that none of them will talk to you. Concerned, they ask you why that is. They ask you what happened. Then you tell them about these attractions that you have been having. You tell them that you are a homosexual.

Silence is thrown over the room like a blanket. You see your father's face cringing. He puts his head down and nods in disapproval, and then he gets up and leaves the room. Your mother is confused and does not know how to respond to this development. She dismisses you until they have had a chance to think over how they want to respond and what they want to tell you. When they formulate their thoughts, they tell you that you have made a choice to be a homosexual, and you simply need to stop. You are left to wonder why in the world you would make that choice. You lost all of your friends and even your parents seem to hate you. For somebody to suggest that you made this choice becomes absurd.

Yet throughout the course of your life, you hear this same rhetoric. You are told that you simply need to change your mind about being a homosexual. You are told that you made a choice. It is typically religious people who are promulgating this information. When you encounter it, it is often accompanied by threats of eternal torment, or in some cases, even derogatory and offensive names. You see this not only in your own life, but also in current events. You hear of people who endured bullying similar to what you experienced, except

the boy was murdered. You just become angry with anybody who opposes the homosexual lifestyle.

The Christian message, then, is rejected out of hand, without ever hearing about the gospel or the mercy of Christ. The Bible is seen as an object of ridicule, for it is seen as the source of Christian doctrine and morality. They may begin investigating atheistic arguments just for the purpose of offending Christians. Just as these Christians have hurt you, so also you aim to hurt them in return. But, you are not aware that the manner in which you are hurting them is propagating this cycle of hatred. For they will use the mean-spirited things that you say to justify their own mean-spirited disposition. But that is precisely what you did.

You will notice also a major shift in your life. This did not only evolve into a matter of your relationship with your friends and parents. There seems to have developed a religious element to this debate. Christians are the ones who are opposing you. Christians are the ones who are telling you that your lifestyle is wrong. You begin to see this as an inherently religious problem, and so you begin to condemn religion.

The thought of becoming friends with a Christian never even occurs to you. You are sure that they would accept your friendship if you became a Christian. But that would be conditional friendship. What you have now is a class of people who will only be friends with you if you change who you are at the fundamental level. But until then, they are going to mock and deride you. This is the relationship that you have with Christians. It is something of a war.

While this testimony may not represent every homosexual, it will represent many. This testimony will not justify the behavior or the lifestyle. But it will offer to us a glimpse into what they are thinking when they promote same-sex marriage. It is essential that we understand our homosexual friends if we want to engage in dialogue with them. In forgetting the experiences and the background of other people, we have made it impossible to communicate. We just accept this picture of the world where they are over there, and we are over here, and we hate each other. Perhaps we need to begin to challenge our conceptions of individuals.

We should acknowledge that religious people are often hateful.

It can be difficult for us to say that “our side” is wrong about something that “their side” might be justified in thinking in a certain way. But it is undeniable that Christians often do step over the line and are hateful toward homosexuals in a very exclusive way. I think this is driven not so much by piety and the desire to honor the Bible, but rather by the desire to have somebody in society that is lower than they are. Who can better fulfill that role than these people who are (to them) manifestly disgusting?

So people are inclined toward bigotry toward homosexuals. If I were to appeal to anecdotal experience, I have seen people objecting to homosexuals having any role in society. Whether a movie theater hires a homosexual teenager to sell tickets, or a homosexual is driving a school bus, people always find reasons to object.

Among the religious, there are some people who think that homosexuality is an unforgivable sin. That is to say that if you are a homosexual, you are simply reprobate and there is no hope for you. But this stands in contrast with the model of love and mercy that Jesus displayed to even the vilest of

sinner. It stands in contrast with Paul condemning homosexuality (1 Corinthians 6:9), and then, a couple of verses later, saying, “and such were some of you,” indicating that people can be forgiven of their homosexual inclinations. There is simply no biblical warrant for the suggestion that homosexuality is unforgivable. Yet people will adopt this stance just to fuel their hatred for others. Then they will just sprinkle this hatred with a bit of biblical language, and they think they are justified in it.

Religious bigotry toward homosexuals certainly exists, and there is no utility in denying it. If we deny that, we sequester homosexuals with whom we would like to develop a friendship. For if I am to say that this homosexual did not endure religious bigotry, then I am saying that everything that these religious people said to him was justified. When in fact, it may not have been. Christians are often mean-spirited and do not know how to talk to people, and are no better in handling differences than teenagers.

This means that we need to acknowledge that religious people have treated homosexuals poorly. Perhaps even many religious people. Perhaps every single religious person who they have ever encountered has treated them poorly. Now

you are approaching them and not only acknowledging that, but indicating that you intend to show only love for them. When we acknowledge that the religious bigotry is not a myth, we offer a hint that we are not like that. We see it in the world, and that is not the model that we labor for. Our homosexual friend will see that. Then the lines of communication can be opened. Then you can begin to talk.

Learn what can be compromised.

Christians stand on the precepts outlined in the word of God. They are eternally authoritative and cannot be compromised. We cannot look at Scripture through the lens of culture. Instead, we need to look at culture through the lens of Scripture. The biblical mandate concerning homosexuality cannot be compromised and we cannot look for new interpretations that are meant to appease the demands of culture, as some have done. We need to stand firmly in this regard.

But we do need to understand what can be compromised. As we engage in conversations with people, we should understand what concessions are available to us. One of the main debate points between the LGBT movement and the

Christians is the issue of whether they were born that way. Christians are usually keen to deny that they were born that way. I think we should compromise that. We should accept that, in fact, they were born that way.

It seems to me that they can speak more authoritatively about how they were born than we can. It is a point that has no implications whatsoever. If they were not born that way, this would not establish that it was wrong. If they were born that way, this would not justify their behavior. People are born with every manner of immoral proclivity. Some people are born with a predisposition toward anger or gluttony or addiction. That does not justify these behaviors. Just because we are born with something does not justify it.

I think that by sticking to this sort of point, it shuts down communication. There are very few ways to argue that a person is or is not born in a particular way, and people usually just appeal to their theological presuppositions. But that is particularly unhelpful. This is because they will just appeal to moral presuppositions, and then we are not making any progress at all.

If I want to have a conversation about this sort of thing, it should be about a point that matters. I am not so interested

in asserting something that does not matter blindly. We should redirect our attention to other areas. We should instead try to get to know them as people and then understand how we can relay our thoughts to them. But for us to bother talking about whether somebody is born with a particular proclivity is neither interesting nor helpful. We should just grant it to them that they were born that way.

They think this issue is akin to racism.

