TRUE WORSHIP
IN AN AGE OF
COUNTERFEITS

Spiritual Gifts, the Closed Canon,
the Holy Spirit, Entertainment,
Pastoral Authority, and Ministry Money

TRUE WORSHIP
IN AN AGE OF
COUNTERFEITS

Joseph M. Jacowitz

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To Anthony Okoroh

My beloved brother and partner in the gospel

"I thank my God upon every remembrance of you...for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now..."

(Phil. 1: 3, 5).

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FOREWORD

In a church age when biblical illiteracy thrives, Pastor Joseph M. Jacowitz has provided a needed and necessary work in *True Worship in an Age of Counterfeits: Spiritual Gifts, the Closed Canon, the Holy Spirit, Entertainment, Pastoral Authority, and Ministry Money*.

Although the brazen attack on *Sola Scriptura* has long been one of the chief pillars of the Roman Catholic Church, as Jacowitz lays bare, neglect and depreciation of the sufficiency of Scripture have crept into the Christian church. As Jacowitz rightly observed, the practice he calls "the fortune-teller fallacy," found in many modern charismatic churches, "bears little resemblance to the biblical phenomenon."

Even more, Jacowitz makes an exegetically airtight case for a closed canon. Virtually all false religions have this in common: They always have a reason why *Sola Scriptura* doesn't work. The fact of the matter is that many Christian churches have, in practice, considered embracing that notion as well—especially with the popular idea of hearing God audibly.

In *True Worship in an Age of Counterfeits,* the reader will see two ways of denying Scripture alone: canon *addition* and *canon reduction*. Canon addition is adding to the canon, either by adding books or by adding things God did not say or promise. This practice is found in the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and many charismatic denominations.

Canon addition in any form is an incoherent means of hearing God. It implies that God's Words are a constant stream of new revelation. Thus, the inherent problem is the lack of objective verifiability of what God said. Satan was the first to misrepresent what God actually said (Gen. 3:1–5).

Canon reduction, by contrast, is the process or teaching that attempts to modify the text by reducing portions (or all) of Scripture to accommodate personal views, predilections, or denials of the content (or context).

Examples include Marcion's canon; Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing of Scripture; the naturalistic a priori assumptions of the

liberal scholarship of the Jesus Seminar; and the practice of the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses of removing and/or distorting many biblical passages to posit their theological distinctives. If Scripture is an open canon subject to any person's claim of what God said, then how, for example, can anyone question the LDS doctrine of a plurality of Gods?

Aside from the "checklists" at the end of each chapter and the practical application for the Christian, Jacowitz does a fantastic job answering the main objections to cessationism.

True Worship in an Age of Counterfeits: Spiritual Gifts, the Closed Canon, the Holy Spirit, Entertainment, Pastoral Authority, and Ministry Money not only edifies and equips Christians for proper evangelism and leadership, but also clearly provides a biblical rejoinder to the vast array of erroneous teachings regarding *Sola Scriptura*, the misapplication and misinterpretation of spiritual gifts, the canon as closed, and the true work of God the Holy Spirit.

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PREFACE

There is a restlessness in the modern church. It is a frantic, exhausting energy that drives men and women from one conference to another, from one emotional high to the next, always searching for a fresh word, a new revelation, or a spectacular sign. In this relentless pursuit of the extraordinary, a profound tragedy has occurred: the ordinary, objective, and finished Word of God has been functionally abandoned.

I did not write this book to engage in a sterile, academic debate. I wrote it because the souls of men and women are being shipwrecked on the shoals of modern mysticism. As a pastor who has labored in the gospel ministry for over four decades, I have watched the charismatic movement—and its aggressive offshoots like the New Apostolic Reformation—sweep through congregations, promising fire but delivering only ash. They promise an intimate, direct pipeline to God, but leave believers trapped in a cycle of subjective feelings, constantly questioning whether they have heard God correctly.

This is a crisis of authority.

When a man says, "God told me," he asks for more than your attention. He asks you to receive his words as God's words. What happens when those words govern your conscience, direct your family, or demand your money? Love for Christ requires us to ask whether Christ has actually spoken. No preacher's reputation, no moving testimony, and no experience we treasure should make that question forbidden.

When the church loses its grip on Scripture's absolute sufficiency, it loses its anchor. It becomes vulnerable to every wind of doctrine, every charismatic charlatan, and every self-appointed apostle who claims to speak for the Almighty. The historical, orthodox doctrine of Cessationism does not deny God's power; it profoundly affirms the perfection of His completed revelation. God has spoken. The canon is closed. The foundation of the apostles and prophets has been laid once and for all.

My prayer is that this book will serve as a theological rescue line for the awakened believer. If you are exhausted by the treadmill of

manufactured miracles and subjective prophecies, you will find rest in the old paths. Profound peace comes from resting your soul entirely on the infallible, unbreakable, and perfectly sufficient Word of Christ.

INTRODUCTION

I was raised in a conservative Jewish home in Brooklyn, New York, far removed from the theological debates of historic Protestantism. In 1976, while serving as a marksmanship instructor in the United States Marine Corps, God sovereignly opened my eyes to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the true Messiah, and I bowed the knee to Him as Lord and Savior.

Teaching marksmanship required close attention to fundamentals. A steady stance and properly aligned sights mattered; confidence could not compensate for neglecting them. That concern for a sound foundation stayed with me when the Lord called me into ministry. In studying His Word, I wanted to understand what He had actually revealed and to teach it faithfully. Our convictions about God and His work must be governed by Scripture.

I have served in the gospel ministry for over forty years and have shepherded Christ Bible Church since 1990. I have sat with the broken, confronted the rebellious, and sought to feed the flock faithfully. The questions addressed in this book belong to that pastoral work. What we teach about the Holy Spirit and His gifts shapes how people worship, pray, understand their trials, and seek to obey Christ.

This book examines claims of continuing revelation, the authority claimed by modern apostles and prophets, and the place of spiritual gifts in the church. The teaching of the modern charismatic movement and the New Apostolic Reformation must be tested by the same Scriptures that govern every Christian doctrine. My conviction is that the foundation of the apostles and prophets has been laid and that God's written revelation is complete. The chapters that follow set out the biblical case for that conviction and address the claims that challenge it.

Let me make one thing clear at the outset. This book is not written because I desire less of the Holy Spirit, but because I desire the church to know, honor, and experience the true work of the Holy Spirit as Scripture reveals Him. We reject claims of continuing revelation, counterfeit gifts, and subjective impressions treated as divine

authority. We also reject a cold, lifeless cessationism that treats the close of the canon as though it meant the end of the Spirit's work. The canon is closed, but the Spirit remains active in regeneration, indwelling, illumination, conviction, sanctification, prayer, fruit, gifts, and Christlikeness. We obey "Do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19), "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21), and "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1). Our purpose is to distinguish His genuine work from false attribution, so Christ is glorified, Scripture honored, and God's people protected.

Such an examination calls for honesty and a willingness to be corrected. Perhaps you have defended these teachings, supported these ministries, or urged someone you love to seek these experiences. Examining them now may be painful. I am asking you to open your Bible and weigh their claims, including the arguments I make in these pages. If a cherished belief cannot withstand the examination of Scripture, will you surrender it? Our loyalty to Christ must reach even into the convictions we have never wanted questioned. Let us approach His Word with teachable hearts, ready to believe what He has said and obey what He commands.

PART I

The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture

CHAPTER 1

The Shifting Sand of Modern Mysticism

2 Peter 1:16: "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty."

WHEN A HUMAN VOICE BORROWS GOD'S NAME

A Christian may question a friend's advice without questioning God. But what happens when the friend says, "God told me"? Suddenly the believer faces what seems to be a different choice: obey the messenger, or risk disobeying the Lord. An ordinary human judgment has been placed beneath the weight of divine authority, and the very words that need examining may make examination feel like unbelief.

That is how an untested claim to revelation can begin to rule the conscience before anyone has opened the Bible.

The speaker may be sincere. He may love the person he is addressing. He may be a pastor whose kindness has earned years of trust. But sincerity establishes neither the source of a message nor the right to speak it in God's name. Ezekiel records the Lord's verdict upon prophets who confused the movement of their own spirits with His voice: "Woe to the foolish prophets, who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!" (Ezekiel 13:3). Their offense was not that they felt strongly. It was that they presented what arose within themselves as a word from God.

Now carry that distinction into an ordinary home. A minister assures a family that God has revealed the recovery of someone they love. They pray and cling to his assurance. The illness advances. When death comes, the family is left with more than grief. Were they insufficiently believing? Did God withdraw His word? Must they now

distrust His promises? One man's unverified certainty has made the faithfulness of God appear to stand or fall with his prediction.

The promise was never God's to break.

This is why we must be more careful with God's name than with our own reputation. We may encourage a suffering Christian to pray for healing, trust the Lord's power, and rest in His mercy. But we may not transform what we hope God will do into what we claim He has said He will do. Paul himself pleaded for the removal of an affliction and received the Lord's assurance of sufficient grace (2 Corinthians 12:7–10) instead. Scripture offers the sufferer no warrant to conclude that an unremoved trial proves deficient faith.

Peter gives us something sturdier than a compelling personality. "We did not follow cunningly devised fables," he writes, but "were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). He proceeds to recall the Father's testimony concerning Christ and the prophetic Word given by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:17–21). The apostle does not ask the church to submit to religious excitement. He directs it to God's attested revelation.

The Holy Spirit has not impoverished believers by giving them Scripture. He opens that Word to their understanding, exposes the sin they have defended, and shows them the Savior they have neglected. What is newly discovered in the heart need not be a new revelation from heaven. Christ is no less near because His voice is heard faithfully through the Word He has given.

So before we ask whether a claimed prophecy was moving, accurate, or delivered by someone we love, we must ask the question that governs all the others:

Who has authorized this person to say, "God has spoken"?

THE LAMP PETER LEFT BURNING

Peter knew the day was approaching when he could no longer speak to the churches. He had seen Christ's majesty on the mountain and heard the Father honor His Son. No one could take that experience from him. But what would the believers have when Peter himself was gone? He tells them plainly: "I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease" (2 Peter 1:15).

That concern changes the force of his testimony. Peter does not leave the church chasing another mountain or waiting for another man with a remarkable story. He directs them to the prophetic Word, "a light that shines in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19). Picture a house at

night. The person who lit the lamp has departed, but the light has not departed with him. The Christians who never stood on the mountain with Peter were not abandoned to whatever voice next claimed to come from heaven.

Why can they trust this witness? Not because the prophets were unusually confident, but because "prophecy never came by the will of man"; the Holy Spirit moved those who spoke God's Word (2 Peter 1:21). The question is not whether someone trembles while telling his story. It is whether God actually gave him the words. That distinction once meant a great deal to me in the Marine Corps: confidence cannot make faulty preparation reliable. Neither can confidence turn faulty spiritual information into the voice of God. A man may stake his reputation on a claim. A frightened listener may stake his future on it. Their certainty does not establish its source.

Peter's approaching death did not make the church's future depend upon a replacement personality. At the end of his letter he urges believers to remember the words of the prophets and the commandment received through Christ's apostles (2 Peter 3:1–2). The apostle was passing from the scene; his witness to Christ was not. The church was given light to follow, not a vacancy for the next commanding voice to fill.

THE WORD THAT EQUIPS—AND THE SPIRIT WHO OPENS IT

Now see Timothy receiving Paul's counsel while deceivers threaten the church. What must the young pastor possess to protect those entrusted to him? Paul does not send him hunting for confidential messages from heaven. He tells him to continue in the Holy Scriptures, which make him wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 3:13–15). Then comes the reason: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" and is given so that the servant of God may be "thoroughly equipped for every good work" (vv. 16–17). The Word is not a thin ration until some more exciting voice arrives. It is God's appointed provision for knowing Christ, exposing error, correcting life, and walking in obedience.

This does not mean your Bible contains tomorrow's appointment book. It may not tell you whether a treatment will succeed or which employment offer will come. It teaches you how to live faithfully when you do not know. James warns against boasting of tomorrow as though it were ours to command (James 4:13–16). God has not

failed to equip His children because He requires them to trust Him with what He has not disclosed. Not knowing tomorrow is often the very place where faith must live.

Nor does an open Bible make the Holy Spirit unnecessary. How many times have we read familiar words while our hearts remained cold, only for those same words later to uncover a hidden sin or give us courage in suffering? The truth did not become new; the Spirit made us see what had been there. The psalmist prayed, "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law" (Psalm 119:18). Jesus promised His apostles the Spirit's help in remembering His teaching and bearing witness to Him (John 14:26; 16:13–14). That promise belongs first to those appointed witnesses; it also displays the Spirit's great work of glorifying the Son, not competing with Him for our attention.

Spurgeon brought this distinction into focus when he said, "The Holy Ghost does not reveal anything fresh now. He brings old things to our remembrance." [1] His concern was not to diminish the Spirit's power. It was to keep believers from despising the treasures they had barely begun to search. Think of a Christian travelling hundreds of miles to hear an alleged personal prophecy while leaving unread the Gospel in which Christ speaks of His death, resurrection, forgiveness, and love. When did the words of our Father become less precious to us than the impression of a stranger?

THE WALL THAT COULD NOT STAND

There is a reason the Lord treats unauthorized promises so severely. Through Ezekiel He pictured false prophets as people covering a flimsy wall with untempered mortar and assuring everyone it would stand (Ezekiel 13:10–16). The fresh plaster made the wall look secure. But the storm would expose what the surface had concealed. The danger was not merely that someone had built badly. People were being taught to trust a shelter that could not protect them.

Now listen to Jeremiah. His false prophets offered peace to people who refused the Lord's Word, and God exposed the source of their messages: "I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied" (Jeremiah 23:21). One prophet might honestly describe a dream; he was not therefore authorized to call the dream God's command. The Lord Himself separates a dream from His Word and calls His servant to speak the Word faithfully (Jeremiah 23:25–29). The issue is not

whether the dreamer was emotional or persuasive. It is whether the message was God's.

This is where an apparently harmless phrase becomes dangerous. A pastor may say, "I have prayed about this, and I believe we should proceed." His judgment can be heard, weighed, questioned, and corrected. But let him say, "God told me we must proceed," and he may place the elders, a family, or an entire congregation under an obligation they dare not challenge. The claim that needs testing has been used to forbid the test. God's name has become the plaster on a wall built out of human certainty. John MacArthur expressed the danger this creates: "when someone claims to have private revelation from God, the sufficiency and singularity of Scripture is instantly clouded, and the authority of Scripture is undermined." [2] The church may still profess that the Bible is supreme while obeying the pastor's words as though they came from heaven.

Moses had already warned Israel against this presumption:

> Deuteronomy 18:20: "But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die."

That civil penalty belonged to Israel's covenant order; it gives the church no permission for violence. Yet its severity reveals how seriously God regards a person claiming authority He never gave. Deuteronomy 13:1–4 presses the matter further: even an astonishing sign cannot excuse words that turn God's people away from Him. A wonder cannot make falsehood true. The Lord's already revealed truth judges the claim, not the other way around.

This warning does not license contempt for every believer who has said, "God told me." Some have learned the phrase through imitation, some sincerely mean only that they reached a conviction in prayer, and some have themselves been misled. We may speak firmly about the words without claiming to know every heart. But a well-meant assurance becomes no safer by borrowing an authority it cannot establish. A wall is not strengthened by the sincerity of those who painted it.

THE TEST THE CHURCH MUST NOT SURRENDER

A thoughtful charismatic reader may object: *Did not the New Testament churches receive prophecy? Why, then, should Christians test such claims instead of welcoming them?* The apostles anticipated the question. Paul writes, "Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is

good" (1 Thessalonians 5:20–21). Those commands belong together. He did not want the church to smother what the Spirit truly gave; neither did he grant anyone immunity from examination. In Corinth he directed that when prophets spoke, the others should judge what was said (1 Corinthians 14:29). John likewise commanded believers to test the spirits because false prophets had gone into the world (1 John 4:1).

Do you see what these texts do to the familiar accusation, "If you question my prophecy, you are resisting the Spirit"? In a church where prophecy was being exercised, testing was itself commanded. Even Paul's hearers in Berea were praised for examining his teaching against the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). If even the apostle's teaching was examined against Scripture, no modern speaker can rightly demand exemption from that test. Love for the Spirit's genuine work requires truthfulness about what He has—and has not—said.

We must also be exact about what these passages do not settle. Instructions about prophecy in the apostolic churches do not, standing alone, tell us whether that revelatory gift was appointed to continue in every generation. Christians who defend its continuation do not all teach that every impression is infallible. Wayne Grudem and John Piper, for example, have argued for contemporary prophecy that is to be tested and whose human report may be mistaken. [3] That position deserves an accurate account rather than a caricature. But a question remains even when those qualifications are granted: *If the report may be mistaken, by what right can it be pressed upon another person's conscience as the very speech of God?* A wise impression can be considered as an impression. It must not quietly become a command the Lord never gave.

The reason this distinction matters is larger than a debate about one gift. Christ has already established His church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Himself as the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19–22; 3:5). The building grows, but the foundation is not laid afresh every time another person claims apostolic rank. Hebrews opens with God's speech culminating in His Son (Hebrews 1:1–3). These passages require careful interpretation; neither one alone resolves the duration of every spiritual gift. Together they turn our eyes toward the apostolic witness to the risen Christ, rather than toward the personality of the next claimant.

Calvin warned against separating the Spirit from the Gospel He seals upon believers: "the office of the Spirit promised to us, is not to

form new and unheard-of revelations." [4] That is a warning about where the Spirit directs the church, not a substitute for biblical exposition. Scripture—not an impressive historical name—must establish our conclusions. But the question remains uncomfortably practical: does the church treat Christ's received Word as sufficient when it gives an untested impression the force of divine command?

There is another neglected sign of the Spirit's work. Augustine, speaking about tongues as a sign suited to the apostolic period, said, "These were signs adapted to the time. ... That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away." [5] His words do not prove that God never worked a miracle afterward. His more searching point in the same homily was to ask his hearers about their love for the brethren. A man may demand an extraordinary sign while overlooking the Spirit's ordinary, costly evidence: truthfulness, holiness, love, and obedience (1 John 3:14–18; Galatians 5:22–25). He may spend his life looking for a spectacular proof of God's nearness while refusing the brother Christ has commanded him to love.

WHEN THE FALSE SHELTER FALLS

Return now, not to the prediction in the opening pages, but to the heart left behind after it fails. The family does not need another debate about the minister's sincerity. They need to know whether the Lord they loved has deceived them. They may replay every prayer, searching for the moment their faith supposedly faltered. If their pastor leaves them with that conclusion, he has not merely misinterpreted a spiritual experience. He has helped fasten a burden upon their conscience that Scripture never placed there.

Open the apostle Paul's own record. He pleaded repeatedly for his affliction to be removed, and the Lord did not grant that request; instead Christ promised sufficient grace in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). Paul was not rebuked for unbelief because the affliction remained. Epaphroditus was desperately ill and recovered through God's mercy (Philippians 2:25–27); Trophimus was left sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). One was restored, another was still ill, and both accounts belong in the same inspired Bible. The Lord has not authorized us to convert every prayer for healing into a guarantee about its outcome.

The believer wounded by an unauthorized promise needs a distinction that can take years to recover: God's faithfulness must never be put on trial for a sentence He never spoke. Patiently separate the

preacher's prediction from the Father's actual promise. Pray with the suffering person; do not scold him for grieving. Show him the risen Savior who suffered, who understands weakness, and whose grace did not fail Paul when the thorn remained. The object is not to win an argument over spiritual gifts while leaving the sufferer afraid of God. It is to return the sufferer to the God who is truly faithful.

The speaker himself must face a sobering danger. Christ warns in Matthew 7:21–23 that some will point to prophecy and mighty deeds in His name, yet He will declare that He never knew them. Extraordinary works cannot establish saving fellowship with Him. That warning should silence the boast of the performer, but it also judges the pride of anyone who believes correct cessationist theology can substitute for faith, love, and obedience. The final question is not whether you have produced wonders or correctly criticized them. It is whether you belong to Jesus Christ.

BRING ONE CLAIM INTO THE LIGHT

A claim you can dismiss from a stranger may become difficult to question when it comes from a beloved pastor, a trusted friend, or someone who helped you through your darkest season. The fear of losing that relationship can quietly become the reason you stop asking whether the Lord has actually spoken. So choose one actual claim still shaping your obedience, your fear, or your hope. Put it beside the open Bible. Refuse both the unfairness of assuming the worst about the speaker and the cowardice of withholding a test Scripture commands (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

1. What Exactly Did the Person Say?

Write the claim down as accurately as you can, without interpreting or judging it yet. Did the speaker say, "I think," "I sense," or "God has told me"? Those are not interchangeable expressions. Distinguish what you heard from what you inferred, and do not accuse the speaker of certainty he did not claim.

2. What Scripture Was Used to Support the Claim?

Read the passage in context and ask whether it actually teaches what the person claimed. Does it establish a command or promise for God's people, or has a description of someone else's experience been turned into a guarantee for you? Do not make Scripture answer a question the passage was never addressing.

3. What Makes This Claim Hard for You to Question?

Identify any fear, hope, loyalty, or personal desire that may be affecting your judgment. Would you receive these words as divine instruction if they had come from a stranger rather than a beloved pastor? Has gratitude for genuine past help persuaded you that this person cannot now be mistaken?

4. What Response Does Scripture Require?

Decide what you should believe, reject, correct, or obey in light of God's Word. If the claim remains unproved, do not promote it into certainty. If it contradicts Scripture, refuse it. If you repeated it publicly as God's own speech, seek to correct that misrepresentation with the same seriousness with which you originally made it.

5. What Grace Do You Need from God to Obey?

Ask Him for the courage, humility, patience, or strength you need to respond faithfully. The goal is not to emerge from the exercise with greater suspicion of everyone around you. It is to become more truthful, more teachable, more careful with God's name, and more confidently dependent upon His Word.

Do not close the notebook if the truth requires an action. The person you once burdened may need an apology. The friend whose prediction you have treated as a command may need a loving conversation. Your elders may need to hear that a practice in the church has been given an authority Scripture does not grant. And if the conclusion is not yet clear, seek wise counsel and continue studying without allowing either fear or impatience to dictate the verdict. A believer may be uncertain about an impression and still be entirely certain of his duty to obey what Scripture plainly teaches.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

Axiom One — God's Name Is Not a Human Being's Authority to Borrow

When someone says, "God told me," he is claiming more than a personal opinion. He is claiming to speak for God. We must never allow someone's words to rule our conscience simply because he claims God said them.

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:21; Ezekiel 13:3; 1 John 4:1; 2 Peter 1:20–21; 2 Corinthians 11:13; 1 Corinthians 14:29.

Axiom Two — Certainty Is Not Commission

A person can sound completely certain and still be wrong. Speaking boldly does not mean God sent him, and even impressive spiritual works do not prove that Christ approves of him.

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:16; Deuteronomy 18:20–22; 1 Timothy 1:7; Matthew 7:21–23.

Axiom Three — No Wonder Can Overrule the Word

Even an extraordinary sign cannot make false teaching true. Every spiritual experience must be tested by God's Word. We must never allow an experience to become more authoritative than Scripture.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 13:1–4; Galatians 1:8; Mark 13:22; 2 Thessalonians 2:9–10.

Axiom Four — Testing a Claim Is Not Rebellion Against God

God commands us to test spiritual claims. Examining what a pastor or supposed prophet says in light of Scripture is not rebellion. It is obedience to God.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22; 1 John 4:1; Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 14:29; Revelation 2:2.

Axiom Five — Scripture's Sufficiency Does Not Require Knowing Tomorrow

God has given us His Word so we can know Him and obey Him. He has not promised to tell us everything that will happen tomorrow. Faith means trusting Him even when we cannot see what lies ahead.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16–17; James 4:13–15; Matthew 6:34; Hebrews 11:8.

Axiom Six — The Spirit Who Gave the Word Does Not Make It Second-Class

The Holy Spirit gave us God's Word, and He helps us understand and embrace its truth. Discovering something wonderful in Scripture

for the first time does not mean we have received a new revelation. It means the Spirit has opened our eyes to what God has already said.

Scripture: Psalm 119:18; 2 Peter 1:21; Ephesians 1:17–18; John 16:13–14; 2 Corinthians 3:14–18.

Axiom Seven — Christ's Church Is Built Upon a Foundation, Not an Endless Search for New Founders

Christ is the cornerstone of His church, and the apostles and prophets served in laying its foundation. The church continues to grow upon that foundation; it does not need another one laid in every generation. These passages establish that foundation, although they do not, by themselves, settle every question about the continuation of spiritual gifts.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:19–22; Ephesians 3:5; 1 Corinthians 3:10–11; Revelation 21:14.

Axiom Eight — God's Power to Heal Is Not Our Authority to Promise Healing

We should pray earnestly for the sick because God has the power to heal. But no minister has the right to promise a healing God has not promised—or blame a suffering believer when healing does not come.

Scripture: James 5:14–16; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Philippians 2:25–27; 2 Timothy 4:20.

Axiom Nine — False Assurances May Undermine Faith; They Do Not Make God Unfaithful

When people promise something in God's name that He never promised, disappointed believers may begin to doubt God's faithfulness. But God has not failed them. The promise was never His to break.

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:16–17, 21; Ezekiel 13:10–16; 2 Peter 2:17–19; 2 Timothy 2:17–18; Romans 3:3–4.

Axiom Ten — The Shepherd Must Heal What His Careless Authority Has Wounded

When a pastor wrongly speaks in God's name, simply taking back his words is not enough. He must correct the error, care for those he has hurt, and help them recover their confidence in God's Word.

Scripture: Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 4:16; James 3:1; 1 Peter 5:2–3; Luke 17:1–2; Galatians 6:1–2.

Axiom Eleven — Christ, Not an Extraordinary Experience, Is the Believer's Refuge

We do not need secret knowledge of tomorrow to be secure in God's love. We need Christ. When human promises fail, His Word remains true, His love remains faithful, and He will never abandon those who belong to Him.

Scripture: Hebrews 1:1–3; John 20:30–31; Romans 8:31–39; Colossians 2:9–10; John 10:27–29.

BEFORE GOD, WITH THE BIBLE OPEN

The Letter He Never Wrote

Five Questions That Must Be Answered Before God

Imagine receiving a letter bearing your father's signature. Its promises comfort you. You treasure it for years. Then you discover that your father never wrote it.

Would you continue believing the letter because it once brought you comfort? Or would your love for your father compel you to reject words he never spoke?

Now consider the messages you have believed were from God. What if some of those words never came from Him?

Before answering, listen to God's command:

1 Thessalonians 5:21

"Test all things; hold fast what is good."

Not merely the claims of strangers. Not merely the teachings of

people with whom you disagree. Your own convictions must also stand beneath the examination of God's Word.

1. What Would Be Left of Your Belief If Every Story Were Taken Away?

Suppose every testimony, claimed miracle, and personal experience were removed from your memory. Would Scripture alone convince you that the miraculous and revelatory gifts continue today?

What passages would you use? Have you studied them carefully, or have you depended upon someone else's interpretation?

Have you been allowing experiences to tell you what Scripture means, instead of allowing Scripture to tell you what those experiences mean?

Open the Bible. Write down the passages that support your position. Read them in context. Allow them to speak for themselves.

2. Have You Called Something a Gift of the Spirit That Scripture Does Not Recognize?

When someone claims to prophesy, speak in tongues, or possess the gift of healing, have you compared what they do with what the apostles describe in Scripture?

If the modern practice differs from the biblical gift, why should it bear the same name?

Have you considered the special role of the apostles and prophets in laying the church's foundation (Ephesians 2:20; 3:5)? Have you examined whether their revelatory work was intended to continue after that foundation was established?

Could you be defending a counterfeit simply because it carries a biblical name?

Do not dismiss the possibility. Examine it.

3. What Would It Take for You to Admit That a Supposed Miracle Was False?

Think of a prophecy you believed. Did it come to pass? Think of someone declared healed. Was the healing established?

When the evidence contradicted the claim, did you acknowledge the mistake? Or did you accept an excuse because you wanted the experience to be genuine?

A counterfeit does not prove that every genuine spiritual gift has ceased. But it does require an honest judgment about the claim before you.

If no amount of contrary evidence can persuade you that an experience was false, have you really tested it at all?

Choose one claim you have accepted. Examine the evidence. Be willing to acknowledge what you find, even if the truth disappoints you.

4. What Have You Been Afraid to Question—And Who May Have Suffered Because of It?

Have you ever repeated a promise of healing that God never made? Have you encouraged someone to believe a prediction that later proved false?

Picture that person today. Perhaps the sickness remained. Perhaps the family buried someone they were assured would recover. Perhaps they still wonder why God failed to keep His promise.

Could your words have helped place that burden upon their heart?

And if you now recognize that the promise never came from God, will you go back and tell them?

Consider what Scripture says:

> Proverbs 29:25
>
> "The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe."

Whose approval are you protecting when you refuse to acknowledge what Scripture and the evidence have exposed?

If you have misled someone, seek that person out. Speak truthfully. Ask forgiveness. Help the wounded believer recover confidence in what God actually promised.

5. If Scripture Convinces You That the Revelatory Gifts Have Ceased, Will You Surrender Your Former Beliefs?

What would it cost you to embrace a cessationist position?

Would you lose the approval of friends? Would you have to admit that experiences you cherished were not what you believed? Would you need to correct things you taught your children, your friends, or your church?

Is preserving your reputation more important to you than knowing the truth?

If the Scriptures persuade you that the apostles and prophets served a foundational purpose, and that their revelatory gifts were not

intended to continue throughout the church's history, will you accept that conclusion?

Will you repent where you have falsely attributed words to God? Will you stop defending practices you can no longer establish from Scripture?

And will you learn to delight in the real work of the Holy Spirit—His work of opening the Scriptures, convicting of sin, producing holiness, and glorifying Jesus Christ?

Listen to the Savior Himself:

John 8:32

"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Jesus spoke these words to those He called to abide in His Word (John 8:31). He was calling them to genuine discipleship, not merely a correct theological opinion.

And that is where this examination must lead.

What good would it do to reject false revelations while refusing to obey the true Word of God?

What good would it do to defend the sufficiency of Scripture while withholding your own heart from the Christ whom Scripture reveals?

Will you surrender what you cannot defend from God's Word, and follow Jesus Christ wherever His truth leads you?

THE SHEPHERD UNDER THE WORD

A Pastoral Examination — Chapter 1

Movement One — The Pastor's Convictions

Pastor, Are Your Convictions Grounded in Scripture?

Pastor, why do you believe the miraculous and revelatory gifts continue today? Did you reach that conviction through careful Bible study, or were you persuaded by experiences and testimonies? If you had never witnessed a supposed miracle or heard a modern prophecy, would you still believe what you believe today?

If Scripture shows that an experience you believed was from God was not, will you admit you were mistaken?

Movement Two — Biblical Examination

Does Scripture Support What You Believe?

Pastor, when Paul commands believers to test spiritual claims (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22), have you applied that command to the prophecies and miracles reported in your own church? What biblical standard do you use to determine whether a message truly came from God?

Peter teaches that genuine prophecy comes from the Holy Spirit, not from man's own will (2 Peter 1:20–21). If someone claims God spoke to him, but his message proves false, what reason do you have to believe the Holy Spirit gave that message?

When you compare modern prophecy with the gifts described in 1 Corinthians 12–14, do you find the same characteristics? If you believe modern prophecy may contain errors, which passage of Scripture teaches that a message from God may be mistaken? Have you carefully distinguished God's revelation from a person's imperfect understanding of it?

Paul tells us that the apostles and prophets were part of the church's foundation (Ephesians 2:20; 3:5). What does that teach us about their special ministry? Have you considered whether their work was meant to establish the church rather than be repeated throughout its history?

And when you read about miracles in Acts, have you asked whether Luke was describing extraordinary events or teaching that every generation should expect the same gifts?

Pastor, can you explain your position from Scripture without appealing to a single modern experience?

Movement Three — Personal Experience

What Have You Actually Seen?

Pastor, think about the prophecies and miracles you have witnessed or heard about. How many have you personally investigated? How many have you accepted because someone you trusted told you they happened?

Have you heard someone predict an event in God's name that never occurred? When it failed, did you acknowledge the prediction was false, or did you accept an explanation that allowed the person to continue claiming prophetic authority?

Have you witnessed someone declared healed who remained seriously ill? Did you examine the evidence, or did you accept the testimony because you wanted it to be true?

When a claimed miracle fails examination, are you willing to reject it—or do you look for a reason to keep believing it?

Does discovering counterfeit gifts prove that every genuine gift has ceased? No. But doesn't it give you good reason to examine carefully the gifts you believe continue today?

And if a claimed prophecy can fail repeatedly without ever being rejected, what does it mean to test prophecy?

Pastor, can you remember an experience you once believed was from God but later discovered was not? What did you do when you learned the truth?

Are you willing to question what you have experienced as carefully as you question what others believe?

Movement Four — Responsibility for the Sheep

Who Suffers When a False Promise Is Believed?

Pastor, imagine sitting beside a grieving mother whose child has died. Someone assured her that God had promised healing. She believed him. Now she wonders whether her lack of faith caused her child's death.

What would you tell her?

Would you suggest that she failed to believe strongly enough? Would you defend the person who made the prediction? Or would you open the Scriptures and show her that God never promised what the supposed prophet declared?

Have you considered how easily a false prophecy can damage a believer's confidence in God? When human words are presented as divine promises, who helps the wounded Christian understand that God has not failed him?

Have you been more careful to protect the reputation of a supposed prophet than to protect the conscience of a suffering believer?

Have you ever allowed someone to pressure a church member into making a serious decision because he claimed God had revealed what that person should do? What protection have you provided against such misuse of spiritual authority?

Paul commanded elders to care for the flock purchased by Christ's

blood (Acts 20:28). Peter charged shepherds to lead by godly example rather than dominate those entrusted to them (1 Peter 5:2–3).

Pastor, have your people learned that they may question a supposed revelation without questioning God Himself?

And if your teaching has encouraged them to believe something Scripture does not support, will you return to those people, acknowledge your mistake, and help them recover?

When someone has been wounded by a false promise, will you be more concerned about defending your theology or caring for the sheep Christ entrusted to you?

Movement Five — Accountability to Christ

When You Stand Before the Chief Shepherd

Pastor, the day is coming when you will give an account to Jesus Christ for your ministry (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:4).

On that day, will the approval of your friends matter more than your faithfulness to His Word?

If careful study persuades you that some of the gifts you have defended are not what Scripture describes, will you change your position? Will you explain your reasons to your congregation, even if people disagree with you?

What if your decision costs you friendships, ministry opportunities, or the respect of pastors you admire?

Would you rather suffer the embarrassment of admitting you were wrong today, or continue teaching what you can no longer defend from Scripture?

If you discover that you have misled others, will you repent before God and acknowledge your error? Will you patiently reteach the truth, correct harmful practices, and remain faithful when criticism comes (1 Timothy 4:16; 2 Timothy 4:2–5)?

And what if someone you love refuses to accept your changed convictions? Will you treat that person with patience and kindness while remaining faithful to what you have learned?

Pastor, Jesus Christ purchased the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28). He knows every sheep you have encouraged, every wounded believer you have comforted, and every word you have spoken in His name.

When you stand before Him, will you be able to say that you

faithfully taught what His Word declares, rather than what your experiences persuaded you to believe?

Do you love the Holy Spirit enough to refuse to credit Him with words He never spoke?

Do you love the sheep enough to correct your mistakes, even when doing so is painful?

And do you love Jesus Christ enough to surrender a cherished belief when His Word convinces you it is wrong?

THE SHEPHERD WHO MUST GO BACK

Pastor, picture the moment after the controversy has faded and the congregation has moved on. Someone still sits at home trying to understand why the promised healing never came. You may have forgotten the words you allowed from the platform. That person has not. You cannot discharge your duty simply by announcing that your church now holds a more careful position on revelation. The sheep may still be bleeding where your words wounded them.

Paul begins with the shepherd before the flock: "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock" (Acts 20:28). James warns that teachers will receive stricter judgment (James 3:1). So begin without evasions. *Did I say God told me when I meant I felt strongly? Did I defend an untested prediction because the speaker was influential? Did I silence the questions I should have welcomed? Did I allow the weak to conclude that they were to blame when a prediction failed?* If you recognize yourself, the first act is not a new ministry policy. It is repentance before the Lord you claimed to represent.

Then go back. Where the claim was public, correct it plainly enough for those who heard it. Where a family suffered under it, seek them out. Say what should have been said: *I presented a human assurance as though it came from God. I had no right to do that. I am sorry.* Do not turn the apology into a defense of your intentions. The wounded person does not need a speech about your sincerity. He needs a shepherd willing to stand beneath the same Word he asks the sheep to obey.

Teach the church what you failed to teach before. Open 2 Timothy 3 and show why Scripture equips the believer; open 1 Thessalonians 5 and show why testing a claim is obedience, not rebellion. Distinguish a command of God from a pastor's judgment and a hopeful prayer from a promised outcome. Do not ridicule people for believing vocabulary

their leaders taught them to use. They must learn to recognize the difference before they can live by it (2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Timothy 4:16).

Then change what permitted the confusion. Do not allow someone's claimed revelation to govern a family's medical treatment, marriage, money, or church standing. Require public teachers and counselors to identify Scripture as Scripture and impressions as impressions. Provide a fair way for elders to examine claims, protect vulnerable people, and correct mistakes without spectacle (1 Peter 5:2–3). These are not administrative details beneath the dignity of theology. They are what truthfulness looks like when it puts on a shepherd's clothes.

And when resistance comes, remain. Some will say you have lost your spiritual fire; others may withdraw confidence or friendship. Hear fair criticism of how you led. Admit needless harshness and correct poor decisions. But do not restore a dangerous claim merely to recover approval. Peter reminds elders that they serve beneath the Chief Shepherd and will answer to Him (1 Peter 5:4). He will not ask whether every impressive personality remained pleased. He will ask how you cared for the people He entrusted to you.

Stay near the injured believer as well. A doctrinal statement can be corrected in an afternoon; the spiritual harm may take far longer to mend. Read the passages with him. Hear the questions he is ashamed to ask. Pray when the old fear returns. A pastor has not finished correcting error when he has won the dispute. He has finished his duty only when he has also labored to care for the sheep the error wounded.

THE SAVIOR WHO DOES NOT BORROW ANOTHER VOICE

Perhaps the person whose claim you must now question baptized you, prayed with you in illness, or welcomed you when others turned away. Disagreeing may cost something real. Paul told Timothy, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7). The courage he needed was not permission to become harsh. It was strength to remain faithful to Christ when faithfulness carried shame or loss (vv. 6–12).

Jesus told His followers that their Father knows their material needs, then commanded, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). He did not promise that every relationship or reputation would survive obedience. The comfort is greater and more exact: your Father does not cease to know you when obedience becomes costly. And

Proverbs warns, "The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe" (Proverbs 29:25). You need not surrender discernment to preserve someone's approval.

But the end of this chapter cannot be merely a braver decision or a better method of testing. Look at the Savior Himself. The Son of God was rejected, suffered, and gave His life for sinners. He rose and reigns over His church. Scripture does not leave you with a distant command to be discerning; it shows you the One who has already borne your sin and who holds His people fast (Hebrews 1:1–3; Romans 8:31–39; John 10:27–29). If you trusted a false promise, you may confess the mistake without despair. If you spoke beyond what God authorized, you must repent and seek forgiveness. If someone else's prediction left you afraid of God, come back to what God has actually said about His Son.

The Word we are defending is not a cold document lying between us and an absent Lord. It is the Spirit-given witness that leads sinners to the living Christ. You do not need to manufacture another voice to discover that the Savior has spoken—and that He will not abandon His sheep.

KEY SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR THE READER

Apostolic witness and the prophetic Word: 2 Peter 1:16–21; 2 Peter 3:1–2; Ephesians 2:19–22; 3:5; Hebrews 1:1–3.

Scripture's sufficiency and the Spirit's ministry: 2 Timothy 3:13–17; John 14:26; 16:13–14; Psalm 119:18.

The danger of unauthorized claims: Jeremiah 23:16–32; Ezekiel 13:1–16; Deuteronomy 13:1–4; 18:20–22.

The duty of discernment: 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22; 1 Corinthians 14:29–33; 1 John 4:1–6; Acts 17:11.

The shepherd's responsibility and the believer's hope: Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 4:16; James 3:1; 1 Peter 5:2–4; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; 2 Timothy 1:6–12; Matthew 6:25–34; Proverbs 29:25.

SOURCE NOTES

1 C. H. Spurgeon, "The Comforter," sermon no. 5, delivered January 21, 1855, section II, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 1. Original sermon available through the Spurgeon Library. The quotation concerns the Spirit's work of bringing Christ's teaching to remembrance; the surrounding passage explicitly argues that the canon of revelation is closed.

2 John MacArthur, "Strange Fire Redux, Part 3," section "A Departure from the Inerrant Word," *Grace to You*, article B141017, source text. The quoted words occur in the published discussion of modern prophecy and the authority of Scripture.

3 For the position being described rather than endorsed, see Wayne Grudem, "Why Christians Can Still Prophesy," especially the discussion of lesser authority than Scripture and the testing of congregational prophecy; and John Piper, "The New Testament Gift of Prophecy," March 26, 1990, theses 2–3. Both distinguish the authority of Scripture from the fallibility of a present-day human report. Their conclusions are not assumed by this chapter.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, chapter 9, section 1, translation available in the Calvin Institutes digital text. Calvin's fuller sentence speaks of the Spirit sealing upon believers the doctrine of the gospel, not forming a new doctrine detached from Christ's Word.

5 Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Homily VI, section 10, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 7, translated by H. Browne. Primary-text translation. Augustine speaks specifically about the extraordinary sign of tongues, then turns his hearers toward brotherly love as evidence of the Spirit's indwelling. His observation must not be enlarged into a denial of divine miracles after the apostolic age.

CHAPTER 2

Sola Scriptura: The Bedrock of the Faith

> Psalm 19:7–8: "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes."

WHEN A VERSE BECOMES A GAG ORDER

Imagine a young believer lingering after the service, his Bible folded open against his chest. He is not hunting for a quarrel. The sermon troubled him, and he wants to know whether the passage actually supports what he heard. The pastor listens for a moment. Then comes the warning: "Do not touch My anointed ones" (Psalm 105:15). The conversation ends. The young man walks away with the terrible impression that asking what God meant is an offense against God.

The words are biblical. Their use is not. Read the psalm. God is recounting His covenant faithfulness to Abraham and his descendants; He protected the patriarchs when they were few, vulnerable, and wandering among peoples and kingdoms (Psalm 105:8–15; cf. Genesis 12:17–20; 20:3–7). The verse is not a charter granting every minister immunity from having his teaching examined. A promise of divine protection to the patriarchs has been pressed into service as a prohibition against opening a Bible. The same sentence that celebrated God's faithfulness now shields a man's explanation from correction.

Scripture does command believers to honor faithful leaders (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; Hebrews 13:17). It also protects elders from unsupported charges, requiring proper witnesses and due process (1

Timothy 5:19). But that very passage goes on to require the rebuke of elders found in sin (v. 20). Biblical honor does not mean unexamined authority; biblical examination does not license contempt. When a pastor uses respect for his office to silence a responsible question about his handling of the Word, he asks the sheep to surrender the very safeguard God gave them.

Now picture the other side of that conversation. Perhaps the pastor was tired. Perhaps the question struck an old wound. Perhaps he has defended the same interpretation for twenty years, and a young believer with an open Bible has touched something he cannot bear to reconsider. His error need not begin in malice. It may begin in the small, fiercely human desire not to be shown mistaken. But once the text is made to protect that desire, something grave has happened: the minister has borrowed God's authority to defend his own.

Chapter 1 confronted the man who says that God has given him a new word. This chapter enters a quieter and, in some churches, more familiar danger: the man who quotes a word God truly gave, then makes it mean what God never intended. The first puts words in God's mouth; the second takes possession of words already there. Both can leave a believer obeying the wrong master while believing he is obeying the Lord.

Sola Scriptura—Scripture alone—does not mean that every believer is his own pope, that pastors are dispensable, or that the church's teachers and confessions have nothing to give us. It means the written Word of God, because it is God's Word, is the only infallible rule for saving faith and obedience (2 Timothy 3:15–17; Isaiah 8:20). Christ appoints teachers to feed His church, not to become proprietors of His speech (Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Peter 5:2–3). The Second London Baptist Confession put it plainly: Scripture is the "only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule." [1] That claim is not vindicated by an open Bible on the lectern. It is vindicated when the preacher allows the Bible to say no to him.

Pastor, think of the person whose life may be hanging on a conclusion you have drawn from a verse. The wife told that a demand for submission requires her to conceal a husband's cruelty, while the same passage commands husbands to love as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25–29). The elderly saint who fears that questioning your advice means resisting heaven. The father who will go home and repeat your interpretation to his children as though he had heard God's voice directly. They do not merely hear your words. They must

live inside the meaning you give them. What will happen to their consciences if you were wrong?

THE VERSE ON THE TEMPLE ROOF

Long before a pastor could be tempted to use a biblical sentence as a shield, the devil attempted to use one as a weapon. He took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and urged Him to throw Himself down. The suggestion came wrapped in the words of Psalm 91: God would give His angels charge concerning Him; they would bear Him up (Matthew 4:5–6; Psalm 91:11–12). What makes the scene chilling is not that Satan despised Scripture. It is that he could quote it while inviting the Son to disobey.

The promise in the psalm was not false. God's protection was not imaginary. The fraud lay in the *therefore*: because the Father protects His own, the Son should manufacture a danger and compel Him to demonstrate that protection. An assurance meant to sustain trust was twisted into permission to put God on trial. Jesus answered, "You shall not tempt the LORD your God" (Matthew 4:7; Deuteronomy 6:16). Deuteronomy recalls Israel's testing of the Lord at Massah (Exodus 17:1–7). The Son refused to turn dependence upon His Father into a demand that His Father prove Himself.

Here is a distinction many listeners are never taught to make: the sentence may be Scripture while the conclusion drawn from it is not. The question is not merely, "Did the preacher quote a verse?" It is, "Did God Himself authorize the *therefore* that followed?" The most dangerous word in some sermons is the word connecting a true text to a false command.

This does not make every sincere mistake diabolical. Honest interpreters can misunderstand a difficult passage and welcome correction. Satan, however, shows the mechanism in its starkest form. A promise is detached from its purpose; a foreign duty is fastened to it; the authority of the original words is transferred to the invented application. Peter warns that Scripture can be twisted to destruction (2 Peter 3:15–17). Paul's remedy is not timidity but reverent labor: the worker must handle the Word of truth rightly (2 Timothy 2:15).

Pastor, before you deliver the stirring application, place your finger on the words that bear its weight. Does the passage command the action you are demanding? Does the promise belong to the person and circumstance you have named? Have you looked for another text that might expose your conclusion as presumption? The Savior

could answer a tempting quotation by opening the larger testimony of Scripture. Surely His servants must never be too proud to do the same.

THE QUESTION THE LAWYER DID NOT WANT ANSWERED

But twisting Scripture is not always the work of adding something to it. Sometimes we understand the command well enough—and spend our ingenuity trying to make it reach less far.

A lawyer asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus did not flatter the man's learning or indulge him in a display of rabbinic cleverness. He put the written Law before him: "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" (Luke 10:25–26). The man answered from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: love God wholly and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus acknowledged the answer. Then Luke tells us what the man did next. *Wanting to justify himself*, he asked, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:27–29).

Here is the tragedy of the question. He could recite the law and still needed to reduce its claim upon him. His answer was correct; his heart pleaded for an exception. Jesus answered with the wounded traveler, the religious men who passed by, and the Samaritan who came near at personal cost (Luke 10:30–37). The man who wanted a manageable definition of *neighbor* faced mercy that crossed the boundary he hoped to preserve. Jesus was not presenting a small achievement by which sinners could purchase eternal life. He was holding the Law's searching demand before a self-justifying heart (cf. Romans 3:19–24).

The devil's temptation and the lawyer's question uncover two different failures. On the temple roof, a true text was pressed toward a false act. Beside the road to Jericho, a true command was negotiated down to a convenient act. One smuggles new meaning *into* Scripture; the other tries to cut unwelcome meaning *out*. Both begin where the human will quietly insists on supervising the Word of God.

We should not claim the ability to read every man's motives; Luke reveals this lawyer's motive, not the private thoughts of all who ask difficult questions. But we know the evasions by which *our own* conscience postpones obedience. We can discuss the qualifications of forgiveness while nursing a grievance we refuse to confess (Ephesians 4:31–32). We can lecture about the meaning of generosity while guarding every expenditure that serves our comfort (2 Corinthians 9:6–8). A father can explain the biblical duty of patience to his children, then walk back into the house with the same cruel tone

(Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21). The interpretation may be orthodox; the interpreter is still bargaining.

Beloved reader, which verse do you hope will turn out to mean less than it appears to require? What obedience would begin tomorrow if you stopped asking how narrowly you might read it? James did not bless the person who studied the mirror and admired his eyesight; he blessed the one who continued in the Word and did what it required (James 1:22–25). Do not ask God for another light while you stand with your eyes closed to the one He has already given.

EVERY VERSE HAS A HOME

How, then, do we listen without becoming captive to the preacher's invention—or to our own? Scripture does not arrive as a sack of sentences shaken loose from their setting. God has spoken through prophets and apostles, in covenants, narratives, wisdom, songs, and letters. A word belongs to a sentence; a sentence does work in a passage; a passage serves the purpose of a book; and Scripture's many books bear witness to God's saving work in Christ (Luke 24:27, 44–47; John 5:39–40). Removing the words from those relationships does not set them free. It makes them vulnerable to whoever grabs them first.

In Jerusalem, after the return from exile, the people stood as the Book of the Law was read. They were not given an impressive slogan and sent away to invent the rest. Nehemiah records that the Law was read distinctly, with explanation that enabled the people to understand the reading (Nehemiah 8:1–8). The Word reached their minds and consciences; they wept, and then were instructed to receive the day with holy joy (vv. 9–12). The meaning came before the response, and the response grew from the meaning. What a rebuke to a pulpit that seeks tears, excitement, or decisions while leaving the passage itself unexplained.

On a desert road, an Ethiopian official was reading Isaiah. Philip did not shame him for needing help; he asked whether he understood what he read. The man welcomed instruction, and Philip began at that Scripture and preached Jesus to him (Acts 8:26–35). Here were two acts of humility joined together: a reader willing to be taught and a teacher who began where the inspired text began. *Scripture alone* was not *the reader alone*. Nor did the teacher's presence free him to supply a different message.

This is why faithful interpretation asks questions that are neither

clever nor optional. Who was addressed? What problem is being answered? Does the writer report something that happened, or command something that must be done? Where does the argument turn? What does the paragraph deny as well as affirm? The publisher's description of W. R. Downing's *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* warns against "an unscriptural subjectivism and personal bias." [2] Such bias is not cured by possessing a dictionary, a degree, or a formidable shelf of commentaries. An educated man may simply learn to defend his preference more skillfully. The purpose of study is to make the interpreter *less free* to invent.

Augustine saw the peril long ago. Writing about biblical interpretation, he warned that the person who takes a meaning different from the author's intended meaning has left the road, even if the mistaken route happens to lead toward a good end. He urged correction lest a habit of wandering take the reader in the wrong direction altogether. [3] That image deserves to live in every preacher's mind. An attractive application may arrive at a seemingly wholesome destination; yet if the road to it is not the road Scripture actually takes, you have trained your people to travel without the Author's directions.

The Second London Baptist Confession states the discipline with admirable firmness: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself." [4] Difficult passages must be examined by clearer ones dealing with the same truth. Peter himself admits that some apostolic writings contain things hard to understand; he does not grant us permission to force them into whatever shape we prefer (2 Peter 3:15–17). Nor should we misuse Peter's earlier statement about prophecy and "private interpretation" as though it prohibited personal Bible study; his explanation concerns the divine *origin* of prophecy, which did not come by man's will (2 Peter 1:20–21). A text may not be made to forbid the very examination needed to read it faithfully.

Pastor, let your people see the hinges of your sermon. Let them follow the argument in their own Bibles. Tell them when you move from what a verse says to an inference you believe it warrants; then tell them when you move again from an inference to your own pastoral counsel. All three may be valuable. They are not equally authoritative. When the congregation cannot see those distinctions, it may learn to trust your confident voice more than God's careful words.

THE PROMISE THAT FOLLOWED HIM HOME

Imagine a father who has lost his work. He has children to feed, bills he cannot postpone, and interviews that seem to lead nowhere. A well-intentioned preacher takes Philippians 4:13 and tells him that Christ guarantees the position he is praying for. The man memorizes the verse. He prays it over every application. When the job goes to someone else, a second fear begins to gnaw at him: *Was my faith too small? Did God fail to keep His Word?*

But the apostle was not describing the power to obtain every desired outcome. In Philippians 4:10–13, Paul speaks of learning contentment in abundance and need, in fullness and hunger. His strength in Christ enables steadfastness under conditions he cannot choose. The promise is not that the door will always open. It is that Christ can sustain His servant when it stays shut. By wrenching Paul's words out of their argument, the preacher has done two injuries at once: he has promised what God did not promise, and he has hidden the consolation God *did* provide. Compare the Lord's sufficient grace in Paul's weakness (2 Corinthians 12:7–10) and His unfailing presence (Hebrews 13:5–6).

Perhaps an even quieter injury begins with Jeremiah 29:11. Spoken as part of a letter to Judah's exiles, the promise of God's good purpose follows the announcement of seventy years in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:4–14). It was not a private guarantee that every modern believer will quickly prosper or escape suffering. To speak of God's faithfulness from this passage is right; to erase the original recipients, the appointed waiting, and the history through which God kept His word is to substitute another promise for Jeremiah's. Christians have profound grounds for hope in God's saving purpose in Christ (Romans 8:28–39; 2 Corinthians 1:20). Why impoverish them with a smaller promise of immediate ease that Scripture never gave?

Now bring that mistake into a room without the preacher. A woman hears that her husband's illness must end in recovery because someone attached a healing guarantee to a beloved verse. She waits through weeks of treatment. When he dies, she is left to wonder whether her prayers were defective. A couple is assured that their estranged child must return by an announced date. That date passes, and their grief acquires an unnecessary accuser. These are illustrations, not reports about named families; they show what happens when an interpreter sends people to live beneath a promise God has not made.

Here pastoral tenderness must become more than a gentle tone.

Tenderness means refusing to put words in the Father's mouth, even when those words would make the bedside quieter for an hour. The sufferer can bear the truth, because Christ can bear the sufferer. He has promised His people His presence; He has not promised them command of tomorrow. A false promise may soothe the room for a moment. Its bill often comes due in the conscience long after the preacher has gone home.

If you have made such an assurance, pastor, whom must you revisit? You may have changed your interpretation already. Does the grieving person know the former guarantee was yours, not God's? Will you leave her blaming her faith for the failure of a word heaven never spoke? You will not heal every wound by explaining your mistake. But you can stop asking her to defend God's faithfulness against a promise that was never His.

THE SPIRIT WHO OPENED THE SCRIPTURES

Someone may fear that so much care with context will turn the Bible into a cold object of study. Watch what happened on the road to Emmaus. Two disciples walked with grief and bewilderment. The risen Christ did not give them a method for extracting secret meanings from their disappointment. Beginning with Moses and the Prophets, He unfolded the things concerning Himself in the Scriptures (Luke 24:25–27). Later they remembered their burning hearts as He opened the Scriptures to them (v. 32); then He opened the disciples' understanding to comprehend them (vv. 44–45). Their hearts were kindled not by leaving the written Word behind, but by meeting Christ through its truth.

The psalmist's prayer is therefore a pastor's prayer: "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law" (Psalm 119:18). He did not ask to become the lawgiver. He asked to behold what he had been given. Paul likewise prayed that believers would receive enlightened understanding of their hope and inheritance in Christ (Ephesians 1:17–19). Scripture can be studied with a cold heart; it can also be handled with a feverish imagination that refuses discipline. Neither is the Spirit's desired work. We need the living God to make the *true* meaning shine upon the conscience.

Francis Turretin expressed the relationship in one memorable line: "The Spirit is the teacher; Scripture is the doctrine which he teaches us." [5] The distinction is not a prison for spiritual life. It protects us from mistaking the movement of our feelings for the voice of God. The

Spirit does not need to contradict His own Word to minister powerfully. He exposes sin, magnifies Christ, strengthens faith, and makes obedience possible through truth (John 16:13–15; 1 Corinthians 2:12–14; Galatians 5:16–25).

We must read Christ's promises concerning the Spirit with the same care we commend elsewhere. He spoke His promise that the Spirit would remind the disciples of His words and guide them into truth immediately to His appointed witnesses (John 14:26; 16:13–15). Their testimony forms part of the church's apostolic foundation (Ephesians 2:19–22). We may rightly seek illumination as believers; we may not quietly promote every private impression to the rank of apostolic testimony. The Spirit opens our eyes to receive God's meaning; He does not grant each reader a new right to manufacture it.

Pastor, think of the anxious person who whispers that a verse seems to mean one thing on the page but that you have announced another meaning as one the Spirit showed you. Will you relieve his fear by explaining the passage—or require him to distrust his careful reading because you speak with spiritual confidence? A shepherd may thank God for fresh understanding and still say, "Test my explanation by the Word." The Spirit of truth needs no immunity from truth's examination.

THE CONGREGATION WITH ITS BIBLE OPEN

The Bereans listened to Paul himself and searched the Scriptures to determine whether his message agreed with what God had written (Acts 17:10–12). Luke does not rebuke them for audacity. He calls their reception noble. Their eagerness to hear and their willingness to examine belonged together. The preacher who demands enthusiasm without examination demands a privilege even an apostle did not require of his hearers.

Nor were the early church's teachers incapable of growth. Apollos spoke with genuine learning and fervor, yet Priscilla and Aquila explained the way of God to him more accurately (Acts 18:24–28). Correction did not destroy his gift. It became more useful. A world of difference exists between a congregation eager to embarrass its leaders and a congregation trained to love truth enough to help its leaders handle it faithfully. Paul required respect for elders and fair procedures when accusations arose (1 Timothy 5:17–20). He did not require silence where the Word was being mishandled.

History supplies a striking witness. At the Diet of Worms in 1521,

Luther refused to set his conscience against what he understood Scripture to require; he said his conscience was "captive to the Word of God." [6] His courage deserves admiration, but not canonization. Luther's interpretations, like ours, must themselves be examined by the Bible. The point is larger than one reformer's courage: a conscience must not be chained to a man or institution where God has not chained it through His Word.

Calvin distinguished Scripture's divine authority from the Spirit's inward work confirming that authority. [7] Owen insisted that faith rests finally upon the truth and authority of God speaking in Scripture, not upon the standing of the person commending it. [8] And J. I. Packer described Scripture as the "instrument of Christ's lordship over his followers." [9] These are not three additional masters of the Christian conscience. They are witnesses pointing beyond themselves. At our best, that is all Christian teachers do: they open the window so that the church sees more of Christ, not more of the man who opened it.

Two rival tyrannies demand resistance. A minister may say, "My office settles what the text means." A reader may say, "My experience settles what the text means." One enthrones the leader; the other enthrones the self. Neither submits to Scripture. The Word confronts both from outside: *What has God said?* Christ gives teachers so that His body grows into maturity in Him (Ephesians 4:11–16), and He gives His people a written witness by which teaching may be tested (Acts 17:11; 1 John 4:1).

So pastors, do not make your congregation choose between revering your ministry and examining your exposition. Invite the question that sends both of you back to the passage. And church member, do not weaponize your right to examine into an excuse to despise your shepherd. Come with the Bible open and a teachable heart, prepared to discover that you were mistaken too. The victory belongs to neither the questioner nor the preacher when the meaning of God's Word prevails. It belongs to the Lord who has spoken.

A LAMP FOR THE NEXT STEP, NOT A MAP OF TOMORROW

The sufficiency of Scripture is often misunderstood at precisely the point where life becomes uncertain. A believer asks, "Which city must I move to? Will the treatment work? Will my daughter return to Christ? Will this business survive?" Those questions are not trivial. They may keep a family awake through the night. But God's Word is

not deficient because it does not disclose every future circumstance. Moses said that the secret things belong to the Lord, while the things revealed belong to His people so that they may obey (Deuteronomy 29:29). The boundary between those two belongs to God, not to our anxiety.

Paul told Timothy that the God-breathed Scriptures make the servant of God wise for salvation through faith in Christ and equip him for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14–17). Peter speaks of all things pertaining to life and godliness in the knowledge of Christ (2 Peter 1:3–4). Neither text promises a forecast of every lawful decision. Their sufficiency is glorious because no needed truth for trusting and obeying God has been withheld. What remains secret is not another shelf of commandments the pastor must claim to have discovered.

God calls His people to seek wisdom, hear counsel, judge circumstances, and make responsible choices (James 1:5; Proverbs 15:22). He forbids deceit and greed, commands care for those entrusted to us, and reminds us that tomorrow's plans stand beneath His will (Colossians 3:9; 1 Timothy 6:6–10; James 4:13–16). He has not promised to select between two permissible jobs for us in a special code. The psalmist calls His Word a lamp to his feet (Psalm 119:105). A lamp does not show every mile ahead; it gives real light for the next faithful step.

Pastor, your people do not need you to counterfeit omniscience in order to comfort them. They need you to say truthfully, "I cannot tell you which treatment will succeed. I can tell you what God commands, what He promises, and who will not forsake you." A minister who admits the limits of his knowledge does not leave his people in darkness. He teaches them the difference between following God's Word and demanding God's secrets. They may walk through a valley without a forecast and still have a Shepherd (Psalm 23:1–4; Romans 8:35–39).

THE SHEPHERD'S RETURN JOURNEY

The most costly moment in ministry may come after discovering that an interpretation was wrong, when the pastor must decide whether those who trusted him will ever hear him say so.

Imagine the Thursday evening when a preacher recognizes what he has overlooked. He has taught a particular verse the same way for years. The context lies open before him, and the conclusion is no longer defensible. He can quietly amend next Sunday's notes, file

away the old outline, and hope nobody remembers. Or he can look honestly at the trail his former teaching has left: the booklet distributed, the counsel repeated, the grieving family still waiting for the promised outcome, the church member who was made to feel disloyal for asking a question. Correcting a page is simple. Retracing that trail requires humility.

James warns teachers that they face stricter judgment (James 3:1); Paul tells Timothy to watch both his life and doctrine because others are affected by them (1 Timothy 4:16). The church was purchased with Christ's blood, not with the preacher's labor (Acts 20:28). A shepherd has no right to use the flock to protect the image of his own infallibility. If his public teaching bound consciences in error, public correction may be necessary. If a private assurance misled a family, he must seek them out privately. He should distinguish the biblical text from his own inference, acknowledge the error without blaming the injured hearer, and give them the sound promise that was obscured (2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Peter 5:2–4).

This is not a demand that every corrected detail become a public spectacle. It is a demand that the correction reach as far as the injury, with judgment suited to its scope. A false charge against a pastor must be handled justly; a pastor's genuine failure must not be buried beneath his office (1 Timothy 5:19–20). The aim is neither humiliation nor reputation management. It is that the sheep may once again recognize the voice of their true Shepherd, whose words cannot fail (John 10:27–29).

Pastor, grace is available to the man who discovers he has spoken beyond Scripture. Do not waste that grace defending the old mistake. The people may be startled to hear you say, "I was wrong." But they will see something more precious than a preacher who never errs: a preacher whose conscience has been mastered by the Word he proclaims. You have not lost authority when you bow before Scripture. You have shown where your authority ends—and where Christ's never does.

BRING ONE INTERPRETATION INTO THE LIGHT

Before turning the page, choose one interpretation that has actually governed your speech or conduct. Not a fashionable error in a distant ministry. A text you preach, a promise you repeat, a duty you resist, or advice you have given in God's name. Lay the Bible beside the exact claim you have made. Then undertake this examination with a pencil,

an open passage, and a willingness to correct what somebody else can see (Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 2:15).

1. Let the Original Hearers Speak First

Read the whole paragraph and its surrounding argument. Identify who speaks, who first receives the words, what occasion called them forth, and what the author meant to accomplish. Ask whether this is promise, command, warning, narrative, or wisdom. Write a single sentence stating what the passage meant *before* it became part of your story. If you cannot write that sentence, you are not yet ready to place a duty upon another conscience.

2. Find the Word That Turned Explanation Into Command

Write your usual interpretation beside the passage. Underline the words in Scripture that genuinely support it; circle the point where you added a "therefore," "always," "must," or "God guarantees." Is that conclusion actually written there, necessarily implied, or merely your preference? Compare clearer passages dealing with the same subject (Matthew 4:5–7; 2 Peter 3:15–17). You may offer sound counsel without calling it a divine decree. Refuse to give your inference a throne.

3. Ask What You Hoped the Verse Would Give You

A hard question may reveal the hidden editor of your interpretation. Did you want certainty about a decision? Protection from correction? A pleasant promise instead of costly obedience? A quick assurance for somebody whose suffering frightened you? Put the motive before the Lord, but do not use it as a substitute for examining the actual wording (Luke 10:29; James 1:22–25). The heart is not the final interpreter; neither is suspicion about the heart an argument against a faithful reading.

4. Name the Person Living Under Your Conclusion

Whom have you counseled, warned, comforted, corrected, or restrained by this interpretation? Imagine that person opening the Bible alone tonight. Could he trace your assertion to the passage? Or would he find only your confidence? If he has lived under a guarantee God never made, consider what fear and disappointment your words may have carried into his home. The flock needs careful feeding, not a burden disguised as bread (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2–3).

5. Take the Correction Where the Words Have Gone

Decide what must happen next. Revise the sermon. Correct the study notes. Speak to the elders. Seek out the wounded member. Tell the family which promise is truly theirs in Christ. Admit the difference between what you said and what Scripture says. Ask for help if the passage remains difficult. Above all, do not congratulate yourself for a better interpretation while leaving someone else captive to the old one (James 3:1; 1 Timothy 4:16). Truth has not completed its ministry in you until you are willing to obey it.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

Axiom One — Scripture's Authority Includes Its Right to Mean What God Intended

God's Word is not raw material for our preferences. His meaning governs our reading; our reading does not confer meaning upon His Word. Understanding requires patient attention to what He actually said through His chosen writers.

> Scripture: Luke 10:25–29; Nehemiah 8:8; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 3:15–17.

Axiom Two — A Correct Quotation Can Carry a False Command

Satan used real words from Psalm 91 to urge Christ toward an act the Father had not commanded. A verse is not being honored when its context is overruled by an application God forbids.

> Scripture: Matthew 4:5–7; Psalm 91:11–12; Deuteronomy 6:16; 2 Peter 3:16.

Axiom Three — A Promise Does Not Become Ours to Redesign Because We Need Comfort

God's promises are precious precisely because they are true. We must not enlarge a promise beyond its intended recipients and purpose, then charge God with failing when our invented guarantee does not come to pass.

> Scripture: Jeremiah 29:10–14; Philippians 4:10–13; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Romans 8:28–39.

Axiom Four — The Clearest Words of God Must Test Our Hardest Interpretations

A difficult verse cannot become an escape hatch from what Scripture teaches plainly elsewhere. Compare Scripture with Scripture; distinguish what is revealed from what you infer; and hold every proposed meaning open to correction by the text.

> Scripture: Acts 17:10–12; Matthew 22:29–32; 2 Peter 3:15–17; Acts 20:27.

Axiom Five — Illumination Opens Our Eyes; It Does Not Make Us New Authors

The Holy Spirit grants understanding of His inspired Word. His help does not authorize a believer to assign meanings at will or make an uncorrectable claim that a private impression has settled a passage's sense.

> Scripture: Psalm 119:18; Ephesians 1:17–19; 1 Corinthians 2:12–14; John 16:13–15.

Axiom Six — Scripture Alone Does Not Mean the Christian Alone

Christ gives teachers, and His church benefits from sound confession, wise counsel, and careful scholarship. These servants help us read; none may become an infallible judge above the Word they teach.

> Scripture: Ephesians 4:11–16; Acts 17:11; Acts 18:24–28; Titus 1:9.

Axiom Seven — The Shepherd Must Correct the Burden His Misreading Placed Upon the Sheep

The pastor's work is not complete when he discovers a better explanation. Where his former teaching bound consciences wrongly or raised false expectations, fidelity requires public truthfulness, personal repentance, patient correction, and renewed care.

> Scripture: James 3:1; 1 Timothy 4:16; Acts 20:28–31; 2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Peter 5:2–4.

BEFORE GOD, WITH THE BIBLE OPEN

The Mirror You Keep Turning Away

Five Questions That Must Be Answered Before God

James compares a hearer who does not obey to a man who looks at his face in a mirror, walks away, and forgets what he saw (James 1:22–25). The mirror was not unclear. The man did not remain before it long enough to be changed. That is a searching picture of what we can do with Scripture. We may read carefully enough to explain another person's error, then turn the mirror away when it begins to disclose our own.

Perhaps you have defended the Bible all your life. Perhaps you teach it. Perhaps you have argued against men who deny its inspiration. None of those things answers the question before God: When Scripture reaches a conclusion you did not want, do you surrender to it—or begin searching for a reading that will spare you?

1. Which Verse Have You Made Say More Than God Promised?

Bring one beloved verse to mind. Have you used it to guarantee success, healing, wealth, reconciliation, or a particular future that its context does not promise? Read the chapter slowly. What consolation remains when you lay aside the promise you supplied? Have you neglected a greater consolation—Christ's sufficient strength in adversity—because you preferred the assurance that adversity would not come?

If you have passed that invented guarantee to someone else, do not merely correct it privately in your notebook. Think of the person who is still waiting for your prediction to come true. Truthfulness may require you to find him and separate God's promise from your own.

2. Who Is Allowed to Tell You That You Have Misread the Text?

A teacher you dislike? An elder who is younger than you? A church member who has studied the passage more carefully? Would you receive a correction from any of them if the text supported it? Or have you arranged your world so that every disagreement counts as ignorance, rebellion, or lack of spiritual understanding?

The Bereans examined apostolic preaching (Acts 17:11). Why should your interpretation enjoy a protection Paul's did not claim?

Name one serious objection to your reading. Answer it from the passage, not from your title, reputation, or frustration.

3. What Are You Seeking to Escape by Reinterpreting an Uncomfortable Command?

The lawyer in Luke 10 knew the duty to love and still tried to narrow its reach. Is there a command whose meaning you have discussed at length because obedience would expose something you want to keep? Have you called a plain duty "complex" when the real complexity is your unwillingness to pay its cost?

Do not confuse the need for careful interpretation with permission to postpone faithful action indefinitely. Ask the Lord to expose the difference between a genuine interpretive difficulty and a convenient one (Luke 10:25–37; James 1:22).

4. Who May Have Learned to Fear God Because You Misrepresented Him?

Imagine a church member whispering, "The pastor said God promised this. It did not happen. What did I do wrong?" Perhaps your words were sincere; perhaps you were repeating what you had once been taught. But intentions cannot repair a wounded conscience. Have you made biblical wisdom an iron law, a general encouragement a guaranteed outcome, or a pastoral inference a condition of salvation?

If someone has been injured by your explanation, will you listen without defending yourself? Will you read the passage with that person and acknowledge what it does not say? The sheep need the truth, and sometimes they need to hear it from the mouth that first obscured it.

5. Have You Learned to Handle Scripture without Coming to the Christ It Reveals?

Jesus told men who searched the Scriptures that they nevertheless refused to come to Him for life (John 5:39–40). They possessed serious religious knowledge and remained distant from its appointed center. Could that be true of you? Have you become more skilled at exposing false interpretations than at confessing your sin, loving Christ, and obeying His Word?

Do not leave this examination with a better technique and an unchanged heart. Bring your misreadings, your pride, and your evasions before the Savior. Receive the correction of His Word as mercy.

He calls His people not merely to win arguments about Scripture, but to abide in His teaching and follow Him (John 8:31–32).

THE SHEPHERD UNDER THE WORD

A Pastoral Examination — Chapter 2

Movement One — The Pastor's Convictions

What Did the Text Say Before You Stood Up?

Pastor, before the sermon found its title, before the illustration delighted you, before the outline began to gather momentum—what was this passage saying? Can you state the writer's argument plainly, without borrowing your sermon language? Would the first hearers recognize the message you are about to place in their hands?

There is a particular temptation for men who love to preach: an idea strikes us with force, and suddenly every verse seems eager to serve it. We begin searching for a passage strong enough to carry an argument we have already decided to make. Scripture then becomes an escort for our convictions instead of their judge. When that happens, will you abandon the beautiful outline to save the truth (2 Timothy 2:15; Titus 1:9)?

Movement Two — Biblical Examination

Can Your Congregation Follow You Through the Passage?

When your people open their Bibles, can they see where your point came from? Do you explain the words that carry the weight of your conclusion, or does the sermon move too quickly from quotation to assertion for anyone to test? Have you distinguished the original meaning from contemporary application, description from command, and biblical promise from pastoral inference?

The Lord rebuked interpreters who were mistaken because they did not understand the Scriptures (Matthew 22:29–32). Paul commanded Timothy to handle the Word rightly (2 Timothy 2:15). What are you doing to ensure that eloquence has not concealed carelessness? Who reads your difficult exegesis before Sunday? Which commentaries challenge your preferred view rather than merely reinforce it? A sermon may feel powerful in the room and still fail the simplest test at the open page.

Movement Three — The Pastor's Teachability

When Did the Word Last Change Your Mind?

Can you name a doctrine, a familiar application, or a cherished interpretation you once taught and later corrected after studying the passage more faithfully? What happened when the correction arrived? Did you make room for it, or did you devote your energy to defending your public consistency?

A pastor may have spent decades gaining the trust of his people. That trust must never become a prison that keeps him from admitting a mistake. If an elder, an earnest student, or a thoughtful church member brings a serious textual objection, will you examine it fairly? Can you say without embarrassment, "I was mistaken, and here is what the passage actually teaches"? The congregation will learn more about Scripture's authority from that confession than from a hundred assertions that the Bible is supreme while your own interpretations remain untouchable (Acts 17:11; Proverbs 12:15).

Movement Four — Responsibility for the Sheep

Who Is Still Carrying Your Mistaken Promise?

Pastor, think of the counsel you gave a couple wrestling with infertility, a father praying for a rebellious child, or a believer facing painful uncertainty. Did you read God's promises carefully, or did your desire to comfort lead you to promise an outcome the passage did not guarantee? What becomes of that family when events unfold differently from what you assured them God had said?

The faithful shepherd does not hide behind the claim that his motives were loving. Love refuses to bind a conscience where God has not bound it. Love also returns when a careless explanation has caused harm. Have you followed up with those who were disappointed? Have you distinguished God's faithfulness from the failure of your interpretation? The flock belongs to Christ and was purchased at immeasurable cost (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2–3).

Movement Five — Accountability to Christ

What Will the Author Say About Your Handling of His Word?

One day the Chief Shepherd will ask us to give account of our

stewardship (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:4). He entrusted us with words that are not ours. We may explain them; we may not rewrite them. We may press their true demands upon conscience; we may not substitute our preferences and announce them as His commands.

What if the cost of correction is real? Suppose it means revisiting a sermon series that brought you praise, withdrawing teaching material carrying your name, or admitting publicly that you used Scripture to defend a policy you ought to have reconsidered. Will the fear of losing authority keep you from submitting to the Authority you preach? Will you protect the appearance of a faultless ministry at the expense of a truthful one (James 3:1; 1 Timothy 4:16)?

And when you stand before Christ, will your people be able to testify that you taught them to examine your sermons by the Word—or that you trained them to treat your interpretation as the final word? Will they remember only how impressive you sounded, or how faithfully you led them to the Savior whose words you were entrusted to teach?

THE SHEPHERD WHO MUST RETURN TO THE TEXT

Pastor, picture your desk after the building is empty. The sermon is still open. So is the passage. For weeks you have sensed an uncomfortable gap between them. You have explained away the questions, appealed to tradition, and told yourself that your larger point was sound. But now the verse sits before you without the meaning you once forced upon it. What will you do with God's words when nobody is watching?

Begin where a shepherd must begin: repent. Do not soften the wrong by calling it merely an unfortunate misunderstanding if pride kept you from investigating what you suspected was false. Confess where you used Scripture to strengthen a conclusion you preferred, silenced careful questions, or bound believers to an application the text did not require. Ezra's people trembled at the Word; the preacher is not exempt from standing beneath it (Ezra 9:4; 1 Timothy 4:16). The pastor cannot call the church to repentance where he refuses to lead it in repentance before God.

Richard Baxter urged pastors to "preach to yourselves the sermons which you study, before you preach them to others." [10] But what happens when the sermon has already gone forth, and the text finally preaches against its author? The Word must still have its way with him. Repentance must travel as far as the error did.

Then teach again, more faithfully. Take the congregation back

through the passage. Show the argument you previously neglected. Explain precisely where the old interpretation departed from the text. Do not make the correction so vague that the people remain uncertain whether the original claim is still binding. Help them see the difference between Scripture's actual promise and the wish you once attached to it. Give them reasons they can follow in their own Bibles (Nehemiah 8:8; 2 Timothy 4:2).

Next, reform the habits that permitted the mistake to flourish. Establish an honest process for examining difficult passages. Invite responsible correction from fellow elders. Train those who teach children and lead Bible studies to distinguish a verse's meaning from personal impressions or applications. Review counseling materials for promises the text cannot bear. A doctrinal statement may proclaim the sufficiency of Scripture while ministry habits quietly teach dependence upon a preacher's unsupported assertions. Bring the habits into line with the confession (Titus 1:9; Ephesians 4:11–16).

John Owen warned, "If the word [does] not dwell with power in us, it will not pass with power from us." [11] A better review procedure may protect future sermons. It cannot humble the man who refuses to acknowledge the error already preached. The reform must reach not only the manuscript, but the heart holding the pen.

And it must reach the people who may have been harmed. The elderly saint who blamed herself when the guaranteed outcome did not occur; the anxious father who believed his child's struggle proved that he had failed a supposed biblical formula; the young man who was told that questioning the pastor's explanation was rebellion—do not demand that they recover simply because you have now recovered the correct exegesis. Sit with them. Listen. Open the text together. Ask forgiveness without concealing the damage behind a speech about your good intentions. A shepherd has not completed his correction until he has also labored to care for the people it affected (Acts 20:28; Galatians 6:1–2).

Then remain faithful when the correction costs you. Some may regard your change as weakness. Others may resent losing the assurances they preferred. Listen to fair criticism; own clumsy implementation; be patient with those whose confidence has been shaken. But do not restore a false interpretation to recover applause. Fidelity is not obstinacy about your methods. It is refusing to let reputation, convenience, or fear reclaim the authority that belongs to God's Word (2 Timothy 4:2–5; 1 Peter 5:3–4).

Robert Murray M'Cheyne wrote, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus." [12] Admitting the mistake may cost you the appearance of being beyond correction. But your people may see something greater than an unblemished reputation: a shepherd who loves Christ's truth more than his own name.

The deepest reform may be quieter than any public announcement. It may occur the next time you prepare to say, "This passage teaches," and you stop because you know you cannot yet prove it. In that pause, a shepherd has begun to love the sheep more than his own certainty. He has remembered whose Word he handles—and whose people must live with what he says.

THE WORD MADE FLESH, AND THE WORD FAITHFULLY HEARD

There is a danger even in a chapter that pleads for faithful interpretation: we might conclude with a method and miss the Person to whom the method must lead. Jesus warned people who searched the Scriptures that they nevertheless refused to come to Him for life (John 5:39–40). You can guard the correct meaning of a verse and still resist its claim upon your heart. Exact exegesis is indispensable; it is not a substitute for repentance and faith.

Jonathan Edwards described spiritual light as "a true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the word of God." [13] A man may parse a sentence correctly while remaining cold toward the Savior whom it reveals. We need more than the skill to trace an argument. We need God to open our eyes to the glory shining through His Word (2 Corinthians 4:6).

After the resurrection, Jesus opened the Scriptures to two discouraged disciples and showed how Moses and the Prophets bore witness to His suffering and glory (Luke 24:25–27). Their problem was not that the ancient words had become insufficient. They had not yet understood what those words were revealing about Him. The Savior did not flatter their misunderstandings. He corrected them and gave them a clearer sight of Himself.

This is what faithful interpretation must ultimately serve. The Scriptures disclose the Holy One who fulfilled the Father's will, died for sinners, rose from the dead, and calls us to follow Him. John says he recorded the signs so readers might believe Jesus is the Christ and have life in His name (John 20:30–31). The Bible was not given to be

a quarry from which we extract verses to support our ambitions. It is God's true witness to His Son and His will.

Spurgeon called Christ Jesus "the sum and substance of the gospel." [14] Not because doctrine can be discarded, but because every saving doctrine leads us toward Him. We may describe the frame with scholarly precision and still fail our hearers if we leave the portrait of Christ veiled. Open the Scriptures until they see whom God has revealed (2 Corinthians 3:18).

If you have misused Scripture, mercy remains for the one who confesses it. If you have been crushed beneath words falsely presented as God's, Christ does not ask you to keep carrying what He never placed upon you. Come to Him in the Gospel. You need not make a text say what you want in order to find sufficient grace. His actual promises are better than the guarantees we invent, because they remain true when our inventions fall apart (Romans 8:31–39; Hebrews 4:14–16).

M'Cheyne gave this counsel: "For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ." [15] That does not excuse the pastor who must correct his harm. It rescues repentance from becoming another prison of self. Neither the wounded believer nor the penitent minister finds lasting refuge by staring at the failure. Both must look to the Savior whose truth corrects and whose mercy receives (Hebrews 4:14–16).

Pastor, open the Bible once more—but do not stand above it. Bring your cleverest interpretations, your longest service, and your deepest convictions beneath the judgment of the words before you. Let the passage correct you before you attempt to correct the church. Let its true meaning lead the sheep, not to your authority, but to the authority and mercy of Jesus Christ.

He is not honored when we make His Word say more than He has spoken. He is honored when we believe what He has said—and obey Him.

KEY SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR THE READER

Authority and faithful interpretation: Psalm 19:7–11; 2 Timothy 2:14–16; 3:14–17; 2 Peter 3:15–17; Nehemiah 8:8; Acts 17:10–12.

Scripture abused and Scripture obeyed: Matthew 4:5–7 with Psalm 91:11–12 and Deuteronomy 6:16; Luke 10:25–37; Matthew 22:29–32; James 1:22–25.

Promises read in context: Philippians 4:10–13; Jeremiah 29:10–14; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Romans 8:28–39; James 4:13–16.

The Spirit, Christ's teachers, and the sufficiency of the Word:

Psalm 119:18; John 14:26; 16:13–15; Ephesians 1:17–19; 2:19–22; 4:11–16; 2 Peter 1:3–4; 1 Corinthians 2:12–14.

The shepherd's responsibility and the believer's refuge: James 3:1; Acts 20:28–31; 1 Timothy 4:16; 2 Timothy 4:2–5; 1 Peter 5:2–4; Luke 24:25–27; John 5:39–40; John 20:30–31; Hebrews 4:14–16.

SOURCE NOTES

1 *The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), chapter 1, paragraphs 1, 6, and 10, on the written Word as the sufficient and infallible rule and the Spirit's work in receiving Scripture. Exact text at https://1689confession.org/the-holy-scriptures/. The phrase "only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule" comes from paragraph 1.

2 FirstLove Ministries, publisher's description of W. R. Downing, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Issues, History, and Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, "Description," https://www.firstloveministries.org/product/an-introduction-to-biblical-hermaneneutics/ (accessed October 17, 2026).

3 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (De Doctrina Christiana), Book I, chapter 36, sections 40–41, translated in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, volume 2, edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1887), available at https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/12021.htm and https://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.xxxvi.html. Augustine compares a mistaken interpretation with wandering from the road; the paragraph above paraphrases the comparison.

4 *The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), chapter 1, paragraph 9, "Of the Holy Scriptures," https://1689confession.org/the-holy-scriptures/. The quoted opening sentence is reproduced accurately from the historic text; note the original spelling variants among editions.

5 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), topic 2, question 2, section IX; quoted in "Francis Turretin on The Holy Scriptures," Semper Reformanda, "Second Question: The Necessity of Scripture," https://www.semper-reformanda.fr/theologien/turretin_francis_on_the_holy_scripture.html (accessed October 17, 2026).

6 Martin Luther, response at the Diet of Worms, April 18, 1521, transcribed in *German History in Documents and Images*, "Luther and Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms (1521)," https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/luther-and-emperor-charles-v-at-the-diet-of-worms-1521. The shorter quotation about conscience being captive to God's Word is preserved in this documentary translation. The disputed "Here I stand" formula is deliberately excluded.

7 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.vii.5, Henry Beveridge translation (1845), available at https://www.calvininstitutes.org/book-1/1-7. Calvin distinguishes the divine authority of Scripture from the Spirit's confirming testimony; the present chapter paraphrases his distinction.

8 John Owen, *Pneumatologia*, Book I, chapter 5, "Divine Revelation Itself the Only Foundation and Reason of Faith," in *The Works of John Owen*, available at https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/pneum/pneum.i.xi.ix.html. Owen grounds faith in God's own authority revealing itself in Scripture, not in the status of the one commending it.

9 J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), "Authority: God Governs His People Through Scripture." Reproduced at https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/packer/06authority.html. Quoted phrase: "instrument of Christ's lordship over his followers."

10 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), part I, "The Oversight of Ourselves," section 1 ("The Nature of This Oversight"), instruction 2. The quoted phrase is from his admonition that ministers apply their own sermons to themselves. Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/baxter/pastor.all.html (see also https://www.preceptaustin.org/the-reformed-pastor-richard-baxter).

11 John Owen, *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and*

Communion of Evangelical Churches, part II, chapter V ("The Especial Duty of Pastors of Churches"), on the experience of the Word's power in the preacher; *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 16, p. 76. Owen's original reads "If the word do not dwell"; "[does]" in the chapter transparently modernizes this grammatical form without changing the sense. Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/evangelicalchurches/evangelicalchurches.iii.ix.html.

12 Robert Murray M'Cheyne, letter to the Rev. Dan. Edwards, October 2, 1840, "Holiness and success," in Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1894), Monergism electronic edition, https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/bonar/MemoirandRemainsRevAndrewBonar.pdf.

13 Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to Be Both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine" (1734), section II ("What This Spiritual Light Is"), defining saving apprehension of the divine excellence disclosed by Scripture. Primary sermon text: https://www.union-publishing.org/resource/a-divine-and-supernatural-light/ and https://ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works2.all.html.

14 C. H. Spurgeon, "The First Sermon in the Tabernacle," sermon no. 369, delivered March 25, 1861, on Acts 5:42, in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 7. Original sermon (wording verified): https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons07.vii_1.html and https://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/the-first-sermon-in-the-tabernacle.

15 Robert Murray M'Cheyne, letter to George Shaw, printed in Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966), p. 293. The quoted sentence and surrounding context are reproduced at https://www.thetrails.org/blog/post/for-every-look-at-yourself-take-ten-looks-at-christ and https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2006/the-treasury-of-robert-murray-mcheyne-1813-1843/.

CHAPTER 3

The Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets

> Ephesians 2:19–20: "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone."

WHEN A TITLE ASKS FOR THE KEYS TO YOUR CONSCIENCE

Imagine a church meeting near its close. A visiting minister has been introduced as an apostle appointed to govern churches in the region. He has preached with conviction, prayed over families, and spoken movingly about the congregation's future. Then comes a different sort of announcement: the elders must submit their plans to his direction because his authority is apostolic. One member asks where Christ has given this man such power. Instead of opening the Scriptures, the visiting minister returns to the title. *He is an apostle. You must recognize the office.*

This is an illustrative scene, not a report about a named church. Yet it exposes the moment when a title can become a command. The next order may concern where a family must live, what an elder may teach, or whether a frightened believer may question what he heard. No one is asking whether the visitor has gifts. They are asking whether Christ has entrusted him with authority over people purchased with His blood. A title is being offered as a substitute for a commission.

If the church accepts the exchange, it has handed a man the keys to rooms in the conscience that belong to its Lord.

John Owen called the use of church power not granted by Christ "an invasion of his right and dominion." [1] The offense begins before the decree is harsh or the money is lost: a servant has taken a place at the door of another believer's conscience that only its Lord may occupy (Matthew 20:25–28; 2 Corinthians 4:5).

The visitor's claim rests upon a distinction the congregation must not lose. Christ still gives teachers to His people; He does not therefore give each teacher a share in the authority of the men who first bore His commissioned witness (Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Peter 5:2–4). Yet watch how quickly the distinction can vanish. The title is announced; gratitude hardens into allegiance; allegiance becomes the measure of spirituality. At last the church member stops asking, *What did Christ command?* and begins asking, *What will happen if I disobey this man?* The change may take place without a single page of the Bible being closed.

Pastor, that is not merely another person's temptation. You may never have called yourself an apostle. Have you ever wanted the kind of influence that makes a congregation stop asking for biblical reasons? Has gratitude for your labor become an expectation that your judgment will be treated as God's? The desire to be trusted is understandable. The desire to be beyond examination is dangerous. A shepherd can covet an apostle's unshared authority without ever coveting his title.

Richard Baxter refused to exempt respected ministers from this danger: "some able godly men have been too lordly." [2] A gifted preacher may guard every doctrinal boundary in his sermon and trample the boundary of Christ's authority in his dealings with the flock. The same Bible that corrects false apostles must also correct the pastor who enjoys being beyond question (1 Peter 5:2–3).

The earlier chapters tested claimed words from God and the misuse of words God has truly spoken. A deeper question now presses upon both: Who was commissioned to give the church its founding witness, and what happens when a later minister demands the place Christ gave those witnesses? We must answer from the Scriptures, because the people who stand upon that foundation are not pieces on a theological diagram. They are Christ's blood-bought household.

THE CORNERSTONE IN A HOUSE OF FORMER ENEMIES

Before we argue about the builders, look at the people inside the house. Paul addresses Gentiles who once stood outside Israel's covenant privileges, strangers to the promises, "having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:11–12). Then Christ intervened. His blood brought the far-off near; His cross reconciled Jew and Gentile to God in one body, destroying an enmity no human settlement could cure (vv. 13–18). The foundation matters because these are the people it carries: former enemies brought home to the Father.

Only then does Paul call these once-alienated people citizens, family members, and living parts of God's dwelling place (vv. 19–22). The church rests upon the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ Himself as its chief cornerstone. The picture is not principally of impressive offices arranged beneath lesser offices. It is the wonder of sinners brought home through one Savior, gathered into one household, and joined into one holy temple in which God dwells by His Spirit.

Matthew Henry saw the union beneath the architecture: "In him both Jews and Gentiles meet, and constitute one church." [3] The astonishing thing is not that once-divided people found a stronger human leader. They were brought to God through the cross of Christ. When a minister makes himself indispensable to that union, he shifts the church's gaze from its Redeemer to its administrator (Ephesians 2:14–18).

That is why Christ must remain visible whenever we discuss the foundation. A cornerstone governs the building's alignment; in Paul's image, Christ gives it unity and determines its truth. Calvin put the matter with needed precision: "He alone supports the whole church." [4] The apostles did not create a second source of salvation beneath Him. They proclaimed the Christ upon whom the whole house depends. Their foundational place is real because their commissioned witness to Him is real (1 Corinthians 3:10–11; Luke 24:44–48).

Picture a man arriving to pour another foundation inside a house where a family already lives. He promises greater strength; the first blow of his hammer announces that the house which sheltered them yesterday cannot be trusted tomorrow. That is what must be tested when a leader tells Christians they cannot become a complete church until restored apostles govern them. *Was Christ's original foundation insufficient?* The speaker may passionately confess Jesus as Lord. The

question is whether the practical consequence of his claim makes the church's stability depend upon an authority Scripture assigns to its founding. A doctrine can be denied in practice while it is affirmed aloud.

Spurgeon refused to let size, antiquity, or prestige substitute for Christ: "it is not Christ's Church if it is not built upon Christ!" [5] Paul leaves no room for another: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). Numbers can fill a building. An apostolic title can fill a platform. Neither can bear the weight of one redeemed soul. The church must be taught where its weight truly rests (1 Corinthians 3:11; 1 Peter 2:6).

Paul finishes the picture with a greater wonder than any human title could offer: believers "are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22). Do you see the consequence? God's presence is not withheld from a reconciled people until an impressive new ruler arrives. He has brought them near through His Son and made them His dwelling. The household does not need a new owner. It needs to recognize who brought it home. That raises the question of the men whose testimony Christ placed beneath its feet.

THE MEN WHO COULD NOT APPOINT THEMSELVES

If these men were appointed to bear a witness upon which Christ's household would stand, their calling cannot be measured by the size of their audiences. Look at the vacancy left by Judas. The eleven sought someone who had accompanied the Lord through His earthly ministry and could testify to His resurrection; Peter stated the conditions for *that vacancy among the Twelve* (Acts 1:21–22). The church did not hold auditions for the most compelling personality in Jerusalem. It prayed before God, who knows human hearts, and received Matthias (Acts 1:23–26). The issue was not whose presence could command a crowd, but who could bear the witness the Lord had appointed.

Calvin insisted that Paul's apostolic authority depended "not on the judgment or opinion of men, but exclusively on the calling of God." [6] A church may recognize a faithful elder and send a missionary; it cannot manufacture the risen Christ's original commission. Confusing those two actions turns an act of congregational stewardship into a claim about heaven's authority (Galatians 1:1; Acts 14:23).

We must read Acts 1 carefully. Its historical qualifications for Judas's replacement should not become a wooden formula that every person called an apostle elsewhere in the New Testament must satisfy.

Paul, for example, had not walked with Jesus from John's baptism onward. Yet he did not claim that talent or a successful ministry made him an apostle. He testified that the risen Lord appeared to him (1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8), and that his commission came through Jesus Christ and God the Father (Galatians 1:1). His encounter was exceptional, not a method churches could reproduce by voting a gifted man into the apostolic company.

Paul's own description should humble anyone eager for the honor. He called himself one "born out of due time" and "the least of the apostles," remembering that he had persecuted God's church (1 Corinthians 15:8–10). To him the office was not a staircase toward prominence. It was mercy received from the Christ he had opposed. When he defended his commission, he defended the gospel entrusted to him, not the prestige of an invented title (Galatians 1:11–12; 2 Corinthians 4:5).

Even after Paul's extraordinary calling is recognized, an objection remains: the New Testament also calls other men *apostles*. Yes—and honesty about the word protects the very distinction at issue. Barnabas is described with Paul as an apostle in Acts 14:14; elsewhere the term denotes a messenger or church representative (Philippians 2:25; 2 Corinthians 8:23). To be *sent* is not necessarily to possess the founding commission of the Twelve or Paul. The distinction is not verbal hair-splitting. If missionary service alone grants foundational jurisdiction, a legitimate title of service has been enlarged until it can command another believer's conscience.

J. C. Ryle wrote of the apostles' special authority to settle the church's disputed questions: "In discharging it they had no successors. With them it began, and with them it expired." [7] He was speaking of that founding commission, not denying the continuing need for ordinary preachers and messengers. The distinction protects their genuine service from being inflated into a power Christ never entrusted to them (Ephesians 2:20; 2 Timothy 2:2).

Here the question becomes personal again. When a minister claims to be Christ's contemporary counterpart to Paul, what evidence could possibly establish that claim? A thriving network, remarkable attendance, personal revelations, and persuasive stories are not the historical commission Paul received. Lloyd-Jones, preaching on Ephesians 2, insisted that the foundation includes the apostles' witness and teaching and cannot be added to or subtracted from by succeeding

generations. [8] The church may honor missionary courage without pretending it restores a founding office.

And pastor, let that distinction search more than your theology. Christ has not required you to become another Paul; He has required you to be faithful with the Gospel Paul preached. Would it diminish your ministry to tell the congregation, "I am a steward, not a foundation; test what I say by the apostolic Word" (Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 4:1–2)? If such a confession feels like a loss of influence, you have discovered how readily the desire to serve Christ can become the desire to occupy a place He never gave. The apostles' *commission*, however, is only half our inquiry. What did the Spirit entrust to them for the church?

WHAT THE SPIRIT REVEALED THROUGH THE FOUNDERS

Their commission tells us why the apostles and prophets could not appoint themselves. Their message tells us why the church cannot dispense with them. Paul moves from the household's foundation in Ephesians 2 to the mystery now disclosed by the Spirit to Christ's holy apostles and prophets in Ephesians 3:3–5. What mystery? Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ through the Gospel (v. 6). The founding authority was given to announce what Christ had accomplished, not to create a second source of spiritual rule.

Pause over that revelation. Men who once stood outside have been brought into one inheritance. Old hostilities do not get the final word. Christ has formed one people through His cross. The Spirit disclosed this great new-covenant reality through witnesses appointed to announce it. The foundation was not a collection of private forecasts about future marriages, political events, or personal prosperity. It was Christ's saving truth given to His church with divine authority (Ephesians 1:9–10; Colossians 1:25–27).

There is an important precision here. It would be inaccurate to argue that every true revelation received during the apostolic period was written into Scripture. The New Testament itself records revelations and prophetic acts without preserving every word spoken (Acts 11:27–28; 21:10–11). Nor must every miracle in the first churches have been performed by an apostle. Our claim is narrower and stronger: the foundational apostles and prophets served a distinctive revelatory work in Christ's establishing of the new-covenant household.

A different question—whether all claimed present-day charismatic experiences are the same gifts—requires its own careful treatment in the chapters ahead.

John Owen distinguished Christ's extraordinary apostolic appointment from ordinary, continuing church offices, and concluded of the foundational apostolic power, "this office and power doth absolutely cease." [9] Owen's conclusion does not replace Paul's argument; it bears witness to a reading tested from Paul's texts. That order matters. We must never replace the assertion "God told me" with the equally unexamined assertion "Owen told me." Every human teacher must finally stand before the words of the apostles he is explaining.

If this extraordinary task belonged to the church's founding, does its completion leave succeeding believers with less of the Holy Spirit? No. That would mistake the ending of one commission for the departure of the One who gave it. The Spirit still gives life, exposes sin, opens the Scriptures, produces holy affections, sustains the suffering, and gathers Christ's people to their Lord (John 16:8–15; Romans 8:9–16; Galatians 5:22–25). Completing a foundation is not the Builder's eviction. But because this message came with divine authority, God did more than command His witnesses to proclaim it. He also testified to their proclamation.

THE SIGNS WERE WITNESSES, NOT A NEW SOURCE OF LAW

How did God distinguish the Gospel's first witnesses from another assembly of religious speakers claiming certainty? Hebrews gives one part of the answer. Salvation was first spoken by the Lord, confirmed to those who came later by those who heard Him, and God Himself bore witness through signs, wonders, miracles, and distributions of the Holy Spirit according to His will (Hebrews 2:3–4). The signs did not supply a new Gospel alongside Christ's words. They testified to the message and the witnesses by whom it reached the church.

The writer does not give a calendar date on which every extraordinary phenomenon would disappear. We should not force him to say what he does not say. Yet he gives the reader a purpose that cannot be ignored: *God bore witness.* Paul likewise cites signs, wonders, and mighty deeds to defend his apostleship (2 Corinthians 12:12). His appeal is not to a stage performance that made Corinth admire him. It is God's authentication amid the patient sufferings of a messenger whom some Corinthians despised.

That claim must be distinguished from the false assertion that only apostles ever performed miracles. Stephen and Philip were not among the Twelve, yet the Lord worked extraordinary signs through them (Acts 6:8; 8:5–7). Their ministry does not detach those signs from the apostolic Gospel they proclaimed. Nor does the biblical purpose of signs mean that God is now incapable of answering the prayers of His people, healing the sick according to His will, or governing events in providence (James 5:13–16; Ephesians 3:20). Cessationism is not a confession that Christ has become powerless.

B. B. Warfield called the extraordinary gifts "part of the credentials of the Apostles" in the founding of the church. [10] A. W. Pink likewise connected the extraordinary founding officers with extraordinary gifts, arguing that the lack of successors to those officers had consequences for the continuance of their attesting functions. [11] Both witnesses advance a historical-theological interpretation. They do not relieve us of the responsibility to distinguish what Hebrews explicitly says, what the wider apostolic record supports, and what conclusions require careful inference.

What happens when that distinction disappears in ministry? An audience may be taught to treat astonishing reports as credentials that place the speaker beyond ordinary scrutiny. A claim to have healed someone becomes authority to direct a marriage, demand an offering, or silence a dissenting elder. But even a genuinely extraordinary event would not make a man the owner of another Christian's conscience. In Deuteronomy 13:1–4, Israel was warned that a sign could accompany a call away from the true God. In Galatians 1:8–9, Paul forbade receiving a contrary gospel even from a messenger claiming heavenly status. Power claimed is not doctrine proved.

Believer, you need not apologize for asking what a reported sign is being made to prove. Pastor, you have not dishonored God's power when you refuse to turn amazement into obedience to a man. Let the event be examined honestly; then let the message be tested by the Gospel (1 John 4:1–3; 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22). The more extraordinary the claim, the less willing a shepherd should be to let excitement take the place of truth. Yet a thoughtful reader will raise another question: if the apostolic assignment belonged to the founding, why does Paul list apostles among Christ's gifts for the church's ongoing growth?

THE WORD "UNTIL" CANNOT REBUILD WHAT IS FINISHED

That question brings us directly to Ephesians 4, and we must not evade its force. The ascended Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints and the edifying of His body, "till we all come to the unity of the faith" and maturity in Him (Ephesians 4:11–13). Some Christians therefore conclude that every office named must continue in the same form until Christ returns. We should grant the real force of their appeal before asking whether Paul's words require that conclusion.

Notice Paul's purpose before deciding the duration of each function. The whole body is to grow into its Head, Christ. Believers must no longer be children tossed about by every wind of doctrine; speaking truth in love, each part serves to build up the whole (vv. 14–16). Christ's gifts are not designed to multiply rival centers of authority. They are designed to rescue His people from instability and bring them to maturity in Him.