We might be inclined to think that this is just an emotional insult that they are spewing out so as to win the argument. I can sympathize with that conjecture. Yet after consideration, I do not think that is the case. I think that they really do think that if somebody is opposed to same-sex marriage that this is similar to being opposed to interracial marriage. If somebody is voicing the demerits of homosexual behavior, this is seen as similar to voicing the demerits of having black skin. Thus to prevent somebody from getting married on the basis of their sexual orientation is seen as akin to slavery. As absurd as this comparison is (nobody is literally in chains. Chains are essential to slavery) this is the mindset that people will maintain when considering this issue.

I am persuaded that the reason for that is purely relational. For those few homosexuals who happen to be a long-term and monogamous relationship, they are told that they cannot marry their partner. As much as they love their partner and want to spend the rest of their lives with them, they are prevented from making this public commitment and declaration. We can see how this would lead people to frustration and anger with the system and feel as though they were being oppressed.

This characterization of same-sex marriage has become the face of the LGBT movement. People campaign for same-sex marriage and the validity of homosexual behavior on the basis of the love that two people of the same gender might have for one another. Beyond that, nothing else really matters. If anyone tries to prevent that, they are being oppressive and are compared to slaver-owners or otherwise racist individuals.

This is worth pointing out because it reveals the emotional core of this issue that we are dealing with. When we engage in conversation with our friends who promulgate the LGBT movement, we need to keep in mind how they see their opposition. They literally see people who oppose them as being similar to racists. Pictures of people protesting

interracial marriage from decades past are posted alongside pictures of people protesting the LGBT movement.

For this reason, it is important not only to disarm their logical assumptions and reasoning, but also their moral assumptions. Christians need to show that conception of homosexuals that we have is not similar to the conception of an African-American man that a racist has. What we want to display is love and kindness and even servitude. It is not that we think that we are inherently better than they are, as in the case of racism.

The question is, when we have these conversations, are we reinforcing the assumptions that they have? Are we being consistent with the idea that we are like racists? Or in the love and kindness that we show, are we shutting down these assumptions?

Us Vs Them

Yet as we consider the religious bigotry that homosexuals have endured, we hastily remind ourselves of what “they” have done to “us.” You may have been reading through the last subsection and thinking that I am accusing religious people of bigotry and ignoring the crimes of the LGBT

movement. I am justifying the mean things that they have done so as to condemn Christians. This may have left you indignant and angry that I would accuse you, and justify their behavior. I have acquitted “them” and charged “us” with a crime.

I understand how you might think that. But I would like to suggest an alternative interpretation. I am not saying that everything that they have said and done is justifiable. Instead, this is a book that I expect will be read by primarily Christian believers. It is simply not helpful to tell you about all of the crimes of the LGBT movement. I am not here to remind you that you were right all along. We pat ourselves on the back enough. We congratulate ourselves enough. I do not need to tell you again that people have wronged Christians.

I am not interested in furthering this mentality of “us versus them.” The reason that communication is impossible is because everybody (not just you, and not just them) is so adversarial. Everybody is so focused on his or her own argumentation that they ignore the struggles of other people and the background that other people have. People are just not interested in hearing what others have to say. Especially when discussing issues as sensitive as this one. The issue of

homosexuality and same-sex marriage really cuts to the core. When we begin to deny that, we essentially deny their identity. Yet, it is our duty as Christians to deny it and to not conform to society. How do we amend our communication when these lines are so firmly drawn?

It seems to me that we need to be robbed of this adversarial disposition. We have been informed that we are Christians and they are the enemy. They are doing so-and-so and they are promoting this and that, and they need to be stopped. They need to be soundly refuted. Yet no matter how much refuting we do, it often just does not matter. Recall the atheist of the last chapter. He has so many emotional barriers to intellectually considering this issue. It is very similar with the homosexual. Despite how sound the argumentation and how persuasive the rhetoric and how logical the syllogism, they are interpreting all of that through the lens of emotion and background that overshadows them.

While it is critical to engage on an intellectual level, we also need to engage on a deeper level. The adversarial disposition that has been applied is simply not appropriate. Now, many will be inclined to retreat to the position that it is “their” fault that we are adversaries. Fine, but even if that is the case, you

can still do everything that you can to leave this disposition behind. If every Christian were trying to befriend these people, rather than adopting the adversarial picture of the dilemma that has been given to us, we would see a decline in the communication poverty that has overcome us.

Are these groups of people or people?

Imagine that you were encountered a stranger and they began talking to you. You have a pleasant conversation with them when suddenly you begin telling them about something that you heard at church a few days ago. They abruptly interrupt you and ask, “Church?” They give you a strange look and then say, “Oh, you are one of *those people*.”

Those people. Do you see what this individual has done? They have loaded all of these experiences with other Christians into a single word that you said. Remember what I said in an earlier chapter. A word is worth a thousand words. In this situation, the word, *church* hosts a number of interactions that they have had with other Christians. In assuming that you are one of *those people*, they are assuming that you are exactly like everybody else that they have

encountered who holds that position. They overlook you as an individual and just see you as part of the corporate body.

Well, this seems to be what Christians think when they meet a homosexual. The homosexual is not an individual with real past and real experiences. They are part of a corporate body, namely, the LGBT movement. They hold the positions and views that you find repugnant. You may begin mentally tracing over all of the arguments that you will have to apply to show them that they are wrong. But in rendering this label, we have treated them as a corporate body rather than as an individual person. We have reinforced the adversarial dilemma and prevented any friendship or honest conversation with this person.

We should instead recognize each individual as a person who is many different things. They may enjoy working with their hands, or being creative, writing poetry, helping their friends, or serving their community. In addition to that, they may be homosexual. Their homosexuality is certainly part of who they are but it is not who they are.

When they lay in bed at night, they have things that they think about. They have things that they weep over. If they are hit, they will bruise. If they are cut, they will bleed. If a baby

were in the middle of the highway, they would do everything they could to bring it so safety. They are very much like you, as individuals. But we have been sold this adversarial meme, which forces us to see individuals as a corporate body rather than as individuals.

But when we transcend this mentality, then we can begin to understand them as people. We can begin to understand what brought them to the position that they are in today. How did their friends and family react? Do they support them today? Do they love them? How have other Christians treated them? As we probe these questions, we begin to set a foundation for showing the love of God in Christ. We can get to know who they are, and appreciate their past and their identity for what it is. This is how we can share the gospel with even those who seem the most hard-hearted. We can listen to the expressions of their heart and their past and show them how Christ offers as a free gift the greatest conceivable mercy and joy.

Chapter 11 – Learning from each other within the confines of friendship.

There is a tendency for people to surround themselves with kindred spirits. We want to be around people who are very much like us and who think like we do. This creates an environment that is not hostile and is not challenging. I am suspicious that people tend to do this because they want their world to be an echo chamber. People generally want everything that they hear to be an affirmation of what they already believe. Dissidence will invoke anger. It will make people uncomfortable. If somebody does happen to hold a position that stands in contrast with the flow of mainstream belief, they would likely choose to do it surreptitiously.