Paul guarantees the church the continuing benefit of Christ's provision; he does not explicitly say that each category of worker must be recreated in an identical form in every century. The foundational witnesses can continue to serve the church through the apostolic truth they entrusted to it, while evangelists and pastors and teachers labor to bring people into maturity through that truth. This reading must be tested, not merely asserted: Ephesians 2:20 calls the apostles and prophets foundational; Ephesians 3:5 identifies their revelatory work; Acts and Paul's letters show the character of their commission. The word *until* secures the church's destination. By itself it does not confer a founding commission upon later applicants for its offices.

The same distinction controls 1 Corinthians 12:28: "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers" describes God's ordering of gifts, not a ceremony by which later leaders inherit the commission of the first witnesses. Watch how the New Testament speaks about what must be handed on. The Jerusalem believers continued in "the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42). Timothy was to guard the entrusted pattern of sound words and commit the teaching to faithful men who could teach others (2 Timothy 1:13–14; 2:2). What travels from generation to generation is the apostolic truth, not a fresh right to found the church again.

This distinction reaches the pew before it reaches the theological library. Suppose a believer thinks, *Unless a living apostle tells us God's*

next instruction, our church cannot grow into maturity. Ephesians 4, written to steady people against doctrinal winds, has now been made to create dependence on a new authoritative voice. But Christ gives teachers to train discernment, not to replace it. A pastor should rejoice when the people he serves can test his sermons more carefully than when they first arrived (Ephesians 4:13–16; Hebrews 5:12–14). If the founders' words can still mature a living church, what precisely have those words left in its keeping?

THE INHERITANCE STILL SPEAKS

The founding witnesses have died, yet the church is not gathered around their empty chairs. Their witness still addresses it. Jude calls believers to contend for "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). That phrase does not by itself fix the date when the final New Testament book was written. It does tell us something precious: the church receives the faith; it does not wait for a succession of religious innovators to compose a replacement. The death of the messenger did not bury the message.

Paul told the Thessalonians to hold fast the teaching delivered by the apostles (2 Thessalonians 2:15), and Timothy to guard the good deposit through the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 1:13–14). Peter did not imagine a church left helpless after his departure; he wrote so that believers could recall the things he had taught after his death (2 Peter 1:12–15). The departure of the messenger did not require another messenger with equal founding authority. It required the church to remember and obey what Christ had entrusted through him.

Here is the neglected comfort in the doctrine of a completed foundation: the weakest congregation does not possess a weaker Gospel because its preacher lacks an extraordinary title. A church meeting in a modest room, with an aging pastor and a handful of believers, can possess the same apostolic teaching, the same crucified and risen Christ, and the same indwelling Spirit as the church in Corinth or Ephesus (1 Corinthians 1:2–9; Ephesians 2:21–22). Its poverty may be real. Its need of holiness and instruction may be urgent. But it has not been left with a deficient Savior until some celebrated figure agrees to visit.

That does not abolish biblical pastors or elders. Christ calls them to feed, protect, correct, and oversee His flock (Acts 20:28–31; 1 Peter 5:1–4). Their authority is real but *ministerial*: they minister Christ's Word; they do not legislate another gospel. Owen describes church

rule as "organical and ministerial only," not sovereign or absolute. [12] The elder who obeys his commission will explain a command Christ has given and will refuse to bind a conscience by one Christ has not given. He will not be ashamed to say, "The Lord has not told us that."

Such restraint can seem unimpressive next to the leader who promises to disclose tomorrow before sunrise. Yet the pastor who says, "God has not told us that," has done something that spectacle cannot do: he has kept the boundary between God's wisdom and his own (Deuteronomy 29:29; 1 Corinthians 4:6). He may still guide, warn, and plead. He must not make uncertainty disappear by turning advice into revelation. And when this boundary is ignored, its cost is not paid merely in a doctrine of church government. Someone carries it home.

THE COST OF GIVING A MAN THE FOUNDERS' CHAIR

Picture the kitchen table six months after a church visitor pronounced a decree over a young couple. They had been weighing a move, seeking counsel, and considering two lawful paths. The visitor claimed apostolic authority to command them to stay and invest their savings in his ministry's expansion; their own pastor, though troubled, remained silent. Now the couple studies the thin balance in their account. They are not only asking how to recover their money. They are asking whether even to question the decision is to rebel against God. The visitor has gone home. His supposed decree is still living in theirs.

This is an illustrative case, not an allegation about a particular individual. It exposes how a false claim of office can convert prudential advice into a demand dressed as divine law. The couple may have needed wisdom from faithful elders. They did not need an unreviewable command from someone invoking an extraordinary jurisdiction. Scripture calls believers to seek counsel and make decisions under God's revealed will (Proverbs 15:22; James 4:13–16); it does not surrender their freedom to an unsupported modern apostolic decree.

The injury rarely stops with the decision. In a church ruled by such claims, a wife may learn to swallow her warning; an elder may keep the peace by refusing to open the passage; a young believer may conclude that silence is the price of belonging. The next question is no longer, *What has Christ commanded?* It is, *What will this man do if I disagree?* The confession may still declare Jesus Lord. The disputed decision reveals which voice is functioning as lord.

Pastor, what has your silence permitted? Perhaps you have never

endorsed a modern apostle. Have you allowed a visiting personality to make claims you would never allow from the ordinary pulpit? Have you accepted a financial appeal that would not survive careful biblical examination because confronting it might embarrass an admired guest? The flock will live with the instructions it hears under your watch. Acts 20:28 does not ask whether the visitor was popular. It asks whether you took heed to the flock Christ purchased.

What would faithfulness require of the pastor now? Not suspicion toward every gifted visitor, and not reflexive defense of the congregation's leaders. It requires him to open Scripture with those he serves, listen to the quiet person whose serious concern was ignored, and examine the facts fairly (Acts 17:11; 1 Timothy 5:19–20). If he failed to question a claim made under his watch, he must say so. If people were pressured by a duty Christ never imposed, he must distinguish the Lord's commands from that man's demands and help them address the consequences. Christ did not purchase a flock so that its members would be afraid to open His Word.

BRING ONE CLAIM OF AUTHORITY INTO THE LIGHT

The young couple in that illustrative scene cannot be helped by a church that merely announces its doctrine of apostleship more loudly. Someone must examine the particular claim that governed their decision. And so must we. Name one demand that has actually shaped a decision in your church, home, or ministry—not a sensational rumor from elsewhere. Write the words as they were spoken. Then, with the Scriptures open, take five steps to discover whether obedience to a man was falsely presented as obedience to Christ (Acts 17:11; 1 John 4:1).

1. Write the Exact Authority Claim

Did the speaker offer biblical teaching, ordinary counsel, a personal impression, or an allegedly binding apostolic decree? Copy the actual words rather than what you now suspect he meant. A faithful pastor can give firm counsel; he may not enlarge his office by withholding the biblical grounds for it (1 Peter 5:2–3; 2 Corinthians 1:24). The examination begins by refusing to let tone substitute for authority.

2. Ask Who Gave This Office Its Commission

Compare the speaker's claim with Christ's appointed witnesses in Acts 1:21–26, Paul's account of his own calling (Galatians 1:1, 11–12;

1 Corinthians 9:1), and the foundation described in Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5. Is this a legitimate description of missionary service, or a claim to the authority of Christ's founding apostles? Which passage supplies the office the speaker says he holds? A title inherited from an organization is not proof of a commission from the risen Lord.

3. Trace What the Claim Has Required of Others

Has it demanded money, a marriage decision, secrecy, submission to a network, abandonment of an ordinary church, or silence when difficult questions arise? Some of those actions may be appropriate in other circumstances; what matters is whether Scripture supports the claimed divine obligation. Write the difference between biblical command, wise counsel, and human demand (2 Corinthians 9:7; James 4:13–16; 1 Peter 5:3).

4. Test the Fruit without Confusing Fruit with Warrant

A ministry may be busy, generous, and emotionally moving. Those goods do not make every assertion true. Ask whether its leaders welcome biblical examination, correct errors, protect weak members, and direct attention to Christ rather than to their rank (Matthew 7:15–20; Acts 20:28–31; 2 Corinthians 4:5). Don't substitute gossip for proof. But do not substitute visible success for God's authorization either.

5. Obey the Word Where the Claim Has Failed

When the claim fails the biblical test, the work has only begun. Identify the correction that must actually be made: seek sound counsel, retract an accusation you repeated, release a promise extracted through improper pressure where you lawfully can, report coercion or abuse through responsible channels, restore a neglected duty. Do not mistake resentment for discernment, or the exposure of error for the completion of obedience (Galatians 5:1; 1 Peter 5:2–4). What Christ has not commanded must not continue to govern the conscience merely because everyone has grown accustomed to it.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

Axiom One — Christ the Cornerstone Is the Source of the Church's Unity, Not an Honorary Part of Its Structure

The church consists of sinners brought near through Christ's blood

and joined into one dwelling place of God. No leader or network can become the center around which that household must gather. Christ determines its unity, its truth, and its life.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11–22; 1 Corinthians 3:10–11; 1 Peter 2:4–6.

Axiom Two — The Apostles and Prophets Belong to the Church's Founding, Not to a Cycle of Repeated Foundations

Paul calls the apostles and prophets foundational and connects their work with the revelation of Christ's Gospel. Every generation benefits from that founding witness; no generation is authorized to perform it again merely by need, enthusiasm, or institutional appointment.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:20; 3:3–6; Acts 2:42; Jude 3.

Axiom Three — Being Sent Does Not by Itself Make a Man an Apostle of Christ's Foundational Rank

The New Testament uses the language of sending for various workers. The distinctive commission of the Twelve and Paul rests upon Christ's appointment and their witness to the risen Lord, not upon ministry effectiveness or a title bestowed by colleagues.

Scripture: Acts 1:21–26; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8–10; Galatians 1:1; Philippians 2:25.

Axiom Four — The Foundation's Revelation Announced Christ's New-Covenant People, Not Private Sovereignty Over Them

The mystery revealed to Christ's apostles and prophets includes Gentiles becoming fellow heirs in His one body. An interpreter who converts the claim of revelation into power over the flock has inverted the purpose of the revelation he claims to honor.

Scripture: Ephesians 3:3–6; 2:13–18; Colossians 1:25–27; 2 Corinthians 4:5.

Axiom Five — Signs Attest God's Message; They Do Not Grant a Man Permission to Change It

Hebrews identifies signs and wonders as part of God's witness to the Gospel confirmed by the Lord's hearers. Their founding role does not authorize a modern claimant to override the written faith, nor does it deny God's ability to answer prayer according to His will.

> Scripture: Hebrews 2:3–4; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Acts 6:8; 8:6–7; Galatians 1:8–9.

Axiom Six — Christ's Continuing Care for His Church Does Not Require New Foundational Offices

Christ continues to equip His people through gifted servants so that the body grows toward maturity. The abiding benefit of foundational apostolic teaching does not require each later servant to receive the apostles' original commission.

> Scripture: Ephesians 4:11–16; 2 Timothy 1:13–14; 2:2; Acts 20:28.

Axiom Seven — The Apostolic Inheritance Remains Present Through Its Teaching and the Indwelling Spirit

The church has not been deserted by Christ because the first witnesses have departed. It possesses a delivered faith to guard, Scripture to teach, and the living Spirit who builds believers together as God's dwelling place.

> Scripture: Jude 3; 2 Peter 1:12–15; Ephesians 2:21–22; John 14:16–17.

Axiom Eight — Pastoral Authority Is Received from Christ and Must Never Be Converted Into Sovereignty Over His Sheep

Elders must feed, protect, and correct with genuine courage. Their authority remains subject to Christ's Word; they may not bind consciences by invented decrees, use fear to enforce loyalty, or claim the founding jurisdiction entrusted to the apostles.

Scripture: 1 Peter 5:1–4; Acts 20:28–31; 2 Corinthians 1:24; 1 Timothy 5:19–20.

BEFORE GOD, WITH THE BIBLE OPEN

When You Discover Who Has Been Holding the Keys

Five Questions That Must Be Answered Before God

Eight truths may be clear on the page while another authority still rules the heart. The longing for an extraordinary voice often begins in a real burden: a decision too painful to make, a future we cannot see, a desire to belong to something remarkable. We want someone close enough to touch who can settle what God has left for prayer, counsel, and faithful judgment. A pastor may expose false apostles and still nurture the same dependence upon himself. Before God, the examination is no longer only *Who claimed authority?* It is *Why was I so ready to surrender what belonged to Christ?*

1. Whose Approval Have You Feared Losing More Than Christ's?

Think of a teaching or directive that troubled your conscience. Did you refrain from examining it because the speaker was celebrated, because friends admired him, or because leaving his approval might cost you a place in the ministry? The fear of man sets a snare (Proverbs 29:25). Name the person whose displeasure has become more frightening than your Lord's. Ask what obedience you postponed to preserve that relationship (Galatians 1:10).

Notice what fear can accomplish without a single extraordinary title. One man's displeasure becomes enough to settle a question your open Bible would have left unsettled. If you can name the person, you can begin to loosen the snare. What would you have to say or do this week if you feared Christ's judgment more than that person's disappointment?

2. Have You Confused an Impressive Ministry with an Authoritative Commission?

The fear of losing a man's approval can grow into something almost like faith in his greatness. Perhaps you witnessed an answer to prayer, heard a moving testimony, or received help from a gifted preacher. Give thanks for whatever was genuine. But where did gratitude turn

into surrender of judgment? Hebrews 2:3–4 describes signs as God's witness to the Gospel; Galatians 1:8–9 forbids another gospel even from a messenger with astonishing credentials. Write down the precise claim you accepted because the ministry impressed you. Can the claim stand when the applause is gone?

If a ministry disappeared tomorrow, would the doctrine you believe remain grounded in the apostles' Word? Or would the disappearance of its leader carry your certainty away with him?

3. Have You Made Ordinary Faithfulness Feel Like Spiritual Poverty?

Once the impressive ministry has become the standard, ordinary faithfulness begins to look embarrassingly small. Have you spoken as though a congregation faithfully teaching Scripture, praying, baptizing, sharing the Lord's Supper, caring for the needy, and making disciples lacks God's fullness unless a spectacular office appears among its leaders (Acts 2:42; Matthew 28:18–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26)? Consider the widow who has prayed for decades and the quiet elder who has buried saints with Gospel hope. What have your expectations taught them to feel about the faithfulness Christ actually commanded?

Examine the appetite beneath the complaint. Is your restlessness for holiness, or for a more extraordinary religious identity? The Spirit's quiet work of making people like Christ is not evidence of His absence (Galatians 5:22–25).

4. Whom Have You Helped Place Under a Burden Christ Did Not Give?

When ordinary obedience has been made to seem insufficient, extraordinary demands can enter without resistance. Have you repeated a supposed decree, pressed someone to give beyond conscience, or warned that questioning a leader imperils fellowship with God? Who now bears the weight of your words? Recall exactly what you said, not merely what you meant, and ask whether loyalty to the speaker blinded you to a neighbor's injury (Romans 14:13; Galatians 6:1–2).

Do not settle for feeling sorry privately. Correction may require an actual conversation, an apology, returning money where right and possible, or helping the person find trustworthy pastoral care.

5. Would You Rather Be an Unnoticed Stone in Christ's House Than a Notable Name Above It?

After fear, admiration, restlessness, and injured consciences have

been named, one question remains beneath them all: *Whose glory do I want?* Christ is building His people together as God's dwelling (Ephesians 2:21–22). There is no small place in a house inhabited by the Lord. Yet we crave a distinguished rank, a private message, a story that makes quiet obedience seem ordinary. Would you still rejoice to be near Christ if no one admired your spirituality?

The Chief Cornerstone is not asking whether you have gained a reputation for discernment or acquired an extraordinary position. He is calling you to Himself. Turn from the need to be remarkable. Be faithful where He has placed you (1 Peter 2:4–5; 4:10–11).

THE SHEPHERD UNDER THE WORD

A Pastoral Examination — Chapter 3

Movement One — The Pastor's Convictions

Who Built the House You Have Been Asked to Serve?

Pastor, the same questions now turn toward the man charged to protect the house. Whose people do you see when you enter the sanctuary? Its walls may contain years of your tears: a difficult church plant, hospital vigils, conflicts endured, comforts surrendered. The Lord has not overlooked your labor. But none of it purchased the flock. Christ did (Acts 20:28). The temptation is to let sacrifice become ownership: *After all I have borne for these people, how dare they question me?* A shepherd has crossed a terrible line when the history of his service becomes the warrant for authority Christ never gave.

Can you thank Him that the congregation belongs to Christ even when another elder challenges a plan you love? If the apostolic foundation is truly a gift, it protects the flock from your preferences as surely as it protects them from another man's extraordinary pretensions (Ephesians 2:20–22; 1 Corinthians 4:1–2). That conviction must next survive a real disagreement, not merely your confession on Sunday.

Movement Two — Biblical Examination

Where Did Your Authority End in the Last Church Disagreement?

Go back to the last decision in which your voice carried the room—perhaps a question of discipline, finances, priorities, or a family's

future. Which sentence from Scripture actually bound the conscience? Which part was your wise but fallible judgment? When an elder asked you to distinguish them, did you show him the passage or require him to show his loyalty? The Lord grants pastors real responsibility, but He does not authorize them to make a permitted choice sinful merely because it differs from their preference (2 Corinthians 1:24; 1 Peter 5:3).

Bring that decision back to the elders if its effects remain. Show where Scripture commanded, where you inferred, and where you advised. If the distinction exposes a mistake, let the decision be corrected. A man who can be corrected in private may spare the church a far more painful correction in public—and teach others to love the truth more than they fear losing face.

Movement Three — The Pastor's Teachability

Can You Rejoice in a Congregation That No Longer Needs to Borrow Your Certainty?

The test of teachability does not end when you tolerate one difficult conversation. What kind of people are growing beneath your preaching? If mature members begin noticing arguments you missed or asking questions you cannot immediately answer, do you feel gratitude—or the slow panic of becoming less indispensable? Christ gave teachers so His people would no longer be children pushed about by doctrine (Ephesians 4:11–16). The pastor who succeeds at that task will raise believers capable of correcting him. Their maturity is not a mutiny.

Rejoice when members bring open Bibles rather than borrowed certainty. Teach them to examine you charitably and courageously; invite fellow elders to challenge your exegesis before it reaches the pulpit. Then ask a harder question: while you were guarding your influence, did someone vulnerable pay the price for your silence?

Movement Four — Responsibility for the Sheep

Who Is Still Afraid Because You Did Not Protect Him?

Perhaps a visitor delivered a directive the elders failed to test. Perhaps a member was pressed to give what conscience and circumstances could not bear, or threatened with spiritual ruin for leaving an unhealthy arrangement. Long after everyone else moved on, that believer may

still wake wondering whether refusing the demand meant resisting God. The wound is not healed because the church stopped speaking of it. Christ entrusted you with a flock, not merely a meeting schedule (Acts 20:28–31).

Seek out those affected. Let them speak without steering the conversation toward your defense. Establish the facts, protecting against reckless charges and protective silence alike (1 Timothy 5:19–20). Then open the Scriptures with them. Show where the authority that frightened them ended; do not ask for immediate trust to ease your embarrassment. Care for the person while you repair the teaching (Galatians 6:2). And remember: the question is not only what injured believers will say about our work. There is Someone before whom every shepherd must answer.

Movement Five — Accountability to Christ

What Will the Chief Shepherd Find You Guarding?

You will stand before the Chief Shepherd whose flock you tended (1 Peter 5:4). What will be found in your hands—His Word faithfully taught, His people protected, or the fragments of an influence you could not bear to surrender? James warns that teachers face stricter judgment (James 3:1). You cannot answer for every false title claimed elsewhere. You must answer for what you taught, permitted, defended, and left uncorrected where Christ entrusted souls to your care. The question reaches beyond a moment of conviction. It calls for repentance that can be seen.

Do not delay repentance until the damage becomes public. The Lord who sees your labor also sees the places where fear has silenced your courage. Bring those places before Him now. A ministry is not vindicated because its founder's name has endured. It is vindicated as Christ's Word has been obeyed and His sheep have been fed.

THE SHEPHERD WHO MUST STEP DOWN FROM A THRONE HE NEVER OWNED

Return to the church meeting with which this chapter began. The visitor is gone. An elder brings you a father's question: *If we refuse that man's directive, will God punish our children?* Your silence yesterday has now become the family's fear tonight. No further lecture on historic apostleship will, by itself, release them. You must open Scripture before those who heard the claim, acknowledge where your

oversight failed, and show what Christ actually commanded. The doctrinal question has reached the shepherd's conscience—and it is asking for action.

Begin with repentance. Not a statement that "mistakes were made," as though the failure belonged to the building. Name your own. Did you flatter an extraordinary title because the man was influential? Did you yield biblical oversight to a personality because confrontation threatened a partnership? Have you cultivated reverence for your office while neglecting the evidence that your authority is borrowed? Confess the particular wrong before God, then before those whom it affected, with wisdom appropriate to the public or private reach of the error (Acts 20:28; James 3:1).

Richard Baxter warned ministers lest they "famish yourselves while you prepare food" for others. [13] A man can expose false claims of apostleship and still starve the very humility that should make him a shepherd. Repentance begins not with a new policy, but with a pastor confessing the authority he enjoyed without warrant. Only then can he teach the congregation why the burden placed upon it was never Christ's.

Then re-teach what was obscured. Open Ephesians 2:11–22 and show the congregation the blood-bought household before you discuss its offices. Take them to Ephesians 3:3–6 and explain the Gospel disclosed through the founding witnesses. Distinguish Paul's extraordinary call from the continuing charge given to elders (Galatians 1:1; 1 Peter 5:2–4). Explain why Spirit-given gifts for the body's maturity do not authorize a man to create another foundation (Ephesians 4:11–16). Let the flock follow the argument in their Bibles; do not ask them merely to exchange one compelling personality for yours.

Next, reform the arrangements that allowed borrowed authority to govern. Reconsider how you introduce and supervise visiting speakers. Require financial appeals to withstand scriptural examination. Make clear who is accountable to the elders, how claims will be tested, and how a member may raise a serious concern without retaliation. Resist the temptation to fix the problem with a new title or policy alone; structures cannot replace truthfulness, though wise structures can protect it (Acts 20:28–31; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:9).

John Owen wrote, "The first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word." [14] His reminder makes the test plain: are your reforms giving people more access to Christ's Word, or merely replacing one system of control with another? Feed

them until they can distinguish the Shepherd's voice from the confidence of His servants (John 10:3–5, 27; 2 Timothy 4:2). But those who already suffered under a false decree will need more than a better sermon next Sunday.

Go to the people who were wounded. The family that abandoned a lawful decision under a claimed decree, the elder intimidated for asking for a passage, the young believer now startled by the very word *authority*—they do not need an organizational chart first. They need a shepherd willing to listen, distinguish the Lord's command from the man's demand, and ask forgiveness without bargaining for swift absolution. Where losses can be repaired, help repair them; where confidence has been shaken, do not hurry it back to health for the sake of appearances. Let the tenderness of the Good Shepherd become visible in your patient care (Isaiah 40:11; 1 Peter 5:2–3).

Then remain when truth costs you what silence would have protected: an invitation, a partner, a donor, or the approval of people who preferred the old arrangement. Stay gentle enough to receive fair criticism of how you corrected it, and firm enough not to reimpose a burden simply to regain applause. Continue in the apostles' doctrine with patience (Acts 2:42; 2 Timothy 4:2–5). This is not the courage of a man who refuses all correction. It is the steadiness of a man who has finally submitted his influence to the Savior's Word.

A deeper victory than exposing a false claimant has now become possible. An ordinary pastor stands with an open Bible and refuses to claim more than the passage gives him. He has no new foundation to announce and no heavenly rank to defend. He has the Word entrusted to the church, the Spirit's help, the sheep Christ purchased, and a Savior whose authority is sufficient. He is not less a shepherd for surrendering an apostle's throne. He is learning to lead from the Shepherd's feet. And that is where the chapter must leave us: not admiring a humbled minister, but beholding the Christ before whom he bows.

THE CORNERSTONE WHO HAS NEVER LEFT HIS HOUSE

Look again at the house Paul describes. It is not a monument left standing after its founder has gone. Its stones are still being joined together in Christ; God Himself dwells there by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:21–22). The apostles' founding work is not repeated, yet the life of the household has not stopped. The risen Lord remains its Cornerstone,

its Head, and its peace. All our warnings about borrowed authority find their answer here: the church belongs to Someone who has never left it.

Spurgeon saw the glory of Paul's picture and exclaimed, "There is no Church without Christ, no temple without Him." [15] No room remains for despair about the absence of living apostles. The risen Jesus who called and sent the first witnesses has not retired from His church. He reigns over it, speaks through the Scriptures He gave, sustains it by His Spirit, and receives every sinner who comes to Him in faith (Matthew 28:18–20; John 6:37; Ephesians 1:20–23).

Think of a widow in a little congregation, her hands folded over a Bible softened by years of use. The visiting dignitaries do not know her name. Her grief has not become less heavy because a ministry announced a new office. She needs forgiveness for yesterday's sins, strength for tonight, and assurance that Christ has not forgotten her. Must someone bearing a restored apostolic title arrive before she may draw near to God? Paul has already answered: through Christ both Jew and Gentile "have access by one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:18). The first apostles did not preach their own lordship; they preached "Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5). No later claimant can open for her a door the blood of Jesus has already opened.

Spurgeon also observed that the glory of this spiritual house is that it is *inhabited*. [16] And who inhabits it? Not an earthly founding celebrity. God Himself dwells with His people by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22). The doctrine we have defended therefore issues not in the cold satisfaction of defeating a title but in the wonder of belonging to the living Christ. Every true believer is a living stone built upon Him (1 Peter 2:4–5). The humblest saint has access to the Father through the same Spirit (Ephesians 2:18). No rival authority can improve that access.

If someone has frightened you by claiming power Christ did not give him, bring that fear to your true Lord. If you have used such a claim to bind others, repent and seek their good. If your heart has been secretly hungry for the honor of a foundational title, let it go. Greater dignity lies in being one of Christ's redeemed people than in gathering a crowd around your own name. The cross has opened the Father's house; the resurrection declares the Lord of that house alive forever (Romans 4:25; Revelation 1:17–18).

Pastor, there will come a day when your last sermon has been

preached and the people no longer speak your name. What would you ask the Lord to leave standing? Not a congregation afraid to make a decision without your voice, but one that knows the Gospel, tests its teachers, loves its neighbors, bears correction, and follows Jesus Christ. The apostles directed the church beyond themselves to Him. Spend your ministry doing the same. Give the sheep no throne to remember but His, and leave them standing on the Cornerstone.

The church does not need another foundation because it has never lost its Lord.

KEY SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR THE READER

The household and its Cornerstone: Ephesians 2:11–22; 1 Corinthians 3:10–11; 1 Peter 2:4–6; Colossians 1:18–20.

The founding commission: Acts 1:21–26; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8–10; Galatians 1:1, 11–12; Acts 14:14; Philippians 2:25.

Revelation and divine attestation: Ephesians 3:3–6; Hebrews 2:3–4; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Acts 6:8; 8:5–7; Galatians 1:8–9.

Christ's continuing gifts and the delivered faith: Ephesians 4:11–16; Acts 2:42; Jude 3; 2 Timothy 1:13–14; 2:2; 2 Peter 1:12–15.

Shepherding, conscience, and the living church: Acts 20:28–31; 1 Peter 5:1–4; 2 Corinthians 1:24; John 10:3–5, 27; Ephesians 2:18, 21–22; 2 Corinthians 4:5.

SOURCE NOTES

1 John Owen, *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches*, part II, chap. III, "Of the polity, rule, or discipline of the church in general," on church authority not granted by Christ: "an invasion of his right and dominion." Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/evangelicalchurches/evangelicalchurches.iii.vii.html. The excerpt describes the unauthorized assertion of church power, not lawful ministerial oversight.

2 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), part II, "Objections to This Duty," response to objection 7, acknowledging that "some able godly men have been too lordly." Primary text: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/baxter/pastor.iv.iv.html. Baxter is discussing pastors whose manner or neglect hindered the fruit of their labors; the chapter applies this admitted danger to authority claims.

3 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. VI, exposition of Ephesians 2:20–22, on Christ as the common Cornerstone of believing Jews and Gentiles: "In him both Jews and Gentiles meet, and constitute one church." Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6/mhc6.Eph.iii.html.

4 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854), commentary on Ephesians 2:20, especially his distinction between Christ as the church's sole foundation and the foundational doctrine preached by apostles and prophets. Text: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41.iv.iii.vi.html.

5 C. H. Spurgeon, "The One Foundation," sermon no. 1494, preached September 14, 1879, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 25 (1879), exposition of 1 Corinthians 3:11: "it is not Christ's Church if it is not built upon Christ!" Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons25/sermons25.liii.html.

6 John Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians*, translated by William Pringle, commentary on Galatians 1:1: "This authority depends not on the judgment or opinion of men, but exclusively on the calling of God." Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41/calcom41.iii.iii.i.html. Calvin explicitly distinguishes this immediate apostolic commission from the church's calling of ordinary pastors.

7 J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew*, exposition of Matthew 16:13–20, especially the apostles' authority to bind and loose in doctrinal and ecclesial disputes: "In discharging it they had no successors. With them it began, and with them it expired." Primary text: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/ryle/matthew.xvi.ii.html. Ryle refers specifically to this apostolic commission, not to all continuing ministerial functions.

8 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "The Only Foundation," sermon on Ephesians 2:20–22, June 10, 1956, sermon no. 4067, Martyn Lloyd-Jones Trust, https://www.mljtrust.org/sermon/the-only-foundation-2/. His exposition of the original witnesses, their doctrine, and the unrepeatable foundation is paraphrased rather than put in quotation marks.

9 John Owen, *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches*, part II, chapter III, section on apostolic office and power, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 16. Verified quotation: "this office and power doth absolutely cease." Source: https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/evangelicalchurches/evangelicalchurches.iii.vii.html.

10 Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), chapter I, "The Cessation of the Charismata," pp. 5–6. The partial quotation is drawn from "They were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church." https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/warfield/warfield_counterfeit.html.

11 Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings from Paul* (posthumous collected edition), "Prayer for Weaker Brothers," on 1 Corinthians 1:4–7, subsection "Extraordinary Gifts of the Spirit," discussing extraordinary offices and gifts. Text: https://thirdmill.org/magazine/article.asp/link/aw_pink%5Eaw_pink.GFP006.html/at/Gleanings%20from%20Paul%20on%20Prayer. Closely related wording appears in *The Holy Spirit*, chapter 31, p. 179, in some editions. The present chapter paraphrases Pink's conclusion in *Gleanings from Paul*.

12 John Owen, *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches*, part II, chapter on the power of the church and the rules of its exercise. Passage identifying church power as "neither autocratical or sovereign ... but organical and ministerial only." https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/evangelicalchurches/evangelicalchurches.iii.xii.html. The omitted words are not represented as continuous quotation.

13 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), chapter 1, "The Oversight of Ourselves," section 1, on pastors receiving the saving grace they proclaim and not starving while preparing spiritual food for others. https://ccel.org/ccel/baxter/pastor.all.html. Quoted excerpt is partial and preserves Baxter's own wording.

14 John Owen, *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches*, part II, chapter V, "The Especial Duty of Pastors of Churches," opening paragraph: "The first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word." https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/evangelicalchurches/evangelicalchurches.iii.ix.html.

15 C. H. Spurgeon, exposition of Ephesians 2:19–22 in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 38 (1892), preserved in *Spurgeon's Sermons*, volume 38. The source states: "There is no Church without Christ, no temple without Him as its Cornerstone, its Priest, its Glory." The chapter quotes the opening portion only. https://ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons38/sermons38.xxxi.html.

16 C. H. Spurgeon, "Blessings Manifold and Marvellous," sermon no. 3474, exposition of Ephesians 2:20–22, in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 61 (1915), p. 12 in the Spurgeon Gems reproduction. Spurgeon contrasts an unoccupied house with the glory of the church as God's habitation through the Spirit. The chapter paraphrases rather than quotes a complete sentence. Primary sermon transcription: https://ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons61/sermons61.xxxv.html.

CHAPTER 4

The Sufficiency of the Closed Canon

2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

A believer can hold an open Bible and still be made afraid to obey it. He knows what the passage requires, yet waits for someone to tell him whether God means it for him now. Into that uncertainty come the words of 2 Timothy 3:16–17: Scripture equips the man of God for every good work. God teaches him what is true, exposes what is wrong, corrects his course, and trains him to walk in righteousness. The provision reaches into the very places where he feels least prepared. His need for understanding, courage, and the Spirit's help is real. None of those needs gives another messenger authority to make God's command wait for his permission.

Christ's care for His church reaches beyond the generation that heard His earthly voice. In John 17:20, He prayed for those who would believe in Him through the apostles' word. Before we were born, the Savior had already spoken of the testimony through which we would come to know Him. Ephesians 2:20 places His church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Himself as the chief cornerstone; Jude 3 directs believers to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The Lord who died and rose for His people has given them an authoritative witness to His saving work. Each generation receives that faith and passes it on. No later messenger is commissioned to lay another foundation beneath Christ's church.

The canon is the collection of inspired books by which God governs

His people's faith and life. Its completion places every later teacher under a settled authority. In A.D. 367, after listing the twenty-seven New Testament books, Athanasius warned, "Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these."[1] That boundary protects the person in the pew as surely as it restrains the man in the pulpit. Both may open the same Scriptures and examine what is taught. A preacher's claim to speak for God must submit to the Word God has given.

That protection is weakened wherever a charismatic or New Apostolic Reformation ministry makes fresh words, dreams, or prophetic "downloads" necessary to know what God requires. A church may confess a closed canon while training its members to depend upon an additional voice. First the private message promises help; then it becomes necessary; finally, questioning it is treated as questioning God. The printed Bible has acquired no additional page, but the messenger has acquired authority over the conscience. In Acts 17:11, the Bereans examined even Paul's preaching by the Scriptures. What has happened to a congregation when examining its preacher's claim is condemned as unbelief? The very act Scripture commends has become dangerous to perform.

Consider a Christian who has spoken maliciously about another church member. Ephesians 4:31–32 leaves him no liberty to cherish that malice, and Matthew 5:23–24 presses upon him the duty of reconciliation. He knows whom he has injured. Yet he keeps asking whether he has received a personal leading to put matters right. The injured brother waits for an apology while the offender waits for a message. Delay acquires the language of devotion. Meanwhile, suspicion spreads, fellowship suffers, and the offender becomes practiced at postponing what he already understands. A supposed need for further revelation can shelter the very sin Scripture has uncovered. We must ask whether we are seeking light because the way is dark, or another voice because the way is costly.

Christian, bring that question to the duty you have been delaying. Calvin wrote on 2 Timothy 3:17 that "he who is not satisfied with Scripture desires to be wiser than is either proper or desirable."[2] Where the meaning is unclear, seek faithful teaching; where the command is clear, ask God for grace to obey it. Name the sin you must forsake, the truth you must tell, or the forgiveness you must seek. Ask for wisdom, as James 1:5 directs, and take the next faithful step. The Spirit who gave the Word must open your understanding and strengthen your obedience; your dependence upon Him continues as you submit

to what He has written. And when that Word exposes your guilt, follow it to the Christ it proclaims. The Savior who bore your sins welcomes your repentance. You need no private messenger to make His promise yours.

Pastor, examine what your people have learned to need from you. Can they ask you to establish a claim from Scripture without being made to feel disloyal to God? Have you called an impression a divine command, or allowed your judgment to carry an authority you cannot demonstrate from the text? Paul refused to exercise dominion over the Corinthians' faith in 2 Corinthians 1:24. If you have crossed that boundary, withdraw the claim before those who heard it. Distinguish biblical commands from your counsel, welcome examination of your teaching, and help frightened believers recover confidence in what God has actually said. The charge in 2 Timothy 4:2 is plain: "Preach the word!" Open it until your people can see why they should believe, repent, endure, and obey. Christ purchased these sheep with His blood (Acts 20:28). Feed them from the Word He has entrusted to you. Teach them to rest their faith where it will still stand when your own voice falls silent.

THE PERFECTION OF THE GIVEN WORD

Paul knew that Timothy would soon have to serve without him. In 2 Timothy 4:6, the apostle speaks of his approaching death; in 2 Timothy 3:13–14, he warns that deceivers will grow worse and tells Timothy to continue in the truth he has learned. The danger is increasing, and the familiar voice will soon be gone. Yet Paul does not leave Timothy searching for a replacement source of revelation. He directs him to the Scriptures. A frightened shepherd might feel that such a world requires something more. Paul teaches him to look more carefully at what God has already given.

Notice how much that provision includes. According to 2 Timothy 3:16, Scripture teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains in righteousness. It establishes truth, confronts the lie we have believed, sets the wandering life back on course, and schools us in obedience. A man may welcome its teaching while resisting its correction; he may enjoy learning what a passage means until he discovers what it requires him to abandon. Scripture's sufficiency reaches that resistance too. The Word has not failed because it has brought us to an uncomfortable place. It may be doing precisely the work for which God gave it.

The result Paul names in 2 Timothy 3:17 is a servant of God who

is "complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." Complete does not mean sinless, incapable of error, or finished with learning. Timothy still needed the instruction Paul was giving him. It means that God's written revelation supplies the truth by which His servant is prepared for faithful service. There is no neglected province of Christian duty for a modern prophet to govern. The teacher must draw from Scripture, the hearer must receive its correction, and both must depend upon God to make its truth fruitful in their lives. Our weakness does not expose a weakness in the Word.

We must make that argument carefully. The Scriptures Timothy had known from childhood were the Old Testament Scriptures, and Paul was still writing inspired words when he described their sufficiency (2 Timothy 3:15–17). This passage therefore cannot mean that no further inspired writing could follow the Scriptures Timothy first learned. Nor does it, by itself, announce the date when the canon closed. It establishes Scripture's divine origin and adequacy for its appointed work. The completed apostolic foundation and the faith delivered to the saints supply the wider setting for the church's settled authority (Ephesians 2:20; Jude 3). The conclusion is firm without asking one passage to carry the whole argument: God has not left His church dependent upon fresh revelation to supply a deficiency in its rule of faith and obedience.

Thomas Watson expressed the scope of that provision plainly: "The Scripture is a full and perfect canon, containing in it all things necessary to salvation."[3] Paul himself joins Scripture to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus in 2 Timothy 3:15. The Bible's completeness must be understood according to God's purpose for giving it. It does not promise to disclose every circumstance we would like to know. Deuteronomy 29:29 distinguishes what God has kept secret from what He has revealed for His people to obey. We can know our duty without knowing tomorrow. To demand knowledge God has withheld can turn a desire for guidance into discontent with His wisdom.

Consider a believer deciding between two lawful jobs. Neither employer's name appears in Scripture. He must learn the facts, seek counsel, consider his responsibilities, examine his motives, and pray for wisdom as James 1:5 directs. Philippians 1:9–10 teaches him to seek growing discernment, so that love governs an increasingly sound judgment. These are exercises of faith. A claimed prophecy naming an employer would offer something different: an answer carrying divine authority beyond what Scripture has revealed. The absence of

that answer does not make faithful choice impossible. God has given this believer truth to govern his decision, freedom within His commands, and reason to trust His providence when the consequences remain unseen. He can make a responsible choice without pretending to possess an infallible forecast.

Christian, examine what you mean when you say that you need more from God. You may need patient instruction, the counsel of mature believers, or renewed strength to bear a painful duty. Ask for those mercies. But do not mistake an appetite for a new message for hunger to understand the one already given. Psalm 119:18 teaches us to ask God to open our eyes to His Word. Hebrews 5:14 describes discernment trained through use. Take the passage that has unsettled you and remain with it long enough to understand its claim. Where it exposes sin, confess it; where it corrects a false belief, surrender that belief; where it calls for obedience, practice it. A Bible defended against additions must also be welcomed when it subtracts an excuse.

Pastor, bring the same examination into your study. Review several recent sermons beside the four uses of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16. Have you instructed your people while consistently avoiding the sins that instruction should expose? Have you announced what is wrong without patiently teaching how obedience must change? If you have left a clear biblical duty unaddressed because you feared the response, confess that failure and teach the neglected truth. Make the correction concrete enough for the congregation to understand and practice. Then continue when familiar expectations resist it. In 2 Timothy 4:1–5, Paul places Timothy's preaching under Christ's judgment and commands perseverance when hearers turn away from sound doctrine. The demand for another message is not permission to abandon the one you were charged to preach.

Such preaching must keep before weary sinners the Savior to whom Scripture directs them. The faith in Christ named in 2 Timothy 3:15 keeps this passage from becoming a program of self-improvement. A thoroughly instructed conscience still needs pardon; a clearly understood command still requires grace to obey. Scripture brings us to Jesus Christ, who bore our sins and rose again, and whose Spirit renews His people for holy living (1 Peter 2:24; Romans 6:4; 8:13). The repentant believer does not have to wait for a private word announcing that Christ is willing to receive him. John 6:37 already gives him that assurance. He may come to the Savior on the strength of what is written. The certainty rests upon the Son who made the promise.

THE FINALITY OF THE SON

Imagine a church that grows restless when Christ is preached, yet becomes attentive as soon as someone claims a new revelation. The change in attention exposes a troubling judgment: what God has given in His Son has begun to seem less necessary than what someone claims He has just disclosed. Hebrews corrects that judgment by making us look again at the One who speaks. God addressed the fathers through the prophets, but He "has in these last days spoken to us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:1–2). The wonder of this announcement lies in whom the Father has sent. John 1:18 identifies the Son, who enjoys the closest fellowship with the Father, as the One who makes Him known. A. W. Pink expressed the finality of that revelation: "Through Christ, God is now fully, perfectly, finally revealed."[4] We cannot measure the riches of His revelation by how recently we heard it.

Consider who this Son is. Hebrews 1:2–3 identifies Him as the heir of everything and the One through whom the worlds were made. He perfectly reveals the Father and sustains the creation in which every prophet lived and spoke. Then the passage brings this majesty to bear upon our deepest misery: the Son Himself accomplished the cleansing of sins and took His seat beside the Father. The One who reveals God is also the One who brings sinners to God. What could a later messenger supply that would improve upon Him? Commenting on this passage, John Calvin wrote, "when you come to Christ, you ought not to go farther."[5] Colossians 2:9–10 joins the fullness of His deity to the believer's completeness in Him. Christ's supremacy sets a boundary to our expectations as well as commanding our worship.

This does not mean that inspired revelation stopped the moment Jesus entered the world or ascended to heaven. The Son appointed the very witnesses through whom His saving work would be authoritatively proclaimed and explained. Before His death, He promised that the Holy Spirit would recall His teaching to the disciples and guide them into the truth they were not yet ready to bear (John 14:26; 16:12–15). The apostles' subsequent teaching fulfilled that promise. John 17:20 confirms the abiding place of that witness: Jesus prayed for those who would come to faith in Him through the apostles' word. Their inspired witness belongs to the Son's own provision for His church. The New Testament therefore neither repairs a deficiency in Christ nor moves beyond Him. It gives us the testimony He commissioned, under the authority He bestowed, by the Spirit He promised.

Hebrews 2:3–4 places the Lord's announcement, the testimony of

those who heard Him, and God's confirming signs within that same history. The readers are summoned to attend to the salvation already announced and confirmed. Joined to the foundational ministry of apostles and prophets in Ephesians 2:20 and the faith entrusted to the saints once for all in Jude 3, this gives the church a settled direction. Christ accomplished redemption; His authorized witnesses delivered its authoritative testimony; succeeding generations receive, guard, and proclaim that deposit. In 2 Timothy 1:13–14, Paul directs Timothy to preserve the teaching he has received and to guard what has been entrusted to him through the indwelling Spirit. The church continues to grow upon the foundation. It does not continue laying it. The finality of the Son and the completion of His apostolic witness belong together in the biblical case for a closed canon. John Owen made the consequence explicit: for the church, "new revelations it hath neither need nor use of."[6]

Nor does this leave us with a book whose riches we have exhausted. J. C. Ryle wrote, "The Epistles are 'Christ' written of, explained, and exalted."[7] His point rebukes the notion that familiar Scripture can give us only familiar thoughts. We may have learned the language of Christ's priesthood while scarcely drawing upon its consolation; confessed His kingship while refusing a costly command; affirmed His glory while giving Him little of our attention. The deficiency lies in our reception. Warning against the pursuit of new revelations, Charles Spurgeon urged his hearers to "be satisfied with this good household bread which God has prepared for his people."[8] Paul prayed for believers to know Christ's love more deeply even while declaring that its greatness exceeds our knowledge (Ephesians 3:14–19). A completed revelation gives us a lifetime of growing understanding, love, and obedience. Its completeness is no excuse for our shallowness.

Christian, that distinction matters when someone makes the absence of a private message feel like evidence that you are distant from God. You have no warrant to measure your nearness to Christ by an experience He has not required. George Müller cautioned, "If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions also."[9] Hebrews 2:1 directs your attention to what you have heard and warns against drifting from it. James 1:22 exposes the self-deception of hearing God's Word while refusing to practice it. Ask where that drift has become visible. Has a claimed revelation received hours of eager consideration while the Lord's command to forgive has met weeks of delay? Name that resentment before God, relinquish

the revenge you have cherished, and pursue peace so far as it depends on you (Ephesians 4:31–32; Romans 12:18–19). Christ's authority reaches the grievance you have kept alive. Receiving His Word means yielding to the Son who speaks through it.

Such obedience depends upon the living ministry of the Holy Spirit. The close of the canon has not ended His work in the heart. As believers behold the Lord's glory, the Spirit changes them into His likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18). John Owen explained that, as we contemplate Christ by faith in the gospel, "all grace will live and thrive in us in some measure, especially love unto his person."[10] Here is spiritual vitality worth seeking: a heart that loves the Savior more, resists sin more honestly, and grows more willing to bear the cost of obedience. Pray for that work as you read and hear the Word. The Spirit makes the Christ already revealed increasingly precious to His people; their deepening acquaintance with Him requires no addition to Scripture.

Pastor, examine the place you have taught your people to give your own voice. If you have presented a personal impression as a word from God, identify the claim and withdraw the authority you attached to it. Those who heard you need to know that your conviction could be mistaken and that their conscience is bound by Scripture. Then show them why Christ's appointed witnesses deserve a confidence no subsequent preacher may claim for himself. Paul's description of ministry in 2 Corinthians 4:5–6 places Jesus Christ before the hearers as Lord and the preacher beneath Him as their servant. Charles Bridges urged pastors to ensure that "every sermon tends to draw sinners to him, and to establish Christians in their consistent profession."[11] First Peter 5:2–4 likewise calls elders to willing service and exemplary lives, forbids domination, and directs their hope toward the Chief Shepherd's appearing. Lead your people to know this Christ through patient exposition. Remain there when novelty attracts more attention. Your people should become increasingly dependent upon the Savior, with less reason to mistake their pastor for a source of revelation.

And remember whose glory we are guarding. The exalted Son has not become remote from those He redeemed. Hebrews 4:14–16 brings our weakness into the presence of a High Priest who understands it and bids us seek mercy and timely help. His finished sacrifice and present intercession give the weary believer solid ground for approaching God (Hebrews 7:25–27). We do not have to persuade a distant Lord to notice us by obtaining another message from Him. We

come through the Son the Father has already given. Yet this welcome gives us no permission to disregard the voice of God: Hebrews 12:25 warns us against refusing Him. His mercy gives us courage to draw near; His majesty leaves us no liberty to improve His Word.

THE DIVINE LOCK ON THE CANON

The last page of Revelation leaves no room for a man to stand beside God and improve His testimony. Revelation 22:18 declares: "For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book." Verse 19 warns against taking words away and threatens exclusion from the holy city and the blessings described. These are judgments, not suggestions for careful editing. The person who tampers with this revelation must answer to the God whose judgment it announces.

To honor that warning, we must let it say exactly what it says. Its immediate subject is the prophecy of Revelation. It does not, by itself, supply the entire argument for the completion of the biblical canon. That conclusion rests upon the finished foundational ministry and the faith entrusted to the church, already considered in Ephesians 2:20 and Jude 3. In 2 Timothy 3:16–17, the Scriptures God inspired equip His servant for every good work. Thomas Watson stated the church's confidence plainly: "The Scripture is a full and perfect canon, containing in it all things necessary to salvation."[12] Revelation's closing warning brings the prohibition against corrupting divine revelation to bear with terrible force. God has never surrendered to His hearers the right to enlarge or reduce what He commands. The church receives His testimony under His authority.

That boundary was already clear in Deuteronomy 4:2. Israel was forbidden to add to God's word or take from it so that the people would keep His commandments. Notice the connection: preserving the command serves obedience to the God who gave it. Calvin drew the consequence plainly: "they only obey God who depend on His authority alone."[13] Proverbs 30:5–6 joins the purity of God's words to a warning that the person who adds to them will be exposed as a liar. Isaiah 8:20 sends rival spiritual claims back to God's law and testimony; whatever contradicts His Word has no light to offer us. To give our invention God's authority is to misrepresent Him. Religious earnestness cannot turn a false claim into His command.

Christ showed how an addition can become an instrument of

subtraction. In Mark 7:9–13, a tradition concerning Corban—a gift dedicated to God—was used to prevent a son from helping his father or mother. God's command to honor parents still stood, but the tradition furnished a religious reason to evade it. The parents were left without the help their son should have given, while his refusal could wear the appearance of devotion. This is what makes human additions so dangerous: they can train the conscience to call disobedience faithfulness. A man may feel most religious at the very point where he is refusing God.

Christ's rebuke of human tradition in Mark 7:9–13 stands beside Paul's warning in Galatians 1:8–9: even an angel from heaven has no authority to preach another gospel. A claimed new revelation and an inherited tradition can make the same unlawful claim upon the conscience. One appeals to what has just been heard; the other to what has long been practiced. Neither acquires divine authority by the strength of that appeal. The church receives what Scripture expressly teaches and what necessarily follows from that teaching; it has no authority to supplement God's rule with human inventions.

The completion of revelation does not end our dependence upon the Holy Spirit. We need His work in us to understand and receive the truth already revealed. In 1 Corinthians 2:12–14, Paul traces spiritual understanding to the Spirit of God and exposes the natural man's inability to receive His truth. Psalm 119:36 teaches us to ask God to incline our hearts to His testimonies. The distinction preserves both our submission and our dependence: the written Word judges the claim, and the Spirit enables us to welcome its judgment. John Owen described the purpose of God's revelation: "that it may put forth a spiritual, practical power in our souls."[14] We may not invoke His name to escape the authority of the words He gave.

Bring that test into the ordinary life of your church. What have we taught people to fear that God has not forbidden? What disobedience have we taught them to excuse as loyalty to a ministry? In 1 Corinthians 4:6, Paul brings loyalty to teachers under what is written, cutting off the pride that exalts one servant against another. Examine one disputed requirement and the passages used to defend it. Does the requirement follow from those passages, or have we supplied the missing authority with the force of our expectations? A congregation can become very conscientious about a human rule while growing careless about the biblical duty it displaces. The Corban passage

requires us to ask who is being neglected while we congratulate ourselves on devotion.