For when dissidence does arise, how does it affect relationships? Even within minor tertiary differences, it tends to frustrate people. Sometimes it does not matter. But often, the relationships between these individuals will change.

Sometimes the role of that individual in the church will be diminished at the discretion of church leadership. In the case of secondary or tertiary differences that do not compromise the Christian faith, this would serve to cripple the body of Christ. For if we only allow the preaching of the gospel to be

done by those with whom we agree about everything, then there would be nobody left to preach the gospel. The gospel would be reduced to a term that we use to describe our catechism at large.

It is also worth noting that this is not a problem exclusive to ecclesiology or church practice. It is an aspect of the lifestyle of the individual. In our daily lives, we do not want to be around people who disagree with us on such a fundamental level. We want to be around people who think like we do. We want to be able to re-affirm what we already believe and remind each other that we were right all along, and any challenges that might come to our beliefs happen in the outside world, challenges from strangers. But when we are comfortable, in the context of friendship, then we can resolve these challenges because all of our friends agree about the various doctrines.

There is some degree to which I can sympathize with this stream of thought. Particular beliefs summon a measure of passion, and if this passion is even slightly misused, it will erupt as anger. When your friends begin to challenge these beliefs about which you are passionate, you might feel an inkling of anger and a resolution to refute everything that

they are saying. You will come off as an ogre. But they are passionate about their disagreement in this very topic. So it can be difficult to maintain friendships with such a person. That is not to say that there is any demerit in them as individuals, but we will ascribe demerit to them as a method of justifying the anger that we feel. People that disagree about crucial topics often just cannot mix with one another.

Just imagine for a moment that a Muslim and a Christian were best friends. The Muslim feels passionately that Muhammad is the prophet of God, and that the Qur'an is the word of God. In engaging with dialogue with this person, you point out that Muhammad allowed his followers to take married captives of war into sex slavery (Qur'an 4:24). They will either vehemently deny this, or they will suggest that this was just a cultural mandate. But just from this very premise, one can understand how that could lead into difficult and angry conversations.

Similarly, Christians believe that Paul is one of the holiest men in the history of the church. He was God's chosen apostle to hoist the gospel into the world. He hosted an aura of humility, strength, sincerity and love, even going to his death for the sake of Christ. Yet the Muslim will condemn this man

as the heretic, liar and blasphemer who distorted the message that Jesus was relaying for his own self-promotion, and apparently it worked because now we all think that Paul was a holy apostle. Like the discussion of Muhammad, the discussion of Paul between a Christian and a Muslim would increase friction and make friendship more difficult. But, conversations about these topics are inevitable. So how can we have a friendship? Is it better to just avoid friendship, and preach the gospel on the street to strangers?

Well, in 1 Corinthians 5:9-10, Paul writes, "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral people. I did not at all mean the immoral people of the world, or with the covetous and swindlers or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world." Apparently the Corinthian church received a letter from Paul wherein he explained the concept of excommunication, where you isolate a fellow Christian who refuses to repent of their sin. They are no longer to be regarded as brothers in Christ. But, the Corinthians thought that Paul meant that any immoral people who refuse to repent should be avoided. Here, Paul corrects them and says that it is not wrong to associate with them. You would have to leave the world to do so.

If we are going to share the gospel with people, we need to associate with them. While the practice of evangelism certainly does entail preaching the gospel to strangers, it also entails becoming friends with unbelievers and developing the maturity to deal with these disagreements. If you have spent your entire life secluded from disagreement, you might find this to be challenging, especially if the sort of disagreement that we are referring to is about primary doctrines. It will also be likely to cause strife within your fellowship with other Christians that disagree at a denominational level.

This would perhaps be one benefit of Christians uniting under the broad flag of Protestantism into one church or denomination. There would be many divergent views despite that we are united by the gospel. In this way, we would be better equipped to handle disagreements with unbelieving friends that we have because we have already been taught to tolerate differences among the brethren. But the denominational mindset has made us very intolerant of other positions, so that the very presence of dissidence will force us into anger.

Does this person care about me?

I have already pointed out that there is certainly value in street preaching and relaying the gospel to strangers. Jesus appointed 72 disciples to preach the gospel to strangers (Luke 10:1). But throughout our daily lives, there is an opportunity for a relationship that exceeds preaching to strangers. There is an opportunity for real friendships.

What I am talking about is not a conditional friendship where you will become friends on the condition that you see progress toward becoming a Christian. While we want people to become Christians, it seems to me that this would be more of deceptive friendship. It would be more of an exercise in pretending to be their friends just to bring them to accept Christ. When they finally do become a Christian, then you will harvest a real friendship.

I am talking about real and unconditional friendship with those with whom we disagree at a fundamental level. When this individual realizes that what you have is a real and unconditional friendship, they will realize something tremendous. They will realize that you care about them, because you do care about them. So that when you preach the gospel to them, they will know that you are doing it

because you love them and want to see them saved. In the context of an actual friendship, we can traverse the boundaries of anger that we have set down. We will not necessarily be angry with a person that we know is saying these things because they care about us.

Recall our conversation with our Muslim friend about Muhammad and Paul. Even if we get angry with this person, that anger will quickly subside because we know that when they are trying to tear down our faith, they are doing it because they care about us. In the context of friendship, we can accomplish these difficult conversations without getting angry and we can continue to have them. We can continue to investigate what history reveals about Muhammad and Paul. We can continue to discuss the evidence and as time goes on, the anger that we have will begin to dissipate. We will become less defensive and less guarded because we know that this person cares about us.

It is quite easy for us to claim to care about people who are lost. That is very easy, and when we tell the unregenerate that we care about them, while that might be a worthy sentiment, it often does not mean much to them. It will just

come off as a way of reeling them in, to adopt your religious beliefs.

I once had a Muslim tell me how much he loved me and how much he wanted me to become a Muslim. We talked once and I never heard from him again. People can just arbitrarily state that they care about people, and they can tell the lost how much they care about them. But what is that worth?

It seems to me that James has some commentary about this. He writes, "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?" (James 2:15-16).

Similarly, if we just tell people that we care about them or publicly congratulate ourselves for how much we care about the lost, but do not display that love that we have for them, what in the world is that worth? Why should they believe for a single second that we care about them? When we preach the gospel to them, why should they think that we are doing it out of love? But in the context of a friendship, they will think that.

What is your motive?

If I were to encounter a stranger and they began telling me about their religious beliefs, I would be interested in what they have to say. But as so often happens in this sort of conversation, they would probably want to know my religious beliefs as well. They would probably want to challenge what I was saying. They would want to stump me or refute me. I would still be interested in what they are saying, but my suspicions would begin to rise.

I have encountered so many people who only engage in this sort of conversation to demonstrate how smart they are. They want to affirm that they were right all along. But they are not really interested in what I have to say. They are interested in what they have to say. What I have to say will serve as a platform for them to teach their views. They want to be able to tell all of their friends about how they stomped on some guy that they disagreed with.

While I do not load this very negative characterization into everybody, I do become suspicious of it, and when this individual stops listening, or start talking over me, start repeating what they are saying, I will consider my suspicions to be confirmed. This is what is to be expected in the context

of a discussion with a stranger. They do not care about you and they do not want to be your friend. They are just interested in feeding their pride.

But in the context of a friendship, it becomes easier to trust their motives. We trust them as people. We know them. We see signs within the conversation that they care about us. They will listen to what we are saying. They will make an effort to comprehend what we believe so that they can adequately respond to it. They are thoughtful because that is what is required of having a conversation and understanding other people. They care about you and you know that they have pure motives. They are not just being prideful or trying to win the argument. They want to know what you have to say. This is part of the package of friendship.

You will have more tolerance.

I think that the default stance toward other faith groups is one of intolerance. We may tolerate them within our society, in our grocery stores, or even in our workplace. But we generally do not tolerate them in our own lives. It makes us too angry. It puts us on edge. If this person is truly devout in their opposing beliefs, it would certainly be challenging to

have such a person in your life. You would be inclined to nod your head in disapproval every time they spoke. Yet these are people who have tangible intellectual qualms about the Christian faith, and a single interaction will not do it. Sure, we may be able to implement that single interaction in dialogue with other Christians wherein we might say, “A Muslim asked me a question, and I told him...” But when he walks away from us, he is going to ponder that question and come up with answers, just as we do with these questions.

While we can see this urging toward monolithic religion, while we want to be around people who agree with us, that is just not how we can preach the gospel. That is not how we can learn about people. That is not how Christians are supposed to behave. Christians need to really hone their tolerance. We have strived for centuries to surround ourselves with people who agree about every single line. Even Martin Luther, the trailblazer and intellectual and spiritual giant of the great Protestant Reformation, said to Ulrich Zwingli, “We are not of the same spirit,” because Zwingli did not believe that at the Eucharist, one is literally partaking of the body and blood of Jesus. Yet they agreed at every other line.

It seems to me that Christians reflect the same behavior today. We have become utterly intolerant of anybody who has a minor disagreement. We need to do something about that. Even if we start by accepting small differences, that is certainly a mark of progress. We do not have to be monolithic. Christians can congregate, worship together and have fellowship together, so long as they agree about the core of the gospel message. But we can have disagreements. It seems to me that we must have disagreements. If we do not have at least minor disagreements within the body of Christ, then we will be incapable of handling disagreements outside of the body of Christ.

If you are a Calvinist who has always been a Calvinist and you were raised around Calvinists, always surrounded by Calvinists, you will become frustrated with the minor differences introduced by Arminian theology, and vice versa.

This emerges apparent as we see a lack of discernment within the body of Christ. People just do not know what heresy is. They just do not know what compromising the gospel looks like. So it happens that any time they become frustrated with another believer, it is deemed heresy. Any

disagreement is heresy. This monolithic mentality makes it impossible for us to engage with anyone, especially the lost.

You will be able to learn more and teach more.

If I have one conversation with a stranger, I might receive a brief overview or one perspective of a particular view. I might hear it represented in a robust way that I have never heard before. But after we have this sort of conversation, we will go home and conjure up every sort of objection that we can think of. We will convince ourselves that what we heard does not adequately represent the truth and there are answers to the problems that he raised. But if you never have the opportunity to talk with this individual again, you will never know how we would respond to your objections.

In the context of not only one dialogue but a series of ongoing dialogues, there is a lot that we can learn from each other. We can really understand the particular nuances that separate belief from unbelief. We can understand the specific divergences between denominations. What are the things that make our beliefs very different? What does your belief hinge upon? We can ask these questions and with

counterpoint after counterpoint emerging, we can see what they think and where they are coming from.

In this way, we can learn more not only about our friend, but also about comparative religion in general. What separates the Muslim from the Christian? Why does the Muslim believe the things that they believe? This will help to set a foundation for further evangelistic outreach to Muslims. If you have an idea of what they think and why they think it, you will know how to approach the issues and what sort of sensitivities are warranted.

Further, you will have the opportunity to teach your friend about the nuances of your beliefs. You have beliefs as well that hinge upon certain truths. You have what you think is a robust defense of your beliefs. In the context of an ongoing friendship, they will pose a question to you and you can tell them that you will think about that and get back to them during the next discussion.

In the context of an ongoing friendship, you have ample time to pour over the data that you need to, to sit back and consider the problems at hand so you can answer these questions. In this way, you will become more thoughtful as you engage in the difficult questions of your faith in a way

that you have never even considered. You will become more philosophical and more theological. You will not be satisfied to just brush an intellectual problem off, because you need to provide an adequate answer for your friend.

We should enter into these friendships because they will enhance our critical thinking and the critical thinking of our friend. We will teach each other about comparative religion as we learn more both about our own beliefs and the beliefs of the other. It seems prudent, then, to engage not only in single conversations, but also in an ongoing friendship where you can truly learn about each other and reflect upon your own beliefs.

You will be a witness for righteousness to unbelievers.

As we go through life with our unbelieving friends, there will certainly be differences, not only from a doctrinal angle, but also from a moral angle. We will see them making moral decisions that we would not make ourselves. When they want to go out and look for women, we encourage them to stay in, practice chastity and read books. So there is this moral conflict that will exist between us. Indeed, they may look at our moral precepts and think that they are arbitrary. They

make think that the moral decisions that we make and the restrictions that we have are sort of legalistic cages that we impose upon ourselves.

We should be able to sympathize with why they think this, because we were all once slaves of sin. We all once loved our sins so much that we hated the idea of giving it up. The idea of surrendering sin is absurd. It is what gives us pleasure in life. In this way, Christian theology is seen just as a way of spoiling the fun. You cannot look at girls, you cannot get drunk, you cannot do many of the things that you would want to do. The unregenerate man cannot comprehend this. They cannot understand what it means to live a righteous life. They only see rules that you arbitrarily keep for yourself.

The concept of servitude out of love is foreign to them. As Christians, we do good things as an overflow of the love that we have for God. We keep his commandments because we love him. Indeed, the idea of departing from his commandments is equally as inconceivable as keeping his commandments is to the unbeliever.

We hold inverse perspectives of sin and righteousness. We might be able to explain this to them, and they would intellectually accept it, but on a practical level, in the sense of

actually living it out, the unbeliever would find it appalling and absurd.