Pastor, review the membership teaching, ministry expectations, and grounds on which you rebuke or reassure your people. The Bereans searched the Scriptures daily to test what they heard from Paul (Acts 17:11). A shepherd should welcome the scrutiny Scripture commends. Identify any human requirement you have burdened with divine authority, and correct it before those whose consciences you bound. Teach the elders to distinguish God's commands and their necessary applications from prudent arrangements that may be reconsidered. Restore any neglected duty, and help the people affected by the error. Then remain faithful when a familiar practice loses its protection. In Galatians 1:8–10, even an angelic appearance cannot authorize a different gospel, and the servant of Christ cannot make pleasing men his governing aim. Spurgeon put his own theology beneath that judgment: "My love of consistency with my own doctrinal views is not great enough to allow me knowingly to alter a single text of Scripture."[15] A cherished ministry must submit to the truth it exists to proclaim.

And hear the invitation beside the warning. Revelation 22:17 summons the thirsty to receive the water of life freely. The Lamb who redeemed sinners by His blood is the hope set before them (Revelation 5:9). In John 5:39–40, Jesus confronts men who search the Scriptures yet refuse to come to Him for life. J. C. Ryle kept the reader's eye upon their destination: "The grand primary object of all Scripture is to testify of Jesus."[16] His church has no authority to invent another condition of acceptance or to promise salvation apart from Him. If this examination has exposed your sin, turn to Christ for mercy; do not try to silence the Word that has uncovered your need. Carry His invitation to others with its warning and its welcome intact. The Word we are forbidden to alter is the Word on which frightened sinners may safely rest.

THE ANXIETY OF THE OPEN CANON

Imagine a woman lying awake after a preacher tells the congregation that God will give each person a private instruction for the coming week. She wants to obey Him. Now she replays a dream, a phrase from a conversation, a thought that returned while she washed the dishes. Which of them was the message? She has been sent home with a supposed duty no one can put before her in writing. Her fear grows

from the belief that God has commanded something and left her to discover whether she has heard it. A Bible lies beside her bed, yet she has been taught to look elsewhere for what she must not miss.

This is how a claim to fresh revelation can make uncertainty feel like disobedience. The believer begins to fear that he may refuse God without ever discovering what God required. John Newton described people disturbed by impressions of biblical texts with the words "fears and disquietudes"; they later discovered that those fears were groundless.[17] His warning exposes the cost of assigning divine certainty to a private impression. The impression becomes a command; uncertainty about its meaning becomes a charge against the hearer. Yet Psalm 119:105 presents God's written Word as the light for our path. The Lord has given His people something they can read, examine, understand, and obey. We dishonor that provision when we teach them to fear a hidden obligation more than they trust His revealed instruction.

The damage reaches further when the absence of a private message becomes a measure of distance from God. The woman hears others speak confidently about what the Lord supposedly told them. She has no such report. Soon she may question whether He cares for her, whether she has grieved Him, or whether she belongs to Him at all. A human expectation has begun to prosecute her conscience in God's name. Isaiah 8:19–20 answered the pressure to consult mediums by sending God's people to His law and testimony. That same submission must govern our examination of spiritual claims. A teacher has no authority to make an experience Scripture has not required the test of whether God receives His child.

Deuteronomy 29:29 places a needed boundary across this fear. God retains His secret things; He gives His people revealed truth so that they may obey Him. His wisdom governs both what He discloses and what He withholds. Calvin observed that the passage condemns "audacity and excessive curiosity."[18] We may be troubled because we cannot see an outcome, yet ignorance of an outcome is different from ignorance of a duty. James 4:13–16 teaches us to make our plans beneath the Lord's will while acknowledging that we do not know tomorrow. Faith does not require us to possess the future before we can walk faithfully in the present. The Lord who has withheld the outcome has not withheld Himself.

Christian, examine the particular fear that has gained authority over you. Write down the alleged command, the person or impression from which it came, and the Scripture said to establish it. Read that

passage in its context. Does it require the action you have been told to take? First Thessalonians 5:21–22 requires examination, holding fast what is good and refusing evil. A claim does not become God's command because you are afraid to question it. If Scripture establishes a duty, receive it and obey. If the claim depends upon an invented revelation, refuse the authority attached to it. Where several choices are lawful, seek wise counsel, consider your responsibilities, and make a responsible judgment before God (Proverbs 15:22). You may need better judgment without needing another revelation.

This recovery requires the Holy Spirit's present work. James 1:5 teaches us to ask God for wisdom, and Psalm 119:18 teaches us to ask Him to open our eyes to His revealed truth. Newton described God's guidance through "the light of his Holy Spirit, which enables them to understand and to love the Scriptures."[19] That is help worth seeking: understanding that becomes affection, and affection that strengthens obedience. Hebrews 5:14 describes discernment trained through use. Learn to consider a passage carefully, bring your motives beneath it, listen to sound counsel, and practice the duty it makes clear. Such growth takes time. Dependence upon God includes the patient exercise of capacities He is renewing; it does not require an infallible impression before every decision. You can thank the Spirit for growing wisdom without claiming that He dictated your decision.

Pastor, ask whether your preaching has sent people home afraid of instructions you could never establish from Scripture. If you have called an impression God's command, withdraw that claim plainly before those who heard it. Do not explain the confusion as their failure to hear spiritually. Paul refused dominion over the Corinthians' faith and sought their joy (2 Corinthians 1:24). Show your people the difference between a biblical requirement and your own fallible counsel. Then ask the elders to identify who remains afraid of warnings issued from the pulpit. A public correction may leave a private fear untouched. Meet with those members, examine the claim beside the Word, and help them name what they may now refuse and what they should faithfully do. Second Timothy 2:24–25 requires patient teaching and humble correction. The gentleness of the remedy should help expose the harshness of the burden.

Do not shame a frightened believer because relief comes slowly. First Thessalonians 5:14 commands care for the fainthearted, support for the weak, and patience with all. Nor should you soothe him with another unsupported message; that would preserve the authority

that wounded him. Bring him repeatedly to the testimony God has given concerning His Son. First John 5:11–13 locates eternal life in Christ and explains that these things were written so believers might know they possess it. Speaking of assurance, Spurgeon said, "You may have it without personal revelations: it is wrought in us by the Word of God."[20] Romans 8:15–16 also preserves the Spirit's living ministry of adoption and assurance. Teach that dependence without turning it into a demand for new inspired words. Remain faithful to this care when a fresh prediction would attract more attention than patient shepherding.

The rest we seek belongs to the Savior who knows His sheep. In John 10:27–29, Jesus joins their following Him to His gift of eternal life and His power to keep them. Their safety rests in His hand. First Peter 2:24–25 brings wandering sinners to the One who bore their sins and watches over their souls as Shepherd and Overseer. Come to this Christ with the fear you have carried and the sin His Word has exposed. Matthew 11:28–30 gives weary people His invitation to rest under His gentle rule. He teaches those He receives. He does not require them to earn His care by decoding a dream. Let His written promises steady you, His commands direct you, and His Spirit strengthen you to follow. Then bring that confidence into the ordinary duties before you.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR THE BELIEVER

The next test of your confidence in Scripture may come after you close the Bible. You have just read a passage about the tongue; before noon, a criticism gives you a reason to wound someone with yours. The doctrine you defended yesterday now lays a claim upon the sentence you are about to speak. James 1:22–25 exposes the hearer who receives the Word and then leaves its demand behind him. We can resist new revelation while resisting the revelation God has already given. A settled canon has not become a settled authority in a man's life merely because he has learned to argue for it.

Begin, then, with a passage you intend to understand. Read the surrounding verses and follow the writer's thought before deciding how it addresses your circumstances. Ryle urged his readers to "read the Bible with an earnest desire to understand it."[21] A verse does not surrender its meaning to whichever need brings you to it. Attend to who is speaking, whom he addresses, and how his words serve the passage. When the meaning remains unclear, seek help from a faithful

teacher and return to the text together. You may need to read less at one sitting in order to attend more carefully to what you read. The aim is to receive what God has said with understanding.

That attention should begin in prayer. Psalm 119:18 teaches us to ask God to open our eyes to the wonders of His revealed truth. Ask the Spirit to help you recognize what the passage teaches and receive its claim upon you. Where it exposes an evil you have excused, pray for a heart willing to forsake it. Where it reveals a promise, ask for faith to rest upon the One who made it. Reading aloud may help you attend to words your eyes have hurried past. Their authority comes from God, however, and their spiritual profit requires His gracious work in you. The sound of your voice cannot supply the submission your heart withholds.

Carry that submission into a named act of obedience. If the Word exposes dishonesty, identify the falsehood and tell the truth to the person you misled. Consider what harm you must repair instead of letting a private confession conceal a public injury. Commenting on James 1:22, Calvin wrote that "the word of the Lord should strike root in us."[22] Truth takes root where faith begins to govern the conduct that once resisted it. Philippians 2:12–13 joins the believer's serious obedience to God's work within him, both in willing and in doing. You do not earn Christ's acceptance by obeying; you depend upon His grace to live as one He has received.

Receive that help in the church as well as in private. First Timothy 4:13 directs Timothy's ministry toward the reading of Scripture, exhortation, and doctrine. Colossians 3:16 brings the word of Christ into the congregation's teaching, admonition, and singing. Come to worship ready to learn what the passage means. Afterwards, return to a truth that searched you or a promise that strengthened you, and consider what response it requires. Let another believer help you see what pride, haste, or habit has kept you from noticing. The brother who patiently opens Scripture beside you may help you face a duty you have repeatedly read past. Receiving the finished Word includes receiving the help God gives His people to understand and practice it.

Bring what you receive back to God in prayer. Spurgeon warned the person who prayed regularly while neglecting Scripture that "your soul gives out without taking in."[23] Let the passage furnish your praise, expose what needs confession, and give substance to your requests. You need not search for a private message before you can pray intelligently. God's revealed character teaches you whom you approach; His

promises teach you what to trust; His commands uncover the help you need. When yesterday's obedience gives way to today's failure, come again in repentance and faith. A finished Bible can continue to search a changing life. The same truth may uncover a deeper resistance and lead you to depend more fully upon Christ.

Pastor, examine whether your people have heard you praise the Bible's sufficiency without receiving the patient instruction needed to understand it. If you have neglected that work, repent before requiring greater faithfulness from them. Re-teach the congregation how a passage establishes its meaning and how that meaning governs belief and conduct. Make time in your preaching to show the connection, and train elders and mature members to help those who struggle with reading or understanding. Reform any ministry practice that rewards confident assertions while leaving their biblical grounds unexplained. Then remain faithful when slow growth makes a fresh spiritual sensation seem more attractive. Patient instruction costs preparation and perseverance. Your people should grow in conviction from Scripture, rather than remain dependent upon the force of your confidence.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

Axiom One — Christ's Church Receives a Completed Foundation

Christ appointed the witnesses through whom His saving work would be authoritatively proclaimed. Their foundational testimony belongs to His provision for every generation; a later teacher serves the church by faithfully explaining that testimony, never by claiming authority to extend it. A growing church does not require a growing canon.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:20; Jude 3.

Axiom Two — God Has Given Enough Truth for Obedience without Disclosing Every Outcome

Scripture's sufficiency answers our need to know and obey God; it does not promise advance knowledge of every circumstance. We may lack certainty about what a decision will cost while possessing enough light to make it faithfully. God's silence about tomorrow does not cancel His command for today.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Deuteronomy 29:29.

Axiom Three — The Finished Canon Does Not End Our Dependence on the Spirit

A finished canon leaves us dependent upon God to open our understanding, incline our hearts, and sanctify us through His truth. We should pray for that help with confidence. The completeness of revelation exposes our need to receive it more deeply; it gives us no reason to expect inspired additions.

Scripture: Psalm 119:18, 36; John 17:17.

Axiom Four — No Minister May Borrow God's Authority for His Own Judgment

A preacher crosses a sacred boundary when he makes an impression binding upon another person's conscience. His sincerity cannot supply the authority his claim lacks. Scripture must remain available to judge him, and a congregation must never be taught that examining his teaching is disloyalty to God.

Scripture: Acts 17:11; 2 Corinthians 1:24.

Axiom Five — Defending Scripture Does Not Exempt Us from Its Correction

A man may reject every claim to new revelation and still refuse the command already before him. His argument for a closed canon can become a shelter from the very Bible he defends. Faithful reception brings the disputed belief, the protected sin, and the postponed duty beneath Christ's authority.

Scripture: James 1:22–25; Luke 6:46.

Axiom Six — Assurance Rests Upon Christ's Written Testimony

The believer does not need a private message to make the Savior's promise trustworthy. God has given written testimony so that sinners may believe in His Son and believers may know they possess eternal life. We honor the finished Word by coming to the Christ it reveals and resting upon what He has promised.

Scripture: John 20:31; 1 John 5:11–13.

PASTORAL REFORMATION — WHAT MUST THE SHEPHERD DO NOW?

Pastor, the doctrine of a closed canon reaches the way you exercise authority. Your people may hear you deny continuing revelation and

still learn to treat your judgments as though God had spoken them. Examine the moment when someone asks you to establish a claim from Scripture. Can you open the passage with him, or must you make him afraid to question you? The answer reveals whether your ministry is helping the flock live under the Word or making your own certainty a condition of their peace (2 Corinthians 1:24).

Repent — Withdraw the Authority You Had No Right to Claim

Begin with an actual claim you made, endorsed, or allowed to govern the congregation. Retrieve the sermon, message, or instruction; put its words beside the passage offered in support. If you presented an impression as God's command, say plainly that you were wrong to attach His authority to it. Richard Baxter warned ministers, "Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine."[24] A public defense of Scripture's sufficiency rings hollow while the preacher protects his own unsupported pronouncements. First Timothy 4:16 requires him to watch his life as well as his teaching.

Repentance must reach the people who acted upon the claim. Ask whom you pressured, whose question you silenced, and what decision your assurance helped produce. A member may have committed money, accepted a ministry assignment, or carried guilt because you said that God required it. Correct the claim before its original hearers, seek forgiveness from those you wronged, and help repair the harm you can responsibly repair. Ephesians 4:25 requires truthful speech within Christ's body. Do not protect your reputation by describing your error as the congregation's misunderstanding.

Re-Teach — Give the Congregation Grounds for Confidence

Teach the biblical case patiently enough for your people to understand why the church receives a completed revelation. Explain Christ's appointment of His witnesses, the foundational place of the apostles and prophets, and the faith entrusted to the saints (John 14:26; Ephesians 2:20; Jude 3). Show how Scripture equips the servant of God for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Do not ask Revelation's final warning to carry the whole argument by itself. The congregation needs a conviction it can explain from Scripture, especially when an impressive claimant arrives with a different explanation.

Then teach the distinctions that daily life will test. A command establishes duty; a promise gives grounds for trust; wise counsel helps us apply truth to circumstances. None of these authorizes a pastor

to turn his preference into revelation. Work through a lawful choice with the elders and congregation: identify what Scripture requires, what it forbids, and where responsible judgment remains necessary. Deuteronomy 29:29 teaches us to respect both God's revealed will and what He has withheld. The Westminster Confession directs religious judgment to "the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."[25] Teach your people to seek His help in understanding the Word without making their decisions infallible.

Reform — Remove the Practices That Keep the False Authority Alive

A correction from the pulpit must reach the places where the error still speaks. Review the church's counseling materials, membership requirements, recordings, messages, and invitations. Stop presenting supposed revelations as divine instructions, and clearly correct material the church has circulated under that claim. Assign the elders responsibility for specific corrections and dates for completing them. Titus 1:9 requires leaders who can both teach sound doctrine and answer those who contradict it. A revised statement of faith will accomplish little if the congregation can still obtain the old error from the church's own teaching.

Distinguish ending the false claim from healing the fear it created. The claim must lose the church's endorsement now; a frightened believer may need repeated conversations before he understands that refusing it is not refusing God. The Westminster Confession states, "God alone is Lord of the conscience."[26] Sit with that believer, examine the alleged obligation, and show him the biblical grounds for what you say. First Thessalonians 5:14 calls us to comfort the faint-hearted, uphold the weak, and be patient with all. Restore regular Scripture instruction, prayer, and personal care so that the authority you remove is replaced by growing confidence in Christ's Word.

Remain — Accept the Cost of Leading People Back to Scripture

Some may complain that the church has lost its power because the predictions have stopped. Others may withdraw support or seek a minister who will supply the certainty you now refuse to claim. Bring those pressures to the elders openly. Review spending if giving falls, listen carefully to criticism, and correct any harshness or confusion in your leadership; do not finance the church's future by restoring an error you have confessed. In 2 Timothy 4:1–5, Paul charges Timothy before Christ to preach faithfully and endure hardship when hearers

turn from sound doctrine. Their demand for another voice does not release the shepherd from that charge.

Look for the recovery this obedience serves. Can a troubled member distinguish God's promise from a preacher's prediction? Can an elder acknowledge that his judgment was mistaken without fearing that God's truth has failed? Are believers learning to bring their questions to Scripture and their weakness to the Savior? First Peter 5:2–4 calls us to shepherd by willing service and example, with our hope fixed upon the Chief Shepherd's appearing. You can bear losing a reputation for special insight. You cannot faithfully shepherd Christ's people by teaching them to distrust the sufficiency of His Word.

The Bible brings us to the Savior whose grace makes this obedience possible. John 20:31 explains that the written testimony concerning Jesus serves faith in Him and life in His name. Do not make a defense of the finished Word a substitute for coming to the Christ it reveals. He bore the sins His Word exposes and rose from the dead; come to Him in repentance and trust His saving work. First Thessalonians 2:13 describes God's Word working in those who believe. The Spirit continues to use the truth He has given to renew His people. When demands for fresh revelation rise again, plant your feet firmly on the granite of the completed Scriptures. Then live upon what God has spoken, looking to Christ for the grace to believe and obey.

Psalm 119:89: "Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven."

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PART II

Spiritual Gifts and the Work of the Holy Spirit

CHAPTER 5

Discerning the True Work of the Holy Spirit

> John 16:13–14: "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you."

The Holy Spirit deserves better than the careless claims sometimes made in His name. To announce that He caused an experience is to say something about God. Before we attach His name to a trembling body, a burst of laughter, or a powerful impression, we must ask whether His Word warrants the claim. First John 4:1 commands believers to test the spirits. Reverence does not make that examination unnecessary; reverence requires it. We should fear misrepresenting the Holy Spirit more than we fear questioning the person who claims to speak for Him.

Begin with the Person whose name is being used. In Acts 5:3–4, Peter identifies lying to the Holy Spirit as lying to God. In Matthew 28:19, Christ places Him with the Father and the Son in the one baptismal name. He is eternally God, distinct from the Father and the Son, sharing the one undivided divine nature. John Owen summarized the biblical testimony by calling Him "a divine, distinct person." [1] This truth changes how we approach Him. An influence might be harnessed; the living God must be worshiped and obeyed. First Corinthians 12:11 describes the Spirit distributing gifts according to

His own will. No preacher possesses Him, and no congregation can make Him perform.

Consider what happens when a congregation is taught that falling, shaking, or an overwhelming sensation proves that the Spirit has come. A believer who experiences none of these things may begin to doubt His presence. She heard the Word, saw a sin she had defended, and went home determined to seek forgiveness. Yet she dismisses that searching work because her body did not react as others did. The church has taught her to look past repentance for something more convincing. Jonathan Edwards warned that great bodily effects do not establish whether religious affections are genuine. [2] A mistaken test can make believers overlook the very fruit Scripture teaches them to seek.

Romans 8:9 identifies the indwelling Spirit as belonging to every person who belongs to Christ. His presence is not a distinction reserved for believers with a dramatic story. Nor is His work exhausted by a moment they can describe. In Romans 8:13, believers put sin to death through Him; in Galatians 5:22–23, He produces love, joy, peace, and self-control. These truths reach the home after the meeting has ended. The man who once defended his cruelty begins to confess it. The woman who cherished revenge begins to pray for grace to forgive. Such obedience remains imperfect, but we must not despise the Spirit's work because it appears in a changed relationship rather than a startling reaction.

Christ gives this work its direction. On the night before His crucifixion, He promised His apostles that the Spirit would guide their witness into truth and glorify Him (John 16:13–14). The Spirit's ministry cannot be understood apart from the Son He makes known. He brings sinners to trust the crucified and risen Savior, and He transforms believers into Christ's likeness (Titus 3:5–6; 2 Corinthians 3:18). We need more than the ability to detect an unsupported claim. We need the Spirit to make the Christ revealed in Scripture precious to us. A church can reject counterfeit manifestations while remaining painfully indifferent to the Savior.

For the church, the change must reach what the congregation welcomes, rewards, and calls spiritual. Where Charismatic practice has taught people to seek falling, shaking, or supposed messages from God, the church must withdraw its endorsement of these counterfeit measures of His presence. Leaders must examine claims by Scripture, correct misleading teaching, and protect those pressured to imitate

others. First Corinthians 14:26–33 requires edification and order. The Spirit will never contradict His Word or make disorder a mark of His blessing. A congregation once trained to ask, "Did something extraordinary happen?" must learn to ask, "Was Christ faithfully proclaimed, was His truth understood, and are we learning to obey Him?" What will your church stop endorsing—and what will it restore—if Scripture, rather than the excitement of the meeting, is to govern what you call the Spirit's work?

For the believer, this change begins when you stop treating a powerful feeling as permission to believe a spiritual claim. If you have pursued impartations, accepted private impressions as God's voice, or measured your standing by another person's manifestations, bring those practices beneath Scripture's judgment. The Spirit will never excuse your sin or authorize disobedience to Christ. Romans 8:13 directs you to put sin to death through Him, while Galatians 5:22–23 identifies the fruit He produces. Seek His help in prayer, attend faithfully to His Word, confess the sin it exposes, and repair the wrong you have done. Where you once sought another experience, will you now seek grace to forgive the person you have refused to forgive?

For pastors, the change must begin with what we have taught people to expect from our ministry. If we have used suggestive music, repeated commands, or public pressure to produce a response and then called it the Spirit's power, we must repent and correct that teaching before the flock. Acts 6:4 directs us to prayer and the ministry of the Word; First Timothy 4:16 requires watchfulness over our conduct and doctrine. Prepare the text carefully, seek God's help earnestly, welcome correction from fellow elders, and shepherd troubled believers patiently. The Spirit will never sanction deception or domineering leadership. Where we once sought a visible reaction, we must now labor for understanding, repentance, faith, and enduring obedience to Christ—without neglecting the quiet sheep who never gives us a dramatic story. What must you publicly correct, personally repent of, and change in your preaching and shepherding if your people are to trust the Spirit rather than your ability to produce a response?

Before we ask how the Holy Spirit works, then, we must begin with the more fundamental question: Who is the Holy Spirit? His deity gives weight to His authority; His personhood forbids treating Him as a force; His holiness governs what we may attribute to Him. We approach this doctrine as people who need Him. The Spirit who gives life also teaches, comforts, strengthens, and sanctifies those He

indwells. To know Him as Scripture reveals Him is to learn both reverence for His majesty and dependence upon His mercy.

THE PERSON OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

A church may confess that the Holy Spirit is God while teaching its people to treat Him as something a gifted man can release. The contradiction appears when a preacher's gesture is expected to make Him act, or a repeated phrase is supposed to bring His presence. The question reaches beneath the unusual behavior: Who is directing whom? Once the Spirit is treated as power at our disposal, even earnest religious language can conceal a refusal to bow before Him.

Scripture introduces us to Someone who knows, wills, speaks, and loves. In Acts 13:2, the Holy Spirit appoints Barnabas and Saul to the work He has called them to do. The missionaries serve His purpose; He does not serve their ambition. First Corinthians 2:10–11 attributes to Him knowledge of the deep things of God, and First Corinthians 12:11 places the distribution of gifts under His sovereign will. John Owen expressed the point simply: "he knows, he works as he will." [3] His power is never detached from His wisdom, as though we could obtain the power and supply the instructions.

Nor is He a lesser divine being assigned to carry out the wishes of greater ones. At Christ's baptism, the Son stands in the water, the Spirit descends, and the Father speaks from heaven (Matthew 3:16–17). The Father, Son, and Spirit are personally distinct, not three names for one Person appearing in different roles. Yet Christ commands baptism into the one name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). The Spirit possesses the same undivided divine nature as the Father and the Son. He is fully God, eternally God, worthy of the same worship and obedience.

His eternity and presence also correct the small place we sometimes give Him. Genesis 1:2 places the Spirit at work in creation; Hebrews 9:14 calls Him the eternal Spirit. In Psalm 139:7–10, David cannot escape His presence by changing his location. He is not confined to a platform, a meeting, or the reach of a minister's hand. A believer sitting alone beside a hospital bed has not traveled beyond His care. The God who is present there does not need a crowd before He can comfort His child.

His personhood makes our sin against Him painfully personal. Ephesians 4:30 warns believers against grieving the Holy Spirit, and the surrounding verses name lying, corrupt speech, bitterness,

and malice. We cannot honor Him in a meeting while refusing His command to speak truthfully afterward. Owen observed that our obligation is "to believe in him, to yield obedience to him." [4] The man who wants the Spirit's power while protecting his dishonesty has separated two things Scripture joins: dependence upon God and submission to God.

Yet the One we grieve is also the Helper Christ promised. John 14:16–17 presents Him as the abiding gift of the Father, given at the Son's request. His distinction from the Son does not make Him a rival to the Son: He bears witness to Christ (John 15:26). Neither does His holiness make Him indifferent to our weakness. Romans 8:26–27 describes His intercession for believers who do not know what to pray. When words fail, His knowledge does not. We come to Him as needy people who can trust His wisdom, rather than as customers demanding a particular experience.

For the church, honoring His Person requires correcting the language and practices that make Him appear controllable. Where a Charismatic leader has promised to release the Spirit through a gesture or transfer Him through an impartation, elders must explain why First Corinthians 12:11 places His work under His will. Examine teaching, songs, and invitations; stop endorsing counterfeit manifestations and protect members who question them. The Spirit will never become a minister's possession or excuse conduct His Word condemns. Where the congregation once waited for a personality to produce an encounter, let it now gather to hear God's Word, pray for His help, and obey Him together. Will your church withdraw its endorsement of anyone who claims to control or dispense the Spirit, even if that person attracts the crowds?

For the believer, communion with the Spirit calls for honest dealing with the Person who indwells you. If you once pursued a fresh touch while neglecting the truth He had already made plain, begin with the neglected obedience. Ephesians 4:25–32 requires truthful speech, useful work, kindness, and forgiveness. Correct the lie, abandon the corrupt conversation, and seek reconciliation where you have injured another. The Spirit will never make spiritual excitement a substitute for holiness. Will you exchange the search for a sensation you can display for the quiet dependence that obeys Him when nobody is watching?

For pastors, the Spirit's sovereignty requires humility both in the study and beside the troubled sheep. Renounce claims that your

touch, commands, or special anointing can place Him at another person's disposal. Acts 20:28 charges overseers to watch themselves and shepherd God's flock; Second Timothy 2:15 requires careful handling of His Word. Give time to prayer, prepare faithfully, confess personal sin, and submit your teaching and conduct to fellow elders. These are duties of dependence, never guarantees of a result we can demand. Where ministry once centered on your supposed spiritual powers, teach the people to rely upon God Himself, and remain patient when His work brings no public acclaim. What claim to spiritual authority must you surrender, and what neglected duty must you recover, so that your flock learns to depend upon God rather than upon you?

Knowing who He is prepares us to understand what He does. The Spirit does not merely visit human weakness with an impressive moment. He gives life to sinners, dwells in Christ's people, and carries forward their sanctification. We turn now to that gracious work with a better question than how to obtain an experience: What has this holy and merciful Person undertaken to accomplish in those who belong to Christ?

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit's work reaches deeper than anything a congregation can arrange. He brings the truth of God to people who need more than information: they need to be reconciled to the God they have offended. He spoke through the prophets (2 Samuel 23:2; 2 Peter 1:21), and Christ promised that He would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). His searching light exposes our unbelief and overturns our favorable account of ourselves. A meeting that leaves our excuses undisturbed has given us no reason to call its excitement His convicting work.

Yet exposure alone cannot give a sinner life. In John 3:5–8, Jesus tells Nicodemus that entry into God's kingdom requires birth by the Spirit; Titus 3:5 identifies regeneration and renewal as His work. We cannot produce that birth by intensifying an invitation. The Spirit renews the heart so that the sinner comes willingly to the Christ he previously resisted. Calvin called Him "the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself." [5] This is why conversion cannot be reduced to remembering a powerful service. The decisive question is whether we have been brought to trust the Savior Himself.

The Spirit who gives that life also makes His home in those He has renewed. Romans 8:9 places every person who belongs to Christ

among those He indwells; 1 Corinthians 6:19 makes that indwelling a claim upon the believer's body. Our private conduct takes place in His temple. He also bears witness to our adoption and teaches us to approach God as Father (Romans 8:15–16). Ephesians 1:13–14; 4:30 describes His sealing as God's pledge of our inheritance and identifies the day of redemption as its horizon. His presence does not expire when the meeting ends or our feelings subside. The believer's safety rests upon God's faithfulness, not upon an ability to recover yesterday's emotion.

That security gives us courage to face the sin that still needs to be put to death. The Spirit sets God's people apart for obedience (2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2). Justification is God's declaration that we are righteous in Christ; sanctification is His work of making us holy. Our growing obedience never becomes the price of our acceptance. Yet the Savior who frees us from condemnation also frees us from surrender to sin. J. C. Ryle wrote, "Christ is the fountain of life, from which pardon and holiness both flow." [6] We must not seek comfort in Christ's pardon while refusing the holiness He gives.

Romans 8:13 makes our responsibility unmistakable: believers put the deeds of the body to death by the Spirit. His power engages our obedience. It does not make obedience unnecessary. John Owen pressed the urgency home: "be killing sin or it will be killing you." [7] Consider a man who repeatedly seeks prayer for freedom from lust while keeping private access to the material that feeds it. Another emotional evening will not make that protected access innocent. Dependence upon the Spirit means asking for His help while shutting the door we have deliberately left open, confessing our sin, and accepting the care of faithful believers. We cannot appeal to His power as an excuse for postponing His commands.

As He weakens sin's hold, the Spirit cultivates what belongs to the life of Christ. Galatians 5:22–23 names His fruit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These graces reach places a platform cannot display. Longsuffering appears when a weary caregiver answers the same question again without cruelty. Faithfulness keeps a costly promise after enthusiasm has gone. Self-control governs conduct when nobody is watching. Such fruit grows imperfectly, and believers still need correction; nevertheless, these are substantial works of divine grace. A church that overlooks them while celebrating spectacular claims has taught its people to admire the wrong evidence.

The Spirit also equips believers to strengthen one another. 1 Corinthians 12:4–7 connects the variety of gifts with their common usefulness to the body. Ephesians 4:11–16 directs ministry toward the church's maturity in Christ. The teacher's understanding should help someone else understand; the servant's strength should help carry someone else's burden. Spiritual ability is entrusted to us for people we are commanded to love. When a claim to giftedness makes a leader untouchable or excuses neglect of the flock, the gift's stated purpose has been overturned. Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3 reaches beneath impressive ability to the love without which it profits nothing.

Above all, His ministry is relentlessly Christ-centered. John 16:14 records Christ's promise: "He will glorify Me." Therefore, any movement claiming extraordinary devotion to the Holy Spirit while diminishing Scripture, obscuring Christ, tolerating disorder, minimizing holiness, or substituting manifestations for sanctification has misunderstood the very Spirit it claims to honor. 2 Corinthians 3:18 carries this work into the believer's transformation: the Spirit increasingly conforms us to the likeness of the Lord whose glory we behold. He brings the Christ proclaimed in the gospel to bear upon the people who hear it.

This gives hope to the reader who sees how much remains wrong. We do not have to become our own saviors before asking the Spirit for help. Ryle's counsel was plain: "we must begin with Christ." [8] The Son gave Himself to redeem a people eager for good works (Titus 2:14), and the Spirit applies the benefits of that redemption. Come to Christ with the sin you have been hiding and the weakness you cannot overcome by resolve alone. His mercy gives you reason to confess honestly, and His power gives you reason to begin obeying. You are seeking help from the Savior who died to rescue sinners, not presenting Him with proof that you have rescued yourself.

For the church, this doctrine must change how spiritual life is recognized and nourished. Where Charismatic practice has treated tongues, impartations, or bodily reactions as proof of superior spirituality, elders must correct those measures from Romans 8:9 and Galatians 5:22–23. Stop granting authority on the strength of a manifestation, and stop allowing an impressive testimony to silence questions about conduct. Restore patient instruction, personal discipleship, and the loving correction required by Galatians 6:1–2. A congregation that once gathered around people with extraordinary

claims should learn to bear the burdens of members whose growth requires time and care. Which false measure of spirituality will your church stop using, and what specific care will it establish for people that measure has neglected?

For the believer, the question reaches the place where you have hoped an experience would spare you a difficult obedience. If you have sought repeated deliverance sessions while protecting a habit Scripture condemns, bring both the habit and the excuse into the light. Romans 8:13 calls you to fight through the Spirit, and Galatians 5:16 calls you to walk in Him. Name the sin, remove what supplies it, and ask a faithful pastor or mature believer to help you persevere. Look to Christ for pardon and strength when you stumble; confess promptly and resume the fight. The change is from waiting for someone to announce your freedom to depending upon the Spirit in the obedience before you. What provision for sin will you remove today, and whom will you ask to help you keep it removed?

For pastors, the Spirit's patient work must govern what we pursue after the service. If we have counted public reactions as conversions or promised instant freedom where Scripture calls for continuing warfare, we must confess and correct what we taught. Colossians 1:28–29 joins the aim of presenting people mature in Christ with labor sustained by His power. Explain the gospel carefully, examine professions of faith patiently, and arrange continuing pastoral care for those who seek help. Teach the congregation why repentance, faith, and growing holiness deserve attention even when they produce no dramatic report. Do not shame the weak believer whose struggle continues, and do not reverse biblical correction because people prefer the promise of an easier cure. Which claim about your ministry's results must you correct, and which neglected person will receive your sustained care this week?

These works belong together because the Spirit brings us to one Savior. He gives life, establishes us in the Father's love, enables resistance to sin, and teaches us to serve Christ's people. The glory belongs to the Son whose redemption makes these blessings ours. To understand the Spirit's work more clearly, we must now follow the light He shines upon Christ.

THE FLOODLIGHT MINISTRY

When Jesus promised the coming ministry of the Spirit to His apostles, He declared concerning Him, "He will glorify Me" (John 16:14).

The Spirit's ministry would never compete with the Son. He would illuminate Christ, testify of Christ, and cause the apostolic witnesses to understand and proclaim the truth concerning Christ.

J. I. Packer memorably called this the Spirit's "floodlight ministry." He recalled seeing a church building illuminated at night. The floodlights did not call attention to themselves; they illuminated the building. [9]

So it is with the Holy Spirit. He opens our eyes to the Savior's person and work. He magnifies Christ rather than the preacher, performer, experience, or supposed manifestation. This does not mean that the Spirit produces no emotion. He may bring profound conviction, joy, grief over sin, assurance, love, reverence, and holy fear. But intensity of feeling is not, by itself, proof that the Spirit of God produced it. Every experience must be tested by Scripture and judged by what it reveals about Christ and what fruit it produces in the life.

1 Corinthians 12:3 gives us another Christ-centered test: "No one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." The genuine ministry of the Spirit brings men beneath the lordship of Jesus Christ.

For the church, the floodlight test begins with what people have learned to admire. Suppose a congregation can describe a visiting minister's touch and the reactions around him, but cannot explain what he taught about the cross. It has acquired a story about an encounter without gaining a clearer sight of the Savior. Christ may be named repeatedly while the preacher remains the person everyone longs to meet. 2 Corinthians 4:5 puts the preacher in his proper place: Christ is Lord, and His ministers are servants for His sake. Place your teaching, testimonies, and invitations beneath that rule. Stop presenting access to a specially anointed leader as the way to get nearer to God. Explain Christ's atoning death, resurrection, and present intercession until people understand why they may trust Him. Which announcement, testimony, or practice currently magnifies a spiritual personality, and what will you change so that it directs the congregation's confidence to Christ?

For the believer, you may remember the hand laid upon you more readily than the promise of Christ preached to you. If your assurance rises whenever that minister visits and sinks when he leaves, examine where your confidence has fastened. Hebrews 10:19–22 grounds our approach to God in the blood of Jesus and calls us to draw near in faith. The Savior has opened a way into the Father's presence that no

minister owns. Open that passage, name before God the guilt or fear you have carried from meeting to meeting, and rest your plea upon Christ's sacrifice. Ask a faithful shepherd to help you understand His promise, rather than to supply a special experience that must keep being renewed. What assurance have you attached to a person's touch, and what promise of Christ will you trust as you draw near to God today?

For pastors, a preacher can speak often about Christ while quietly making himself indispensable. If we have encouraged that dependence, we must repent of it before congratulating ourselves on the people's loyalty. 1 Peter 5:2–4 places every shepherd beneath the Chief Shepherd; 1 Timothy 2:5 identifies Christ as the one Mediator between God and men. Teach those truths plainly, then correct whatever claim or practice has made your people think access to God passes through you. Invite the elders to examine your ministry's claims. Teach the congregation to test your sermons by Scripture, and replace promises of a special impartation with patient explanation of what Christ has accomplished for His people. Do not shame the sheep for trusting what you trained them to trust. Give them time and teaching, and hold to the correction when admirers leave or the applause diminishes. What will you correct publicly this week so that your people become more certain of Christ's sufficiency and less dependent upon your supposed spiritual power?

But which Christ are we being taught to trust? His name can be repeated while His words are displaced. The Spirit directs us to the Savior made known through His chosen witnesses. We must therefore hear the promise of His guidance first as the apostles heard it.

THE SPIRIT AND THE APOSTOLIC WITNESS

Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would "guide you into all truth" must first be heard in the room where He spoke it. On the night before His crucifixion, Christ was addressing the apostles—the men He had personally chosen to become His authorized witnesses after His resurrection. John 16:13–14 therefore cannot simply be lifted out of its apostolic setting and turned into a promise that every Christian will receive private, infallible guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Earlier that same evening Jesus had told these men, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). That promise had an unmistakably

apostolic dimension. These men had walked with Christ, heard His teaching, witnessed His works, and would soon be commissioned to proclaim His death and resurrection to the world. The Spirit would bring Christ's words accurately to their remembrance and open their understanding to the truth those words contained.

Jesus continued, "But when the Helper comes... He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning" (John 15:26–27). Notice the connection. The Spirit would testify concerning Christ, and the apostles would bear witness because they had actually been with Him. Their witness was not based upon later religious impressions. It rested upon historical eyewitness testimony empowered and preserved by the Holy Spirit.

That is why Jesus could say in John 16:13, "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth." The Spirit would guide Christ's authorized witnesses into the full understanding of His person, His cross, His resurrection, and the redemptive meaning of what they had seen and heard. After Pentecost they proclaimed that truth authoritatively, and the church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42). Paul later explained that the church had been "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).

Here is the distinction that must remain absolutely clear: The apostles were inspired; believers today are illuminated.

The apostles were uniquely enabled by the Holy Spirit to deliver authoritative revelation to the church. Their teaching became part of the once-laid foundation upon which the church continues to stand. Christians today do not receive that same revelatory authority. The Spirit does not make our interpretations infallible, nor does He turn our impressions into additional words from God.

But this does not mean the Spirit has ceased teaching His people. He takes the inspired Word He gave through the prophets and apostles and opens our minds to understand it, presses it upon our consciences, brings its truth to remembrance, convicts us when we disobey it, comforts us through its promises, and enables us to walk in its light. Paul prayed that believers would have "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened" (Ephesians 1:18), and Christ opened the disciples' understanding "that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). That is illumination—the living Spirit making the written Word understood, believed, loved, and obeyed.

This distinction protects us from two opposite errors. On one

side, it prevents us from turning every strong impression into revelation and every sincere interpretation into the voice of God. On the other side, it prevents us from treating the closed canon as though God handed His church a finished Bible and then withdrew from His people. The canon is closed, but the Spirit who inspired it remains powerfully active.

Therefore, when someone says, "The Spirit showed me," we do not automatically dismiss the statement, nor do we automatically receive it as divine authority. We ask a more careful question: Is what he claims consistent with what the Spirit has already revealed in Scripture? Agreement with Scripture is necessary, but it does not prove that an impression came from God. A thought may be sound without being revealed. We must distinguish what Scripture teaches from what we infer, and neither our confidence nor our sincerity gives that inference authority over another person's conscience. The Holy Spirit never contradicts Himself. He does not lead one generation to deny what He inspired another generation to write.

For the church, consider what happens when a leader announces that God has told him which course the congregation must take. A member asks for the biblical grounds, and the question is treated as resistance to the Spirit. The claim has done more than recommend a decision: it has made examination appear sinful. Yet Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans for searching the Scriptures to test what they heard, even from Paul. Elders must welcome that examination and distinguish biblical commands from their own judgments about buildings, appointments, or ministry plans. Stop using a claimed revelation to settle what must be considered through Scripture, prayer, and accountable counsel. A proposal may be wise without being a command from heaven. Recover a church in which members can ask for biblical reasons without fearing that they have offended God. Which decision have we placed beyond examination by calling it God's revelation, and when will we bring it back under the scrutiny of His written Word?

For the believer, a difficult decision can make a private message seem more desirable than biblical wisdom. You want someone to tell you which job to accept or where to live, and a confident prediction promises relief from uncertainty. But the relief does not establish the speaker's authority. James 1:5 directs those who lack wisdom to ask God; it does not promise a personal prophecy naming the next step. Pray, examine your responsibilities in Scripture, seek mature counsel,

and make a responsible judgment without calling it revelation. You may still feel uncertain about the outcome. That uncertainty does not mean Christ has abandoned you. John 20:31 directs your faith to the written testimony about the Son of God, through whom you have life. Your confidence in Him can be firm while your assessment of a job remains fallible. Which decision are you postponing until someone supplies a private word, and what responsibility already made clear in Scripture will you obey today?

For pastors, the correction must reach our own mouths. If we have said "God told me" when we had only an impression, we must repent of borrowing His authority for our judgment. Correct the claim before those who heard it, and release them from obligations we imposed without biblical warrant. Then teach the distinction patiently: in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, Scripture equips the man of God; in 2 Timothy 4:1–2, Christ's coming judgment gives urgency to the command to preach that Word. Review your sermons and counseling with the elders. Replace appeals to private revelation with reasons people can examine in the text, and revisit decisions that were pressed upon frightened consciences. Some may feel that their guide has been taken away; stay beside them while they learn to trust what God has actually said. Others may prefer a preacher who promises fresh messages. Continue teaching faithfully when that preference costs attendance or approval. Which claim will you correct this week, and whom will you personally help to exchange fear of your impressions for confidence in Christ's Word?

The apostles were inspired. We are illuminated. Their words judge our impressions; our impressions never judge their words.

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH AND ORDER

A bodily reaction or surge of emotion cannot, by itself, establish that a person has been "overcome by the Spirit." We must ask what has been taught, what is happening to the mind and conscience, whether Christ is being exalted, whether Scripture is being obeyed, and what fruit follows.

Paul goes even further. In the very chapter regulating genuine prophetic activity, he writes, "And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:32). Even when authentic prophecy was operating in the apostolic church, the Holy Spirit did not erase the prophet's self-control. A man could remain silent, wait his turn, and govern his own speech. Therefore, the claim, "I

could not control myself because the Spirit took over," cannot simply be accepted as evidence of divine activity. Paul's command leaves no room for treating an uncontrollable impulse to speak as permission to disrupt the church.

When Paul corrected the disorder occurring in Corinthian worship, he wrote, "For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:33). Later in the same chapter he gave the governing command, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

The Holy Spirit does not contradict the character of the God whose Spirit He is. Disorder is not automatically spirituality, and loss of bodily control is not a reliable proof of divine power.

Paul also contrasts drunkenness with the Spirit-filled life: "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). Drunkenness gives itself over to dissipation; the Spirit-filled life bears holy fruit. In Ephesians 5:19–21, Paul describes believers singing to the Lord, giving thanks to the Father in Christ's name, and submitting to one another in the fear of God. Among the fruit Paul names is self-control: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23).

For the church, suppose a sermon is repeatedly interrupted by shouting that the leaders welcome as proof of the Spirit's power. The congregation remembers the commotion but cannot explain the truth being taught. A gathering has not been edified merely because everyone has been startled. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul makes the building up of the church the governing aim; in verse 31, he wants the people to learn and be encouraged. Elders must therefore protect the congregation's opportunity to hear, understand, and respond to the Word. Stop rewarding disruptive behavior with spiritual prestige. Explain why speech must serve the whole assembly, and restore intelligible teaching, prayer, and congregational praise. Strong affection can accompany that worship without taking command of it. Which interruption have we praised as power while it kept people from hearing Scripture, and what will we change before the next gathering?

For the believer, if you have been told that remaining on your feet means resisting the Spirit, do not manufacture a reaction to escape the accusation. Neither falling nor standing can settle the condition of your soul. Galatians 5:16 directs you to walk in the Spirit, and verses 22–23 identify the fruit to seek. Bring that test into the conversation

in which you are tempted to lash out, the grievance you keep rehearsing, or the temptation you have arranged to meet in private. Ask the Lord for help, confess the sin, and take the concrete step obedience requires, even when no one sees it. Titus 2:14 tells us that Christ gave Himself to redeem and purify a people zealous for good works. The Savior's purpose for you reaches into those unobserved hours. Which sinful habit have you left untouched while pursuing another experience, and what specific act of obedience will you take today in dependence upon His Spirit?

For pastors, begin with the disorder we have encouraged or excused. If we taught people that correction would quench the Spirit, we must repent of making our silence sound faithful. In 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, Paul places the command not to quench the Spirit alongside the command to test all things. Teach both, then open 1 Corinthians 14 and show why the church's edification requires responsible oversight. Agree with the elders how you will address interruptions, protect the congregation's hearing, and care for the person involved without public humiliation. Stop inviting people to surrender self-control as a condition of receiving God's blessing. Explain the correction before the next meeting, and follow it with patient shepherding afterward. Some will accuse you of extinguishing the fire; others will be frightened that God has withdrawn. Answer them from Scripture, stay near the fearful, and hold to the correction even if those who demand the old manifestations leave. What have you taught your people to mistake for the Spirit's power, and what will you now confess, teach, and change to lead them under Christ's rule?

The issue is not whether a believer may ever weep, tremble, rejoice loudly, or experience overwhelming emotion. The issue is whether Scripture gives us warrant to declare such reactions proof that the Holy Spirit is present.

THE WITNESS OF THE GREAT AWAKENING

The Great Awakening cannot be used to prove that bodily reactions establish the Spirit's presence. Jonathan Edwards witnessed extraordinary emotional and physical responses under powerful preaching, yet he refused to make bodily effects a sure test either for or against a genuine work of God.

In Religious Affections, Edwards wrote:

"It is no sign that affections have the nature of true religion, or that they have not, that they have great effects on the body." [10]

That distinction is enormously important. A person may weep and remain unconverted. Another may quietly hear the Word, be pierced in conscience, repent, believe, and leave transformed. The body is not the final judge of the Spirit's work.

George Whitefield likewise expected Christians to know the real and personal ministry of the Holy Spirit. Yet he strongly opposed separating supposed spiritual guidance from Scripture:

"And though it is the quintessence of enthusiasm, to pretend to be guided by the Spirit without the written word; yet it is every Christian's bounden duty to be guided by the Spirit in conjunction with the written word of God." [11]

Howell Harris described a profoundly felt assurance following his conversion, but he looked to what followed the experience:

"I was now acquitted at the bar of Justice, and in my own conscience; and my faith proved itself to be true, by the peace, joy, watchfulness, hatred of sin, and fear of offending God, that followed it." [12]

There was emotion, but there was also holiness. There was joy, but there was hatred of sin. There was assurance, but there was watchfulness. That is the biblical balance. We must look beyond the intensity of an experience and ask whether it agrees with Scripture, glorifies Christ, produces repentance, and bears the enduring fruit of righteousness.

THE ABIDING MARKS OF THE SPIRIT'S TRUE WORK

The surest way to recognize a counterfeit is to know the genuine. Scripture does not leave us guessing about the Spirit's abiding work. It tells us what He actually produces in those He indwells.

He gives life. Jesus said, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Titus 3:5 calls this "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." The true work of the Spirit therefore begins much deeper than excitement, bodily sensation, or emotional intensity. He raises the spiritually dead. He opens blind eyes. He creates faith where there was unbelief and love for Christ where there was hostility toward Him. Arthur W. Pink states the principle plainly: "Spiritual life must precede spiritual sight, and the Spirit Himself must enter the heart before there is life." [13]

He indwells and assures believers. Romans 8:9 says, "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His." His presence is not the possession of an elite class of Christians who have experienced something spectacular. Every true believer is indwelt by the Spirit. And Romans 8:15–16 tells us that He bears witness to our adoption so that we cry,

"Abba, Father." That is a far deeper evidence of His presence than trembling, falling, shouting, or any other outward manifestation.

He sanctifies and puts sin to death. Romans 8:13 declares, "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Galatians 5:16 commands us to "walk in the Spirit," and verses 22–23 describe the fruit He produces: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. John Owen identifies the Spirit as the One who directly produces holiness in believers: "The immediate efficient cause of all gospel holiness is the Spirit of God." [14] Here is one of the clearest tests of spiritual claims: does the experience leave a person more holy? Does it produce greater hatred of sin, greater obedience, greater purity, greater humility, and greater love for Christ?

He conforms believers to Christ. Paul says that we "are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Octavius Winslow beautifully connects the Spirit's Christ-centered ministry with this transforming work: "It is the peculiar work of the Spirit to glorify Christ ... in drawing out the likeness of Christ upon the soul." [15] This is the direction of all genuine spiritual power. The Holy Spirit is not trying to make us fascinated with manifestations. He is making us like Jesus Christ.

Jonathan Edwards adds another searching test. Genuine spiritual affection is drawn not merely to what God gives, but to who God is. Edwards wrote that true saints "love God, in the first place, for the beauty of his holiness." [16] This exposes a subtle counterfeit. A person may become excited about promised healing, prosperity, emotional relief, supernatural experiences, or even a sense of divine favor while remaining largely unmoved by God's holiness itself. The Holy Spirit does not merely make Christ useful to us; He makes Christ beautiful to us. He creates increasing love for God's holiness and an answering desire to be holy ourselves.

For the church, this love of holiness must shape whom we esteem and what we encourage. If a believer with an impressive account of an experience receives our attention while a patient, faithful member is scarcely noticed, we are teaching the congregation what counts. Galatians 5:22–23 directs our attention to the character the Spirit produces. Make room to recognize the member who bears patiently with a difficult brother, serves without demanding recognition, and receives correction with humility. Encourage such obedience through

prayer, instruction, and personal care. We need not pretend that these believers have become sinless; we should thank God for His grace and help them grow. Whose faithful obedience have we overlooked because it came without an extraordinary story, and how will we encourage that person this week?

For the believer, the searching question is whether you welcome God's holiness when it exposes something you still want to keep. You may admire holiness in a sermon and resent it when the same truth reaches your dishonest words or the resentment you have carefully defended. Romans 8:13 calls you to put sin to death by the Spirit. Name the sin without excusing it, ask the Lord for help, and take the step you have been postponing: correct the falsehood, seek forgiveness, or abandon the private arrangement that feeds temptation. Do not offer these acts as payment for God's acceptance. Come to Christ for mercy, and obey in dependence upon His Spirit. What cherished sin does God's holiness now expose, and what will repentance require of you today?

For pastors, the same truth must govern our account of the church's health. If we have valued dramatic reports more than growing holiness, we should confess that error and change what we teach our people to seek. Open Titus 3:5 and Romans 8:9–16 with them; explain regeneration, the Spirit's indwelling, adoption, and the putting to death of sin. Then remain close enough to know where they need help. Return to the struggling member, ask whether the broken relationship is being repaired, and pray with the believer who is learning to resist a stubborn temptation. Such care takes time, and its fruit may attract little attention. Our people still need it. Which person's growth in holiness have we neglected while seeking a more impressive report, and when will we return to that work of shepherding?

This is why the true work of the Spirit cannot finally be measured by what happens in a meeting. It must be measured by what happens in a life. A person may fall to the floor and remain proud, bitter, immoral, and unchanged. Another may quietly hear the Word of God, repent deeply, forgive an enemy, break with a secret sin, and begin walking faithfully with Christ. Which one displays the greater evidence of the Holy Spirit?

The answer should be obvious. The Spirit's true power is not proved by creating a spectacle. It is displayed in creating saints—men and women increasingly conformed to Jesus Christ and called to glorify Him.

ILLUMINATION, NOT NEW REVELATION

The Spirit's continuing work must not be confused with continuing inspired revelation. Scripture distinguishes the truth God has revealed from the Spirit's work of enabling sinners and saints to receive that truth.

> 1 Corinthians 2:12–14: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Paul joins the Spirit-taught words of the apostolic message with the Spirit-enabled reception of that message. The Spirit who gave the truth must also enable us to receive it; receiving it does not make us sources of new inspired truth.

The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes this biblical truth:

"Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word." [17]

Notice what illumination does not mean. The Spirit does not reveal a new gospel, add another doctrine, or produce another inspired book. He enables us to receive what God has already revealed.

Paul prayed that God would give believers "the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened" (Ephesians 1:17–18). Christ similarly "opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

Paul explains what this enlightenment is to accomplish: knowledge of the hope of God's calling, the riches of His inheritance in the saints, and the greatness of His power toward believers (Ephesians 1:18–19). He is asking that they grasp what God has given them in Christ, not that each believer become a source of additional inspired doctrine.

In regeneration, the Spirit opens spiritually blind eyes. Throughout the Christian life, He continues to enlighten the understanding and apply biblical truth to the conscience. A believer may read a familiar passage and suddenly see the ugliness of a sin tolerated for years.

Another may come trembling to a promise he has read many times and find his heart strengthened to trust Christ in suffering. The Word has not changed. No new revelation has been given. The Spirit has taken His already-inspired Word and applied it powerfully to the heart.

For the church, no claim of illumination gives a speaker permission to close the question of what Scripture actually says. If a teacher answers a request for biblical evidence by saying that the Spirit showed him, the congregation is being asked to trust his experience where it should be examining the text. Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans for receiving the message eagerly while searching the Scriptures to test it. Ask the teacher to explain the passage in its context. Receive what it establishes, and refuse to let an impressive claim supply the authority the text does not give. Which teaching have we accepted because we feared questioning the speaker, and when will we examine it together from Scripture?

For the believer, discovering that you misread a verse is a reason to receive correction, not to abandon confidence in the Spirit's help. In Psalm 119:18, the psalmist asks God to open his eyes to the wonders of His law. Bring that dependence to your own reading. Read the surrounding paragraph, follow the writer's argument, and ask a faithful pastor for help where you remain uncertain. An interpretation does not become certain because it came while you were praying. Let Scripture correct the conclusion you wanted it to support. And where its command is already clear, do not postpone obedience while waiting for a private impression to make it feel binding. What clear duty have you delayed while asking God for further direction, and what will you do about it today?

For pastors, we must repent where we have presented our own interpretations with a certainty that belongs to God's Word. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul directs the minister to diligent, faithful handling of the truth. Open the passage with your fellow elders, identify what you overstated, and correct the claim before those who heard it. Teach the congregation to distinguish the authority of Scripture from the fallibility of its teachers. Stay near the frightened believer who has been told that questioning your interpretation means resisting the Spirit. Show him from the text why receiving correction honors the God who gave it. Some may prefer a leader who claims unquestionable insight; remain faithful to Christ when that preference costs approval. Whose conscience have we bound with our own certainty, and what correction will we make so that Christ's Word governs them again?

That is not a lesser work. It is one of the most precious ministries of the Holy Spirit.

THE TEST OF FRUIT OVER TIME

A manifestation can occur in a moment. Sanctification must survive Monday morning. Jesus gave the church a simple and searching principle: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). The biblical question is not merely, "What happened in the meeting?" but, "What happened afterward?" Did the experience produce deeper obedience to Christ, greater hatred of sin, more humility, more love, greater faithfulness, and a stronger attachment to Scripture? Jonathan Edwards, who labored carefully to distinguish genuine revival from religious excitement, brought the issue back to the life that follows the experience: "Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice." [18] The great question, then, is not merely what a person felt in a moment of religious intensity, but what grace produced when that person returned to ordinary life.

The Apostle John makes the same point with unmistakable force: "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments" (1 John 2:3). Genuine Christianity does not mean sinless perfection. A true believer may fall into particular acts of sin, sometimes grievously, and must continually confess and forsake them (1 John 1:8–9). But a true Christian cannot make peace with sin and live under its settled dominion as the governing pattern of life. Romans 6:1–2 asks, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not!" The new birth creates a new direction.

John presses this even further: "Whoever abides in Him does not sin" and "Whoever has been born of God does not sin" (1 John 3:6, 9). John is not teaching that Christians never commit individual sins—he has already denied that error in 1 John 1:8. His point is that the regenerate person cannot continue in an unbroken, settled practice of sin as though nothing has changed. Sin remains in the believer, but it no longer reigns without resistance. This warfare is not incidental to the Christian life. John Owen urged believers to make mortification their daily business: "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." [19] The presence of conflict with sin is therefore not proof that regeneration has failed; the absence of any conflict may be far more alarming.

At this point another distinction must be guarded. Justification and sanctification are not the same grace, but they are never separated in the same person. Justification is God's once-for-all judicial declaration

that a sinner is righteous in Christ; sanctification is His continuing work of making that justified sinner holy. Ephesians 2:8–10 joins the two without confusing them: we are saved by grace through faith, and we are created in Christ Jesus for good works. Titus 2:11–14 does the same: the grace that brings salvation also teaches us to deny ungodliness and to live soberly, righteously, and godly. Calvin put it memorably: "Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify." [20] J. C. Ryle likewise wrote, "Sanctification ... is the invariable result of that vital union with Christ which true faith gives to a Christian." [21] Holiness is not the ground of justification, but it is its necessary fruit. We are not justified because we are sanctified; we are sanctified because the Christ who justifies also gives His Spirit. Where justification is real, sanctification will appear—imperfectly, progressively, and sometimes through painful conflict, but truly.

That distinction is essential when evaluating claims of spiritual power. A person may fall to the floor, speak dramatically, weep uncontrollably, or describe an extraordinary encounter with God. But if months and years later there is no growing holiness, no war against sin, no obedience to Christ, and no enduring fruit of righteousness, Scripture gives us no reason to treat the original experience as proof of the Spirit's work.

By contrast, the believer who quietly hears the Word, repents deeply, begins putting secret sin to death, forgives an enemy, repairs a broken relationship, becomes faithful in marriage, grows in prayer, and perseveres in obedience may display far more convincing evidence of the Holy Spirit than anything spectacular that occurred in a crowded auditorium.

The Spirit's true power is not proved by creating a spectacle. It is displayed in creating saints—men and women increasingly conformed to Jesus Christ and called to glorify Him.

The following eight biblical truths show why justification and sanctification can never be separated in those whom Christ saves.

1. Christ cannot be divided: the Savior who becomes our righteousness also becomes our sanctification; we cannot receive Him for acceptance with God while excluding His transforming work (1 Corinthians 1:30).
2. God joins these benefits in the same people: those whom Paul identifies as justified are also washed and sanctified, leaving no biblical category of justified believers untouched by holiness (1 Corinthians 6:11).

3. Union with Christ brings new life: those united to His death and resurrection are brought into a new manner of living, making an unchanged allegiance to sin incompatible with belonging to Him (Romans 6:4).
4. God promises an obedient heart: His covenant provision includes a new heart and His indwelling Spirit, who causes His people to walk in His commandments (Ezekiel 36:26–27).
5. Saving grace trains those it saves: the grace that brings salvation also teaches its recipients to renounce ungodliness and live righteously, so grace cannot be invoked as permission to remain under sin's rule (Titus 2:11–12).
6. Christ's death secures a holy people: He gave Himself to redeem us from lawlessness and purify a people eager for good works, making sanctification part of His saving purpose (Titus 2:14).
7. Every person belonging to Christ possesses His Spirit: that same Spirit enables believers to put sin to death, so belonging to Christ cannot be separated from His sanctifying presence (Romans 8:9–13).
8. Salvation creates what it commands: those saved by grace through faith are God's workmanship, created in Christ for good works, making obedience the intended fruit of salvation rather than its purchase price (Ephesians 2:8–10).

These eight truths bring us back to the question no extraordinary experience can answer by itself: what fruit remains when the meeting is over? Look at the life that follows. Is cherished sin being confessed and forsaken? Is obedience becoming dearer because Christ is becoming dearer? The Spirit who unites a sinner to the Savior continues His work when the music stops, the crowd leaves, and no one is watching. His fruit appears in the costly duties of ordinary life: telling the truth, forgiving an offender, resisting temptation, and returning to Christ after failure. Test the claimed experience by that enduring work. Then bring the same examination home to your own soul.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Christian, be very careful what you attribute to the Holy Spirit. To say, "The Spirit did this," or "The Spirit told me this," is not casual religious language. You are attaching the name and authority of God to an experience or impression. That claim deserves reverence, humility, and rigorous biblical examination.

For the Church

Do not measure the Spirit's presence by noise, bodily reactions, atmosphere, music, emotional intensity, or the charisma of a leader. Ask instead whether Christ is being exalted, Scripture is being honored, sin is being exposed, repentance is occurring, and believers are growing in holiness. A meeting can be emotionally overwhelming and spiritually barren, while a quiet congregation hearing Christ faithfully preached from Scripture may be witnessing a profound work of the Holy Spirit.

A congregation teaches its people what to value by what it celebrates. If extraordinary claims receive constant attention while repentance and patient obedience pass unnoticed, struggling believers may learn to distrust the very fruit Scripture tells them to recognize. Think of the member who has finally confessed a hidden sin, or the wounded Christian who is learning to forgive. Shall we leave such people wondering whether the Spirit has passed them by because they have no spectacular experience to report?

Open the Scriptures together. Teach the congregation to recognize the fruit named in Galatians 5:22–23, encourage those in whom it is growing, and patiently help those who are weak. When a claim about the Spirit misleads the church, address it plainly from Scripture. Give people biblical reasons for what you affirm and what you reject. A congregation needs discernment that protects souls and love that stays beside them.

Whom have we overlooked because their quiet obedience attracted less attention than someone else's spectacular claims?

For the Believer

But the examination must become personal. It is possible to defend cessationism correctly while resisting the Spirit's sanctifying work in your own life. You may reject false prophecy while harboring bitterness. You may expose counterfeit miracles while refusing to forgive. You may defend the sufficiency of Scripture while rarely opening your Bible with hunger. You may criticize emotional excess while possessing little love, joy, gentleness, or self-control yourself. Correct doctrine must lead to holy living.

Bring that examination to the place where obedience has become costly. Perhaps there is an apology you keep postponing, a temptation you carefully keep within reach, or a resentment you defend whenever conscience begins to trouble you. Name the sin honestly before God. Ask for the Spirit's help, remove what feeds the temptation, and take

the step Scripture requires. Where you have wronged someone, seek forgiveness. Where you have concealed a struggle, seek the help of a faithful pastor or mature believer. Do not settle for admiring holiness while arranging your life to avoid its demands.

Romans 8:13 brings both the seriousness of the duty and the source of our strength before us: "but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." You cannot overcome sin by determination alone. Depend on the Spirit as you obey the Word He has given. If you have fallen again, confess it and return to Christ. His sufficiency is a reason to come to Him now; your repeated failure is no reason to remain away.

What sin are you asking God to deliver you from while still making provision for it?

For Pastors

Pastor, your people learn from you what to call the work of the Holy Spirit. Examine the claims you repeat, the experiences you commend, and the evidence you offer when you say that God is at work. Christ said of the Spirit in John 16:14, "He will glorify Me." Let that purpose govern your preaching and your judgment. Teach your people to look for love for Christ, submission to His Word, repentance, and the fruit of holiness.

If you have attached God's authority to an impression or endorsed an experience without biblical warrant, acknowledge it and correct it before those you have misled. The embarrassment of correction must not outweigh your concern for their souls. Then stay near the people whose consciences have been troubled by such claims. Some may fear that their lack of an extraordinary experience means they lack the Spirit Himself. Hear them patiently. Open the Scriptures with them. Help them understand what Scripture actually teaches about the Spirit's presence and work, and continue caring for them as they learn.

Guard your own life as you guard your teaching. A congregation needs a shepherd who welcomes the same searching Word he brings to others, who repents when it exposes him, and who depends on the Spirit in the ordinary duties of his calling.

Are your people learning to recognize the Spirit's work by growing likeness to Christ—or by the experiences you have taught them to prize?

The purpose of this discernment reaches into the life we live before God. When Scripture exposes sin, repent. When it directs you to Christ, trust Him. When it makes your duty plain, obey in dependence

on the Spirit. The Holy Spirit glorifies the Savior and forms His likeness in His people. Let that truth govern both the claims you accept and the fruit you seek in your own life.

BRING EVERY SPIRITUAL CLAIM TO THE WORD — CHAPTER 5 CHECKLIST

- Does this teaching or experience direct attention primarily to Jesus Christ, or to the preacher, prophet, manifestation, or experience itself?
- Is the claimed work of the Spirit consistent with Scripture's teaching about His holy character, His truth, His order, and His purpose?
- Am I treating bodily reactions, intense emotions, unusual sensations, or extraordinary experiences as proof of the Spirit's presence when Scripture does not give me that test?
- What lasting fruit has followed the experience—repentance, holiness, humility, love, obedience, and greater devotion to Christ, or merely a desire for another experience?
- Am I seeking private impressions or supposed revelations when God has already spoken clearly in His written Word?
- Do I see the Spirit's biblical work in my own life: growing hatred of sin, increasing love for Christ, self-control, forgiveness, purity, faithfulness, prayer, and obedience?
- Would I still believe the Holy Spirit was powerfully present if there were no spectacular manifestations at all, but Christ was exalted, Scripture faithfully preached, sinners converted, sin mortified, and believers made holy?

CHAPTER AXIOMS

These axioms gather the chapter's biblical tests for recognizing the Holy Spirit's work and refusing the substitutes that borrow His name.

Axiom One — The Holy Spirit Is God, Never a Minister's Possession

The Spirit acts with divine wisdom and sovereign freedom. No gesture, formula, or supposed anointing places Him at a preacher's disposal. The moment a leader teaches people to depend upon his ability to release the Spirit, he claims a mastery that belongs to no creature. We approach the Spirit as worshipers who need His mercy.

Scripture: Acts 5:3–4; 1 Corinthians 12:11.

Axiom Two — The Spirit's Written Word Judges Every Claim Made in His Name

An experience cannot supply its own certificate of divine origin. Its force, sincerity, and popularity leave the question of truth unanswered. Testing a spiritual claim by Scripture honors the Spirit who gave Scripture; placing the claim beyond examination denies His Word its rightful authority.

Scripture: 2 Peter 1:20–21; 1 John 4:1–6.

Axiom Three — The Spirit Magnifies the Christ Whom the Apostles Proclaimed

Repeatedly mentioning Jesus does not establish that a ministry glorifies Him. The Spirit brings the crucified and risen Savior into clearer view and teaches His people to trust and obey Him. Where fascination with a preacher grows while understanding of Christ remains shallow, the congregation has reason to examine what it has been taught to admire.

Scripture: John 15:26–27; John 16:14; 2 Corinthians 4:5–6.

Axiom Four — Illumination Opens Our Understanding without Making Us Inspired

The Spirit enables us to understand, love, and obey the revelation He has given. His help does not make our interpretations infallible or turn our impressions into commands for another person. Genuine dependence welcomes correction from Scripture because the purpose of illumination is submission to God's truth.

Scripture: Ephesians 1:17–19; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Acts 17:11.

Axiom Five — Emotional Force Cannot Settle a Spiritual Verdict

Tears may accompany repentance, but tears cannot prove it. Composure cannot prove spiritual life either. We must examine what is believed, whom it exalts, and what obedience follows. Neither excitement nor restraint gives a congregation permission to disregard truth, edification, and self-control.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 14:26, 32–33; Galatians 5:22–23.

Axiom Six — Every Believer Belonging to Christ Has the Holy Spirit

The Spirit's indwelling is not a distinction reserved for Christians with extraordinary experiences. The weakest believer who truly belongs

to Christ is not waiting for a minister to complete his membership in God's family. His need is to grow in the grace already given, with his confidence resting upon the Savior rather than the intensity of his feelings.

Scripture: Romans 8:9, 15–16; Ephesians 1:13–14.

Axiom Seven — The Spirit Produces Holiness That Experience Cannot Replace

The grace that pardons also brings a sinner into newness of life. Holiness never purchases acceptance with God, yet settled refusal to repent cannot be sheltered beneath a remembered religious experience. The Spirit's fruit appears through real, imperfect obedience, including the humility that confesses failure and returns to Christ for help.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:8–10; Romans 8:13; 1 John 1:8–9; 1 John 2:3–6.

Axiom Eight — Exposing Counterfeits Does Not Supply Spiritual Life

A church may identify false claims accurately and still neglect prayer, cherish pride, and leave its people poorly shepherded. Discernment must lead us into deeper dependence upon God. The Spirit whose work we defend is the Spirit whose help we need to preach faithfully, love patiently, resist sin, and persevere.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:6–7; 2 Corinthians 3:5–6; Ephesians 6:18.

PASTORAL REFORMATION — WHAT MUST THE SHEPHERD DO NOW?

Pastor, consider the two people a false test can injure. One rests his assurance upon an extraordinary experience while refusing to repent. Another trusts Christ and struggles against sin, yet fears that the absence of that experience means the Spirit has passed him by. The same teaching can put the first man to sleep and keep the second awake in distress. Your task is to open Scripture until each hears the truth his soul needs: warning where there is presumption, comfort where faith trembles, and Christ before them both (1 Thessalonians 5:14; 1 John 2:1–6).

The pastor cannot call the church to repentance where he refuses to lead it in repentance.

Repent — Confess What You Taught People to Mistake for God's Work

Begin with the evidence of your own ministry. With the elders, examine the assurances you gave after a meeting, the testimonies you endorsed, and the claims you made about a person's spiritual condition. What did you introduce, tolerate, defend, or help normalize? Where did you fail to teach the biblical tests? If you treated a bodily reaction as proof of conversion, identify that judgment plainly. If you assured an unrepentant person that an experience settled his standing with God, withdraw that assurance and explain the gospel to him. 1 Timothy 4:16 places the shepherd's life and teaching under continuing examination. A correction that never reaches the person who trusted your words leaves him exposed to the same danger.

Look also at the people whom your measure of spirituality diminished. Did you make a believer ashamed because he had no dramatic story? Did you treat an honest question as unbelief, or praise a gifted leader while overlooking the people injured by his conduct? Seek out those you wronged. Ask forgiveness without requiring them to minimize the harm. Richard Baxter's warning reaches the manner of the apology itself: "He that means as he speaks, will surely do as he speaks." [22] Let your fellow elders examine whether your conduct now agrees with your confession. Ephesians 4:30–32 connects grieving the Spirit with sins that must be put away in our dealings with one another.

Repentance also belongs in the pastor's study where no extraordinary claims were ever welcomed. You may have exposed false manifestations while preparing sermons with little prayer and correcting people with little gentleness. Opposition to error can become a place to hide from your own barrenness. Bring that neglect before the Lord, and ask the elders to help you recover the prayer and personal care your teaching requires (Acts 6:4; 2 Timothy 2:24–25). The congregation needs to see what dependence upon the Spirit does to the man who teaches it.

Re-Teach — Give Each Soul the Biblical Test It Needs

Before announcing a program of changes, give the church a clear account of the Spirit's saving work. Open John 3:3–8, Romans 8:9–16, and Galatians 5:22–23. Explain the new birth, the indwelling Spirit, adoption, and growth in holiness. Set these truths beside the tests the congregation previously learned to use. The person who remembers a manifestation but continues defending sin must hear

why that memory cannot assure him of salvation. The believer who grieves over sin and clings to Christ must hear why a difficult battle is not proof that the Spirit has abandoned him. Teach carefully enough that neither person can borrow the counsel intended for the other.

Keep the ground of acceptance distinct from the evidence of new life. Christ's righteousness and sacrifice are sufficient for every sinner who believes; progress in holiness adds nothing to their worth. Yet the Spirit unites believers to a living Savior whose grace changes them. J. C. Ryle wrote, "Sanctification, again, is a thing which admits of growth and degrees." [23] That distinction gives patience a biblical foundation. We can urge a believer forward without pretending he has arrived, and encourage real growth without assuring someone who refuses to repent. Romans 5:1 establishes peace with God through faith; 2 Peter 3:18 calls those who belong to Christ to grow in His grace and knowledge.

Then teach discernment through an actual claim the church has heard. State it fairly, read the passage offered in support, and show what the passage establishes and what it does not. Explain why the Spirit's illumination does not confer the apostles' authority upon a contemporary teacher. Let the congregation see you receive a legitimate correction. Acts 17:11 commends examination of the message by Scripture. Your people are learning something precious when they discover that your teaching can be questioned without their loyalty to Christ being questioned in return.

Reform — Change the Practices That Keep the False Test Alive

End the church's endorsement of false tests now. Stop invitations that pressure people to fall, imitate a response, or seek an impartation as the proof of possessing the Spirit. Correct published claims that presented these experiences as evidence of conversion or spiritual superiority. Explain the correction to the people who heard the original teaching, and prepare teachers and ministry workers to give the same biblical reasons. 1 Corinthians 14:26–33 makes the congregation's edification and orderly instruction matters of obedience. Agree beforehand how elders will address disruptive claims calmly and care for those involved. Public humiliation teaches its own destructive lesson about spiritual authority.

Distinguish the practice that must end immediately from the expectation that will take time to unlearn. A frightened member may still hear the old accusation whenever he questions a manifestation:

perhaps he is resisting God. Sit beside him with 1 John 4:1 and explain why testing the claim is an act of obedience. Another person may miss the reassurance a repeated experience supplied. Help him understand Christ's promise and pray with him as he learns to rest upon it. Assign responsibility for this care to particular elders and arrange another conversation. Do not leave a person alone with fears the church helped create.

Restore pastoral work that follows people home. When someone professes faith, hear what he understands about Christ, repentance, and forgiveness; do not certify conversion merely because he responded visibly. When a believer confesses a stubborn sin, arrange instruction, prayer, and accountable help beyond the first conversation. Galatians 6:1–2 calls spiritual people to gentle restoration and burden bearing. John Owen located the strength for putting sin to death in the Spirit: "He only is sufficient for this work; all ways and means without him are as a thing of nought." [24] Careful arrangements serve that dependence; they cannot produce the life for which we pray. At the next elders' meeting, name the correction to make, the person responsible, the people needing care, and the first date for reviewing what has actually been done.

Remain — Stay with the Flock When False Assurances Are Gone

Some may accuse you of quenching the Spirit because you no longer endorse the experiences they expected. Open 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 with them. Paul's command not to quench the Spirit stands beside his command to test and hold fast what is good. Explain why reverence requires discernment. Listen when criticism exposes impatience, poor explanation, or neglected people, and correct those failures. But if attendance or giving falls, do not recover it by restoring a claim you now know Scripture cannot sustain. Bring the cost honestly to the elders and make responsible adjustments. 2 Timothy 4:1–5 prepares the shepherd to endure hardship while continuing to teach the Word.

Stay long enough to learn what the quieter work requires. The member who has begun telling the truth may still fear what another confession will cost. The man seeking reconciliation may meet a wounded person who cannot yet trust him. The believer learning to pray may feel the poverty of words that once came easily in a crowd. Go back to them. Help them take the next obedient step without promising a quick result. Review the church's health by the truth being received and the love, faithfulness, and self-control growing among its

people. Quietness alone proves nothing; a congregation can become orderly while remaining proud. The question is whether we are becoming more like Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 5:22–23).

And when your own failures make this work painful, come to the Savior you are teaching others to trust. Christ did not shed His blood merely for sins committed outside the pastor's study. Confess what you have done, receive His mercy, and submit to whatever correction faithfulness requires. His forgiveness does not excuse neglected duty; it gives a humbled shepherd reason to obey without hiding. 1 Peter 5:2–4 places your service beneath the care and coming judgment of the Chief Shepherd. Serve with your eyes upon Him. The congregation needs more than a pastor who has stopped making false claims. It needs a pastor whose truthful, prayerful, patient care helps the sheep recognize the Spirit's real work—and love the Savior whom He glorifies.

CLOSING APPLICATION

Do not settle for a counterfeit when the reality is infinitely more glorious. The Holy Spirit has not been given to entertain the church or to turn worship into a spectacle. He has come to glorify Christ, open blind eyes, regenerate dead sinners, dwell within God's people, assure them of their adoption, strengthen them in weakness, help them pray, kill their remaining sin, produce holiness, distribute gifts for the good of Christ's body, and conform the redeemed increasingly to the image of the Son.

If you have chased manifestations, prophetic personalities, emotional experiences, or spiritual excitement, bring those things honestly before the Lord. Do not defend an experience merely because it was powerful, precious, or difficult to question. If Scripture exposes it as false, Christ is worth surrendering it. No memory, leader, movement, or spiritual experience deserves the loyalty that belongs to Jesus Christ alone.

But do not react to charismatic excess by becoming cold, prayerless, lifeless, and merely intellectual. That is not biblical Christianity either. We desperately need the Holy Spirit. Without Him there is no new birth, no genuine faith, no true holiness, no spiritual understanding, no mortification of sin, no Christlike fruit, and no persevering Christian life. We need Him every hour to make Christ glorious to us, Scripture precious to us, sin hateful to us, prayer natural to us, holiness beautiful to us, and obedience urgent to us.

And if you have never been born again, no spiritual manifestation can substitute for regeneration. You do not need to fall on a floor, speak in an unknown tongue, receive a private prophecy, or feel an electrical sensation. You need the Spirit of God to open your blind eyes to the glory of Jesus Christ. You need to see yourself as a sinner and Christ as the only Savior. Look to the Son of God who was crucified for sinners and raised from the dead. Repent and believe the gospel.

God promises salvation to everyone who believes in His Son:

> John 6:47: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life."
>
> John 6:37: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out."
>
> Romans 10:13: "For 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

Seek the real work of the Holy Spirit. That work may never make you impressive before men, but it will prepare you to stand before Jesus Christ.

> Romans 15:13: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

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CHAPTER 6

Prophecy, Revelation, and the Closed Foundation

Hebrews 1:1–2: "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son."

THE WORD THAT FOLLOWED A FAMILY HOME

Imagine a father and mother sitting at their kitchen table after a church meeting. A visiting speaker has told their daughter that God has chosen the man she must marry. The young woman is frightened. She does not love the man. She has reasons to question his character. But the visitor said, *The Lord has shown me.* Now a question that should have been considered by Scripture, wise counsel, and honest judgment has been placed behind a locked door. To question the prediction feels like questioning God.

The family does not need an argument about religious vocabulary. They need to know whether the Lord of heaven actually spoke. Their daughter may have to live for decades with what the visitor said in thirty seconds. One man went home with the satisfaction of having delivered a prophecy. Another family went home afraid to disobey it.

This is an illustrative situation, not an accusation against a particular church or minister. Its danger is real enough without a name attached to it. The words *God told me* can turn advice into law, expectation into terror, and the ordinary uncertainty of human life into alleged rebellion against heaven. A sincere speaker may not intend any of these consequences. Sincerity does not relieve him of responsibility for the authority he has claimed.

In Chapter Three, we stood on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ Himself the chief Cornerstone. That foundation raises this question with unavoidable force: Who may now tell the people living in Christ's house that God has issued another binding word? The issue is not whether God still lives, answers prayer, directs providence, or gives wisdom. It is whether anyone today may announce new revelation with the authority of God's own speech.

Hebrews begins where our inquiry must begin: God has spoken. The wonder is not first that men once heard extraordinary things. The wonder is that the holy God whom sinners could never discover by climbing toward Him came down in revelation—and has spoken climactically in His Son. We dare not make that voice smaller so that our impressions may stand beside it.

WHEN GOD SPEAKS, THE WORD IS HIS

Peter writes that prophecy of Scripture did not originate in human will: men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20–21). In context, Peter is defending the trustworthiness of the prophetic Scriptures, not supplying a detailed description of every unwritten utterance in the early church. Yet the principle he establishes reaches the heart of the question: the authority of prophetic Scripture comes from its divine origin, not from the intensity of the speaker's conviction.

Not every genuine revelation in biblical history became a book of Scripture. Agabus prophesied without writing a canonical epistle (Acts 11:27–28; 21:10–11). Philip's daughters prophesied, though Luke does not record their utterances (Acts 21:8–9). That distinction matters. *Not written into the canon* is not the same as *not spoken by God*. The Bible itself teaches us not to confuse the boundaries of the written canon with the total number of revelations granted during its formation.

But notice Paul's own language in Corinth. When another person receives a revelation, the first speaker must yield the floor (1 Corinthians 14:30). Paul speaks of something being *revealed*. The verse does not settle every later dispute about the precise character of congregational prophecy. It does prevent us from pretending that the New Testament simply used *prophecy* as a grander name for a good hunch. The burden falls on anyone proposing a new category: where does Scripture authorize calling a humanly mistaken message God's revelation?

A preacher and a prophet therefore must not be quietly exchanged. A preacher opens the revelation God has given, studies it, and explains it. He may misunderstand a clause, misapply a narrative, or need correction from a more careful student. His authority lies in the Scripture he faithfully expounds, never in a new revelation he claims to possess (2 Timothy 2:15; Acts 17:11). A prophet, in the biblical sense at issue, claims that God has disclosed something. The source of that claim—not the attractiveness of its delivery—is precisely what must be tested.

Here is a painful possibility: a man may say *God told me* because he is afraid to say *I think*. Perhaps he fears that ordinary counsel will be ignored. Perhaps he longs to rescue someone from a dangerous decision. Perhaps, less nobly, he has learned that divine vocabulary makes a congregation easier to govern. The moment a man borrows God's name to make his judgment unanswerable, he has increased his authority without increasing its truth.

The problem does not become harmless because the prediction is comforting. A pleasant falsehood about tomorrow is still an abuse of God's name today. Before we ask whether the speaker is gifted, we must ask what God has said about words put into His mouth.

THE NAME OF GOD MUST NOT BECOME AN ADVERB

Jeremiah describes men who ran though the Lord had not sent them and prophesied though He had not spoken to them (Jeremiah 23:21–22). Their offense was not that they cared too much. It was that they claimed an origin for their message it did not possess. Later in the chapter the Lord distinguishes His word from the dreams these men keep repeating: "What is the chaff to the wheat?" (Jeremiah 23:28). The difference between a dream and God's word is not a matter of spiritual enthusiasm. It is the difference between chaff and grain when hungry people need bread.

Deuteronomy 18:20–22 holds a claimant responsible for speaking in God's name what God has not commanded. Where a predictive claim fails, God's people must not defend it as though their loyalty could make it true. Deuteronomy 13:1–5 adds an equally necessary warning: even a sign that comes to pass cannot vindicate a message that leads away from the Lord. The test of prophecy is not a spectacular result plus a religious explanation. Truth and fidelity to God belong together.

These Old Testament passages are not a ready-made answer to

every question about New Testament prophecy. They establish God's truthfulness and the seriousness of false attribution. We must still hear what the apostles say about prophecy in their congregations. But no argument from the New Testament may begin by making the God of truth indifferent to whether His supposed messenger accurately represents Him.

Picture a young man promised employment within a month. He turns down a genuine offer because a prophet has guaranteed a better one. The month passes. Nothing comes. Then the prophet says the promise was delayed by the young man's insufficient faith. The prediction has escaped accountability by accusing its disappointed hearer. The claim was spoken as God's certainty; its failure is now charged to the believer's conscience.

What does the pastor do if he was present when the promise was announced? Does he defend the speaker because the speaker is his friend? Does he tell the young man to wait another month so that nobody loses face? Or does he open the Bible, distinguish faith from credulity, and ask whether anyone had the right to make the promise in God's name? A wounded conscience does not heal because the minister who wounded it is well-intentioned.

There is, however, a New Testament objection that deserves more than a dismissive reply. Paul commanded Christians to evaluate prophecies. Did that command acknowledge mistakes in genuine prophetic messages? We must face the question where Paul raised it.

TESTING A VOICE IS NOT REWRITING GOD'S VOICE

"Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge" (1 Corinthians 14:29). The Thessalonians received a companion command: do not despise prophecies; test all things; hold fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:20–21). These instructions governed actual congregations in which prophetic activity occurred. We should not empty the texts of their historical meaning simply because we reject contemporary claims to the same gift.

Thoughtful continuationists argue that a true prompting from God could be mixed with a mistaken human report; they distinguish the revelation itself from its fallible transmission and point to the congregation's responsibility to weigh what was spoken. Their argument should be answered at its strongest, not reduced to the accusation that they deny biblical inspiration. Many explicitly affirm a closed canon and the full authority of Scripture.

Why does Scripture command us to test prophecy? Not because God might speak falsely, but because men may falsely claim to speak for Him. Israel was commanded to test the prophets (Deuteronomy 13:1–5; 18:20–22), and John tells Christians to test the spirits (1 John 4:1). The question is simple: Did God actually say this, or is someone putting words into His mouth? If a message contains errors, we cannot excuse them because other parts sounded spiritual, comforting, or encouraging. God does not speak partly truth and partly error. When a man claims to speak for God, it is the man's claim that must be tested—not God's truthfulness.

Acts 21 brings the dispute into a sharper light. Agabus took Paul's belt and predicted that the Jews in Jerusalem would bind its owner and deliver him to the Gentiles (Acts 21:10–11). Luke subsequently reports that Jews seized Paul and sought his death, while the Roman commander came, arrested him, and ordered him bound with chains (Acts 21:27–33). The narrative assigns the physical command to bind Paul to the Roman officer; that detail must not be concealed. Paul later characterized the event as his being delivered from Jerusalem into Roman hands (Acts 28:17).

Some regard the difference in agency and sequence as evidence of a genuine but imprecisely reported prophecy. Others understand Agabus as describing the responsibility of the Jews who seized Paul and brought about his Roman custody, not the identity of every hand that fastened a chain. Luke gives enough to make the first reading a real interpretive question; he does not explicitly call Agabus mistaken. Nor does this single narrative establish a general permission to announce fallible directives in God's name. Where the text does not settle every detail, we must not let our certainty grow larger than the text. [1]

Now consider what is being asked of the frightened daughter at the kitchen table. She is not being invited to weigh a historical description of Paul's arrest. She is being asked to bind her future to another person's claim that God has spoken. Can the visitor produce a biblical warrant granting his words that power? If he readily admits he may be wrong, why did he speak as though heaven had already settled her decision? The distinction between impression, interpretation, and divine speech is not a scholar's indulgence. It is a shelter for ordinary believers.

But another question follows. Even if biblical prophets truly spoke revelation in the apostolic churches, what place did that ministry have

in God's construction of the church? That question draws us from the testing of voices to the foundation beneath them.

A FOUNDATION CANNOT BE LAID ON EVERY FLOOR

Paul describes the church as built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself the chief Cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19–22). In the next chapter he says the mystery of Christ—Gentiles made fellow heirs through the Gospel—was revealed by the Spirit to Christ's apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:3–6). Their place in the building and their service in revealing its Gospel belong together.

Calvin expressed the force of Ephesians 2:20 in seven words: "Foundation, in this passage, unquestionably means doctrine." [2] He did not mean the prophets invented a second foundation alongside Christ. He meant that the church rests on Christ as proclaimed by the witnesses He appointed. The building has no secret room requiring a new set of foundational men to unlock it (1 Corinthians 3:11).

John Owen described the extraordinary apostolic commission and concluded that "this office and power doth absolutely cease." [3] Owen's conclusion is not a substitute for Paul's reasoning; it is the judgment of a pastor-theologian trying to follow that reasoning. Likewise Warfield said of the extraordinary signs that they were "part of the credentials of the Apostles" in founding the church. [4] His historical account is a theological argument, not a verse that names the calendar date of the final miracle.

The distinction is crucial. Hebrews 2:3–4 says the great salvation announced by the Lord was confirmed by those who heard Him, with God bearing witness through signs, wonders, various miracles, and gifts of the Spirit. Stephen and Philip also performed signs (Acts 6:8; 8:5–7), so no one may infer that only the Twelve ever did extraordinary works. Nor may we infer that Christ can no longer heal or answer prayer. The issue is not whether the risen Lord still has power. It is whether the original witnesses' revelatory commission must be continually reissued for His church to live.

Ephesians 4:11–16 confirms that Christ continues to care for His people and equip them for maturity. It does not explicitly require every worker named in verse 11 to appear with the same foundational commission in every century. The church still receives the apostles' ministry through their entrusted teaching; teachers now help believers understand and obey that deposit (2 Timothy 1:13–14; 2:2). The

apostle's death did not silence his doctrine; the Spirit who gave it has not died.

If a congregation in a remote village owns the Scriptures and hears Christ's Gospel faithfully preached, it is not missing a piece of Jesus because no modern prophet has visited. It may need training, help, correction, and shepherds who will stay. It does not need a stranger to announce that the foundation beneath its feet was never finished. But we must now examine a subtler confusion: does a prophet's limited understanding mean the message God gave him was itself imperfect?

THE MOUNTAIN PEAKS AND THE VALLEY THEY COULD NOT SEE

Imagine a traveler looking toward a line of mountains at dawn. Two snow-covered peaks appear almost to touch. After hours on the road he reaches the nearer summit and discovers a broad valley between the first peak and the second. The mountains were real. His view of their distance was incomplete.

Peter says the prophets who spoke beforehand of Christ's sufferings and subsequent glories searched carefully into the time and circumstances signified by the Spirit of Christ within them (1 Peter 1:10–12). The prophets possessed true revelation without possessing God's exhaustive view of its fulfillment. The same pattern appears when the apostles themselves struggled to grasp the necessity of Jesus' suffering before His resurrection opened their understanding (Luke 24:25–27, 44–47).

This picture, sometimes called *prophetic telescoping*, explains a difference we dare not erase: incomplete knowledge in the prophet is not the same thing as a false word from God. A man may accurately report what God has made known and still not understand everything God has kept hidden (Deuteronomy 29:29). He may see the peaks while God alone sees the valleys. His ignorance is not permission to revise heaven's words.

Now return to today's promise-maker. If he says, "I misunderstood the impression," he has admitted something very different from the biblical prophet searching the significance of words God had truly given. A Christian may misunderstand providence, misjudge a situation, and need to withdraw his advice. Let him say so. Humility is not damaged when counsel is corrected. It is damaged when a man protects his counsel by continuing to call it revelation.

Paul teaches something more about prophecy that we must not

neglect: its role was not permanent in the same way love is permanent. Christians who believe the extraordinary gifts have ceased do not all explain this passage alike. I want to acknowledge that difference while making my own position clear.

WHAT PAUL'S WORDS TEACH ABOUT CESSATION

In 1 Corinthians 13:8–13, Paul contrasts love, which never fails, with prophecy, tongues, and revelatory knowledge, which would pass away. I am convinced that the Greek words Paul uses and the way he joins them together conclusively establish that tongues have ceased. I do not regard this passage as an incomplete argument that must borrow its decisive proof from other passages. Chapter 9 sets out the grammatical argument in detail.

Some cessationist interpreters, including R. Bruce Compton, understand the passage in relation to the completion of revelation. Others, including Thomas Schreiner, understand "the perfect" in relation to Christ's return. [5] I respect the seriousness with which they approach Scripture. Their disagreement, however, does not determine my conclusion. My conviction rests on the wording of the passage itself, including Paul's distinction between the verbs and his movement from what is partial to what is complete. His descriptions of seeing "face to face" and knowing more fully belong to that argument and must be explained with care.

The other passages considered in this book provide further confirmation: Christ's climactic revelation, the foundational work of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20; 3:5), the testimony of the first witnesses (Hebrews 2:3–4), and the truth entrusted to the church (Jude 3; 2 Timothy 1:13–14). I value their agreement with Paul's teaching here. But I do not depend on them to turn an uncertain conclusion about tongues into a certain one. I regard the Greek wording and syntax of this passage as conclusive in themselves.

Jonathan Edwards described the extraordinary gifts as belonging to the church's earlier provision until it had "a complete standing rule established." [6] His judgment is a valuable historical witness, but my conviction does not depend on his agreement either. The question is what God has said and what He has supplied for His people to know Him and obey Him.

The Word given to the church is not a relic displayed behind glass. It is God's appointed instrument in the hands of the living Spirit. The Bible's authority and the Spirit's presence must never be torn apart.

Otherwise, in trying to defend a closed foundation, we may leave the reader imagining an empty house.

THE FOUNDATION IS CLOSED; THE HOUSE IS NOT EMPTY

Hebrews does not say that God used to speak until He became distant. It says He spoke in former times through the prophets and "has in these last days spoken to us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:1–2). The Son is not merely the newest messenger in a procession that awaits the next prophet. He is the appointed Heir of all things, the One through whom God made the worlds, the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person (Hebrews 1:2–3). God's climactic Word is a Person whose glory no later message can improve.

The apostles were commissioned to bear witness to Him. Christ told them the Spirit would guide them into truth and glorify Him (John 16:13–15); the church receives their written witness as Scripture given by God's inspiration and sufficient to equip God's servant for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). These verses do not by themselves date the end of revelatory gifts. They identify the Savior to whom revelation leads and the enduring instrument by which the church is furnished for faith and obedience.

The confession of 1689 expressed the church's conviction that nothing is to be added to Scripture "whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men." [7] Those words distinguish the rule of faith from private claims. The confession does not deny the Spirit's inward illumination; the same paragraph affirms that such illumination is necessary to understand savingly what is revealed in the Word. There is no contradiction between a closed canon and a congregation praying with tears for the Spirit to open blind eyes.

Calvin warned that the promised Spirit's office is "not to form new and unheard-of revelations," but to seal Gospel truth upon believers. [8] That warning must be read in its context: he is opposing supposed revelations that draw people away from the received Gospel. He is not declaring God incapable of providential guidance, miraculous answers to prayer, or sovereign mercy to the sick.

Consider an elderly believer whose husband has died. She wakes before sunrise with grief too deep to arrange into sentences. She opens Psalm 23, prays, and finds the promises of her Shepherd newly precious. Christ has not spoken a new psalm into the canon. By His

Spirit He has made the old Word living comfort. The page did not change. The woman did (John 14:16–17; Romans 8:15–16, 26–27).

The Spirit still regenerates sinners (John 3:5–8), convicts the world (John 16:8), produces His fruit (Galatians 5:22–25), assures God's children (Romans 8:14–16), distributes gifts for service (1 Corinthians 12:4–7), and gives wisdom to those who ask (James 1:5). He is neither unemployed nor replaced by a book. He is the divine Author who opens His Word and conforms His people to the Son revealed there.

When a man says that a congregation without fresh prophecy has become a church without the Spirit, he has made extraordinary speech the measure of God's presence. Scripture measures the Spirit's work by His witness to Christ, His fruit, and His faithfulness to God's truth (John 16:14; Galatians 5:22–25; 1 John 4:1–3). The absence of a claimed new revelation is not evidence that the risen Christ has abandoned His sheep.

But if the Lord's Word is already sufficient for faith and obedience, why do predictions about private fortunes, romances, and promotions gain such power? We must look at the need they promise to satisfy.

WHEN THE FUTURE IS SOLD AS SPIRITUAL CERTAINTY

A widow is told that a financial gift will unlock the prosperity God has revealed for her family. A young man hears that he must join a particular ministry or forfeit his calling. A couple is assured their sick child will certainly recover, and when the child does not, the blame is laid at their feet. These are illustrative scenes. Their moral weight lies in the method: *a claim of divine knowledge is made to govern another person's money, choices, or grief.*

Some predictions are so elastic that almost any event can be presented as fulfillment. A difficult season becomes a "breakthrough" if trouble ends, or a "test of faith" if it continues. A word that can never be shown false can become a prison whose door has no handle on the inside. But genuine biblical revelation is not a device for making the speaker immune from examination (Deuteronomy 13:1–5; 18:20–22; 1 John 4:1).

In the New Testament, when people are uncertain how to make lawful decisions, the answer is not to secure a private oracle. They are commanded to pray for wisdom, plan humbly, seek counsel, do what is honorable, and acknowledge that tomorrow belongs to God (James

1:5; 4:13–16; Proverbs 15:22; 2 Corinthians 8:21). These commands do not remove the pain of uncertainty. They teach Christians how to obey without pretending to be omniscient.

Believer, perhaps the hardest person to question is the one whose words once gave you hope. You admired him. You repeated his prediction. You defended him against criticism. Admitting he spoke without warrant may feel like tearing out a page of your own story. But loyalty to a beloved servant must not become disloyalty to the Lord he claims to serve. You may thank someone for a genuine kindness without surrendering your conscience to his unverified message (Galatians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 1:24).

Pastor, whom have your people been taught to fear? They should fear the Lord, not a prophet's retaliation. If anyone under your oversight believes the absence of a promised healing proves personal guilt, you must help that soul distinguish God's actual commands from another person's failed assurance (Romans 8:1; James 5:13–16). If an unsupported decree has governed a marriage, a gift, or a move, responsible pastoral care must reach the actual injury—not merely correct a statement in next Sunday's sermon.

Now let the reader do more than agree. Let one actual word, once given the authority of heaven, be brought back before the Scriptures.

BRING ONE PROPHECY INTO THE LIGHT

Choose one message that shaped an actual choice in your life or church. Do not begin with a spectacular rumor on the internet. Begin with the sentence that changed your plans, opened your wallet, frightened your child, or silenced your question. Place that sentence beside an open Bible.

1. Write What Was Said, without Softening It

Was it counsel, a hope, a warning, an impression, or an asserted revelation? Quote the speaker accurately if you can. The wording matters. *I think this may be wise* and *God has commanded you* are not interchangeable. If you cannot remember the words, say so rather than creating evidence you do not possess (Proverbs 18:13, 17).

2. Identify the Authority It Claimed

What Scripture, read in context, was offered as warrant? Was obedience requested because the Bible required it, or because a particular person claimed God had revealed it? Ask the question without shouting it.

A quiet Bible opened to the relevant passage may reveal more than a hundred angry arguments (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

3. Trace Who Has Carried the Consequences

Did someone give money, refuse a lawful opportunity, enter a relationship, neglect medical care, conceal a concern, or begin living under fear? Do not use the examination to shame an already wounded person. Identify the burden and who placed it there. Where a serious allegation is involved, establish facts carefully and protect those at risk (Acts 20:28–31; 1 Timothy 5:19–20).

4. Distinguish What God Said from What People Supplied

Read the relevant Scripture in its full argument. Separate biblical command from wise but fallible advice; separate a providential possibility from a promise; separate an answered prayer from a new rule governing other people. The goal is neither gullibility nor bitterness. It is obedience to Christ's actual voice (2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Corinthians 1:24).

5. Name the Next Right Action

Withdraw a demand you had no authority to make. Apologize to someone you frightened. Seek responsible help where loss or coercion occurred. Resume a neglected duty; seek counsel before altering a lawful commitment. Do not replace one reckless act of obedience to a supposed prophecy with another reckless act of reaction against it. Let Scripture, truthfulness, and love guide the repair (Galatians 6:1–2; James 1:22).

A test that produces no obedience has become another religious exercise. We now have to ask what truths should govern every such test, long after the example has been forgotten.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

Axiom One — God's Name Cannot Make a Human Impression Into Divine Speech

Prophetic authority belongs to God because prophecy, when genuine, originates with Him. Intensity, sincerity, spiritual reputation, and favorable results cannot create that origin. A speaker who cannot establish God's authorization must not impose his impression upon another conscience as God's decree.

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:21–28; Deuteronomy 18:20–22; 2 Peter 1:20–21; 2 Corinthians 1:24.

Axiom Two — The Call to Test Prophecy Protects Divine Truth; It Does Not License Falsehood in God's Name

The early churches were commanded to evaluate prophetic claims. They were not instructed to treat a mistaken statement as God speaking inaccurately. Testing a claimant and rejecting falsehood are acts of reverence toward the truthful God.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 14:29–30; 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21; Deuteronomy 13:1–5; 1 John 4:1.

Axiom Three — The Apostolic-Prophetic Foundation Is Christ's Gift to Every Generation, Not Each Generation's New Assignment

Christ established His household through commissioned witnesses and the Gospel the Spirit revealed to them. Their teaching continues to nourish the church; their founding commission is not recreated by new titles, experiences, or need.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:19–22; 3:3–6; Acts 2:42; 2 Timothy 1:13–14; 2:2.

Axiom Four — Limited Human Understanding Must Never Be Confused with an Untruthful Divine Message

God disclosed true things to prophets who did not understand the whole course of their fulfillment. Their searching displays the limits of human knowledge, not defect in God's speech. The Christian may candidly admit an impression or interpretation was wrong without attributing the error to heaven.

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:10–12; Luke 24:25–27; Deuteronomy 29:29.

Axiom Five — Paul's Words Establish Cessation; Other Passages Provide Further Confirmation

Paul contrasts love's permanence with gifts whose appointed work would end. I am convinced that the Greek wording and syntax of 1 Corinthians 13 conclusively establish that tongues have ceased. I

understand the passage's movement from partial to completed revelation to explain the end of prophecy and revelatory knowledge. Other biblical passages confirm these conclusions; they do not supply a missing proof. Christians who interpret the passage differently deserve a patient answer, but their disagreement does not determine my conclusion.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:8–13; Hebrews 1:1–3; 2:3–4; Ephesians 2:20; Jude 3.

Axiom Six — The Closed Canon Does Not Mean an Absent Spirit or a Powerless Christ

The Spirit who inspired the Scriptures still gives life, illumines Christ's truth, assures believers, produces holiness, equips service, and sustains the afflicted. He does not need to add a new command to the canon in order to make its ancient words living in a human heart.

Scripture: John 3:5–8; 14:16–17; 16:13–15; Romans 8:14–16, 26–27; 2 Timothy 3:16–17.