But this righteousness that we have is not our own. It is a gift from God that we live out in our daily lives (Romans 1:26-27). With this gift, we can be a witness to the unregenerate man. We can show him the virtue of righteousness and the vice of sin. For in the moral perfection of God, men are left to stand in awe, in reverent fear and wonder. We are to labor to represent the righteousness of God.

Of course, we are still sinners and we will fail at times. When we do fail, we should apologize for our failings. This will require humility and self-reflection. If we fall short of the standard of righteousness that God has for us in the presence of our friend, we should acknowledge that and we should apologize for that. If we try to hide it, then it appears as though we do not care about sin. But when we acknowledge our sin before our friend, we are representing the righteousness that God has given us. We will show him that it is possible to live in righteousness out of love rather than out of duty.

We will be a witness for love and intelligence to cult members.

People who are in a Christian cult group (this would not include groups such as Scientology, because they do not identify as Christians), such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Oneness Pentecostals are told throughout their lives of the stale worship of the Trinitarians.

They do not care about their relationship with God. They do not read the Bible. They do not pray. They do not live Christian lives, but just sort of do anything they want and have Christian language sprinkled over their lives. I mentioned this in an earlier chapter when I wrote about what it means to poison the well. If you were to encounter a parishioner of the Oneness Pentecostal church, they would be likely to interpret everything that you say through that lens. As a Trinitarian, you are by default an individual who engages in worship that is devoid of the Spirit. You do not read the Bible and you do not pray or fast. The well is poison. Everything that you say is interpreted through that mentality.

But when we begin to develop friendships with these people, their assumptions about you will be slowly disarmed. As you labor for righteousness, they will see that you really do

love the Lord and you really do want to do his will. Perhaps they will even contrast that against their own righteousness, which is probably more legalistic than anything else. They will contrast your righteousness, which is born from love, with their righteousness, which is born from duty and the desire to merit or achieve salvation through doing good works. In this way, the Christian concept of righteousness could be displayed to them for the first time in you.

Further, as you begin to dive into your study of the Bible, you will have the opportunity to reveal to them that Trinitarians really do and can know the Bible and can be guided by the Spirit into proper understanding. Your knowledge of the biblical data can serve as a witness to them that their assumptions and what they have been taught about Trinitarians in the past is not really true. In this way, you would be able to disarm those assumptions.

But, if that particular teaching was wrong, that would lead to the question of what other teachings were wrong. Thus simply your witness of love, righteousness, and knowledge of the Scripture would plant a seed of skepticism in their mind. But if you were not friends with these individuals, they would never see this fruit in your life. They would only see a

Trinitarian and they would keep their assumptions. When you develop an ongoing friendship with them, then their assumptions about you would be challenged.

Both you and your friend will learn to be more open-minded.

But just as Christian cult groups make assumptions about what Trinitarians believe, so also Christians make assumptions about what other world religions believe. We will make assumptions about the beliefs and practices of Islam. Our pastors may provide some faulty information for us and we will establish it as a fact. All of the terrorism on the news can cause us to be skeptical of the motives of Muslims as individuals, and our friendship with a Muslim can teach us that they are not all terrorists. Instead, we may begin to learn that some Muslims really are nice and peaceful people.

Similarly, many Muslims (particularly those who hail from Islamic lands) have this conception of the west with all of its' lust and greed, that it was born out of Christian theology. The reason that the practices of western culture are so immoral is that the majority of westerners are Christians. Well, when they get to know you, they will see that you do not live like

that. While the world around you is depraved, you are laboring for righteousness. They become more open-minded about other people.

You can see that in both of these situations, the individuals started as being judgmental, and then they got to know somebody as a friend and their judgments were shut down.

Friendships will force us to look at the depths of an individual rather than rendering superficial judgments. They will force us to not judge based on appearance or even their religious affiliation. Our friendships with one another will disarm our negative assumptions that we tend to make about people of other faith groups and give us cause to be open.

That is not to say that we are open in the sense of accepting their beliefs as our own, but rather open in the sense of accepting people in friendship. There are so many barriers that we have trouble looking past, whether cultural or religious. When we look at people, we just think, "Muslim," and ignore the depth, the assumptions and the individuality that is there. There is no reason that we cannot open ourselves up to them. When Jesus encountered the woman at the well, who was essentially an adherent to a Jewish cult group, he offered her living water (John 4:10). This is the

behavior toward different people that Christians need to exemplify.

Chapter 12 – Allow your love to be your seat at the table.

There are generally a number of obstacles preventing us from comprehending what is true or what is the right thing to do. People are often not so interested in the question “what is true?” as much as they are interested in the question “how does this proposition affect my life?”

When we begin to ask the latter question, our quest for truth begins to subside in favor of our quest for pleasure and satisfaction. In this way, people are often not interested in what is true. Even if we could present a profound and sophisticated treatment of a certain issue, people would reject it if it impacts their lives in a negative way. If they follow the logic to its’ conclusions, they will have to surrender something in their life. Perhaps they would have to surrender something precious to them, such as their autonomy.

Now I have isolated the reason that most people reject Christian belief. It is not that they reject the evidence for God’s existence. It is not that what you are saying is unreasonable. It is that they are asking a different question than what you are answering. You are answering the question of what truth is. They are asking the question of how truth will impact their lives and accordingly, what lie will better

comport with their lives. What lie will allow them to preserve their autonomy? What lie will not overwhelm them with the unbearable weight of righteousness?

This seems to be from where the urging of relativism derives. Folks are much more keen to hear that all propositions have equal truth-value. If that is the case, then nobody can challenge them with the call to righteousness. Nobody can tell them that they have to surrender their autonomy or the sin that they mightily preserve. The question of truth is always hazy and fades into the background behind the more potent question of how a particular truth claim will affect their lives.

For this reason, even if we are able to present a particular truth claim in a way that is intellectually satisfying, that the academics and philosophers would nod in approval, this individual would still find our presentation to be lacking because it does not answer the more fundamental question of how it impacts their lives.

Further, people are usually not willing to hear the expression of somebody whose moral opinion has no proven repute. If a stranger is relaying their moral opinion about your

life to you, typically the reflex that we have is to think, who is this person? How dare they tell me how I need to live my life?

Our moral opinion is of little value to them because they do not recognize the worth in moral stances that a stranger holds. Thus again, the question of what truth is fades into the background. They are not hearing us say that some proposition is true. They are only hearing us say that they need to change their lives to live up to our moral standard. We are then standing in judgment over them. We do not have a seat at the table.

Just consider the people in your life who can dictate your moral duties and tell you how to live your life. I would venture a guess and say that for most readers, that number is quite limited. We allow people to voice their thoughts on our moral duties only when they proven to be worthy of such a responsibility.

If Charles Manson were to instruct me about how to be a decent and loving citizen, I would not hold his moral opinion in high regard. His moral opinion has emerged as nefarious. Indeed, anything that he says will be thought of as of moral repugnance. Consider for a moment that if people want to condemn a presidential administration, they will point to

random parallels between that administration and the administration of Adolph Hitler.

It is thought that since Hitler is proven to be a moral monster, then any moral opinion that he held must have been monstrous. In fact, there is even a tendency to attribute the moral opinions of everyone with whom we disagree to the philosophy of the Nazis. When a debate is particularly fervent, one side will invariably compare their intellectual opponents to the Nazis. If I hate licorice candy, I will suggest that Hitler loved licorice candy. When people are proven to be of low moral repute, we do not listen to them.

Similarly, if a stranger were to inform us of our need to abdicate our autonomy, we would question their moral repute. We would not ask whether this individual was correct. The first question that we would ask is, "who does this fellow think he is?" As far as we are concerned, this individual has no moral repute at all. They have not proven themselves to us. Why should I listen to the moral opinion of somebody that I do not know? This person could be a hateful and judgmental bigot. They could be feeding their pride by putting others to shame. I do not know them. Their moral opinion is of little

value to me for this reason. Such a conversation will often become contentious and adversarial.

What if we allowed our love to be our seat at the table? We are so involved in an individual's life that they regard our moral opinion highly. They know us as individuals of high moral repute. They know that we would never say anything to hurt them. They know that we care about them and they we are good people who love others. We are no longer strangers pounding on the door, holding signs, telling them how sinful they are. Instead, we are inside, at the table, and talking about things that matter.

We can begin to overcome these obstacles that people have to living righteous lives, to submitting to the gospel, and to putting their faith in Jesus for their salvation, by allowing our love to be our seat at the table. People will want to listen to our moral opinion because we have a proven worthy moral opinion. They will listen to us before they listen some stranger telling them how wrong they are. If we are going to reach people, this is what we need to do. *We need to allow our love to be our seat at the table.*

Love your neighbor as yourself.

The concept of love is often used in an abstract way. There is a theological stance known as *antinomianism*, which suggests that Christians have no specific moral duties.

Christians can live however they want because they are no longer under the Law, but under grace (ironically, when Paul made this statement in Romans 6:14, he meant the opposite. He wrote, “For sin shall not be master of you, for you are not under Law, but under grace.”) Some suggest that the only thing that we have to do is “Love God and love other people.” But this is applied in such a broad way that the word *love* does not entail any moral duties.

This concept of love is foreign to the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 13:4-6, Paul informs us that love is patient, kind, does not envy or boast, is not proud, honors others, is not self-seeking nor quick to anger, it keeps no record of wrongs and does not rejoice in evil. These are all moral precepts that the person who loves needs to keep. If we want to show love for our fellow man, we need to labor to do these things.

Further, when Jesus tells us, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” (Mark 12:31), that is a very specific command that is wrought with moral precepts. The measure to which we

love ourselves we need to love others. This means that if our neighbor is hungry, the Christian duty is to care about this individual to the extent that we would care if we were hungry. If they need somebody to mow their lawn, or if they need a ride to the doctor, if they need us to sacrifice our time for them, the Christian duty is to execute these things.

As emissaries for Christ, we need to behave as he did in the world. He conceded everything that he had to guilty sinners who had no hope and were without God in the world. He surrendered himself for them. The person who has love will exhibit parallel compassion for sinners and a drive toward serving others. That is the duty of the Christian. It is nothing glamorous and it is nothing that will make you rich and famous and healthy and peaceful. It is simply spending time with somebody and helping somebody who the world thinks does not matter.

We care about their cause and we want them to turn to Christ in faith, not because they will promulgate our fame our cause our name to ring out before all men. Not even because it will promote the Christian religion (as Scientologists will seek out superstar actors). But rather, we seek them out and we seek to show them love because human beings have

value. This value swarms even the individual and the lowly. For Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:31).

Understand where they are coming from.

I have underlined this point several times throughout this book. But if we are going to allow our love to be our seat at the table, it is critical that we understand why they believe the things that they do. We need to listen to them and really try to digest what they are saying. When we are relating to unbelievers, this may often strike us as difficult, because unbelievers will hold to views that are an affront to Christian theology. They are an affront to the person of Christ, who we love and with whom we have a relationship. Nonetheless, it is our duty to understand them and to listen. Paul reminds us that love is patient. As they are explaining their point of view, we need to be patient and understanding.

Our natural inclinations will often counter this activity. We do not want to listen to that sort of thing. We do not want to hear blasphemies uttered. But it is important to keep it in the forefront of your mind that the task at hand is to relate to this individual rather. We want them to know that they are valued

and that we care about what they have to say. So the question is not so much of how we can make them believe that we care about what they have to say. For that would just be an exercise in deception. Rather, we make them believe that we care about what they have to say *by actually caring about what they have to say*. If we actually care, then it will be apparent that we actually care. We will listen to them. We will not just be waiting for our turn to speak. We will carefully consider their words and we will respect past experiences.

People have a host of past experiences that have led to them to conclusions that they currently hold. There are a host of emotional presuppositions that lead them to think that the gospel does not matter or is worthy of their rejection.

There is a time to be stern and a time to be compassionate and we need apply wisdom to recognize which approaches to apply. But tampering with emotional baggage is a difficult task and often when we are getting to know somebody, I would caution patience and just allow this individual to tell their story and offer their personal testimony. People are often not going to turn to Christ in faith after one encounter. We need to remember that this one encounter is not the end of the story, and that we have to prepare for the future encounters

that we will have. That is not to say that we should tarry in preaching the gospel. But it is to say that there are times that we should be willing to listen and to be gentle when there is room for it.

How heavy does your argumentation need to be?

Many Christians that people encounter are just waiting for their turn to talk. They are waiting to explain why everything that their unbelieving friend thinks is wrong. They are waiting to pound the argumentation and reasoning into the ground or to emit a clever one-liner that leaves their friend staggering. They have won the argument. Well, we are all impressed. You won the argument. But you have also sequestered the individual.

When you are operating within the confines of an ongoing friendship, you do not need to be so heavy on the argumentation. Everything that they say does not warrant an instant rebuttal. After all, you might not always have one and this will lead to your trying to manufacture answers out of thin air, and it is pretty obvious when people do this sort of thing.

If I am in a situation where I am talking with somebody who disagrees with me, it is pretty transparent when they are improvising. They are just making things up and contradicting themselves as they pursue the answer to my question. That leads me to think that they do not really care about what I am saying and they are just looking for ways to refute it.