Axiom Seven — A Shepherd Who Allowed an Unsupported Word to Bind the Sheep Must Help Release Them

The error is not corrected merely because a pastor now explains prophecy more accurately. He must acknowledge his part, teach the distinction between God's commands and human counsel, protect the vulnerable, and repair what can be repaired. The flock was purchased by Christ, not by the speaker who claimed an extraordinary message.

Scripture: Acts 20:28–31; 1 Peter 5:2–4; James 3:1; Galatians 6:1–2.

BEFORE GOD, WITH THE BIBLE OPEN

The Promise You Have Been Afraid to Question

You may accept all seven axioms and still keep a private altar to a word God never spoke. Perhaps it promised you a child, a ministry, an inheritance, an illness healed, or a marriage that would restore your happiness. You remember exactly where you stood when it was

announced. You may even remember the speaker's hand upon your shoulder. The memory is vivid. The authority is still unproved.

Do not answer these questions in the safety of general opinions about people you have never met. Let Scripture examine one episode of your own life.

1. Which Human Sentence Have You Been Afraid to Put Under Scripture?

Write the sentence. Who said it? Was it offered as hope or as the Lord's decree? Which verse, in context, gives the speaker authority to make that claim? If no verse does, what have you been defending all these years: God's Word, or the pain of admitting you trusted a person too quickly? The Bereans examined even apostolic preaching by Scripture (Acts 17:11). Why should a later speaker receive greater immunity?

2. Who Is Still Paying for Your Certainty?

Has a child lived in fear because you repeated a prophecy over his future? Has someone been pressured to give money, refuse treatment, enter a relationship, or remain in an unhealthy arrangement? What did your confidence cost that person? Do not answer, *My intentions were good.* Ask what consequences remain and what restitution or protection is now within your power (Galatians 6:2; James 3:1).

3. What Have You Called Unbelief Because It Was Really a Request for Evidence?

Someone asked, "Where does Scripture say that?" Did you welcome the question, or accuse the person of grieving the Spirit? Did you use spiritual language to end a conversation you could not answer from the Bible? Write down the question you refused. A faithful test of a claim does not insult God. It refuses to lend a human claimant an authority God has not supplied (1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1).

4. Have You Mistaken a Desire to Know Tomorrow for Faith in the LORD of Tomorrow?

Perhaps you want certainty more than you want obedience. You want to know whether your business will prosper before you practice honesty; whether your child will recover before you pray; whether your future will be safe before you entrust it to Christ. Where has your desire for a forecast become resistance to God's present commands? Jesus taught His disciples to seek the Father's kingdom amid

tomorrow's uncertainty (Matthew 6:33–34). Faith is not knowledge of every future event. It is trust in the One who holds it.

5. Will You Give Up the Right to Be Impressive If It Means Obeying the Truth?

Perhaps you have been known as someone who hears God's private messages. People seek your advice because they expect more than Scripture. Would you be willing to say, "I was wrong; I offered my impression as revelation"? Would you still delight to serve if you were known only as a Christian who prays, reads carefully, speaks truthfully, and loves his neighbor? Christ calls His servants to faithfulness, not spiritual theater (1 Corinthians 4:1–2; 2 Corinthians 4:5).

If you cannot yet answer, do not bury the discomfort under a new prediction. Bring the facts into the light. Open the Word. Ask Christ to give you a conscience that fears misrepresenting Him more than it fears embarrassment.

THE SHEPHERD UNDER THE WORD

A Pastoral Examination — Chapter Six

Movement One — The Pastor's Convictions

Has the Lord's Name Been Used to Support Something You Could Not Preach from His Word?

Pastor, you know the pressure in a room when a respected visitor says he has heard from God. People lean forward; the congregation is expectant; declining to affirm the announcement may make you appear spiritually cold. You can hear the question before anyone speaks it: *Are you going to resist the Spirit?* And so you stay quiet. The man leaves with public honor. Your sheep stay with the weight of his words.

Did your silence arise from conviction or fear? Paul told the Ephesian elders that the flock was purchased with God's own blood (Acts 20:28). Before that purchase, how small is the cost of an awkward conversation! The church does not belong to the visitor, and it does not belong to you. You were not appointed to protect a speaker's dignity at the expense of a sheep's conscience.

Movement Two — Biblical Examination

When Someone Said "God Told Me," What Passage Did You Open?

Look back on the last claim allowed from your pulpit or in your church's ministry. Were the elders able to trace its authority through Scripture? Did you distinguish an ordinary application from new revelation? Did you make your people aware of what Deuteronomy 18, Jeremiah 23, 1 Corinthians 14, and Ephesians 2–3 actually teach—and what they do not explicitly settle? An unexamined affirmation can teach a congregation more powerfully than a careful sermon preached later.

A pastor who cannot explain why he endorsed the words should withdraw the endorsement. Not because every emotional moment is false, but because love refuses to make a believer obey a sentence the Lord never authorized (2 Corinthians 1:24; 1 Peter 5:2–3). Take the exact words to fellow elders. Let Scripture judge the claims, including your earlier judgment.

Movement Three — The Pastor's Teachability

Can You Confess an Error without Making the Flock Carry Your Shame?

Perhaps you approved the message. Perhaps you repeated it at a prayer meeting. Perhaps a family reorganized its life because you told them they could trust it. Now Scripture has unsettled your certainty. What will you do with that humiliation? Will you present a vague "clarification" and hope no one notices? Or will you say, "I gave that message a divine authority I could not establish, and I was wrong"?

The Lord has not called you to preserve an image of uninterrupted discernment. He has called you to guard the truth and teachable souls (1 Timothy 4:16; 2 Timothy 2:24–26). Your public admission may be the first safe moment in which a frightened member realizes he is permitted to ask questions.

Movement Four — Responsibility for the Sheep

Which Person Still Hears a Failed Prophecy When the Room Is Quiet?

There may be a mother still blaming herself for the death of a child because healing was promised and did not come. There may be a young believer still afraid to marry because a stranger claimed to know

God's choice. There may be a widow whose gift was extracted under a threat that disobedience would close heaven's favor. Do you know the names of those people? Have you asked what they endured when the meeting was over?

Seek them out. Listen without turning their testimony into an argument for defending your own reputation. Establish the facts carefully. Bring biblical comfort to what was falsely called guilt, and practical assistance to what can still be repaired (Romans 8:1; Acts 20:28–31; Galatians 6:2). The shepherd's work does not end when he takes the microphone back. It begins where the microphone's effects have followed people home.

Movement Five — Accountability to Christ

What Will the Chief Shepherd Say About the Words You Permitted in His Name?

James warns that teachers receive a stricter judgment (James 3:1); Peter reminds elders that the Chief Shepherd will appear (1 Peter 5:4). On that day the applause for an extraordinary meeting will be silent. The attendance figures will not speak for you. Christ will know whether you fed His sheep with His Word or exposed them to commands He never gave.

You cannot repair every wrong done by another minister. But you can repent of what you introduced, endorsed, tolerated, defended, or refused to correct. Do not postpone that repentance until the final judgment makes honest confession impossible. The Chief Shepherd is merciful to humbled sinners. He has not asked you to be an infallible prophet. He has commanded you to be a faithful shepherd.

THE SHEPHERD WHO MUST RELEASE THOSE HE BOUND

An elder approaches you after worship. A family has asked whether they will offend God by setting aside a supposed prophecy given in your church years ago. You remember the meeting. You remember your own words of approval. You also know that you cannot establish the pronouncement from Scripture. Now the issue is not how to improve a paragraph in a doctrinal statement. It is whether a pastor will finally tell the truth to a family his silence helped frighten.

Repent. Not for failing to know every secret of providence; you were never expected to know that. Repent for speaking as though

you did. Name the places where you welcomed unauthorized claims, permitted the Lord's name to be attached to your judgment, or valued the admiration of a visiting minister above the safety of Christ's flock (Acts 20:28; James 3:1). If the error was public, correct it publicly in a proportionate, careful way; if private, go to those affected. Say what you did. Do not hide behind *we were all learning*. The pastor cannot call the church to repentance where he refuses to lead it in repentance before God.

Richard Baxter warned ministers to take heed to themselves, "lest you famish yourselves while you prepare food for them." [9] A man may preach true doctrine about revelation and still starve his conscience of repentance. The proof is not that he now has a sharper argument. It is whether he will humble himself before someone whose life was made harder by his earlier assurance.

Re-teach. Take the church patiently through Hebrews 1:1–3, the prophetic warnings in Deuteronomy 13 and 18 and Jeremiah 23, Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14, and the apostolic-prophetic foundation in Ephesians 2–3. Explain the difference between revelation, illumination, wisdom, and fallible counsel. Show why no speaker may enlarge God's commands by adding the words *God told me*. Explain the genuine exegetical questions about Agabus and 1 Corinthians 13 rather than frightening people into agreement by pretending none exist. A congregation reformed only by its pastor's confidence may drift again when a more confident visitor arrives. Give the sheep reasons they can carry home in their own Bibles (2 Timothy 2:15; Acts 17:11).

Reform. Require invited speakers to submit to the oversight of elders, including financial appeals and personal directives. Teach ministry leaders not to attach divine authority to impressions. Provide a safe way for members to report coercive claims without retaliation; investigate serious allegations fairly, protecting both the vulnerable and the falsely accused (1 Timothy 5:19–20). Where people were wrongly pressured, help release them from illegitimate demands and address losses within your lawful ability. Do not place a grieving family on public display to demonstrate your courage. Shepherd them quietly, with Scripture, truthfulness, and patient care (1 Peter 5:2–3; Galatians 6:1–2).

C. H. Spurgeon exhorted hearers to receive God's Word rather than their own inventions: "we desire to know neither less nor more than He has spoken." [10] That is the discipline a pastor must now cultivate.

His reforms must give the church a clearer hearing of Christ, not replace one domineering claim with a stricter personality or another unwritten rule. Where Scripture allows prudence and freedom, let believers exercise it before God.

Remain. Some will say you have changed. A ministry partner may withdraw. Giving may diminish. Friends may insist that you have quenched the Spirit. Hear fair criticism of your conduct and correct genuine mistakes; do not confuse teachability with surrendering the biblical conclusion. Keep preaching the Word with patience, praying with the sick, helping the poor, and welcoming those who struggle to understand (2 Timothy 4:2–5; 1 Thessalonians 5:14). The Spirit does not need you to imitate prophetic certainty in order to defend His work. Remaining faithful is not winning every argument. It is refusing to put the old chains back on Christ's sheep to recover your popularity.

A pastor's deepest victory here may go unnoticed. No camera records the meeting in which he says to a frightened mother, "I cannot tell you God promised that." No conference applauds when he withdraws a false assurance. Yet in that small room, a conscience has been released from a demand Christ never made. The shepherd has lost an appearance of extraordinary power and recovered something better: the privilege of serving beneath the Word of his Lord.

THE SON WHO HAS NOT STOPPED SPEAKING

The chapter began with a family at a kitchen table, afraid that questioning a man might mean disobeying God. It must end at a different table: the Lord who took bread, gave thanks, and told His disciples of His body given for them, His blood shed for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 22:19–20; Matthew 26:26–28). There is no guessed future here, no elastic prediction, no need to keep a frightened soul dependent upon a minister's private insight. There is the public Gospel of the crucified Savior.

Hebrews says God has spoken in His Son. That Son is no mere religious specialist. He is the brightness of the Father's glory; after making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:1–3). The throne of revelation belongs to the One who also bore the shame of redemption. He speaks with the authority of the God who made us and the mercy of the Savior who came for sinners.

If you have trusted a false prophecy, bring your fear to Him. If you have used spiritual language to control another person, confess the

wrong and seek to repair it. If you are a pastor whose silence left sheep exposed, return to the Chief Shepherd. His Word will correct you more kindly than pride ever can, even when that correction is painful (Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 Peter 5:4).

And if you have never come to Christ, do not congratulate yourself for identifying another man's false words. The deepest question is whether you will receive God's true Word concerning His Son. Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). He receives those who come to Him (John 6:37). A person may be right about cessationism and still perish outside the Savior. Turn from sin. Come to Christ. There is no secret prophecy you must obtain before you may obey His invitation.

Believer, the Scriptures are not a consolation prize awarded after the miraculous age. They bear witness to the Lord who is alive. Read them with reverence. Pray for the Spirit's light. Obey what is clear. Wait humbly where God has not told you what tomorrow will bring. When another voice claims to know what Christ has not revealed, you need not answer with contempt or fear. Open the Word, and remember whose household you inhabit.

The foundation is closed. The heavens are not empty. The Son has spoken—and His sheep still hear His voice in His Word.

KEY SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR THE READER

God's speech and the reliability of prophecy: Hebrews 1:1–3; 2 Peter 1:19–21; Jeremiah 23:21–29; Deuteronomy 13:1–5; 18:20–22.

Testing claims and understanding Agabus: 1 Corinthians 14:29–33; 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21; 1 John 4:1–3; Acts 21:10–33; 28:17.

The completed foundation and the question of duration: Ephesians 2:19–22; 3:3–6; 4:11–16; Hebrews 2:3–4; 1 Corinthians 13:8–13; Jude 3.

The Spirit's present work and Scripture's sufficiency: John 3:5–8; 14:16–17; 16:8–15; Romans 8:14–16, 26–27; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Galatians 5:22–25.

Shepherding, repentance, and the living Christ: Acts 20:28–31; 1 Peter 5:1–4; James 3:1; Luke 22:19–20; Hebrews 1:1–3; John 6:37.

SOURCE NOTES

1 Acts 21:10–33 and 28:17 are the governing primary texts for Agabus's prediction and Paul's arrest. For contrasting scholarly judgments concerning its precision and the nature of New Testament prophecy, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), discussion of prophecy; and R. Bruce Compton, "The Continuation of New Testament Prophecy and a Closed Canon: Revisiting Wayne Grudem's Two Levels of NT Prophecy," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 22 (2017): 57–73, https://dbts.edu/2017/10/09/the-continuation-of-new-testament-prophecy-and-a-closed-canon-revisiting-wayne-grudems-two-levels-of-nt-prophecy/. The chapter states the narrative's agency distinction and does not claim Luke explicitly pronounces Agabus mistaken.

2 John Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854), on Ephesians 2:20: "Foundation, in this passage, unquestionably means doctrine." Primary text: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41.iv.iii.vi.html.

3 John Owen, *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches*, part II, chapter III, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 16, on the cessation of extraordinary apostolic office: "this office and power doth absolutely cease." Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/evangelicalchurches/evangelicalchurches.iii.vii.html.

4 B. B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), chapter I, "The Cessation of the Charismata," p. 6, on extraordinary signs as "part of the credentials of the Apostles." Primary text: https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/warfield/warfield_counterfeit.html.

5 R. Bruce Compton, "1 Corinthians 13:8–13 and the Cessation of Miraculous Gifts," Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal 9 (2004): 97–144, https://dbts.edu/2004/10/23/1-corinthians-138-13-and-the-cessation-of-miraculous-gifts/; idem, "First Corinthians 13 and the Cessation of Miraculous Gifts: A Critique of Thomas Schreiner's Spiritual Gifts," Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal 25 (2020), https://dbts.edu/2020/09/24/first-corinthians-13-and-the-cessation-of-miraculous-gifts-a-critique-of-thomas-schreiners-spiritual-gifts-what-they-are-and-why-they-matter/. Compton summarizes Schreiner's eschatological reading and defends a completed-revelation interpretation. These sources document differing cessationist interpretations; the author's conviction that the Greek wording and syntax conclusively establish the cessation of tongues is stated and defended in the text.

6 Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), "Practical Inferences," discussion of charity and extraordinary gifts in relation to 1 Corinthians 13, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2: "a complete standing rule established." Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works2/works2.vii.ii.iii.html.

7 *The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), chapter 1, paragraphs 1 and 6; quoted words are from paragraph 6. https://the1689.org/chapters/1. The original text of paragraph 1 reads "those former ways ... being now ceased"; some modernizations replace *ceased* with *completed*. This chapter relies on the original confessional wording.

8 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.ix.1, trans. Henry Beveridge, describing the Spirit's work in relation to the received Gospel: "not to form new and unheard-of revelations." Primary text: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.all.html.

9 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), part I, chapter 1, section 1, warning ministers against spiritual neglect while serving others: "lest you famish yourselves while you prepare food for them." Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/baxter/pastor.all.html.

10 C. H. Spurgeon, sermon on receiving the Word of the Lord, in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 29 (1883), describing the Christian's desire not to go beyond what the Lord has said. Primary text: https://ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons29/sermons29.li.html.

CHAPTER 7

The Counterfeit and the Genuine: Redefining Biblical Miracles

Acts 4:16: "Saying, 'What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.'"

A counterfeit hundred-dollar bill is dangerous only because it resembles the genuine article. A crude imitation deceives no one, but a forgery that borrows the appearance of the real thing can pass unnoticed. The same principle applies to claims of miraculous power. The church must not decide whether something is a biblical miracle by excitement, sincerity, testimony, atmosphere, or even by the fact that an unusual recovery occurred. We must first ask what Scripture itself means by miraculous gifts and what those gifts looked like when God gave them.

This distinction matters because cessationism does not teach that God has become inactive, that prayer is powerless, or that divine providence has been reduced to ordinary causes. God remains sovereign over disease, life, death, and every cell in the human body. The issue is narrower and more precise: does the New Testament teach that Christ continues to distribute to particular people the apostolic-era gift of healing and miracle-working as He did during the foundational period of the church?

THE UNDENIABLE STANDARD

Consider the healing at the Beautiful Gate in Acts 3. The man had been lame from his mother's womb and was more than forty years

old (Acts 4:22). He was publicly known, carried daily to the temple gate, and recognized by the people who had seen him begging. Peter did not invite him into a private room, ask the crowd to accept an unverifiable testimony, or tell him that improvement might become evident over time. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Peter commanded him to rise and walk, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. He stood, walked, leaped, and entered the temple praising God (Acts 3:1–10).

The enemies of the apostles could investigate the result because the healed man was standing in front of them. Their conclusion was not that the testimony was emotionally persuasive but that the event itself could not be denied: "Indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it" (Acts 4:16). Biblical healings were not all performed in precisely the same manner or at the same speed—Mark 8:22–25 records a healing that unfolded in stages—but they were works of divine power that produced real effects, not phenomena protected from examination by vagueness.

John gives the theological reason for calling Christ's miracles signs: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:30–31). A sign is not an end in itself. It identifies, authenticates, and points beyond itself to the person and message God is revealing.

MIRACLES AS DIVINE ATTESTATION

The New Testament explicitly connects signs, wonders, miracles, and extraordinary gifts with the authoritative founding proclamation of Christ and His eyewitness messengers. Hebrews describes a historical sequence: salvation was first spoken by the Lord, confirmed by those who heard Him, and then attested by God Himself.

> Hebrews 2:3–4: "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?"

Hebrews 2 does not by itself provide a calendar date for the cessation of every extraordinary manifestation, but it does establish a vital purpose: God bore witness to the founding gospel proclamation

through signs and wonders. Paul makes the same connection when he reminds the Corinthians that "the signs of an apostle" had been accomplished among them "in signs and wonders and mighty deeds" (2 Corinthians 12:12). That does not mean that apostles were the only Christians through whom God ever worked miracles—Stephen and Philip are obvious counterexamples (Acts 6:8; 8:6–7). It means that miraculous signs belonged to the apostolic revelatory epoch and functioned, among other purposes, as credentials of that founding witness.

Paul could therefore describe his own ministry "in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God" as he carried the gospel from Jerusalem toward Illyricum (Romans 15:18–19). Luke likewise records that "God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul" (Acts 19:11–12). The phrase itself reminds us that even within the apostolic age such manifestations were extraordinary. They were never presented as a routine medical provision available on demand in every congregation.

Authentication was not the only purpose of miracles. Christ healed because He had compassion (Matthew 14:14), and His works manifested the breaking-in of the kingdom of God (Matthew 12:28). Miracles revealed mercy as well as authority. But compassion does not erase their redemptive-historical function. The same acts that relieved suffering also testified to Christ, His kingdom, and the messengers through whom His New Covenant revelation was being established.

THE WITNESS OF HISTORY

Church history cannot establish a doctrine that Scripture does not teach, and the post-apostolic record contains reports of extraordinary providences and claimed miracles that must be assessed individually. Yet major witnesses across the centuries recognized a discontinuity between the apostolic gifts and the ordinary life of the later church.

John Chrysostom, preaching on 1 Corinthians 12 in the fourth century, said of the phenomena under discussion that they "then used to occur but now no longer take place." [1] His testimony is especially important because he was not a modern polemicist looking backward from the twentieth century; he was an ancient preacher describing what he regarded as a vanished apostolic phenomenon.

B. B. Warfield later summarized the relationship between miracle and apostolic foundation: "They were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church." [2]

Warfield did not deny divine providence or claim that apostles were the only persons through whom extraordinary signs occurred. His point was that the charismata belonged to the apostolic founding era and were bound to its revelatory and authenticating purpose.

A. W. Pink made the same connection between extraordinary office and extraordinary gift: "as successors were not appointed for the former, so a continuance was never intended for the latter." [3] Charles Spurgeon, who certainly did not deny the present power of the Holy Spirit, referred to "those earlier miraculous gifts which have departed from us," while insisting that regeneration, holiness, and the Spirit's saving work are greater abiding blessings. [4]

John Calvin addressed the healing gift directly: "The gift of healing, like the rest of the miracles ... has vanished away." [5] And John Owen, distinguishing the Spirit's abiding work from sudden extraordinary endowments such as miracles and tongues, wrote, "That dispensation of the Spirit is long since ceased." [6] These men differed in century, temperament, and theological context, but they shared the conviction that the extraordinary apostolic gifts were not the ordinary inheritance of every subsequent generation.

THE QUESTION IS NOT WHETHER GOD CAN HEAL

This is where careless arguments often create unnecessary confusion. The question is not whether God can open blind eyes, restore hearing, strengthen crippled limbs, reverse disease, or answer the prayers of His people in ways physicians cannot explain. He can. He is God. The question is whether He still distributes to individuals the standing miraculous ability to heal others in the same sense in which the New Testament describes "gifts of healings" and apostolic signs. Tom Pennington states the distinction well: all Christians affirm that God can heal; the disputed issue is whether God still distributes to particular people the miraculous ability to heal others. [7]

James 5:14–16 therefore belongs in any responsible cessationist treatment of healing. Sick believers are commanded to call for the elders, who are to pray over them. Cessationism does not send the suffering Christian away from prayer; it sends him to God. The church should pray earnestly, humbly, and expectantly, while refusing to convert prayer into a claim that a particular minister possesses an apostolic power to heal at will.

THE LATER APOSTOLIC RECORD IS PASTORALLY INSTRUCTIVE

Several New Testament texts quietly reinforce this distinction. Paul left Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). He advised Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach and frequent infirmities (1 Timothy 5:23). Epaphroditus became so ill that he nearly died, and Paul describes his recovery not as the exercise of an apostolic healing technique but as the mercy of God: "God had mercy on him" (Philippians 2:25–27). None of these texts alone proves cessation, but together they show that even within the apostolic age healing was never an autonomous power possessed by a man and exercised mechanically whenever sickness appeared.

The same truth protects suffering believers from one of the cruelest distortions of healing theology: the claim that continued illness necessarily proves insufficient faith. Scripture does connect faith with healing in a number of Gospel accounts, and those passages must be allowed to say what they say. But Scripture also records healings in which the recipient's faith was plainly not the controlling explanation. Lazarus was dead (John 11:38–44). The lame man in Acts 3 was expecting alms, not a miracle. The power rests in the sovereign God, not in a sufferer's ability to manufacture the required psychological or spiritual condition.

WHEN GOD DOES NOT REMOVE THE THORN

Christian faith is not demonstrated only when suffering disappears. Paul pleaded three times for the removal of his thorn in the flesh. God did not grant the request in the form Paul desired. Instead He answered with sustaining grace.

> 2 Corinthians 12:9: "And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.'"

That answer must be allowed to stand against every theology that turns continued suffering into evidence of spiritual failure. Sometimes God glorifies Himself by removing the affliction; sometimes He glorifies Himself by sustaining His child through it. The sick Christian is not a second-class believer because the cancer remains, the pain returns, or the disability is not removed. Grace is not the consolation prize given when divine power fails. Grace is itself divine power resting upon the weak.

THE DANGER OF SIGN-SEEKING

The desire to see God act is not inherently sinful, and Christians should never become practical deists who expect nothing from prayer. Yet Scripture also warns that the craving for signs can become unbelief wearing religious clothing. When the scribes and Pharisees demanded a sign from Christ, He answered, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign" (Matthew 12:38–39). They were not lacking evidence; they were refusing the revelation already standing before them.

After the resurrection, Jesus told Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). The mature Christian does not require God to repeat apostolic signs in order to prove that Christ is alive. He receives the apostolic witness God has preserved and trusts the Savior to whom those signs pointed.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR THE BELIEVER

If you are sick, pray. Ask the elders to pray. Seek appropriate medical care. Ask other believers to intercede. Give thanks for every providential mercy and every recovery, whether it comes through ordinary medicine, unexpected improvement, or an answer that leaves physicians astonished. But place your confidence in God, not in a personality who claims to possess a gift that guarantees your healing.

If someone has blamed you for remaining sick, bring that accusation to Scripture. Confess real sin where God exposes it, but do not manufacture guilt in order to protect another person's failed promise. You are not required to defend a healing claim by condemning yourself. The Lord who loved Paul did not remove Paul's thorn, and the Lord who loved Trophimus allowed him to remain sick for a time.

If you have claimed powers God has not given you, repent. If you have promised healing as though it were within your control, correct the record. If you have encouraged people to abandon medicine or to treat unanswered prayer as proof of defective faith, seek to repair the harm. Do not hide behind sincerity. Love requires truth.

And do not let cessationism become an excuse for unbelieving prayerlessness. It is possible to reject counterfeit healing claims and still dishonor God by never asking Him to heal at all. The same Bible that teaches us to test miraculous claims commands the church to pray for the sick. Cessationism should produce neither gullibility nor cynicism, but confidence in the sovereign God who remains free to act as He pleases.

BRING THE MIRACLE TO THE WORD — CHAPTER 7 CHECKLIST

1. What exactly is being claimed? Is this an answer to prayer, an unusual providence, or the claim that a particular person possesses a continuing biblical gift of healing or miracle-working?
2. Does the claimed phenomenon resemble the biblical category? Is the effect real and identifiable, or has the definition of miracle been weakened so that ordinary improvement, unverifiable testimony, or emotional experience automatically counts as apostolic power?
3. What authority is being attached to the miracle-worker? Is the claimed sign being used to authenticate new revelation, personal authority, a ministry brand, or teaching that Scripture does not authorize?
4. How is suffering treated when healing does not occur? Are the sick comforted with God's sovereignty and grace, or blamed for insufficient faith, hidden sin, or failure to follow the healer's instructions?
5. Does the ministry distinguish God's sovereign ability to heal from a human being's claim to possess the gift of healing? James 5 calls the church to prayer; it does not create a permanent class of miracle-workers.
6. Is Christ the center of attention? Do people leave speaking primarily about the Savior and His Word, or about the healer, the atmosphere, the technique, and the spectacle?
7. Am I demanding signs in order to believe what God has already made certain in His Word? Has the desire for the extraordinary begun to make ordinary faithfulness, prayer, Scripture, and the local church seem spiritually inadequate?
8. What must I now do? If I have trusted a healing claim more than Scripture, blamed myself for another person's failed promise, exaggerated an experience, or made claims in God's name that I could not substantiate, will I bring the matter into the light and obey Christ?

Do not trade the sovereign God of Scripture for a system that promises control over Him. Pray boldly, hope deeply, use the means God provides, and entrust the outcome to the Father who knows what His children need. Your final hope is not that this mortal body will escape every disease before death. Your hope is resurrection.

2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

SOURCE NOTES

1 John Chrysostom, Homilies on First Corinthians, Homily 29, on 1 Corinthians 12:1–2, describing the extraordinary phenomena as things that "then used to occur but now no longer take place."

2 Benjamin B. Warfield, Counterfeit Miracles (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), chap. 1, "The Cessation of the Charismata," especially p. 6, on miraculous gifts as credentials of the apostles in the founding of the church.

3 Arthur W. Pink, The Holy Spirit (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), chap. 31, "The Spirit Endowing," on extraordinary offices and gifts and the absence of successors to the former.

4 C. H. Spurgeon, "Receiving the Holy Ghost," sermon no. 1790, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. 30 (1884), on the earlier miraculous gifts having departed while the Spirit's saving work abides.

5 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV, chap. 19, sec. 18, on the gift of healing and the temporary purpose of miracles.

6 John Owen, Pneumatologia: A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit, Book IV, chap. V, on the extraordinary gifts of miracles and tongues and that dispensation having ceased.

7 Tom Pennington, "The Case for Cessationism Stands," Grace to You, response to Andrew Wilson following the 2013 Strange Fire Conference, on the distinction between God sovereignly healing and God distributing to individuals the miraculous ability to heal others.

CHAPTER 8

The New Apostolic Reformation

False Apostles, Fresh Revelation, and the Crisis of Authority

> Revelation 2:2: "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars."

Christ did not condemn the church at Ephesus for testing men who claimed to be apostles. He commended it. Their titles did not settle the question. Their claims had to be examined, and when those claims proved false, the church was right to reject them. A congregation does not dishonor Christ by refusing authority He has not given.

John commands believers to "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1). His reason is plain: false prophets have gone out into the world. A religious claim cannot establish its own truth merely by invoking the Spirit. John directs his readers to what is confessed about Jesus Christ and whether the apostolic witness is received (1 John 4:2–6). The test therefore reaches beyond a speaker's sincerity or the force of his delivery to the doctrine he teaches.

Paul likewise required examination in the congregation: "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge" (1 Corinthians 14:29). He then added, "And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:32). The surrounding instructions require a speaker to yield the floor and show that spiritual gifting does not abolish self-control (1 Corinthians 14:30–33). Verse 29

establishes the duty to weigh what is spoken; verse 32 rules out the excuse that spiritual impulse makes orderly restraint impossible. These instructions regulated prophecy in the apostolic church. They do not establish that the gift continues today, but they expose the error of demanding unquestioning acceptance merely because someone claims to speak by the Spirit.

Nor does testing dishonor the Spirit. In 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, Paul places his warnings against quenching the Spirit and despising prophecies beside the duty to examine everything, retain what proves good, and reject evil. Willingness to receive truth and care in testing a claim belong together.

The Bereans put that disposition into practice. They welcomed Paul's teaching and examined it against the Scriptures; Luke commends their response (Acts 17:11). The standard was God's revealed Word, not the congregation's preferences. If an apostle's hearers were commended for examining his preaching, a modern leader cannot rightly make freedom from examination a condition of loyalty.

Now bring that truth into your own church. Could you ask a respected leader to establish his claims from Scripture without being accused of rebellion? Could you question a prophecy without being told that you were resisting the Holy Spirit? If someone announced that God had spoken through him, would you know how to examine the message—or would fear silence you before you opened your Bible?

This is not a dispute about impressive titles. It is a question of who may govern your conscience in the name of God. The same Christ who commended discernment also rebuked the Ephesians for leaving their first love (Revelation 2:4). He requires truth without coldness and love without surrender. We must not become cruel toward deceived people, but neither may we leave them defenseless before destructive teaching.

WHAT IS ACTUALLY BEING CLAIMED?

Paul did not treat the faith of Christians as his possession. In 2 Corinthians 1:24 he wrote, "Not that we have dominion over your faith." A genuine apostle refused to make himself the master of another believer's trust in God. That places a searching question before every claim to apostolic authority today: does this ministry teach people to stand upon God's Word, or to depend upon the authority of its leaders?

The concern here is the claim that Christ is restoring apostles and

prophets whose present-day authority and revelations are needed to direct His church. The expression New Apostolic Reformation covers overlapping networks and teachings. We must examine what a particular ministry actually says. The evidence must be its published claims, not merely a label attached by its critics.

Harvest International Ministry supplies a concrete example. On its own website, Ché Ahn says he launched HIM after receiving a "word of the Lord" through Cindy Jacobs. The ministry describes itself as an apostolic network, affirms contemporary apostolic and prophetic gifts, and attributes its development to "God-breathed prophetic words." Its account therefore asks readers to understand the movement's origin in terms of claimed divine speech. [1]

Its membership page then places the network under a founding apostle and apostolic teams. Members are asked to align with its vision, mission, statement of faith, and core values to uphold what it calls the "God-given order of leadership." They are also asked to prioritize an annual summit where they can be equipped with "fresh revelations and insight." [2]

The same page specifies a nonrefundable $250 application fee, asks members to fulfill a faith pledge and support the work financially, and limits consideration for commissioning by Ché Ahn, or recommendation by an HIM-commissioned apostle or prophet, to members. Money, ministerial recognition, and claimed apostolic alignment meet within the same membership structure. [3] The question is what biblical warrant gives that structure its claimed spiritual authority.

HIM also affirms Scripture as God's uniquely inspired and inerrant Word. [4] That makes the question sharper: what authority do the additional revelations possess? If a leader's new message must be obeyed because God supposedly spoke it, the believer has acquired an obligation that cannot be established from the biblical text. A ministry can honor the Bible in its confession while teaching people to seek binding directions elsewhere. Saying that Scripture is supreme does not settle what actually governs the conscience.

Here is the boundary that must remain visible. Cooperation, counsel, and financial support do not create apostolic authority. Neither does a claim that a prophet commissioned the movement. The church must receive the authority Christ has actually given, and reject the authority men assign themselves. In 2 Timothy 3:16–17, Paul directs Timothy to God's inspired Scriptures as sufficient to

equip him for every good work. A supposed new revelation cannot be made the missing condition of faithful ministry.

To see how a claim to revelation can become coercion, consider a hypothetical situation, not a reported incident at HIM. A young pastor seeks help from an influential leader. The leader says God has revealed that the pastor's congregation must redirect its mission giving to his network. When the pastor asks why, he is told that yielding to this apostolic direction will demonstrate whether he is ready for greater responsibility. His concern for biblical faithfulness is recast as resistance to spiritual authority.

Notice what has happened. An unseen message has become a demand upon an entire congregation. Money is requested under the weight of that message, and the pastor's future recognition is tied to his response. He is being pressed to prove his humility by surrendering the very examination Scripture requires. If he passes that pressure to his people, the unsupported claim travels from one leader's private experience into the church's budget and conscience.

The deceit lies in presenting a human demand as a divine obligation. The abuse lies in using that claimed obligation to obtain submission, money, or silence. God's name is made to carry a demand that God's Word has not established. A sincere voice cannot make the demand true, and a useful ministry project cannot supply the missing authority. No leader has the right to turn your desire to obey Christ into a means of controlling you.

Peter forbids precisely the domineering posture that such pressure produces. His instruction continues in 1 Peter 5:3: "nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." The flock belongs to God; elders must answer to the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:2–4). Likewise, 2 Corinthians 9:7 directs believers toward willing generosity rather than giving under compulsion. An appeal for support must not become a test of submission to an unproved revelation.

If you face such a demand, bring it into the open. Ask the leader to state exactly what you are required to do and show where Scripture requires it. Read the passage in context. A repeated claim that God spoke is not a biblical explanation. Seek counsel from faithful elders who are free to examine the claim without protecting the claimant's position. Refuse to treat a private message as God's command merely because refusal may cost you someone's approval.

And if you are the pastor who passed the pressure on, tell your

people where you exceeded Scripture. Withdraw the obligation you had no right to impose. Do not leave them wondering whether disobeying your earlier demand will bring God's displeasure. Teach them how to distinguish a biblical command from a minister's judgment, and let them see you submit to the correction you require of others.

This recovery leads into faithful church life. Hebrews 13:7, 17 directs believers to honor leaders who teach God's Word and watch over souls as men accountable to Him. Such shepherds help the wounded learn to trust Christ and understand Scripture. They do not need to make themselves indispensable to God's favor. Through Christ, believers already have access to the Father by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:18). No apostolic network supplies a missing link in that access.

Let this example teach us to examine the authority being claimed, the obedience being demanded, and the biblical warrant offered for both. Not every continuationist claims restored governing apostleship, but wherever such authority is asserted, it must face the same test. The church must not surrender her conscience because impressive men announce a new divine order. Her safety rests upon the foundation Christ has already laid.

THE FOUNDATION HAS ALREADY BEEN LAID

Ephesians 2:20: "Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone."

We must begin with the Savior whose church this is. Hebrews 1:1–3 places God's former speech through the prophets beside His climactic revelation in the Son. The One who reveals the Father is also the One who has purified His people from their sins and taken His seat at God's right hand. The church rests upon this Christ and His accomplished salvation. Its foundation cannot be treated as an unfinished religious project that later leaders have been called to complete.

Ephesians 4:11 names apostles and prophets among Christ's gifts to the church. Verses 12–13 describe their purpose: equipping the saints and building the body toward maturity. Some argue that because the church has not reached that goal, new apostles and prophets must still be supplied. But the continuing need for apostolic teaching does not establish a continuing succession to the apostolic office. In Ephesians 3:3–5, Paul says the mystery of Christ was revealed to His apostles and prophets, then directs the Ephesians to understand his knowledge by reading what he has written. His teaching can reach believers whom he will never meet.

Charles Hodge addresses the inference directly: "It is the ministry and not those particular offices, that is to continue." [5] The church's growth still requires the truth given through the apostles and prophets. Their foundational work continues to serve her through Scripture, while pastors and teachers explain and apply that truth. The same Spirit who revealed the mystery is still building believers together as God's dwelling (Ephesians 3:5; 2:22). Christ has not withdrawn the apostles' teaching because He has completed their earthly ministry. Apostleship does not have to be repeated for apostolic truth to remain in command.

Keith Underhill identifies the foundational witnesses: "Together with the New Testament prophets the apostles were the foundation of the church." [6] A foundation is laid so that the building may rise upon it. You do not strengthen a house by pouring another foundation through its upper floors. The church continues to grow; that does not mean its foundational offices must be recreated in every generation. Christ established His church through His authorized apostolic-prophetic witness. We receive that authoritative witness in the Scriptures, and we build upon it rather than supplement it with another foundation.

The prophets belong within this argument too. Ephesians 3:5 places them alongside the apostles as recipients of the mystery now revealed by the Spirit, and Ephesians 4:11 distinguishes the two groups. Paul is speaking of prophets serving in the New Testament church. In 1 Corinthians 14:29–30, their ministry involves revelation received, not simply an unusually forceful explanation of a passage. The foundational ministry of apostles and prophets therefore concerns the giving of divine revelation. Calling a present-day preacher "prophetic" cannot confer that ministry upon him. We must examine the work Scripture assigns to the gift, not merely the title someone prefers.

Paul distinguishes laying the foundation from building upon it in 1 Corinthians 3:10–11. He laid the foundation at Corinth through his ministry; another worker builds upon it. He then identifies Jesus Christ as the foundation no one may replace. The later builder has serious work to do, but his work begins with what has already been laid. A growing church needs faithful builders. Its growth gives them no authority to change the ground beneath it.

John Calvin keeps Christ at the center of the image: "Christ is actually the foundation on which the church is built by the preaching of

doctrine." The apostles and prophets serve that foundation by directing the church to Him. [7]

There are not two competing foundations here, one divine and another human. Christ saves; the apostles bear His authorized witness to that salvation. They do not contribute a missing part of His atonement. Through their teaching, the church receives God's own explanation of who the Redeemer is and what His death and resurrection accomplished (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). To build upon their doctrine is to receive the Christ they proclaim. To revise that doctrine is to claim authority over the testimony by which He makes Himself known.

Christ prepared these witnesses for a responsibility later teachers could not simply assume. In John 14:25–26, He promised that the Spirit would teach His disciples and bring back to their remembrance what He had said while present with them. In John 15:26–27, He joined the Spirit's testimony to their witness as men who had been with Him from the beginning. These promises are tied to an actual history with Jesus. We receive their benefit through the witnesses He equipped; we do not acquire their historical place by claiming their title.

The promise reaches beyond accurate recollection. In John 16:13–15, the Spirit will guide them into truth and glorify Christ by declaring what belongs to Him. Paul accordingly describes his proclamation in terms of words taught by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:12–13), and he thanks God that the Thessalonians received the apostolic message as God's Word (1 Thessalonians 2:13). The church was being founded through a divinely authorized interpretation of Christ's saving work. An able pastor explains that revelation; ability does not make his explanation a further revelation.

Richard Gaffin expresses the connection simply: "God's word focuses on God's deeds." [8] Christ's saving work and the inspired witness to it belong together. The church must not imagine that the apostles merely left a collection of moving memories to which every age may add its own equally authoritative impressions. Their appointed work supplied the authoritative testimony upon which later faith and ministry depend. The completed foundation remains effective precisely because it is preserved and built upon. Completion does not mean that its authority has expired.

We therefore do not choose between Christ and the apostles' doctrine. Through their testimony we learn who Christ is, what He accomplished, and what He commands (John 20:30–31; Acts 2:42).

The church is not waiting for a contemporary apostle to reveal a more complete Savior. Nor may a new spiritual movement revise the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Jude 3 makes that responsibility explicit by describing the faith as "once for all delivered to the saints." The church has received something definite to defend. Every new generation must learn it, believe it, and contend for it. The mission may carry that faith into places where it has never been heard; it gives no servant permission to alter what has been entrusted to him. Spiritual maturity deepens our grasp of the delivered faith. It does not authorize additions to it.

Paul shows how that faith is to reach succeeding teachers. In 2 Timothy 2:2, he directs Timothy to entrust what he heard from Paul to reliable men capable of teaching others. Follow the movement: Paul teaches Timothy; Timothy teaches faithful men; those men teach others. The teachers multiply, while the apostolic teaching governs every generation. A pastor may train his successor, but he cannot confer authority to reveal a new article of faith.

Nor is this merely the careful preservation of old information. In 2 Timothy 1:13–14, Timothy must hold to the teaching he received from Paul and guard what was entrusted to him through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Here is the Spirit actively at work in the very act of preserving apostolic truth. A church does not have to choose between dependence upon the Spirit and submission to the completed Word. It needs His help to understand, love, guard, and obey what He has given.

Peter prepares his readers for his death in the same spirit. In 2 Peter 1:12–15, his approaching departure makes him determined that they should continue to remember the truth he has taught. He writes so that his witness will serve them when his voice can no longer be heard. The death of an apostle does not make his teaching expire. The church honors him by remembering and obeying it.

This enduring authority belongs to their written witness as well. In 2 Peter 3:15–16, Peter speaks of Paul's letters alongside the other Scriptures and warns that twisting them brings destruction. The church does not receive those letters as the private opinions of a gifted religious leader. God has placed His people under their authority. When a contemporary claim is tested by Scripture, an ancient man is not being preferred over a modern man. God's established Word is judging a human claim.

This connection between the apostolic message and the written

Scriptures was recognized in the early church. Irenaeus describes the gospel first proclaimed publicly and afterward "handed down to us in the Scriptures." [9] The written witness carries the message beyond the lifetime of its first heralds. We open those writings to receive the Christ they proclaimed, not to wait for a later teacher to supply what their gospel lacked.

Consider also where Paul places the church's confidence when he warns its elders about danger after his departure. In Acts 20:28–32, the Spirit has appointed overseers to shepherd the flock, wolves threaten it, and even men within the leadership may draw disciples after themselves. Paul commends the elders to God and to His gracious word, which can build them up. This is his provision for a church facing real danger without his bodily presence: watchful shepherds serving under the Word, dependent upon the living God. A minister who draws the flock's confidence away from that Word and toward himself is reproducing the danger Paul warned against.

This also explains the relationship between a closed canon and a growing church. The canon is the church's received body of inspired Scripture. Its closure does not mean that Christians have finished learning, that every question has been answered in our minds, or that the Spirit has finished sanctifying us. It means that the rule by which our teaching is judged is settled. Our understanding must grow under that rule. A deeper understanding of what God has said must never be confused with authority to add something He has not said.

Richard B. Gaffin Jr. states the rule for judging such claims: "The Bible is the standard for all genuinely Christian experience." [10] A believer who asks a teacher to show where Scripture authorizes his demand is obeying the command to test the spirits (1 John 4:1). Citing the Spirit does not release a teacher from submission to the Spirit's Word.

Christ Himself looked beyond the men gathered around Him to those who would later believe through their testimony. John 17:20: "those who will believe in Me through their word." Before the apostles had finished their work, the Savior was praying for the people their message would reach. Their testimony can bring you to the same Lord they knew. John explains that this is why he wrote: that readers might believe in Jesus Christ and have life in His name (John 20:30–31).

Think of the comfort this gives an ordinary believer. You do not have to discover which living apostle possesses the newest insight before you can know what to believe. Christ has not left His people

dependent upon a changing succession of private revelations. The foundation is sufficient to bear the whole household of God.

A TITLE CANNOT SUPPLY AN APOSTOLIC COMMISSION

When Judas was replaced among the Twelve, the candidate had to have accompanied Jesus' earthly ministry and become a witness of His resurrection (Acts 1:21–22). Matthias met those stated qualifications. Paul's calling was exceptional: the risen Christ appeared to him, called him, and commissioned him. Paul grounded his apostleship in Christ's appointment, not a congregation's admiration or a network's recognition (1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8; Galatians 1:1).

Christ's headship includes His right to appoint the men who speak with foundational authority for Him. In Galatians 2:7–9, James, Peter, and John recognize the grace already given to Paul and extend fellowship to him. They acknowledge a commission they did not create. John Calvin explains that the apostles were chosen "by the direct agency of the Lord himself." [11] Their authority came from the Sender before it was recognized by the church. This is why ecclesiastical approval cannot make a man an apostle: the church receives Christ's appointed messengers; it does not possess Christ's prerogative to appoint them. When leaders bestow an apostolic title and demand the obedience attached to it, they are claiming more than the right to organize a ministry. They are asking believers to receive their decision as an act of the risen Lord.

A claimed vision today does not establish the same commission. Neither does a conference ceremony, a ministry credential, a large following, or an impressive testimony. The question is not whether someone sincerely believes he has been appointed. It is whether Christ has authorized the foundational office he claims.

B. B. Warfield explained the relationship between the extraordinary gifts and the church's founding messengers: "They were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church." [12]

The New Testament also records miracles through men such as Stephen and Philip; miraculous activity was not restricted to the apostles personally (Acts 6:8; 8:6–7). Nevertheless, signs accompanied the founding witness and authenticated the apostolic ministry (Hebrews 2:3–4; 2 Corinthians 12:12). An extraordinary report by itself cannot prove that someone possesses an apostle's authority.

Nor can spiritual power be judged apart from the truth being taught (Deuteronomy 13:1–4).

The signs themselves must be read within God's purpose in giving them. Hebrews 2:3–4 traces a movement from the salvation announced by the Lord, to the testimony of those who heard Him, to God's own confirming witness through miracles and gifts distributed according to His will. The wonders served the testimony; they did not turn astonishment into an independent source of authority. Charles Hodge calls such confirmations "seals of a divine mission." [13] A seal authenticates the messenger God has sent; it does not make every later report of a wonder a fresh apostolic commission. Nor can it authorize a different gospel. In Galatians 1:8, Paul places even himself and an angel beneath the gospel already preached. No claim of spiritual power can place its speaker above the truth God has given.

Revelation 2:2 shows Christ commending the church for testing men who claimed to be apostles and finding them false. A title printed before a person's name does not place that person beyond the judgment of God's Word. If a leader insists that examining his claim is rebellion, put his demand beside Christ's commendation. The Lord of the church praises the very discernment that demand would silence. Testing a claimed apostle is part of faithfulness to the true Christ.

WHEN A HUMAN WORD BORROWS GOD'S AUTHORITY

There is a vast difference between saying, "After prayer and careful thought, I believe this would be wise," and saying, "God has told me that you must do this." The first invites examination of a judgment. The second claims divine authority. When that claim concerns your family, your future, your money, or your place in a church, it can press upon your conscience with enormous force.

Someone may respond, "We are not adding a book to the Bible." But that does not settle the issue. Not every revelation given during biblical history became a separate biblical book. The present question is whether God has authorized this new message and requires the hearer to receive it as His word. A leader does not escape that question merely by declining to print his prophecy between the covers of a Bible.

John Owen distinguished the Spirit's illumination of Scripture from new revelations offered as a guide: "Believers are not directed to

look after such revelations for their guide." His argument directs faith and obedience to what God has already revealed. [14]

In Luke 24:44–45, the risen Christ directs His disciples to the Scriptures concerning Himself and opens their understanding so they can comprehend them. The written testimony and the opening of their minds are distinct. That distinction protects us from mistaking discovery for revelation. A believer may suddenly see the grace of Christ in a passage he has read for years. The discovery is new to him; the truth did not begin when he discovered it. Illumination enables us to receive what God has revealed. It does not give our impressions the authority of His voice.

That is not spiritual lifelessness. It is dependence upon the Spirit who opens our understanding to the truth He has given. Charles Spurgeon expressed it memorably: "God does not give a fresh revelation, but he rivets the old one." We need our eyes opened, our consciences awakened, and our hearts strengthened by the Word—not a rival source of commands. [15]

Psalm 119:18 teaches us to ask God to open our eyes to the wonders already in His law. The prayer brings our need to the right place: we need sight, and God has given something worth seeing. In 2 Timothy 3:15–17, Paul directs Timothy to the Scriptures that make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ and equip God's servant for every good work. Consider the freedom this gives a frightened believer. Your obedience to Christ does not have to wait until someone supplies a private message. God has given His Word to teach and correct you. Depend upon His Spirit to understand and obey it.

Proverbs 30:5–6: "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar."

A helpful thought may be received as counsel. An interpretation must be tested by its text. An impression must not be promoted into a command from heaven merely because it feels powerful. The words "God told me" must never become a way to end the examination that Scripture requires.

DOES FALLIBLE PROPHECY SOLVE THE PROBLEM?

"I may be wrong" can sound humble. But when a speaker adds, "God showed me," the disclaimer has not removed the weight of God's name. The hearer may still fear that rejecting the message means resisting the Lord.

Some continuationists place the error in the messenger's report while preserving a divine source behind it. God reveals; the person may misperceive, misunderstand, or misreport what He gives. John Piper teaches this distinction and denies that such speech carries Scripture's infallible authority. His position is not a claim to restored governing apostleship. It is a claim that a genuine revelation can reach the church through a fallible prophetic report. [16]

What establishes that God spoke? If error has entered the message, what evidence identifies its unseen source as divine? Calling the report fallible acknowledges a problem in the delivery. It does not authenticate the voice behind it. The church must not surrender its judgment at the very point where the claim needs examination.

When a preacher misreads a passage, we can lay his sermon beside the text. The Bible remains before us; his explanation can be challenged. A claimed private revelation gives the congregation no such access to its alleged source. We have the speaker's report, but we cannot lay it beside the revelation he says he received. A sentence may comfort us, and its teaching may be true. Neither fact proves that God has given a new revelation.

Consider how Peter describes the prophecy of Scripture in 2 Peter 1:20–21. Men spoke as the Holy Spirit moved them. His work reached their mouths. Calvin says the Spirit "ruled in their mouth as in his own sanctuary." [17] Human weakness did not outrun divine government. God secured the testimony He gave through these men. A doctrine of fallible prophecy must therefore establish from Scripture another kind of prophetic speech in which God gives a revelation but does not secure its faithful delivery. Admitting that people make mistakes does not establish that category.