Other people can identify this behavior. If an individual espouses a view or a slice of argumentation that you find disagreeable, you do not have to feel inclined to diffuse it right away. A fundamental aspect of listening to this individual is in not just waiting for your turn to talk. When you do that, you are relaying to them that you do not care about what they have to say. You are relaying to them that their thoughts and point of view are not very important. It is only yours that matter, and theirs are manifestly fallacious.

Some people respond to this. But it depends on this situation and heavily depends upon the person. If we are talking about some abstract idea that has no overlap with anything that matters, then some would just be willing to concede the point. If I was talking about the plot in a particular film, and it was demonstrated that my hypothesis or interpretation was incorrect, I would just concede it

because films do not matter. But when we talking about things that matter, such as ethics, philosophy, or theology, then I will not be so quick to concede. People are generally not willing to abandon their beloved stances so quickly.

This is what will happen when we pursue the argumentation too heavily. We may win the argument, but isolate the person. We do not want to isolate the person. We want the person to know that their opinion is of value and that we care about them. There is a time for us to allow the arguments and the rebuttals to subside.

There will be an occasion.

You have allowed your love to be your seat at the table. This means that you have established yourself as somebody who has a morally praiseworthy disposition. You have established yourself as somebody who understands. You have established yourself as somebody who has the virtue of patience. You have established yourself as somebody who cares about what they have to say. Now they will care about what you have to say. If you care about what they have to say, they will care about what you have to say. Some people may be stubborn and unwilling to let you in for a little while, but

that is where you exercise patience and acknowledge that *eventually* they will care about what you have to say and will let you in.

If this person really does know that you care about them and that you are not interested in being judgmental, they will listen to your moral opinion. You will have the opportunity to tell them why certain behaviors really are wrong. You will have the opportunity to tell them about the perfect standard of holiness and righteousness that God has provided and that it is our duty as creatures to labor to meet. You will have the opportunity to relay the centrality of the gospel in the universe, and why you live the way that you do. You will have these opportunities.

Further, the opportunity will arise for you to explain your intellectual objections to a few of the things that they have said in the past. You will be able to walk them through some of the logical errors that they might have made, and you can do that without an aura of arrogance but rather with an aura of understanding and humility.

When we are at the table, we can tell them that it is possible for them to change their life. The reason that they are so miserable and depressed is that they are clinging so

mightily to these sins and trying to justify them and they just do not realize it. Perhaps they have seared their conscience in nonsense, watching television in all of their spare times and indulging in every manner of immorality so that they can elude the thought of the vanity of existence.

As Shakespeare wrote in his play *Macbeth*, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player. That struts and frets his house upon the stage. And then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” We can help them to overcome this vanity of vanities.

Reveal the love that Christ had.

We often do not notice the sophistication of the intellectual attacks with which the Pharisees swarmed Jesus. They would concoct every manner of subterfuge to spoil his reputation. For he was a man of repute among the people, and they wanted to rob him of the love that the crowds had for him so that there would be no objection when the time came to arrest him. These quagmires that they devised were quite brilliant. This is often overlooked because of how well he answered the challenges.

In John chapter 8, the Pharisees staged this woman caught in adultery and brought her to Jesus, quizzing him about what the proper response to this sin is. They asked him what should be done to his woman. This was a very clever ruse. For if Jesus had said, "Let her go free," he would be a transgressor of the Law, and the crowd would be forced to acknowledge that. But if he had said, "Stone her," he would lose his reputation as the friend of sinners. In answering this challenge, he exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and demonstrated the height of mercy and friendship with sinners. He said, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7).

While this demonstration of mercy occurred in a distant land and in a distant era, with little significant cultural overlap, the principles of humanity that we see in this story are recognizable by all and relevant to all. It is common wisdom think that we have so much sin in our lives that we might as well just throw up our hands in futility. We can never turn to Christ in faith because it will not matter. We have abandoned him and we have done far too much. This is probably what your friend thinks about their standing with God.

Yet in this story, we see this woman who was an adulterer and Jesus had mercy upon her. Similarly, the woman that he encountered at the well in John 4 was an idolater who rejected the majority of the biblical narrative. She was a licentious sinner, undisciplined in her sexual activities. Yet Jesus said to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” (John 4:10). He offered mercy and the gift of the Holy Spirit to a woman who had nothing to give him in return. He offered this to a woman who had lived in sin for her entire life.

We see the same thing in the thief on the cross. This man knew that he was a transgressor of the Law. Yet in this highly religious society, he always had this conception of the divine. He knew that God was there and he knew that God demanded impeccable moral repute. He also knew that he had not met that perfect standard of righteousness and that he was worthy of condemnation. He cried out, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!” There was nothing that this man had to offer. There was no righteousness or moral worth. He knew that he had wasted his years, wallowing in the evil days and that there was

nothing that could be done to bring him redemption. He asks only for the proverbial drop of water on his tongue, as he pleads that Jesus merely remembers him. But Jesus did not give him that drop of water. He offered him streams of living water. He replied, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in paradise."

People have a conception of God and righteousness akin to the thief on the cross. They know that they have lived in such repugnance that there is nothing to be done for them. Thus as we allow our love to be our seat at the table, we are to reveal the mercy that Jesus offers, and that this mercy is given as a free gift to the vilest sinners who have lived in such a way that they feel as though they are beyond repair, who cannot offer him anything in return. This is the love that needs to be shown.

Reveal Christ Crucified.

Yet how are we to relay these cosmic truths? How can we tell them that God will have mercy? Where is the God of justice? Does he no longer exist? Is that a myth that religious people have conjured up so that they might be able to stand

in judgment of other sinners? Does God have no justice at all? Why is he letting people go free?

God certainly does have justice, and it would be a mistake to impale the conviction that individuals have over their sin without properly expounding upon why they are feeling convicted. This feeling of conviction is not a taunt from the universe. It is not an evolutionary vestige. It is a tangible prompting of the Holy Spirit as God calls us to turn from our sins and put our trust in him. For his righteousness and holiness is such that he cannot have sin in his presence. This is something that transcends all human comparisons and illustrations.

We cannot approach God because he is impeccably righteous and holy. Our sin is offensive to him. Just think of the most abominable sins that you can. Such a person does not deserve to be in your presence because of how they have hurt other people and stained society and humanity. Imagine those people. That is a glimpse of how God sees us. But his righteousness over us is far greater than our righteousness over them. God snarls his nose in disgust at the sight of us. He is perfectly holy to the extent that we would say that nobody

could be like that. It is inconceivable that anybody could be so pure and holy. That is God.

Yet the most abominable, those that God snarls his nose in disgust over, those that transgress his Law and wallow in sin, those that live their lives shaking their fist at him, God pointed to and declared, “These are my children.”

Think again of those that you think are so lowly and abominable so as to not even warrant your presence. Think of them for a moment. Who are they? What have they done? *Christ ate with them.*

When the religious authorities saw this, they said something similar to what we might say. Why are you eating with such people? Do you not know what they are? Do you not know what they have done? These are the vilest of men. Flee from them, Lord! Come and join the reputable.

But the ground must have shaken as Jesus uttered his response. “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but the sinners.” (Mark 2:17). While God displayed a justice that is beyond all human comparison, he displays a mercy that boggles the mind of the pious.

How do these concepts fit together? How could God be qualitatively perfect in his justice, while qualitatively perfect in his mercy? For if he exercising justice, he is impugning his mercy. If he is exercising mercy, he is impugning his justice. We see the answer at the cross. When Jesus was murdered, the fullness of wrath that we deserve was poured out upon him. He absorbed our punishment (Romans 3:25). Our unrighteousness was laid upon him so that his righteousness could be laid upon us. Thus the perfect justice and mercy meet at the cross.

This is the message that your unbelieving friend needs to hear. This demonstration of justice and mercy is enough to reduce the strongest man, the mightiest General, the highest intellectual and the craftiest sinner to their knees in praise and thankfulness. God the Son took their place. Three days later, he rose from the dead.

The pursuit of satisfaction ends at the cross.

Your friend will have spent their entire life desperately trying to find things that satisfy her. Every time they think they have accomplished this, it emerges as a pale object. It emerges as a mundane experience. There are certainly things

that they enjoy in this world, such as the love of marriage and children. But nonetheless, people have an immense capacity for joy that they are always trying to fill and are always looking in the wrong places.

Paradox of paradoxes, they persist in the shallow substitutes and reject what can overflow their hearts with joy and love. The reason that Christians love others is not that it is our duty to do so. It is that our cup is overflowing (Psalm 23:5) and we have made Jesus our delight (Psalm 37:4). Thus there is a lot of delight for us to share with others. We offer the overflow of the love that we have for Christ and we want them to have the same overflow as well. Tell your friend this. Share the gospel and tell them how grateful you are that he has redeemed you and is redeeming his people, and you pray that this will happen to them so that you can see their cup overflow as well.

Conclusion

The writing of this book should be taken as a reflection of my observations of how Christians engage with one another as well as my own personal self-reflection. In this way, I am not attributing to myself some higher standard of behavior that the rest of you need to measure up to. I see in myself many of the same flaws that I outlined throughout this book and I think it is a problem that we collectively need to overcome. That is why I labored to outline a few of the emotional, traditional, prideful, and psychological obstacles to relating to other brethren.

We make a host of assumptions that are often based on a single word. This is because *a word is worth a thousand words*. If I were to say a single word related to a biblical topic, you would already have a number of assumptions about what I mean by that based on previous experiences that you have had. You would load your experiences into what I said and assume that I hold a particular that I do not hold. If you do that, then you are going to argue against a position that I do not hold, and I am not going to understand your objections because we are using the same language in different ways. In this way, we are engaging in internecine activities for neither

of us understands the other. We are only trying to refute what the other person is saying even at the compromise of knowing what the other person is saying.

Calvinists have accused me of being an Arminian and have called me a heretic for that. Arminians have accused me of being a Calvinist and for that nefarious behavior, have accused me of heresy.

There are two problems with this. First, it is clear that both of these groups must be misunderstanding what I am saying. Yet there is a simple resolution that I am afraid has not been exercised. It is utterly foreign and even absurd. If you want to know what I am thinking, you should simply ask me. Yet for them to pose this question would chauffeur with it a measure of humility. For they would be conceding that they might not know all of the particular nuances and interpretation of this issue. They would be admitting that they might not really know everything that there is to know. For them to ask me a question is an act of humility. Nonetheless, this is what I expect. If you want to know what I think, you should ask me. You should not make assumptions about what I think and load all of your objections onto me.

Second, for the Calvinist to accuse the Arminian of heresy, or vice versa, would be to conflate inconsistency with heresy. If somebody holds a view that logically entails a denial of orthodoxy, then this individual would not be guilty of heresy. They would merely be inconsistent. They would not be following their beliefs to their logical conclusions. On the other hand, heresy is an outright denial of orthodoxy. You are a heretic if and only if you hold to a heretical position *by confession*. But if by confession, you repudiate heresy and have an orthodox confession, you cannot be condemned as a heretic, even if you believe something that logically entails heresy. The difference is between being inconsistent and being heretical.

I am precipitously persuaded that perhaps people propagate this charge of heresy as an expression of disdain. It is an emotional insult. It is like calling somebody an idiot. In the heat of the debate, overwhelmed by frustration, you emit the word, *heresy!* This sort of behavior erupts as a manifestation of our inability to communicate with one another. We are so incapable of handling differences that we just become frustrated when anybody disagrees with us.

The reason for this seems to be that we are just not around people who are different from us. Christians are urged toward monolithic tendencies, so that we have to have within our congregation's people who agree about every single point. A denominational separation makes sense only in the case of [1] heresy and [2] ecclesiological differences. What I mean [by 2] is that if we just cannot worship together because our practices are so different, then it makes sense to separate.

An example would be Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals. The former believes that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are prevalent in the body of Christ, while the latter thinks that they ceased at the death of the last apostle. It makes sense that while acknowledging each other as brethren that we would separate because of this ecclesiological difference.

But for Arminians and Calvinists to separate and not worship together does not make sense. There are no ecclesiological differences and this separation only makes it more difficult to handle disagreements when they arise. For centuries, we have trained ourselves to have this inability to handle disagreement. We have trained ourselves to call people heretics for when they should be called inconsistent. We are experts in shutting down communication. We are

experts in plugging our ears and refusing to listen to what anybody has to say aside from those who will remind us that we were right all along.

That is what prompted this book. This is a plea to Christians to just be quiet and listen to what your brethren are saying. Ask them what they mean. Do not isolate them just because they disagree with you. By doing this, we can train ourselves to handle disagreements and therefore be more effective in preaching the gospel to the lost.

About The Author

When I first created my blog, www.thereforegodexists.com, in 2012, I was (and remain today) very much focused on providing good answers to difficult questions that people will have about the Christian faith. Back then, I would find myself engaging with a lot of atheists, and I was just appalled at the terrible behavior that I encountered and the mean-spirited disposition to which many of these individuals clung.

Perhaps in my naivety, I expected Christians to behave better, and they usually do, but there is still a negative disposition about anybody who happens to disagree with them. So throughout the years in my study of theology, pursuing a Bachelor's in Religion at Liberty University, blogging about theology and philosophy of religion, I have noticed how poorly many Christians handle disagreements.

That is what prompted this book. I am passionate about the gospel and oriented toward sharing the gospel with this dark and dying world. Christians need to do serious introspection and self-reflection when fulfilling the Great Commission lest they damage the gospel of Christ.