Scripture's commands to test and weigh must be obeyed (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22). But testing a claim does not lower the standard of truth. Israel had to test prophetic claims when a false prediction exposed a word the Lord had not spoken (Deuteronomy 18:20–22). As the Grace to You article "Prophecy Redefined" puts it, "A true prophet was judged on the basis of the truth or falsehood of his prophecies." [18] The test did not make room for error within God's speech. It exposed words falsely attributed to Him.

The New Testament gives the same reason for vigilance: false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1). Paul also requires anyone claiming to be a prophet or spiritual to acknowledge his

written instructions as the Lord's commandments (1 Corinthians 14:37). A claim to the Spirit's guidance must bow before the Word He gave through the apostle. The messenger does not gain immunity by invoking the very Lord whose command judges him.

Ezekiel 13:6: "They have envisioned futility and false divination, saying, 'Thus says the Lord!' But the Lord has not sent them; yet they hope that the word may be confirmed."

Notice where Ezekiel places these speakers: they have spoken in God's name, and now they are waiting for events to rescue their words. Hope is not authorization. Sincerity is not revelation. When a message fails, repentance must not hide behind the word "imperfect." If you attached God's name to a promise He did not give, withdraw it plainly. Tell the people that you had no right to ask them to receive it as His promise. Honor the Lord by confessing the words you wrongly placed in His mouth.

SPIRITUAL COVERING MUST NOT BECOME SPIRITUAL INTIMIDATION

Consider a hypothetical conversation. A member opens his Bible and asks, "Where does Scripture require this?" The leader answers, "You are questioning your covering. Be careful that you do not come under judgment." The Bible remains open, but the question has been driven from the room. The member is now being asked to fear what might happen if he persists. A threat has taken the place of an explanation.

A church needs faithful oversight. Believers should honor those who labor in the Word and watch over their souls (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; Hebrews 13:17). Yet the very passage that commands submission also says that these shepherds must give account. Their office places them under judgment; it does not lift them above examination. Peter forbids elders to lord it over the flock and directs their attention to the coming Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:2–4). Every pastor tends sheep who belong to Someone else.

2 Corinthians 1:24: "Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand."

Paul's refusal of dominion reaches the conscience. The minister cannot make himself the final reason a Christian believes or obeys. The Westminster Confession states the governing principle: "God alone is Lord of the conscience." [19] A pastor may speak with authority when he faithfully declares God's Word. He may rebuke sin, correct error, and urge costly obedience. But he cannot turn his own preference

into God's command or make submission to an unsupported claim a test of loyalty to Christ. His task is to bring the conscience beneath Scripture. Intimidation fastens it to the preacher.

The warning about touching God's anointed must also be read where God placed it. Psalm 105:8–15 recalls His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and His protection of His people as they wandered among nations. He restrained kings who could have harmed them. This passage displays God defending His vulnerable people against the powerful. It gives no minister permission to threaten a believer who asks him to explain his teaching from Scripture.

The Bereans examined Paul's preaching by the Scriptures and were commended for doing so (Acts 17:11). Paul publicly confronted Peter when Peter's conduct departed from gospel truth (Galatians 2:11–14). Apostolic standing did not make Peter's conduct untouchable. A modern leader cannot claim an exemption that Peter did not possess.

Nor does biblical examination authorize careless accusations. In 1 Timothy 5:19–21, Paul requires two or three witnesses before an accusation against an elder is received, commands public rebuke of those who are sinning, and forbids partiality. The same apostolic instruction protects an elder against an unsupported charge and requires correction when sin is established. A church must be able to examine evidence without deciding beforehand that its leader is either guilty or beyond correction. His reputation cannot be permitted to decide the case.

In his 2013 address "Are We Preachers or Witch Doctors?" Conrad Mbewe described settings in which a supposedly privileged spiritual figure inspired such fear that followers hesitated to expose wrongdoing. They believed that opposing or exposing him was "to bring a curse upon yourself." [20] Dependence upon his supposed access to hidden spiritual power had displaced biblical shepherding. His account concerns the situations he described, not every African church or every charismatic believer. It shows how fear can keep a person silent even when conduct cries out for examination.

Bring the questions close to home. Are you being taught to understand the Bible, or to fear the leader? Can an accusation be examined fairly? Can a prediction be checked against what actually happened? Does a minister admit error, or does every challenge become proof that the questioner lacks faith? What happens to the person who asks for the text?

Christian, a threat can follow you home long after the meeting has

ended. You may sit at your kitchen table with an open Bible and still hear the warning more loudly than the passage before you. Ordinary hardship may then begin to look like proof that the leader was right. But fear cannot turn his words into God's words. Proverbs 29:25 identifies the fear of man as a snare and directs our trust to the Lord. Bring the frightening claim into the light of Scripture. Do not let a man's anger become your interpreter of God's providence.

Begin with the demand that has troubled your conscience. Write down what you were told to believe or do, then read the passages offered in its defense, including the words around them. Ask a faithful, accountable elder to examine them with you. The Bereans did not settle the matter by measuring Paul's confidence; they searched the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). Receive correction where the text corrects you. Where the demand contradicts Scripture, refuse it. You do not owe a minister the disobedience he has called loyalty.

And look beside you. Is another believer being pushed into silence while you keep your head down? Have you repeated a threat to your spouse, your children, or a frightened friend because the pastor said it first? Withdraw what you had no right to place upon their consciences. Listen to the person who has been branded rebellious for asking an honest question. Help bring the facts before accountable shepherds. Paul commands us to comfort the fainthearted and uphold the weak (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Do not leave a trembling brother to face alone the pressure you now recognize.

Pastor, a congregation's silence is no proof that your teaching has persuaded it. Some may have learned that questions cost too much. If you have used threats of divine displeasure to defend your own unsupported demands, withdraw those threats before the people who heard them. Explain the Scriptures you misused. Receive correction without punishing the person who brings it. Let your repentance teach the church that its shepherd, too, must bow before the Word.

Begin where your use of the Bible became a threat. Return to the passage you misused and teach it in its context. If you publicly called a member rebellious without biblical grounds, publicly correct the accusation. Do not leave his name under a cloud while yours emerges polished by a vague apology. Then bring your conduct before fellow elders who are free to disagree with you. The impartial examination required in 1 Timothy 5:19–21 must reach your chair as surely as anyone else's. A promise to welcome correction means little if the person raising a concern must first secure your permission to be heard.

Go also to the people who learned to shrink when you entered the room. Ask what your words required them to carry. Listen without preparing your defense, and do not demand immediate trust as proof that they have forgiven you. Their recovery must not become another test of submission to you. If truthful examination costs you influence, accept the loss rather than recover it through pressure. James 3:1 places teachers under stricter judgment. The hour to humble yourself is now, while you can still acknowledge the wrong to those who heard it and put your authority to work for their good.

Look again at the Shepherd whose name is being invoked. Christ laid down His life for His sheep; He did not sacrifice His sheep to protect His standing (John 10:11). He knows His own and holds them in a hand no enemy can force open (John 10:27–29). Christian, refusing a demand that contradicts His Word does not place you outside that hand. Pastor, your ministry should help frightened people rest there. Paul preached Christ Jesus as Lord and served the church for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4:5). Let the people grow secure in the Savior, even when that means they become less afraid of you.

No pastor should require you to violate Scripture to demonstrate loyalty to him. Honor faithful shepherds; receive biblical correction. But do not surrender the duty to examine a claim because the speaker has frightened you. Christ's sheep belong to Christ. Faithfulness to Him may require the question a leader wishes you would stop asking.

THE SEVEN MOUNTAINS AND THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST

The pressure to submit does not always arrive as a threat. A grand plan for tomorrow can make plain obedience today look embarrassingly small. A pastor feeding an unnoticed congregation may begin to wonder whether he has missed the real work of God. A Christian caring for an aging parent may feel left behind by those who promise to reshape nations. Before that vision recruits your conscience, ask who gave it the right to define faithfulness.

Harvest International Ministry names "influencing the seven mountains of society" among its aims. Its membership materials place that aim within a network led by a founding apostle and apostolic teams, with members asked to align with its vision. The seven mountains refer to areas such as family, education, religion, business, government, media, and arts and entertainment. [21] The decisive question is how such a scheme acquires authority over Christ's church. Naming

seven areas of society does not establish that God has commanded the church to organize its mission around them.

Christians should carry honesty, mercy, diligence, and courage into their callings. No apostolic network owns the classroom, the business, or the public office in which a believer serves Christ. Paul directs even servants with little earthly standing to work wholeheartedly for the Lord who will reward them (Colossians 3:22–24). Their service already matters to Him. The error begins when a ministry presents its chosen program as a divine mandate and makes participation a measure of obedience to God. Dividing society into seven categories cannot supply that authority.

John 18:36: "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.'"

Jesus spoke these words while standing before a ruler who could condemn Him to death. His apparent helplessness did not make His kingdom unreal. Its source and power were beyond Pilate's reach. Christ was not denying His rule over the world; He was denying that His kingdom arose from the world or depended upon its weapons. Calvin explains that this spiritual kingdom "must be founded on the doctrine and power of the Spirit." [22] The church cannot borrow the world's measurements of power and then use them to judge her King.

That distinction reaches deeper than a dispute about influence. A just law may restrain public evil. An honest school may teach what is true. These are real goods, but neither can give a sinner a new heart. Jesus told Nicodemus that entrance into God's kingdom requires birth by the Spirit (John 3:3–8). A Christian name above the door cannot regenerate the people who enter. If the church begins counting positions occupied while neglecting souls that need salvation, she can announce advances while leaving people dead in their sins.

The risen Christ gave His church a commission that begins with authority He already possesses. In Matthew 28:18–20, all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Him before He sends His disciples into the world. He sends them to make disciples among all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything He commanded. The mission is vast enough to claim our lives. Its size gives us no permission to change its terms.

Spurgeon drew the consequence plainly: "As he has all authority,

let us not intrude another authority." [23] Christ has not left a blank space in the church's commission for a modern apostle to fill. Plans for schools, businesses, public service, or other undertakings must be judged beneath His Word. They may serve biblical duties; they cannot become additional articles of faith. A leader crosses that boundary when he requires believers to receive his strategy as God's own command. Neither his ambition nor his success can make that crossing lawful.

Watch what this confusion can do to a congregation. When influence becomes the measure of spiritual usefulness, a believer's promotion may receive more attention than his integrity. Would we still celebrate his faithfulness if refusing a dishonest order cost him the promotion? Would a little church that teaches the truth and loves its neighbors count as a success if no influential person ever noticed it? Paul requires faithfulness of Christ's stewards (1 Corinthians 4:1–2). We must not teach the church to feel ashamed of obedience because obedience has failed to make it prominent.

Christian, bring that question into the work already before you. Have you postponed speaking of Christ to a coworker while waiting for a larger opportunity? Have you treated prayer with your children as small work because it offers no public platform? Begin with the person and the duty you have been overlooking. Seek greater usefulness, but do not despise the place where obedience costs you something today. The Lord whom Paul set before lowly servants sees work that will never appear in a ministry report (Colossians 3:23–24). You do not have to become important before you can be faithful.

Nor should the church confuse spiritual power with weakness. Spurgeon described Christ's kingdom as "a power mightier than all secular states combined." [24] The Spirit can bring a sinner to love the Lord he once resisted; no office, law, or institution can accomplish that work in His place. The gospel remains God's power for salvation (Romans 1:16). Preach Christ with confidence. Pray for conversions. Teach believers to obey Him in public and in private. The church's dependence upon the Word and Spirit should make her bold enough to carry the gospel anywhere, even where she possesses no influence to protect her.

Pastor, examine what your vision has taught the flock to value. If you have presented a social strategy as a revelation that binds the church, withdraw that claim plainly. Open Matthew 28:18–20 and teach the commission Christ actually gave. Show how a believer can

serve faithfully in an ordinary calling without receiving an apostolic assignment to a mountain. If your preaching has made humble obedience seem beneath the church's destiny, ask forgiveness of the people whose service you taught them to despise.

Then let that correction reach the calendar and the budget. Where campaigning for influence has crowded out gospel witness, the teaching of Scripture, prayer, or care for the flock, restore what you neglected. Name the first change with your fellow elders and explain its biblical reason to the church. If the correction costs recognition, network support, or a generous donor's approval, do not restore the false claim to recover the lost advantage. Paul charged Timothy before Christ and His coming kingdom to preach the Word, endure affliction, and fulfill his ministry (2 Timothy 4:1–5). The approaching King, not the departing supporter, must govern your decision.

Look finally at the people gathered around the Lamb in Revelation 5:9–10. They belong to Him because He redeemed them to God by His blood, out of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. His death purchased what our influence could never obtain. This is the Savior we proclaim, and He has promised to remain with His disciples as they obey His commission (Matthew 28:20). Go, therefore, with confidence in Him. Feed His people, carry His gospel, and teach His commands. Let no shepherd neglect them while pursuing a grander assignment of his own.

CHRIST HAS GIVEN SHEPHERDS, NOT A NEW SOURCE OF REVELATION

You can grow so accustomed to a leader's certainty that a faithful pastor's restraint feels like neglect. He will not predict your recovery, select your spouse by revelation, or announce the hidden purpose of every sorrow. Has he nothing to give you? He has the Word of God, and his first kindness is to refuse to counterfeit it. He can sit beside you in uncertainty without pretending that God has entrusted him with your future.

Rejecting unauthorized apostleship does not leave the church leaderless. Christ gives pastors and teachers to build up His people through the truth already entrusted to the church (Ephesians 4:11–16). Notice the maturity Paul describes: believers become steadier in the truth, less vulnerable to deceivers, more able to serve one another, and more closely joined to Christ their Head. A ministry that keeps people helpless without its leader's private instructions moves against

that purpose. The shepherd should rejoice when the sheep learn to recognize truth, including when they recognize an error in his teaching.

Paul showed Timothy how this ministry would continue. He was to entrust what he had heard from the apostle to faithful men who could teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). New teachers would carry the same truth to people Paul would never meet. Calvin drew out the duty to "maintain and defend the purity of doctrine." [25] The treasure passes into other hands; it does not become another treasure. Paul's further charge to preach the Word, correcting and exhorting with patience, gives the pastor work enough for a lifetime (2 Timothy 4:2).

A faithful pastor does not possess authority because every thought in his mind is true. His authority is ministerial: he serves Christ by faithfully explaining and applying Christ's Word. When he departs from that Word, his title does not make the departure binding. This applies to a cessationist pastor as surely as to a charismatic leader. Spurgeon described Christ's ministers as "not lords or law-makers." [26] A man may deny continuing revelation in his confession and still expect his counsel to be received as God's unanswerable decree. His doctrine must govern the way he counsels as well as what he preaches.

That same Word also governs the hearer. Christian, freedom from a man's invented command does not free you from a biblical rebuke. If your pastor opens Scripture and exposes bitterness you have been nursing, do not dismiss the truth because another leader once misused his authority. Read the passage. Ask him to explain what you do not understand. Then obey what God requires. Hebrews 13:17 calls believers to receive the oversight of those who watch for their souls and must give account. Discernment should make you harder to deceive and more willing to be corrected.

We must not replace one personality-centered religion with another. Leaving a claimed apostle only to surrender your conscience to an unaccountable preacher is not recovery. Seek a church where Scripture governs the teaching, elders are accountable, correction is possible, and the weak receive patient care. Look beyond the welcome at the door. Can the sermon's argument be followed in the biblical passage? Will the elders explain their counsel? Does a struggling believer receive patient help after his difficulties cease to be new? Such care belongs to the church's obedience to Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:12–14).

Pastor, this examination begins with you. Paul's charge in 1 Timothy 4:16 joins attention to your own life with attention to your

doctrine. Baxter pressed the danger: "Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine." [27] If you teach that Scripture judges every man, let your fellow elders see you receive its judgment. When you have presented your own judgment as God's command, correct that claim before those you advised. A congregation learns something about the authority of Scripture when its pastor admits that Scripture has corrected him.

Then teach people how to examine the counsel they receive. Take a passage the congregation has heard misused; read it with the sentences before and after it. Show what God commands, what He promises, and where a decision requires wisdom rather than a claim to revelation. Give reasons they can examine after the conversation ends. Train faithful men to teach others, as Paul required of Timothy (2 Timothy 2:2). If every question must return to you because no one else has learned to open the Scriptures, something in your shepherding needs to change.

That change may uncover an uncomfortable appetite in the shepherd. It can feel good to be the person everyone needs. But when another elder gives sound counsel, or a member learns to comfort a sufferer from Scripture, Christ's care has reached farther. Do not resent the growth you were appointed to nourish. Peter calls elders to lead by example beneath the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:2–4). Remain faithful when teaching the flock costs you the pleasure of being its only trusted voice.

Nor has the living God ceased to work through the truth His servants teach. The Spirit gives life (John 3:5–8), enlightens our understanding (Ephesians 1:17–18), and transforms believers into Christ's likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18). When Scripture exposes a cherished sin and brings a believer to forsake it, the absence of a new revelation has not left the church powerless. Spurgeon put our confidence where it belongs: "The strength of a living church is the living Christ." [28] Preach with that confidence, pastor. Christian, open your Bible expecting to be searched, taught, humbled, and strengthened.

Carry that confidence into the sickroom. James 5:14–16 directs the sick believer to call for the elders and directs them to pray. Ask God earnestly for healing; submit the outcome to His wisdom, remembering that confidence in prayer rests upon His will (1 John 5:14). You need neither an apostle's title nor a prediction before you can kneel beside the bed. And when distress leaves you scarcely able to pray, Romans 8:26–27 speaks of the Spirit's help in your weakness.

The frightened believer who has run out of words has not run out of help.

The closed canon is not a closed heaven. Through Christ, believers have access to their Father. Paul grounds that nearness in Christ's blood and His reconciling work at the cross (Ephesians 2:13–18). A faithful shepherd leads you to rest upon what your Savior accomplished. The pastor did not purchase that welcome and cannot ration it. Receive the care Christ gives through His servants. Bring your fears into the light of His Word. Whatever obedience may cost, you will not be entrusting yourself to an absent Shepherd.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Perhaps the hardest part is not recognizing the problem. It is admitting what recognition will cost. You have invested years. You love people there. Someone cared for you in a difficult season, and you fear that questioning his teaching would make you ungrateful. But gratitude for genuine kindness does not require surrender to error. You may acknowledge the kindness and still refuse a claim that cannot bear the light of Scripture.

You may already know which conversation you have been postponing. You have rehearsed the explanation, imagined the disappointment, and put it off again. J. C. Ryle wrote, "He must be content to be thought ill of by man if he pleases God." [29] Obedience may be misunderstood even when you explain yourself carefully. Speak with gratitude, name the teaching you can no longer defend, and show from Scripture why you cannot submit to it. You do not need to make an enemy of the person who helped you. Neither must you secure his approval before obeying Christ.

Perhaps you are carrying the wreckage of a promise. Someone spoke confidently about a healing, a marriage, a child, or a future opportunity. You trusted the message because you thought you were trusting God. When it failed, you were left asking whether God had failed you—or whether you had failed Him.

Hear this distinction carefully: God has not broken a promise merely because someone attributed to Him a promise He never made. Bring the claim back to Scripture. Do not allow a human misrepresentation to become your verdict on the faithfulness of Christ. The Savior who bore your sins does not require you to defend false words in order to honor His true ones. Hebrews 10:23 grounds our hope in the faithfulness of the One who promised. Calvin makes the necessary

distinction: God is "true to his promise, which his word contains." [30] The failed prediction may still hurt. You may still grieve the future you had begun to imagine. But you can bring that grief to Christ without accusing Him of breaking another man's word.

Do not act merely from anger, and do not isolate yourself from Christ's church. Seek sound, accountable pastoral help. Examine the actual teaching. Where it is safe and appropriate, ask clear questions and request clear answers. But do not remain subject to demands that contradict Scripture because you fear a leader's displeasure. Your conscience belongs to God. The same passage that calls us to hold fast our hope calls us to gather with believers and encourage their love and good works (Hebrews 10:23–25). Leaving error should open the way to faithful fellowship, where you can be known, instructed, corrected, and cared for.

That return to truth may require you to correct your own words. Being deceived does not make you responsible for everything a teacher did. But if you repeated his prediction as God's promise, urged a friend to obey it, or shamed someone for asking questions, go back to that person. Tell him what you said, why it was wrong, and that you had no right to place him under that burden. Paul joins truthful speech to our membership in one another (Ephesians 4:25). A quiet change of opinion in your own mind does not correct the falsehood still sounding in your neighbor's ears.

And to the minister who recognizes his own conduct in these pages: repentance is still required, and Christ is still merciful to those who come to Him. Have you called your preferences revelations? Have you used spiritual language to protect your authority? Have you allowed people to believe that questioning you meant questioning God? Tell them the truth. Withdraw what you had no right to impose. Repair the harm where you can. The flock belongs to Christ, not to you (Acts 20:28).

Give that repentance words the wounded person can recognize. Matthew Henry's warning is brief: "Deceit lies in generals." [31] "We have all made mistakes" may leave every damaging claim intact. If you announced a healing God had not promised, withdraw the announcement before those who heard it. If you blamed the sufferer's unbelief when the healing did not come, confess that wrong to the sufferer and correct the accusation before those to whom you made it. Do not ask the injured person to protect your reputation by staying silent. Godly sorrow produces an earnest determination to put matters right

(2 Corinthians 7:10–11). Let the congregation see what you are now willing to correct at your own expense.

Then teach the truth you displaced. Explain why a closed canon and a sufficient Scripture leave the church rich in God's counsel, and why a pastor's strong impression cannot add to it. Remove the practices that taught people to depend on fresh messages: the counseling demand justified by a private word, the recurring invitation to a teacher who claims new revelation, the testimony presented as a guarantee that everyone will receive the same outcome. Repentance must also submit your conduct and fitness for office to examination under Scripture's qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1–7). You cannot settle that question merely by announcing that your theology has changed.

Such reform may cost you the admiration that made the old course attractive. When people ask for the familiar excitement again, remember Paul's charge to preach the Word patiently and endure hardship even when hearers prefer teachers who suit their desires (2 Timothy 4:1–5). Do not rebuild the expectation you have begun to dismantle. Nor should shame drive you back into concealment. Richard Sibbes wrote that "there is more mercy in Christ than sin in us." [32] That mercy gives the repentant sinner courage to tell the whole truth. Come to Christ without bargaining for the preservation of your position, and follow Him through the consequences of your repentance.

Nor should anyone imagine that rejecting the New Apostolic Reformation is the same as being reconciled to God. You may recognize a false apostle and still refuse the true Christ. You need more than a correct view of spiritual gifts. You need forgiveness, a changed heart, and the Savior who died for sinners and rose again (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). Turn from your sin and trust Him. No network can grant what only Christ can give, and no human intermediary can improve upon His finished work (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 10:19–22).

Christian, you have access to the Father through the Son. Open the Scriptures. Pray for the Spirit's illumination. Submit to what God has actually said, and rest in the sufficiency of the Christ they reveal. Take that confidence into the next ordinary Lord's Day. Hear the Word with an obedient heart; join the prayers of the church; make room for the believer whose troubles will require patient attention. You may have spent years waiting for a dramatic word about your future while overlooking the person God had already commanded you to love.

Watch for the Spirit's fruit in those ordinary duties (Galatians 5:22–23). The apology you once refused, the resentment you bring

before God, the patient answer to someone still caught in the teaching you have left—these are places where the truth must now govern you. Refuse the contempt that would turn your recovery into another claim of spiritual superiority. The Lord who has dealt mercifully with you calls you to speak truth with kindness and to forgive as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:25–32). You have more to do than tell the story of the error you escaped. There is a Savior to trust, a church to serve, and a neighbor to love today.

A prayer: Father, expose every place where I have feared a human voice more than Your Word. Forgive me for defending what I should have tested, and for repeating what I had no right to call Your message. Give me courage to obey You, humility to receive correction, love for those who are deceived, and deeper rest in Your Son. Amen.

BRING THE CLAIM TO THE WORD — CHAPTER 8 CHECKLIST

Bring one actual teaching, prophecy, or demand before these questions. Write down the claim accurately. Read the relevant passages in their context. Do not rely only on how the message made you feel.

- **What authority is being claimed?** Is this an explanation of Scripture, a fallible judgment, or a message I am being required to receive as God's own words?
- **Where is the biblical warrant?** Does the passage actually establish this office, promise, or obligation, or has the leader assumed what must be proved?
- **What happens when the claim is tested?** Are questions answered from Scripture, or met with accusations of rebellion, threats, and appeals to spiritual status?
- **What happens when the message fails?** Is the error acknowledged openly, or is responsibility transferred to the hearer's faith, giving, or obedience?
- **Who is becoming indispensable?** Am I growing in dependence upon Christ and understanding of His Word, or in dependence upon a particular voice and its private guidance?
- **What am I afraid to lose?** Am I overlooking error because of friendships, family pressure, a treasured experience, ministry opportunities, or fear of a threatened curse?
- **What obedience is required now?** What claim must I stop repeating, what pressure must I refuse, what counsel must I seek, or what wrong must I acknowledge?

These questions are not merely for identifying someone else's error. Ask whether you have allowed a person's approval to become more important than Christ's truth. Ask whether you have helped place another believer under a burden God never imposed.

Isaiah 8:20: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

SOURCE NOTES

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CHAPTER 9

The Cumulative Biblical Case for Cessation

I am convinced that the Greek wording and syntax of 1 Corinthians 13 conclusively establish that tongues have ceased. The other biblical passages examined in this chapter confirm that conclusion and explain its place in the church's life. They add to the evidence, but my conviction does not depend on combining several arguments that are inconclusive on their own. We begin with Paul's words, then consider the further testimony of Scripture before turning to the implications for worship and ministry.

1. THE GRAMMATICAL AND CONTEXTUAL CASE FOR CESSATION IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13

First Corinthians 13:8–12 is one of the clearest passages addressing the temporary character of the revelatory gifts:

> "Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known."

Paul's words work together to make his meaning clear. The verbs of cessation, the contrast between partial and complete revelation, and

the successive illustrations of childhood and maturity, dim reflection and face-to-face clarity, and partial and fuller knowledge all point in the same direction. The revelatory gifts belonged to an incomplete stage in the church's reception of divine revelation. When that revelatory process reached its appointed completion, those temporary means were no longer necessary.

1. the Voice of the Verbs: Pauō and Katargeō

Paul deliberately uses two different verbs in verse 8.

Concerning prophecy and knowledge, he uses passive forms of katargeō: they "will fail" and "will vanish away." These gifts are brought to an end.

But when Paul speaks of tongues, he changes both the verb and the voice. He uses the future middle pausontai, from pauō, "to cease." A. T. Robertson identifies the form as future middle and states that tongues "shall make themselves cease or automatically cease of themselves." [1]

Robert L. Thomas likewise observes that Paul's choice of pauō and the middle voice appropriately describes a gift that could cease on its own after fulfilling its appointed function. [2]

The distinction fits the biblical purpose of tongues. Paul explicitly associates tongues with Isaiah's prophecy concerning a sign to unbelieving Israel (Isaiah 28:11–12; 1 Corinthians 14:21–22). Tongues therefore possessed an appointed historical function within the apostolic era. Once that function was fulfilled, the gift ceased.

Prophecy and supernatural knowledge are treated differently. They were revelatory gifts operating during the period in which the church possessed revelation "in part." Paul connects their termination with the coming of "that which is perfect" or complete.

I therefore regard Paul's choice of words and grammatical forms as decisive evidence that tongues have ceased. In my understanding of his argument, tongues cease upon fulfilling their appointed function, while partial prophecy and revelatory knowledge are brought to an end when revelation reaches its completion. The other passages describing the purpose of these gifts confirm this conclusion; they do not supply a proof that I believe Paul's language lacks.

2. the Revelatory Character of "Knowledge"

The "knowledge" Paul says will be done away cannot refer to ordinary knowledge of God, Scripture, or Christian doctrine. Such knowledge remains indispensable to faith and obedience. Within Paul's

immediate discussion of spiritual gifts, however, "the word of knowledge" appears as a supernatural gift of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:8), and Paul associates extraordinary knowledge with prophecy and the understanding of mysteries (1 Corinthians 13:2). Thus when he writes, "we know in part and we prophesy in part" (13:9), knowledge and prophecy belong to the same temporary revelatory economy. Both supplied portions of divine truth while apostolic revelation was still being given.

This is crucial to Paul's argument. If the "knowledge" that exists "in part" is revelatory knowledge, then the completeness that replaces its partial condition must likewise be sought in the realm of revelation. Paul is not contrasting limited human intelligence with omniscience; he is contrasting partial revelatory disclosure with the completed revelation that brings those temporary means to their appointed end.

Jonathan Edwards reached the same conclusion from Paul's context. He distinguished ordinary Christian knowledge from the supernatural gift under discussion and wrote that by this "knowledge" Paul meant "a particular miraculous gift that was in the church of God in those days." [3] Edwards connected it directly with "the word of knowledge" in 1 Corinthians 12:8, prophecy, mysteries, and immediate inspiration. Thus an important historical exegete recognized precisely the distinction Paul's context requires: ordinary knowledge continues, but the extraordinary revelatory gift of knowledge was temporary.

3. "That Which Is Perfect": To Teleion

The expression to teleion is neuter and means that which is complete, mature, or whole. The crucial contextual contrast is not between something sinful and something sinless, but between what exists ek merous—"in part"—and what is complete.

Robertson describes ek merous as that which is "in part" in contrast with "the whole," and to teleion as "the perfect, the full-grown, the mature." [4]

Gerhard Delling's treatment in Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament likewise recognizes that in 1 Corinthians 13:10 the sense "whole" is suggested by its antithesis to ek merous. [5]

Robert L. Thomas similarly argues that "complete" or "whole" provides the proper quantitative antithesis to "in part." His lexical observation is important: Paul is contrasting partiality with completeness. [6]

The question therefore becomes: What in the immediate context is partial?

"For we know in part and we prophesy in part."

The partial things are revelatory knowledge and prophecy. They communicate portions of God's revelation during the apostolic period. The natural counterpart to partial revelation is completed revelation.

The complete must therefore be sought in the same realm as the partial.

The movement is not from bad revelation to good revelation, nor from false revelation to true revelation. It is from revelation given piecemeal through temporary gifts to revelation brought to its intended completeness.

I therefore understand to teleion as the completed revelation of God preserved for the church in the New Testament Scriptures.

4. Paul's Fourfold Movement from Partial to Complete

Paul does not leave to teleion suspended as an isolated expression. He immediately explains the transition by several reinforcing illustrations.

partial → complete
childhood → maturity
dim reflection → face-to-face clarity
knowing in part → knowing more fully

These are not disconnected metaphors. They describe the same transition from an incomplete revelatory condition to the mature condition that replaces it.

"When I was a child," Paul writes, "I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child." Childhood corresponds to the period of partial revelation. But "when I became a man, I put away childish things." Maturity corresponds to the passing away of those temporary means once their purpose has been accomplished.

The metaphor does not demean the revelatory gifts. They were gifts of God perfectly suited to the infancy of the New Testament church. But a divinely appointed temporary means does not become permanent merely because it was once necessary.

Robert G. Gromacki captures this progression when he explains that teleion describes something presently partial and developing that subsequently reaches completion. [7] He connects that development with the progressive revelation of the New Testament and the maturity reached as the apostolic revelatory period came to completion.

Larry D. Pettegrew makes the same connection. Describing the apostolic church's dependence upon partial revelation, he writes that Paul taught that eventually "revelation would be completed," after

which the church could expound completed revelation rather than depend upon temporary revelatory gifts. [8]

5. "Face to Face" — Clarity, Not Necessarily Physical Sight

Paul next writes: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face."

The expression "face to face" does not require a physical vision of Christ in heaven. Scripture itself uses face-to-face language to describe directness and clarity of communication within earthly experience.

Exodus 33:11 says, "So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend."

Numbers 12:6–8 makes the contrast still clearer. God ordinarily communicated to prophets through visions and dreams, but with Moses He spoke "face to face," plainly rather than in dark sayings.

The biblical contrast is therefore between indirect or less complete communication and communication possessing greater directness and clarity.

That is precisely Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 13. During the apostolic period, the church received portions of revelation through individual prophecies and revelatory gifts. With completed revelation, the church would possess the whole body of truth God intended to give for its faith and obedience.

R. Bruce Compton argues extensively from this contextual relationship. He concludes that "the perfect" refers to the full or complete body of revelation God intended for the church and preserved in the New Testament canon. [9]

6. "Now I Know in Part"

Verse 12 must be interpreted by verse 9.

> "For we know in part and we prophesy in part."

The subject is revelatory knowledge and prophecy.

When Paul repeats in verse 12, "Now I know in part," there is no contextual reason to change subjects. The same partial knowledge that accompanies partial prophecy remains in view.

The contrast is therefore between the piecemeal revelatory knowledge available through these temporary gifts and the fuller knowledge available when the revelation they supplied has reached completion.

"Then I shall know" does not mean that the believer becomes omniscient. Paul is not promising that Christians will ever possess the

infinite knowledge of God. He is contrasting partial access to revealed truth with the completed body of revelation God intends His church to possess.

The words "just as I also am known" emphasize directness and clarity rather than equality with divine omniscience.

Myron Houghton develops this point in his study of the passage, arguing that completed revelation enables believers to possess a degree of clear and objective knowledge unavailable while revelation was still being supplied piecemeal. [10]

7. a Substantial Exegetical Witness

The writers considered below offer valuable help with particular words, grammatical forms, and features of Paul's argument. They do not all agree on every detail or give each observation the same weight. I cite them for the points they actually support. My conclusion that the Greek wording and syntax conclusively establish the cessation of tongues is the judgment I am defending from the text itself.

A. T. Robertson identifies pausontai as future middle and writes that tongues "shall make themselves cease or automatically cease of themselves." He also defines ek merous as "in part" over against "the whole," and to teleion as "the perfect, the full-grown, the mature." [11]

Robert L. Thomas recognizes the significance of Paul's change from katargeō to pauō and argues that to teleion carries the sense of "complete" or "mature," providing the natural antithesis to ek merous. [12]

Gerhard Delling, in Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, likewise identifies "whole" or "complete" as the sense suggested by the contrast with ek merous. [13]

Robert G. Gromacki argues that teleion describes something presently partial that subsequently reaches completion, and he connects Paul's maturity imagery with the completion of apostolic revelation. [14]

Larry D. Pettegrew connects the revelatory gifts with the incomplete condition of the apostolic church and concludes that Paul looked forward to the time when revelation would be completed. [15]

R. Bruce Compton devoted an extensive exegetical study to this passage and defends the interpretation that "the perfect" refers to the completed New Testament canon and that miraculous gifts ceased with the closing of the canon. [16]

8. Supporting Cessationist Witnesses

Other recognized cessationist interpreters provide additional

corroboration at particular points without necessarily arguing every grammatical detail in precisely the same way.

Myron Houghton explicitly defends cessationism from 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 and develops the completed-revelation understanding of to teleion and the face-to-face imagery. [17]

Merrill F. Unger likewise identifies "the perfect" with the completed New Testament canon and understands the partial revelatory condition to end with its completion. [18]

Joseph Dillow connects the maturity of the church with the completion of New Testament revelation and the passing of the temporary revelatory gifts. [19]

Walter J. Chantry treats the passage in relation to the cessation of the charismatic gifts and the establishment of the completed New Testament Scriptures. [20]

Tom Pennington likewise stands firmly within the strict cessationist tradition and acknowledges that a case for cessationism can be made from 1 Corinthians 13 while placing the passage within the larger biblical case for the cessation of the miraculous gifts. [21]

The importance of these witnesses is not that authority is established by counting scholars. Scripture alone determines doctrine. Their value is that they demonstrate that this reading arises from recognizable grammatical and contextual arguments and has been defended by serious interpreters of the Greek text.

9. a Historical Exegetical Witness — Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards provides particularly significant historical corroboration because he did not merely affirm cessationism generally; he interpreted the argument of 1 Corinthians 13 in connection with the completion of revelation. Edwards identified prophecy, tongues, and supernatural knowledge as extraordinary gifts given during the church's foundational period. He argued that once the canon of Scripture had been completed and the church established, these gifts were no longer needed and therefore ceased. He further connected Paul's childhood imagery with the church's infancy, treating the miraculous gifts as temporary provisions suited to that foundational stage. [22]

"These extraordinary gifts have ceased." [23]

10. the Witness of Owen and Spurgeon

The same conclusion concerning the temporary nature of the extraordinary gifts appears in major voices from the historic Protestant church.

John Owen carefully distinguished the extraordinary gifts of the apostolic age from the ordinary gifts Christ continues to supply His church. Speaking specifically of miraculous gifts and tongues, he wrote:

> "That dispensation of the Spirit is long since ceased." [24]

Owen explains that when the divinely appointed end of those gifts ceased, their extraordinary communication ceased as well.

Charles H. Spurgeon likewise contrasted the Spirit's permanent saving and sanctifying work with the temporary miraculous manifestations of the apostolic church. He referred plainly to:

> "those earlier miraculous gifts which have departed from us." [25]

Owen and Spurgeon do not determine the meaning of 1 Corinthians 13. The inspired text must do that. Their importance is historical: the cessation of tongues and the extraordinary gifts was recognized by towering Protestant pastors and theologians long before the contemporary charismatic controversy.

PRACTICAL APPEAL — WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE TEXT?

Reader, you have now seen the argument. You have followed Paul's words, his grammar, his contrast between the partial and the complete, his movement from childhood to maturity, from the dim mirror to face-to-face clarity, and from knowing in part to fuller knowledge. You have also seen that this understanding has not arisen from one isolated writer or from a recent controversy. Serious students of the Greek text and respected pastors and theologians have reached the same or substantially supporting conclusions. The question before you now is no longer merely, "Can another interpretation be proposed?" The more searching question is, "What interpretation does the evidence compel me to embrace?"

Now compare that method with much of what passes for proof of continuing revelation today. Where is the careful exegesis? Where is the patient handling of grammar, context, authorial intent, and the broader witness of Scripture? Too often the appeal is not, "Look

carefully at what God has written," but, "Look what happened in this meeting. Listen to this prophecy. Feel this atmosphere. Watch this manifestation. Hear this testimony." Volume replaces argument. Repetition replaces exposition. Music, excitement, personality, and emotional intensity are made to carry a theological conclusion that the biblical text itself has never established.

Emotion is not the enemy. God created the affections, and biblical truth ought to move the heart deeply. But emotion cannot determine truth. A congregation may shout, tremble, weep, fall, laugh, or erupt in excitement, and none of those reactions can establish that a doctrine is biblical or that the Holy Spirit produced the experience. Scripture commands us, "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21), and, "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1). The test is not how powerful the moment felt. The test is truth.

Ask yourself candidly: On what do you want to build your convictions about the Holy Spirit—the carefully examined Word of God, or the emotional force of a preacher's assertions? Will your doctrine rest upon apostolic Scripture studied in its language and context, or upon dramatic stories, shouted declarations, supposed prophecies, and manifestations that may never have been subjected to serious biblical examination? Making a claim louder does not make it more inspired. A preacher's confidence does not confer divine authority upon his words. And a crowd's emotional response cannot turn an unsupported assertion into revelation.

Paul did not tell Timothy to create an atmosphere. He told him, "Preach the word!" (2 Timothy 4:2). Why? Because the time would come when people would "not endure sound doctrine," but would gather teachers according to their own desires (2 Timothy 4:3–4). The flesh prefers what excites, flatters, fascinates, or promises immediate power. Scripture often does something very different: it corrects us, humbles us, exposes us, and demands that our experiences bow before what God has actually said.

If you have held a contrary position for many years, I am not asking you to surrender it because I have written a book or because respected scholars agree with me. I am asking you to bring your conviction once more beneath the authority of the Word of God. Your experiences may have been sincere. People you love may have taught you differently. A church, pastor, denomination, or entire spiritual history may be tied to your present understanding. But none of those things is permitted

to stand above Scripture. The Bereans were called noble because they received teaching eagerly while still searching the Scriptures to determine "whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). Truth has nothing to fear from examination.

And if the evidence now persuades you that you have been wrong, do not be ashamed to change your mind. There is no humiliation in being corrected by God. The humiliation would be seeing what Scripture teaches and refusing to yield because the cost of admitting error seems too great. Every Christian has had to abandon cherished beliefs, assumptions, habits, and loyalties when the light of Scripture exposed them. That is not defeat. That is discipleship. "He who is of God hears God's words" (John 8:47).

Perhaps the greater difficulty will come after you are persuaded. You may now find yourself standing differently from people you deeply respect. You may belong to a church in which tongues, prophecy, revelatory impressions, or modern apostles are assumed to be normal Christianity. You may fear being misunderstood, labeled, rejected, or accused of resisting the Holy Spirit. At that point the issue becomes more than interpretation; it becomes obedience. "The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe" (Proverbs 29:25). Conviction that never survives social pressure is not yet conviction strong enough to govern the life.

But let the same humility govern the convinced cessationist. Do not receive these arguments merely as ammunition with which to defeat another Christian. If Scripture has given you greater clarity, then greater clarity should produce greater humility, not greater pride. Remember how patiently Christ has corrected you. Speak the truth firmly, but speak it as one who stands only because grace has taught him to stand.

The issue finally comes down to allegiance. If Scripture teaches that these revelatory gifts fulfilled their appointed purpose and ceased, then continuing to seek them is not spiritual hunger—it is seeking what God no longer gives in that form. And if Scripture has given the church a completed revelation, then contentment with that revelation is not spiritual coldness. It is faith. It is saying to God, "What You have given is enough because You have declared it enough."

So I ask you to make the question personal. If your former position cannot survive the grammar, the context, the argument of the chapter, the broader witness of Scripture, and honest examination before God, will you relinquish it? And if you are now persuaded,

will you stand where Scripture has brought you even if standing there becomes costly?

Do not defend a position merely because it has been yours. Do not surrender your conscience to a personality merely because he is charismatic, forceful, popular, or surrounded by an emotionally charged crowd. Let the written Word judge the preacher, the prophecy, the manifestation, the experience—and this book as well.

Defend the truth because it belongs to Christ. And when the evidence of Scripture changes your mind, let Scripture also change your allegiance, your practice, your worship, and your courage.

TEST YOUR POSITION BY THE TEXT

1. Have I allowed Paul's immediate context to define what is "in part" and what becomes "complete," or have I brought my conclusion to the passage before interpreting it?
2. Have I honestly weighed the cumulative force of the verbs, the partial/complete contrast, childhood and maturity, face-to-face clarity, and partial versus fuller knowledge?
3. Is my position resting primarily upon Scripture carefully interpreted, or upon experiences, traditions, teachers, or spiritual manifestations that I am reluctant to question?
4. If the grammatical and contextual evidence contradicts a position I have long held, am I willing to change my mind simply because the Word of God requires it?
5. If I am persuaded that the revelatory gifts fulfilled their appointed purpose and ceased, am I willing to order my doctrine, worship, church life, and spiritual expectations accordingly—even if doing so is costly?

> "Test all things; hold fast what is good."
> — 1 Thessalonians 5:21

CONCLUSION

Paul's argument possesses a remarkable internal unity.

Tongues will cease. Partial prophecy will be done away. Partial revelatory knowledge will be done away. The partial gives way to the complete. Childhood gives way to maturity. The dim mirror gives way to face-to-face clarity. Knowing in part gives way to fuller knowledge.

The repeated movement is from temporary, partial revelatory means to the completed condition for which those means were given.

The Greek wording and syntax are decisive for me. I am convinced that Paul's words, read in the sentences in which he placed them, conclusively establish that tongues have ceased. His contrasts and illustrations make the argument clearer, and the other New Testament passages provide further confirmation. I do not appeal to those passages because I regard the grammatical case here as insufficient.

I therefore understand Paul to teach that the extraordinary revelatory gifts belonged to the foundational period of the church and ceased when the revelatory purpose for which they were given had been fulfilled. His contrast between the partial and the complete is why I understand "the perfect" as completed revelation, as explained above. The church is not left impoverished by the cessation of these gifts. It possesses the completed apostolic revelation, the written Word of God, sufficient to make the man of God "complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

2. THE EXPIRATION OF THE APOSTOLIC OFFICE

The New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) is built entirely on the premise that the office of the Apostle continues today. This contradicts the strict boundaries the New Testament places around the apostolic office.

The Eyewitness and Commission Requirement

When the church replaced Judas among the Twelve, the candidate had to have accompanied Jesus' ministry and become a witness of His resurrection (Acts 1:21–22). Paul's calling was exceptional: he had seen the risen Lord and received his apostleship directly from Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1; Galatians 1:1). He described Christ's appearance to him as "last of all" (1 Corinthians 15:8). Seeing Christ alone did not confer apostolic office; Christ's appointment was essential.

The Foundation-Laying Function

Ephesians 2:20 declares that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone." A foundation is a unique, unrepeatable architectural event. It is not laid continuously throughout the building's construction. The apostles and prophets belonged to the church's foundational

period and delivered the authoritative witness upon which the church continues to build.

The Authenticating Signs

Paul points to signs and wonders accompanying his apostolic ministry (2 Corinthians 12:12). Yet Stephen and Philip also performed signs (Acts 6:8; 8:6), so miracles cannot be reduced to acts performed only by apostles. Paul's appeal to "the signs of an apostle" belongs with his divinely commissioned ministry as a witness of the risen Christ and the foundational authority entrusted to the apostolic circle. The signs authenticated that foundational revelatory era; they do not establish a continuing apostolic office in later generations.

The modern claim to governing apostles therefore faces a serious biblical obstacle: the foundational qualifications, commission, and function of the New Testament apostles are not presented as a recurring office to be replenished throughout church history.

3. ANSWERING THE STRONGEST OBJECTIONS TO CESSATIONISM

If the Bible tells Christians to desire prophecy, why would we say that prophecy has ceased? If God still heals, why would we say that the gift of healing has ended? These are reasonable questions. A reader deserves clear answers, especially when the answers may affect his church, his family, or his care for someone who is suffering.

Some Christians who disagree with us love the Lord and take His Word seriously. We should listen to their strongest arguments and answer them honestly. Our purpose is to help people understand Scripture and trust Christ. With that in mind, let us consider seven important questions.

1. Why Does Paul Tell Christians to Desire Prophecy and Not Forbid Tongues?

Because those gifts were present in the church Paul was addressing. His instructions told believers how to use them. Whether God intended to keep giving those gifts to every generation is a separate question.

The Christians in Corinth had genuine spiritual gifts. Paul wanted their use to help the whole congregation. Prophecy could be understood by those who heard it. Tongues needed interpretation so that others could benefit. He therefore encouraged prophecy and told the church not to forbid tongues (1 Corinthians 14:1–5, 39).

We cannot brush those commands aside. But we must read them alongside what Paul says about the purpose of apostles and prophets. In Ephesians 2:20, he describes them as part of the church's foundation. A foundation is laid at the beginning. The building then grows upon it. In Ephesians 3:5, he explains that God revealed His truth about Christ to these apostles and prophets through the Spirit.

This is why I believe their work of receiving new messages from God and delivering them to His people belonged to the church's beginning. Christians today continue to build upon what they taught. We do not need a fresh foundation in every generation.

That argument must be shown from Scripture. Simply saying that Corinth was a different church in a different time would not be enough. Paul's commands matter, and we must explain why a gift's purpose was temporary before concluding that its use has ended.

There is another point worth remembering. Calling something "tongues" does not prove that it is the gift Paul described. Even when the gift was present, Paul required the speaker to remain silent in church if no interpreter was available (1 Corinthians 14:28). His words never gave anyone permission to accept every claim or allow every practice. The same apostle who welcomed the gift also set limits on its use.

2. If Prophecies Must Be Tested, Can a True Prophecy Contain Mistakes?

The need to test a message does not prove that a message from God can be partly wrong. We test it because someone may claim that God has spoken when He has not.

Some Christians understand this differently. They believe God gives a true revelation, but the person receiving it may misunderstand it or explain it badly. The church must then separate God's message from the speaker's mistakes. Wayne Grudem argues for this view. In his view, the Holy Spirit speaks truthfully, but the person may misunderstand or misreport what He says.[26] We should represent his position accurately even while disagreeing with it.

Paul does tell believers to examine prophecies (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22). But God also told Israel to examine prophetic claims. That did not mean Israel should accept errors as part of God's message. It meant the people had to distinguish a true message from a false claim (Deuteronomy 13:1–5; 18:20–22). John gives a similar warning because false prophets have entered the world (1 John 4:1).

What, then, about Agabus? He warned that the Jews in Jerusalem would bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles. Yet the account describes a Jewish mob attacking Paul, followed by Roman soldiers rescuing him and putting him in chains (Acts 21:10–11, 27–33). Did Agabus get the details wrong?

We should face that question directly. Luke says the Romans put Paul in chains. We should not invent an earlier scene in which the Jews did it. The question is whether Agabus was describing who would fasten the chains or who would bring about Paul's imprisonment. The Jews' attack led to his arrest and Roman custody. On that understanding, Agabus was holding them responsible for what their actions caused.

The Bible sometimes describes responsibility this way. Peter charged his hearers with crucifying Jesus, although other hands carried out the act (Acts 2:23). Later, Paul described himself as having been delivered from Jerusalem into Roman custody (Acts 28:17). That confirms where he ended up; it does not tell us who fastened his chains.

This explains why I do not regard Agabus as an example of a mistaken prophet. Luke never calls his warning an error. Instead, Acts 21:11 introduces it with the words "Thus says the Holy Spirit." The warning prepared Paul for the suffering that followed. A question about who caused his imprisonment does not establish that God gave the church a new kind of prophecy containing mistakes.

We all make mistakes when offering advice. When we do, we should admit them. We should be far more careful before telling someone that our advice came as a message from God.

3. Could God Give a Prophecy Today without Adding It to the Bible?

A true prophecy did not have to become part of the Bible. But that fact alone does not show that God continues to give prophecies today.

Consider Philip's four daughters. They prophesied, yet Luke does not record their messages (Acts 21:9). It would therefore be wrong to argue that every true prophecy had to become a verse of Scripture. Christians who believe prophecy continues often agree that the Bible is complete. They believe God still gives messages for particular people or situations.[27]

The question is whether Scripture teaches that God would keep giving these messages after the apostles and prophets had finished laying the church's foundation.

Paul places apostles and prophets together in that foundation

(Ephesians 2:20). He also connects them with God's work of revealing His truth about Christ (Ephesians 3:5). Later, he lists apostles and prophets separately among Christ's gifts to the church (Ephesians 4:11). Taken together, these passages give us reason to understand them as two ministries serving the church at its beginning.

Those who believe prophecy continues may argue that some prophets helped lay the foundation while other prophets had a different, continuing role. But the passages just mentioned do not establish a second kind of prophet whose messages from God could contain mistakes. Nor does helping one congregation prove that a gift was intended to continue forever. A gift could meet a local need while serving the church during its earliest years.

The Westminster Confession states the historic position that God's former ways of revealing His will have ceased.[28] A confession summarizes what Christians believe; Scripture must supply the reasons for believing it. Our case therefore rests on the work God gave the apostles and prophets, rather than on the mistaken idea that every prophecy had to be added to the Bible.

This matters in everyday life. A Christian friend may offer wise advice about marriage, work, or money. You can consider it prayerfully. But suppose he tells you that God has revealed whom you must marry or how much money you must give. He is now asking you to receive his words as God's direction. Before accepting that claim, you have every right to ask what Scripture gives him that authority.

4. Does 1 Corinthians 13 Say These Gifts Continue Until Christ Returns?

No. My conviction is that the Greek words and sentence structure of this passage conclusively establish that tongues have ceased. Other passages confirm that conclusion. They do not supply a missing proof that Paul's argument here fails to provide.

Let me explain why in plain English. My argument rests on the words Paul chose and how he joined them together. It does not rest on finding a date hidden inside one Greek word.

First, Paul distinguishes tongues from prophecy and knowledge. In verse 8, he uses one Greek verb for prophecy and knowledge and a different verb for tongues. He also changes the form of the verb. Prophecy and knowledge are described as being brought to an end; tongues are described as ceasing. I understand that deliberate distinction as part

of Paul's explanation of gifts whose work would end. But we must keep reading to understand his full argument.

Second, Paul identifies what is incomplete. In verse 9, he joins knowing in part with prophesying in part. I understand this knowledge to be the special gift through which God supplied truth to the church, rather than ordinary Christian understanding. Paul is describing God's revelation being given in portions. One prophecy supplied truth, and another supplied more. The church was still receiving what God intended to give it.

Third, Paul says that the partial gives way to the complete. The Greek expression translated "that which is perfect" refers to what is complete or mature. The question is: What is being completed? Paul has just told us what is partial: the knowledge and prophecy through which God was giving His truth. I therefore conclude that the completion belongs to that same subject. God finishes giving the revelation that these gifts had supplied in portions.

That is why I understand Paul to be speaking of the completed revelation preserved in the New Testament Scriptures. The temporary gifts had served their purpose. The church would now live by the truth God had finished giving. We still need to learn that truth, preach it, and obey it. We no longer need the gifts through which it was first supplied.

But what about seeing "face to face" in verse 12? Does that not mean seeing Christ when He returns?

I understand those words as an illustration of clear communication. Scripture uses similar language about God speaking with Moses during his earthly life (Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:6–8). The expression does not always describe someone entering heaven or witnessing Christ's return. Here, I read it alongside Paul's contrast between receiving revelation in portions and having it in its completed form.

Nor does a complete Bible mean that every Christian understands it completely. Paul's argument concerns the truth God supplies, not a promise that every believer will know everything. Our understanding can remain limited even though God has finished giving the revelation His church needs.

Some sincere Christians, including some who believe tongues have ceased, understand this passage differently. Richard Gaffin, for example, connects the perfection Paul describes with Christ's return.[29] I respect that judgment, but I do not share it. I am persuaded that Paul's Greek words and the way his sentences fit together establish

the completed-revelation reading and the cessation of tongues. My conclusion does not depend on how many scholars agree with me. It depends on the argument I have explained from Paul's text.

The passages concerning the church's foundation and the purpose of these gifts provide further confirmation. They strengthen a conclusion I believe this passage already establishes. That is the position defended in this book.

We should state that conviction clearly and defend it patiently. Paul's chapter also teaches us to love. Firmness about what we believe gives us no permission to treat a Christian who disagrees with contempt (1 Corinthians 13:1–3).

5. If We Are Still in the "Last Days," Why Would These Gifts Have Ended?

Because an event can begin a period without being repeated throughout that period. We must ask what God intended each gift to accomplish, as well as when He gave it.

At Pentecost, Peter explained that the coming of the Holy Spirit fulfilled Joel's promise about the last days. That promise included prophecy, dreams, and visions (Acts 2:16–21). We still live in the age that Pentecost announced. But that does not mean everything that marked its beginning must keep happening in the same way. Christ rose from the dead, for example, and His resurrection is not repeated.

Peter's central announcement was that Jesus had been exalted and had poured out the promised Spirit (Acts 2:32–33). The Spirit continues His work in believers. The question is whether every gift He gave when the church began was intended to last throughout its history.

A similar question arises in Ephesians 4:11–13. Paul says Christ gave ministers to equip His people until they reach maturity. Does the word "until" mean that every kind of minister listed must continue until Christ returns?

If it does, the argument would require continuing apostles as well as prophets. Yet many Christians who believe prophecy continues agree that the church does not have apostles today with the authority of Peter or Paul. Gaffin points out this difficulty.[30]

There is a straightforward explanation. The work of an apostle can continue helping the church after the apostle's death. Paul is still teaching us through his letters. Peter's witness still strengthens our faith. Pastors and teachers continue to explain and apply that

teaching. Christ's purpose moves forward without another generation of apostles laying another foundation.

We should never use this argument as an excuse for a lifeless church. The Spirit still helps believers resist sin, grow in holiness, love one another, and serve Christ (Romans 8:13–16; Galatians 5:22–25). A pastor who teaches that certain gifts have ceased should also teach his people to depend daily upon the Spirit who lives in them.

6. Why Pray for Healing If the Gift of Healing Has Ceased?

Because God still hears prayer and can still heal. The end of a particular gift does not mean the end of His power, mercy, or care.

James tells sick believers to call for the elders of the church and receive their prayers (James 5:14–16). We should do that. We should ask earnestly for recovery, seek appropriate medical care, and help people carry the burdens that illness brings.

But when God answers a prayer for healing, that does not automatically mean the person who prayed possesses the gift described in 1 Corinthians 12:9. The healing shows God's mercy. It does not, by itself, establish that person's spiritual gift.

Even the apostles could not heal everyone whenever they wished. Paul left Trophimus ill at Miletus. When Epaphroditus recovered from a serious illness, Paul attributed his recovery to God's mercy (2 Timothy 4:20; Philippians 2:25–27). God remained in control.

What about James's strong assurance concerning prayer for the sick? We should let it encourage us to pray. We must also read it alongside Scripture's instruction to pray according to God's will (1 John 5:14). Paul repeatedly asked the Lord to remove his thorn, but the Lord sustained him instead of granting his request (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). We may ask confidently while leaving the answer with our Father.

If someone remains ill, we have no right to conclude that he lacks saving faith or must be hiding a particular sin. Imagine the weight of hearing that accusation after months of suffering and earnest prayer. The church should be helping him bear his burden.

Sit beside him. Pray with him. Help with the practical needs his illness has created. Remind him that Christ has not stopped loving him. Our bodies still await their final redemption, but nothing can separate God's children from His love in Christ (Romans 8:23–25, 35–39). We can reject false promises of guaranteed healing and still pray with hope and compassion.

7. What About People Who Have Had Remarkable Experiences?

Listen respectfully, then examine the claim. A person can accurately describe what happened and still misunderstand what it means.

Three questions will help: What happened? How do we know? What does Scripture allow us to conclude?

Someone may recover unexpectedly from a serious illness. We should thank God, and medical confirmation may help establish what occurred. But the recovery alone does not prove that another person possesses the gift of healing. A Bible verse may come to mind at just the moment someone needs it. We can be grateful for God's care without calling the experience a new revelation.

This allows us to be both charitable and careful. We do not have to accuse a person of lying simply because we disagree with his explanation. Neither must we accept his explanation simply because he is sincere.

Scripture warns us about making remarkable events our final test of truth. Deuteronomy 13:1–5 describes a person whose sign comes to pass but who leads people away from the Lord. Jesus also warns that claims of extraordinary works do not prove that a person belongs to Him (Matthew 7:21–23). What someone teaches and whether he follows Christ matter more than how impressive his story sounds.

Be especially careful when an experience becomes a demand for obedience. A person may say that something wonderful happened to him. That does not give him authority to tell you that God requires you to follow his private instructions. Pastors themselves are forbidden to dominate those entrusted to their care (2 Corinthians 1:24; 1 Peter 5:2–3).

Sometimes we will have to say, "I do not know how to explain what happened." That is an honest answer. We need not supply an explanation for every event before we can trust what Scripture teaches.

And when someone has been misled, our purpose should be to help him, not embarrass him. Patiently bring him back to Christ and His Word. The Christian life rests upon a Savior we can trust and a gospel we have received, even when some experiences remain unexplained.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

These axioms gather the chapter's cumulative argument and the obligations that follow when Scripture settles what the church should believe.

Axiom One — The Text Must Govern the Claim

A confident voice cannot supply what a passage does not say. We must follow the biblical writer's words, context, and purpose, then weigh his teaching with the rest of Scripture. Neither a crowded meeting nor a celebrated name can relieve the church of that responsibility. Faith receives God's testimony; it does not make a preacher's certainty its substitute.

Scripture: Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 2:15; 1 John 4:1.

Axiom Two — A Gift's Purpose Governs Its Duration

God's use of a gift in the apostolic church does not establish its continuance in every generation. Paul distinguishes the partial revelation supplied through temporary gifts from the completeness toward which it moved. Tongues also served their appointed sign function. We honor these gifts by receiving what God accomplished through them, including the completion of the work for which He gave them.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:8–12; 1 Corinthians 14:21–22; Hebrews 2:3–4.

Axiom Three — The Church Builds Upon the Apostolic Foundation

The apostles' departure did not remove their authority from the church. Their inspired testimony remains in Scripture. A later leader does not become their successor in revelatory authority by adopting their title or reporting remarkable works. Christ's church grows by receiving the foundation He laid, rather than commissioning another generation to lay it again.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:19–22; Acts 1:21–22; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 2 Timothy 1:13–14.

Axiom Four — Completed Revelation Calls for Continuing Obedience

The completion of Scripture ends the church's search for additional revelation; it does not end her need to learn. A closed canon can remain a closed book on a neglected shelf. Its sufficiency becomes precious as we receive its teaching, submit to its correction, and practice the obedience for which it equips us.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:15–17; James 1:22–25; Jude 3.

Axiom Five — An Answer to Prayer Does Not Confer a Sign Gift

We may ask God earnestly to heal while refusing the claim that a

minister possesses the apostolic gift of healing. An answer to prayer glorifies the God who gave it; it does not certify every doctrine taught by the person who prayed. Nor does continued illness place the sufferer outside God's care. His power and wisdom remain His own.

Scripture: James 5:14–16; 1 John 5:14; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.

Axiom Six — Historical Witnesses Serve Scripture

Faithful scholars can clarify a word, uncover a connection, and expose an error we missed. Their work deserves careful attention, but their number cannot settle the meaning of a passage. The church must be able to show why an argument is biblical, rather than merely identify respected men who held it.

Scripture: Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 3:5–7; 2 Timothy 2:15.

Axiom Seven — Conviction Must Survive the Cost of Obedience

Once Scripture has exposed an error, affection for a teacher or fear of losing friends cannot make that error safe to retain. Truth reaches our lives when it changes what we teach, endorse, seek, and practice. We must also remain willing to receive correction ourselves; courage under pressure and humility under Scripture belong together.

Scripture: Galatians 1:10; Proverbs 29:25; James 1:22; 2 Timothy 2:24–25.

Axiom Eight — The Word We Defend Calls Us to Christ

A person may argue correctly about the end of revelatory gifts while remaining a stranger to the Savior whom revelation proclaims. Biblical knowledge cannot forgive sin, and victory in controversy cannot reconcile us to God. The Scriptures direct us to Jesus Christ, whose saving work we receive through faith. Defend the Word with a heart that is also learning to trust its Lord.

Scripture: John 5:39–40; 2 Timothy 3:15; Romans 5:1.

PASTORAL REFORMATION — WHAT MUST THE SHEPHERD DO NOW?

Pastor, when a member honestly asks, "Where does Scripture teach that?" what happens next? If the question is treated as disloyalty, the congregation is learning that your conclusion must be protected from the very examination you require of others. A church can reject the title of modern apostle while allowing a pastor's opinions to exercise an authority he has just denied. Paul's ministry in 2 Corinthians 1:24

gives us a different pattern: he served the believers' joy rather than claiming dominion over their faith.

The pastor cannot call the church to repentance where he refuses to lead it in repentance before God.

Repent — Submit Your Own Teaching to the Test

Begin with a claim you have actually made. Open the sermon, lesson, or published statement with your fellow elders and examine the passage on which it rested. Did you explain the text, or merely attach it to a conclusion? Did you introduce an unsupported claim, tolerate it from a visiting speaker, defend it to protect a friendship, fail to teach against it, or help make it normal? Do not retreat into the vague admission that everyone makes mistakes. Name the words that need correction and the people who learned to trust them. Galatians 2:11–14 shows Paul confronting conduct that contradicted the gospel even when the man involved was Peter. A respected ministry does not make a contradiction harmless.

The same examination belongs to the settled cessationist. An accurate conclusion does not excuse a careless argument. If you overstated what a Greek form proves, misrepresented an opposing position, or quoted an author beyond what he meant, correct it. Spurgeon resolved to "renounce the most cherished opinion rather than shape a text or alter a syllable of the inspired Book."[31] Let that submission reach your next conversation with someone who questions you. Where your teaching was public, make the correction accessible to those who heard it. Where you wounded someone by treating a sincere question as rebellion, seek that person's forgiveness. James 3:1 places teachers under a stricter judgment; it gives us no shelter behind our reputation.

Re-Teach — Help the People See Why the Argument Holds

Your congregation needs more than your assurance that the case is strong. Walk them through it. In 1 Corinthians 13, show how the discussion of gifts leads into the contrast between the partial and the complete. Explain the words you use, keep the surrounding verses open, and distinguish the force of an individual observation from the force of the argument taken together. Then show how the chapter's teaching belongs with the apostolic foundation in Ephesians 2:20 and the sufficiency of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:15–17. A member who cannot read Greek should still be able to follow the reasons you

give. Technical vocabulary must serve understanding, never keep the congregation at a distance.

Give objections enough attention for the person who holds them to recognize his own position. Explain why commands addressed to a church possessing a temporary gift do not by themselves establish that gift's permanence. Distinguish God's freedom to heal from a person's claim to possess a sign gift. When discussing an experience, separate what reportedly happened from the authority someone claims because of it. Do not require people to deny an event they believe occurred before you will help them examine its meaning. The question is whether the conclusion follows from Scripture. Titus 1:9 requires an elder to give sound instruction and answer contradiction; repeating the church's position is not the same as teaching its grounds.

Prepare those who teach children, lead groups, and counsel troubled members to explain these distinctions patiently. Give them the passages and time to work through real questions together. Ask members to explain in their own words why a claim should be received or refused. A congregation may learn your answer without learning how to examine the next claim. The Bereans' example in Acts 17:11 should become a habit your ministry cultivates, including when the teaching under examination is your own.

Reform — Remove the Authority You Cannot Show from Scripture

Examine where an unsupported claim still governs the church. It may remain in a membership requirement, a counseling instruction, an invitation to a visiting preacher, or a promise attached to giving. Put the actual practice beside Scripture and identify what must change. Acts 15:24 records the apostles' concern for people unsettled by teaching they had never authorized. The distress mattered, and the false claim of authority had to be corrected. Calvin likewise insisted that "necessity ought not to be laid on consciences in matters in which Christ has made them free."[32] Explain where Scripture commands obedience, where elders exercise lawful pastoral judgment, and where a personal opinion has been presented as God's command. Restore those distinctions in the church's teaching and practice.

End claims to new revelation and demands that depend upon them as soon as their error is established. Patient instruction must not become permission for continued deception. But give people time and help to understand what they are surrendering. A member may fear that questioning a prophecy places his family in danger; another

may think that leaving a supposed apostle means leaving Christ. Meet with them, open the relevant Scriptures, hear their fears without ridicule, and arrange continuing care. First Thessalonians 5:14 requires patience suited to people's differing needs. The false claim should lose its place immediately; the frightened person must not lose the shepherd's presence.

Make the reform concrete at the next elders' meeting. Name the teaching to correct, the material to withdraw or revise, the leader responsible, and the people who need a personal explanation. Set a date to review what was done. Then protect time for the public reading and preaching of Scripture, prayer, and counsel that helps people obey it (1 Timothy 4:13–16; Acts 6:4). If the church has stopped chasing new words while its members still receive little help understanding the written Word, the work of recovery remains unfinished.

Remain — Hold the Truth without Abandoning the People

The cost may arrive after the explanations appear complete. A respected friend may withdraw his support. A family may leave because you no longer recognize the authority of its favored teacher. Attendance or giving may suffer. Bring those pressures honestly to the elders, examine any failures in your leadership, and make responsible decisions about the church's resources. But do not restore a false claim to recover what obedience has cost. Galatians 1:10 searches whose approval we serve. Ryle reminded believers facing blame, "Your praise will come from the King of kings and Judge of all the earth."[33] Keep that coming judgment before you when present approval becomes expensive to lose.

Remain available to those who are learning slowly. Questions may return because fear returns. Some will need to hear again why prayer remains meaningful, why suffering does not prove that God has rejected them, and why an impressive personality cannot command their consciences. Keep teaching, praying, and visiting. At the same time, receive criticism that exposes your impatience or an inadequate explanation. Second Timothy 2:24–25 joins gentleness to the duty of correction. A shepherd who cannot be corrected teaches his people to fear the man whose task is to help them trust Christ.

Finally, do not let the defense of a completed revelation crowd out the Savior it reveals. Bring the guilty to His atoning death, the fearful to His promises, and the weary to His care. Romans 5:1 locates peace with God in justification through faith in Jesus Christ. Your people do not need to become expert controversialists before they may rest

in Him. Christ receives sinners who come to Him (John 6:37), and His Word equips those He receives to walk in obedience. Let the cumulative force of this chapter reach that pastoral end: a congregation able to recognize false authority, receive the truth, and follow the Lord with a steadier faith.

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PART III

Recovering Biblical Worship and Faithful Church Leadership

CHAPTER 10

The Regulative Principle vs. the Theater of Worship

> Leviticus 10:1–2: "Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD."

THE GOD WE APPROACH HAS NOT SURRENDERED HIS AUTHORITY

Christ did not purchase His church so that His ministers could sell His grace; neither did He purchase it so that they could redesign His worship. The same ownership governs both questions. Paul tells the elders in Acts 20:28 to shepherd "the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." We are caring for what belongs to Another. When the church gathers, its first obligation is therefore larger than attracting attention, satisfying expectations, or making visitors comfortable. It must honor its Owner. Before asking whether people enjoyed the service, we must ask whether the Lord received what He appointed. A full room cannot transfer the title deed from Christ to the people sitting in it.

The judgment upon Nadab and Abihu brings that ownership into terrible focus. In Leviticus 9:24, fire from the Lord "consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar." In Leviticus 10:2, fire from the Lord "devoured them." The first fire consumed the appointed offering; the second consumed priests who offered what God had not commanded. Their office did not authorize their innovation. God

Himself explained the judgment in Leviticus 10:3: "By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified." The men nearest the sanctuary were not free to make God common. Neither are we. Nearness to holy things increases responsibility; it does not create permission to alter them.

That is why the question of worship reaches beneath musical preference to the character of God. The Lord forbids worship through images and declares in Exodus 20:5, "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God." His jealousy is His righteous claim upon what belongs to Him. When He tells His people in Deuteronomy 12:32, "you shall not add to it nor take away from it," He denies them the authority to improve His worship by their own religious inventions. Calvin named the principle without apology: "God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word." [1] The worshiper does not decide what honors God and then require God to accept the decision. God reveals what honors Him, and the worshiper obeys.

WHAT THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE ACTUALLY SAYS

The regulative principle of worship means that Scripture governs the acts the church offers to God as worship. We must be able to show biblical warrant for those acts. A practice does not become an appointed means merely because no verse names and forbids it. Jesus says in Matthew 15:9, "And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." These people were religiously busy; their worship was nevertheless vain. Dr. Samuel E. Waldron explains that the parts of the church's worship are "prescribed and regulated by Scripture alone." [2] This principle asks a searching question of every proposed addition: Who authorized the church to offer this to God? Popularity answers a different question. So does sincerity. Neither supplies the missing authority.

The church receives that authority through the Word of its Head. Christ's commission in Matthew 28:20 is "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." He commissions His servants to teach His commands, not to invent others under cover of His name. John Owen presses the point: "what we do beyond what he hath commanded, we do it not in obedience to him." [3] Paul describes the sufficiency of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:17: "that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." The pastor is equipped to serve, not licensed to supplement Christ's authority. A

claimed revelation, a compelling atmosphere, or an impressive result cannot give him a commission the written Word withholds.

Biblical warrant includes commands, the authoritative pattern of apostolic teaching and practice, and conclusions necessarily required by that revelation. This is careful reading, not a hunt for isolated proof texts. Acts 2:42 says the first believers "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Acts 20:7 describes the disciples coming together "to break bread." We follow what Scripture establishes about the church, while distinguishing that instruction from incidental details of an event. George Müller expressed the governing conviction as "the word of God is our only standard." [4] The question is not whether a leader can find a verse containing a useful word. It is whether the verse, understood in context, actually warrants the practice he proposes.

THIS IS GOD'S HOUSE

Why does the church's assembly require this particular care? Because it is no ordinary gathering of people who happen to share an interest. Paul calls it in 1 Timothy 3:15 "the house of God, which is the church of the living God." Peter describes its members in 1 Peter 2:5 as "a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Notice who judges the sacrifices: God. Notice through whom they are accepted: Jesus Christ. Waldron begins with the decisive fact, "The church is holy." [5] Its holiness is not produced by the architecture or the lighting. It belongs to God. The church cannot borrow the identity of a theater and retain the obligations of a temple only when convenient.

Neither the pastor nor the congregation owns the church; both stand under Christ's authority. Christ gives shepherds authority to serve His people under His Word. 1 Peter 5:3 forbids "being lords over those entrusted to you," and Titus 1:9 requires an elder to be "holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught." Waldron's warning to church leaders is wonderfully direct: "It is not your house." [6] That sentence reaches the planning meeting, the budget, the appointment of leaders, and the pulpit itself. A pastor may exercise judgment in carrying out his commission. He may not enlarge the commission because he is gifted, admired, or convinced that the church would prosper under his innovation.

The principle consequently reaches beyond the order of service. Christ governs the church's doctrine, its officers, its discipline, and

its mission. Titus 1:5 directs Titus to "appoint elders in every city"; Matthew 18:17 directs a case of persistent sin to the church; and Jude 3 identifies "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." We do not appoint new apostles because celebrity leadership attracts attention, revise doctrine because hearers resist it, or abandon discipline because holiness threatens attendance. When Müller and Henry Craik gathered a small fellowship at Bethesda in 1832, their stated desire was to "act as the Lord shall be pleased to give us light through His word." [7] The church's arrangements must remain answerable to that light.

APPOINTED ACTS AND PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS

Someone objects, "Where does the Bible command microphones, printed hymnals, chairs, or a service beginning at ten o'clock?" That objection confuses an act of worship with a practical arrangement for carrying it out. Hebrews 10:25 forbids "forsaking the assembling of ourselves together"; people who assemble must meet somewhere and at some time. 1 Corinthians 14:40 commands, "Let all things be done decently and in order." Order requires practical decisions. Carl Trueman explains, "Scriptural sufficiency is not jeopardized by this lack; Scripture was never intended to speak with precision to such local details." [8] Scripture appoints the church's worship; ordinary judgment serves its performance. Choosing a room does not create a new religious act. Choosing an hour does not authorize a new means of approaching God.

A microphone serves the hearing of the Word. It cannot confer divine authority upon the speaker. A screen may display the words the congregation is to sing; it cannot turn a performance watched by the congregation into the congregation's own praise. The principle in 1 Corinthians 14:26 is "Let all things be done for edification." We must therefore ask what the arrangement actually serves. A. W. Pink writes, "The Scriptures have set us bounds for worship, to which we must not add and from which we must not diminish." [9] Calling something a circumstance does not settle the question. When a device is treated as necessary to produce God's presence, it has acquired a spiritual office Christ never gave it. A useful servant has begun making promises on its own behalf.

WHAT CHRIST GIVES HIS GATHERED CHURCH TO DO

Consider first the Word. Paul commands Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:13, "give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine," and in 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word!" These are not suggestions for filling the space between musical performances. They identify a central responsibility of the minister and a central provision for the flock. Luther insisted that "the chief and foremost part is to preach and teach the Word of God." [10] A service that makes Scripture reading an inconvenience and preaching a brief interruption has taught the congregation to expect nourishment elsewhere. The Bible may remain on the platform while the ministry of the Bible is steadily pushed toward the edge of the gathering. What we regularly shorten tells the church what we consider expendable.

Hearing that Word is itself an act of engaged obedience. Romans 10:17 says, "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." James 1:22 commands, "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." The congregation is not attending a demonstration of the preacher's ability. Its members must understand, believe, examine themselves, repent, and obey. A sermon becomes theatrical when the hearer is trained to admire the voice while evading the truth it carries. "He was wonderful" can become a refuge from "I must change." Faithful preaching may delight the hearer, but it does not leave him safely applauding another man's performance. The Word addresses him. He must answer it with his life.

Prayer likewise gathers the congregation into dependence upon God. The apostles devoted themselves in Acts 6:4 "to prayer and to the ministry of the word." When threatened, the believers in Acts 4:24 "raised their voice to God with one accord." Public prayer is not background speech while the next performer prepares. The saints must follow its truth, share its petitions, confess its dependence, and make its thanksgiving their own. Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 14:16 is whether the hearer can say "Amen" to the thanksgiving. Even that little word requires understanding and participation. In describing a hoped-for earnest Christian congregation, Luther would "direct everything towards the Word and prayer and love." [11] The church is learning to seek God together, not merely listening to someone sound devout.

Congregational praise carries the same responsibility. Colossians 3:16 joins the indwelling Word to "teaching and admonishing one

another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," while Ephesians 5:19 directs believers to sing and make melody "in your heart to the Lord." There is instruction, mutual ministry, and Godward affection. Spurgeon saw the danger when a trained choir sang for popular effect: "There is an artistic appeal to human passions. Harmony is attended to; homage is neglected." [12] The question is not whether voices are skilled. It is whether the skill helps the church offer praise or makes the church an audience for somebody else's artistry. We may perfect the sound of a song while losing sight of the One to whom it should be sung.

The ordinances are equally governed by Christ's appointment. Paul introduces the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23 with "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you." Christ's command in Luke 22:19 is "do this in remembrance of Me." Baptism likewise comes under His command in Matthew 28:19, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." God has not left the church without visible signs. He has given signs whose meaning He determines and whose observance He commands. We do not improve them by making them production moments. The bread and cup declare Christ's death; they are not props around which a leader may construct another spectacle. Faith receives what Christ gives instead of asking spectacle to make His gift significant.

Giving, mutual care, and discipline also disclose whether Christ governs the assembly. 1 Corinthians 16:2 directs, "let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper." James 2:1 forbids holding faith in Christ "with partiality." Matthew 18:17 says, "tell it to the church." These instructions govern an actual people whose generosity, relationships, and holiness matter before God. An entertainment enterprise can count customers without knowing their lives. A church must care for souls. It cannot treat the wealthy as favored patrons, the poor as unprofitable attendees, and persistent sin as a public-relations problem. The regulative principle belongs to the church's life because Christ rules the whole church, not merely the minutes marked "worship" on a schedule.

These appointments are positive provision. God has not given His church an empty room and a prohibition against filling it. Acts 2:42 shows a people occupied with doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer; Colossians 2:19 describes the body growing "with the increase that is from God." Waldron points toward recovery: "It is the way back to the great, central requirements of gospel worship." [13]

The church's poverty begins when it no longer recognizes the wealth of what Christ has supplied. If Scripture, prayer, praise, the ordinances, and fellowship appear spiritually inadequate, the first question should concern our understanding and faith. Christ's appointments must not be put on probation until they prove capable of competing with a show.

WHAT THE THEATER DOES TO THE CONGREGATION

The theater reverses the congregation's work. Peter calls believers in 1 Peter 2:9 "a royal priesthood," and Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:27, "Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually." These people have been called to offer, hear, pray, sing, serve, and grow together. A theater assigns the decisive activity to the stage and the response to the seats. The people become consumers of an experience prepared for them. That posture can enter a church without a formal change of doctrine. Waldron's conclusion that worship "must be ordered by God" [14] exposes the underlying conflict: Christ determines what His people are to do; entertainment increasingly determines what must be done to keep them watching.

Imagine a congregation told, week after week, to expect the next surprise. A comic sketch receives its full rehearsal and uninterrupted place in the program; public prayer is hurried because the production has run long. A dramatic feature holds attention, and a carefully timed musical rise prepares an emotional response. Scripture and prayer must fit the production rather than govern it. Now ask the question supplied by 1 Corinthians 14:26: "Let all things be done for edification." What is being built? Are believers learning to understand the Word, pray with dependence, sing with understanding, and obey Christ together? Or are they learning that somebody must continually supply them with an experience? The church can teach passivity while keeping the room busy. A congregation may watch intensely and still be trained to do very little of what Christ calls worshipers to do.

There is something spiritually absurd about trying to impress the Creator with a religious show. God declares in Isaiah 66:1, "Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool." Paul says in Acts 17:25 that He is not served "as though He needed anything." We borrow light, sound, breath, and ability from His creation, arrange them for our own pleasure, and then behave as though the arrangement has supplied Him with something His appointed worship lacked. Spurgeon's verdict is sharp: "To invent our own forms of worship is to insult

God." [15] The insult lies in the presumption that our ingenuity can correct His provision. The Lord who sustains the stars has not become dependent upon our ability to keep an audience excited.

Nor can excitement establish that the Holy Spirit has worked. Jesus says in John 6:63, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing." He says of the Spirit in John 16:14, "He will glorify Me." Genuine spiritual affections arise as the Spirit brings God's truth to bear upon the soul; they cannot be certified by intensity alone. John MacArthur warns, "If you're chasing high energy and entertainment, you're running from the church." [16] He is defending the church's life of truth, prayer, holiness, shepherding, and love. When a ministry knows how to move a crowd but cannot teach it to recognize Christ's glory, it has cultivated a response without supplying the biblical reason for that response. The room may be stirred while the soul remains unfed.

The danger deepens when the experience acquires authority. A practice once defended as useful becomes indispensable because people expect it; then Scripture is allowed to govern only where it will not disturb that expectation. Christ exposes the reversal in Mark 7:8: "laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men." Paul warns in Colossians 2:23 of practices with "an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion." They may look serious, useful, or spiritually impressive. Appearance is not authorization. The decisive question is whether the church can still surrender the practice when the Word judges it. If a cherished experience is beyond correction, the church has given it a kind of authority while continuing to confess that Scripture alone is sufficient.

ANSWERING THE OBJECTIONS

"But God looks at the heart." Certainly He does. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "the LORD looks at the heart." That truth destroys hypocrisy; it does not excuse disobedience. Jesus condemns both the distant heart and the invented command in Matthew 15:8–9: "their heart is far from Me," and "Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." A right form with an unbelieving heart is no acceptable offering; neither does sincere feeling authorize a wrong form. Hebrews 11:6 says, "without faith it is impossible to please Him." Faith receives God's revelation and acts upon it. We cannot appeal to the warmth of our hearts while refusing the authority of the One we claim to love. God sees the heart that wants to obey as surely as the heart that wants an excuse.

"Will this leave worship cold and joyless?" Only if we have

mistaken amusement for joy and outward correctness for communion. Psalm 16:11 says, "In Your presence is fullness of joy," and Psalm 2:11 commands, "Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling." Reverence and delight belong together before this God. Owen describes the heart contemplating God's gracious dealings in His appointed worship: "By the contemplation of these things is the soul drawn forth to delight in God." [17] The regulative principle does not forbid tears, gladness, wonder, or deep affection. It gives those affections their proper object and governing truth. A congregation discovering Christ's mercy has a reason to rejoice that survives the last note, the empty room, and the long sorrow of Monday.

"That belonged to the Old Testament; we live under grace." We do, and grace brings us near through a better Mediator. Hebrews 10:19 speaks of "boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus." Yet Hebrews 12:28 still requires that we "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." The cross removes the believer's condemnation; it does not remove God's authority over His worship. Daniel Hyde states the issue plainly: "This means we come to worship on God's terms, not ours; that we do in worship what God wants, not what we want." [18] We come freely because Christ has opened the way. We come obediently because the Savior who opened it is Lord. Access purchased by His blood cannot become permission to disregard His voice.

This does not mean carrying the ceremonial worship of Israel unchanged into the church. Hebrews 10:1 identifies the law's sacrifices as "a shadow of the good things to come," and Hebrews 8:13 says that God "has made the first obsolete." We read the earlier commands in the light of their fulfillment in Christ. The Christian church does not resume the Levitical sacrifices; it obeys the risen Lord, who says in Matthew 28:20, "observe all things that I have commanded you." Nadab and Abihu teach us who possesses authority to appoint worship. Christ and His apostles teach us the worship of the new-covenant church. The form of appointed worship changes with redemptive fulfillment; the worshiper never becomes its legislator.

"But the Bible uses vivid stories, poetry, and dramatic events. Why may we not use drama?" Scripture's literary power does not give the church permission to replace an appointed act with a separate performance. Paul's charge remains, 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word!" A preacher may use an apt illustration, an expressive voice, or a memorable comparison to explain the text. Those things serve the

act of preaching. A dramatic production offered as a new act of public worship requires its own biblical warrant; borrowing a biblical plot does not supply it. 1 Corinthians 4:2 requires of stewards "that one be found faithful." Faithfulness asks whether the means remains within the commission. Creativity is fruitful when it clarifies what Christ commands; it becomes presumptuous when it claims the authority to substitute something else.

"But entertainment helps us reach unbelievers." The church must proclaim Christ to unbelievers, welcome them to hear the truth, and pray for their salvation. But it must not hand them authority to define the assembly's worship. MacArthur writes, "there is no warrant in Scripture for adapting the church's weekly gatherings to the preferences of unbelievers." [19] Paul's description of an unbeliever convicted by genuine prophetic revelation in the apostolic assembly ends in 1 Corinthians 14:25 with the man worshiping God and reporting "that God is truly among you." The revealed truth exposed him. At Pentecost, Acts 2:37 says the hearers "were cut to the heart." Conversion requires the Spirit's work through truth, not the protection of the unbeliever's preferences from truth. Love brings him to Christ; it does not place him over Christ's church.

"But it works. People come, respond, and give." Saul also thought a religious result could justify disobedience. Samuel's answer in 1 Samuel 15:22 was "to obey is better than sacrifice." A promised benefit cannot authorize what God has not appointed. Nor can attendance decide what Scripture means. Paul asks in Galatians 1:10, "Or do I seek to please men?" The question is not whether the church should desire people to be saved. It should plead and labor for that end. The question is whether their response can overturn its obligation to obey Christ. If "it works" means only that people remain interested, the church may achieve its stated goal while failing the purpose for which Christ gathered it.

"Is this not legalism?" Legalism appears when human commands are given the weight of divine commands, or when obedience is treated as the ground of acceptance with God. The regulative principle refuses both errors. Calvin insists that God's will is "to be sole legislator of his worship." [20] Colossians 2:22 exposes "the commandments and doctrines of men," while Romans 14:23 declares, "whatever is not from faith is sin." A minister cannot manufacture a religious obligation and then condemn the believer who cannot perform it in faith. Derek Thomas concludes, "To obey when it is a matter of

God's express prescription is true liberty; anything else is bondage and legalism." [21] Scripture's government protects the conscience from the minister's inventions. Christ does not free His sheep so that another man may invent their yoke.

WHAT MUST CHANGE IN US

That examination must reach the church that already prefers simplicity. An undecorated room cannot believe, repent, or love Christ for us. Ecclesiastes 5:1 commands us to "draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools." Romans 12:1 calls for "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God." We may have the right elements and still offer them carelessly: minds wandering during prayer, mouths moving in song without affection, ears receiving a sermon without any intention of obedience. The remedy is not to replace Christ's appointments with excitement. It is to repent of our unbelief and use His appointments in faith. A proud defense of biblical order can conceal a heart that no longer trembles at the Word it claims to defend.

Pastor, begin with what your leadership has taught people to expect. Paul's order in 1 Timothy 4:16 is "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine." Examine the actual service, not merely the statement of faith. What has been crowded out? What requires the most preparation? What may no one question? Have you trained the congregation to regard Scripture reading as delay, prayer as transition, and worship as something talented people perform for them? Christ says in John 14:15, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Love must therefore reach the planning meeting. Name what you introduced, tolerated, or defended. Restore the biblical reasons for hearing, praying, singing, and receiving Christ's ordinances before asking people to surrender the experience leadership taught them to need.

Then reform with a shepherd's patience and a steward's resolve. 2 Timothy 2:24 requires the Lord's servant to be "gentle to all, able to teach, patient." Explain the Scriptures, answer honest questions, and protect sheep whose understanding is still being rebuilt. Remove practices that claim a spiritual authority they do not possess. Restore the congregation's work instead of merely simplifying the stage. A member should be able to say what truth he heard, what petitions he joined, what Christ he praised, and what obedience now lies before him. If the reform costs approval or attendance, remember the promise in 1 Peter 5:4: "when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the

crown of glory that does not fade away." You are preparing a flock to meet its Shepherd, not maintaining an audience for yourself.

And look again at the Savior whom the church is gathered to honor. In John 17:24, Jesus prays that His people may "behold My glory which You have given Me." He has not brought us near to Himself merely to leave us searching for something more interesting. Revelation 5:12 declares, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain." His worth does not rise when the audience is excited or fall when the congregation is small. The blood that cleanses sinners, the righteousness that clothes them, the intercession that keeps them, and the resurrection that secures their hope give worshipers reason to adore Him. We do not need to make this Savior glorious. We need the Spirit to open our eyes to the glory He already possesses.

Here is the life the regulative principle protects: sinners welcomed through Christ, taught by His Word, helped by His Spirit, and occupied with His praise. Hebrews 13:15 calls us to "continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name." The people in the seats become worshipers again. They hear because God speaks. They pray because He receives them through His Son. They sing because His mercy has given them something true to sing about. They obey because their Redeemer is Lord. Psalm 27:4 names the desire at the center: "To behold the beauty of the LORD." When that desire governs the gathering, the church ceases to ask what show it must provide and begins to ask how it may faithfully draw near to the One it loves.

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE OF WORSHIP

The Pattern Pointed to Christ

Moses did not come down the mountain with permission to improve God's design. He came down with a pattern. Hebrews 8:5: "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." That command protected more than the dimensions of a building. The earthly sanctuary was a copy and shadow of heavenly things; its meaning did not originate with the men who built it. God was teaching His people how sinners could approach Him. To alter what He appointed was therefore to tamper with the lesson He was giving. Israel could not redesign the sanctuary while claiming to preserve the truth the sanctuary declared.

The writer of Hebrews takes us from that earthly copy to the

Savior it anticipated. Christ has entered heaven itself, in the words of Hebrews 9:24, "now to appear in the presence of God for us." The sacrifices, priesthood, and sanctuary belonged to a divine preparation whose fulfillment is found in Him. We do not return to those shadows or turn their furnishings into a modern order of service. We receive the Christ to whom they pointed. But the authority disclosed in the pattern remains: God determines how His people approach Him. The church that rests upon Christ's completed work must not behave as though its access to God still requires an improvement supplied by the stage.

"Does that leave no room for creativity?" Look at the craftsmen God appointed. He filled Bezalel with His Spirit and equipped him, in the words of Exodus 31:3, for "all manner of workmanship." The Spirit who gave the skill also gave the pattern the skill was to serve. Giftedness did not authorize another sanctuary. In the same way, a preacher may find a vivid comparison that opens the meaning of a passage, and musicians may use their skill to help the congregation sing its truth. Their gifts serve the appointed work. Nehemiah 8:8 describes teachers who "gave the sense" of the Scripture. Creativity has done its work when the hearer sees the truth more clearly; it has exceeded its commission when a performance takes the place of the act Christ commanded.

Prudence Under the Word

Consider a congregation meeting in a hot climate. Choosing a cooler hour may help people attend and listen. Providing translation may help hearers understand the preaching. Neither decision creates another religious act or supplies another mediator. Each serves an obligation the church already has. Hebrews 10:25 speaks of "the assembling of ourselves together"; circumstances help an actual people assemble and carry out their appointed work. Waldron states the distinction precisely: "The circumstances of the church's corporate worship may be altered, but not the parts or elements themselves." [22] The circumstances may differ because the commands remain the same. Churches can meet under very different conditions while offering the same obedience to the same Lord.

Christian prudence must therefore ask more than whether an arrangement is impressive or popular. Does it help the congregation understand, participate, and obey? Paul requires intelligible speech in 1 Corinthians 14:9, "words easy to understand," and directs the

assembly in 1 Corinthians 14:26 toward "edification." Pink says that incidental arrangements must "distract not from the solemnity and devotion of spiritual worship." [23] A device may carry the voice clearly and still be used in a way that draws attention toward the performer. An arrangement may remove a practical difficulty or create a spiritual distraction. We must examine what it actually does, rather than assuming that usefulness in one respect settles every question about its use.

This judgment should also reach the person whose needs a polished service can overlook. Can the elderly member hear the reading? Can the congregation follow the prayer? Can those unfamiliar with a song understand its words and join its praise? Philippians 2:4 directs us toward "the interests of others." These are matters of love, not opportunities to display ingenuity. Discussing outward church arrangements, Calvin writes, "Charity is the best judge of what tends to hurt or to edify." [24] A simple change that helps a weak believer participate may serve Christ better than an elaborate production that leaves him watching. Excellence should be judged by the work it helps the church perform, including the work of those least able to demand attention.

Love also restrains the pastor who turns a practical preference into a law for every church. Luther urged that "liberty be servant to love and to our neighbour." [25] His warning about the use of liberty is useful here: an arrangement must serve people rather than imprison their consciences. Romans 14:19: "let us pursue the things which make for peace." A congregation needs an agreed order, but its leaders must distinguish that order from divine command. They should be able to explain why an arrangement is wise without claiming that another faithful congregation sins by choosing differently. We defend Christ's appointments firmly; we hold our own practical decisions with the humility their human origin requires.

When Arrangements Claim Spiritual Power

But a practical choice becomes dangerous when it starts making spiritual promises. Imagine a planning meeting in which someone says, "We must keep this musical background beneath the prayer; otherwise people will not sense that God is present." The arrangement has now been assigned a work beyond supporting an appointed act. Its defense rests upon a claim about God's presence. Paul identifies the source of spiritual fruit in 1 Corinthians 3:6: "God gave the increase." The church cannot transfer that power to a technique. The problem is

exposed by the reason given for the practice: what was introduced to assist the gathering is now trusted to supply its spiritual reality.

"But we believe we were led to do it." That conviction must itself come under examination. 1 John 4:1: "test the spirits." A claim of spiritual guidance cannot exempt a practice from the Word given by the Holy Spirit. Müller explained that one purpose of his Narrative was to help believers "judge by the standard of the word of God the principles on which they act." [26] Apply that test to the reasoning beneath the arrangement. Does Scripture promise what we are asking this technique to accomplish? Have we confused an effect we can produce with a work God alone can give? Earnest confidence becomes dangerous when it refuses the very examination that would distinguish obedience from self-deception.

The same test belongs to our affections. Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." The Word gives the congregation truth to understand, believe, and sing. MacArthur writes, "Music alone, uninformed by truth, is not legitimate worship." [27] A moving sound may accompany worship, but its emotional effect cannot supply the knowledge of God that worship requires. Ask what the hearer has seen of Christ, what mercy has awakened his gratitude, what sin has been exposed, and what promise he has learned to trust. His feeling must have the biblical truth and Godward direction that distinguish worship from an affecting performance.

The Holy Spirit brings that truth home to the soul. John 6:63: "It is the Spirit who gives life." Christ says of Him in John 16:14: "He will glorify Me." Spurgeon describes true devotion as "the work of the Spirit in the soul returning to its author." [28] There is the direction a production cannot create: God gives spiritual life, and the living soul turns toward God through Christ. Skill may help the Word be heard; it cannot make a dead heart love the One the Word reveals. If we take credit for the response because we controlled the effect, we have misunderstood both the worshiper's need and the Spirit's work.

This brings us back to the confidence with which Christians approach God. Hebrews 10:22 calls us to draw near in "full assurance of faith." Owen describes the faithful use of gospel institutions as "faith in his promises annexed to them." [29] We come trusting what God has promised, through the Savior He has given. Faith does not demand a certain atmosphere before it will believe that the Father receives His children. It looks to Christ's blood, His priesthood, and His faithful Word. Here the lesson of the pattern reaches its fulfillment: the God

who determined the way of approach has Himself provided it. Our arrangements must help the church use that provision, rather than teach it to seek another source of assurance.

Pastor, examine the explanation behind each arrangement you have defended. 1 Thessalonians 5:21: "Test all things; hold fast what is good." Name the act it serves, the biblical purpose it advances, and the spiritual claim you have allowed people to attach to it. If it helps them hear, understand, and participate, explain that service clearly. If you have taught them to expect from it what belongs to God, confess the misplaced confidence and correct the teaching. Do not leave the congregation grieving the loss of a supposed source of spiritual power while you quietly change the program. Show them why Christ's provision can bear the weight their expectations had placed upon the arrangement.

The church can then exercise practical judgment without surrendering spiritual authority. Hebrews 12:28 calls for service offered with "reverence and godly fear." Those affections reach the decisions made before the congregation arrives. We may arrange the meeting; we may not redesign the way sinners are received by God, invent the acts He accepts, or promise the work of His Spirit through our devices. This is the conviction to listen for as we turn to the witnesses of the Reformation and the Puritans. Their words must be weighed by Scripture too. They help us hear the seriousness of a question the church is never free to outgrow: have we served the worship Christ appointed, or presumed to improve it?

WITNESSES TO THE WORD — HOW GOD FEEDS HIS CHURCH

When God commands His church to worship, He is not merely drawing boundaries around a meeting. He is providing for people who cannot create their own spiritual life. Acts 20:32 describes the Word of His grace as able to build His people up. That changes the question we bring to the service. We must ask what God has appointed to feed the souls gathered before Him. A church can fill the hour and leave its people hungry.

These provisions are often called means of grace: the ways God has appointed through which His Spirit brings sinners to Christ and strengthens His people in Him. Grace is never a wage earned by attending a service. Christ purchased our salvation; the Spirit applies His saving work. In the church described in Acts 2:42, apostolic

teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer belonged together. The Word gives these acts their meaning, directs our faith to Christ, and governs our response. When we displace the Word, we weaken the understanding with which people pray, sing, and come to the Lord's Table.

The source of that Word must therefore be settled before the preacher opens his mouth. 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." Scripture comes from God. Its authority does not rise or fall with the speaker's personality, education, or popularity. Doctrine teaches us what is true; reproof exposes our departure from it; correction brings us back; instruction trains us to walk in it. God has provided more than material for an interesting sermon. He has provided truth that can enter a disordered life and begin putting it right.

Because Scripture comes from God, the pastor receives a command rather than permission to invent his message. 2 Timothy 4:2: "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching." Paul gives that charge before the God and Christ who judge the living and the dead. The preacher stands under judgment while he speaks of judgment. Martyn Lloyd-Jones stated the priority plainly: "the primary task of the Church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God." [30] The pastor's first responsibility is to deliver what his Master has said.

Paul also tells us how the Word is to occupy the assembly. 1 Timothy 4:13: "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." Reading places God's words before the people. Teaching explains their meaning. Exhortation presses their claims upon conscience and life. These belong together. A reading hurried through can leave the congregation unprepared to hear; an explanation without application can leave obedience untouched; an appeal without doctrine can press people toward a response they do not understand. The pastor must help the flock hear the text, understand it, and answer God.

The church born at Pentecost continued in that life. Acts 2:42: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Their devotion to doctrine was part of their new life together. They needed to learn who Jesus was, what His death accomplished, why He had risen, and how

His lordship now governed them. Fellowship deepened around that truth; prayer answered it; the breaking of bread proclaimed the Savior it revealed. The apostles' teaching fed a people whom the Spirit had brought to life.

This is why preaching cannot be reduced to improving the mood of the room. Romans 10:17: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Faith needs the truth about Christ: His person, His righteousness, His sacrifice, His resurrection, and His promise to receive sinners. A powerful feeling supplies none of those truths by itself. The gospel gives faith its object. The Spirit brings sinners to trust the Savior proclaimed. We must therefore ask what people have heard about Christ, rather than treating the intensity of their response as proof that they have believed in Him.

The knowledge communicated through Scripture is personal without becoming vague. John 17:3 identifies eternal life with knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent. We come to know Him through what He has revealed: His holiness exposes our sin; His justice explains our danger; His mercy directs us to His Son; His promises teach us to trust Him. Doctrine gives substance to communion with God. Without it, a person can use the name of God while filling that name with his own expectations. Faithful preaching helps him meet the God who actually speaks.

That does not make private Bible reading unnecessary or gathered preaching expendable. God gives His people both. Commenting on the connection between Scripture's usefulness and the command to preach in 2 Timothy 3:16–4:2, Calvin wrote, "let believers endeavor to profit both in reading and in hearing." [31] The same Bible that belongs in the believer's hands belongs in the pastor's mouth. Public ministry helps the congregation understand, confronts shared sins, protects it from shared errors, and calls it to a common obedience. A sermon is not another inspired text: Acts 17:11 commends hearers who test what is preached against Scripture. A church that owns many Bibles still needs shepherds who faithfully open them.

Yet even accurate explanation cannot produce spiritual understanding by human power. 1 Corinthians 2:12–14 distinguishes receiving God's truth by His Spirit from treating it as foolishness. The Spirit who inspired Scripture opens the heart to receive it. A. W. Pink wrote, "nothing is ever revealed to the soul by the Holy Spirit which is not in the Scriptures." [32] He is describing the Spirit's inward disclosure of saving truth, not the addition of another Bible. Illumination gives

us a living apprehension of what God has already revealed. It deepens our dependence upon the written Word.

Augustine described this inward grace with striking clarity: those who believe "at the voice of the preacher from without, hear of the Father from within, and learn." [33] His argument follows Christ's teaching in John 6:44–45. The preacher addresses the ears; God makes the hearer willing to come to Christ. Acts 16:14 shows the same truth when the Lord opens Lydia's heart to heed Paul's message. This humbles the pastor and gives him hope. He cannot command a new birth, but he can proclaim the gospel through which God brings sinners to faith.

Luther's confidence rested there when reform met resistance. In his second Wittenberg sermon of 1522 he said, "I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing." [34] He was refusing to force faith into people. He had preached, taught, written, and prayed; the power to change hearts belonged to God. 1 Corinthians 3:6–7 makes the same distinction between planting, watering, and God's giving the increase. Dependence upon God does not excuse careless preparation. It calls the preacher to diligent work without pretending that his skill can supply spiritual life.

The Scottish preacher John Knox defended divine authority over worship in words that still search the church: "All worshipping, honouring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without his own express commandment, is idolatry." [35] His immediate argument concerned the Mass. Matthew 15:9 exposes the enduring danger of teaching human commandments as religious authority. The application reaches our own decisions: when God has commanded the reading and preaching of His Word, we cannot replace them with something we find more impressive and assume that our intention makes the substitution acceptable.

Jeremiah Burroughs drew the same warning from Leviticus 10:1–3: "In God's worship there must be nothing tendered up to God but what He hath commanded." [36] Nadab and Abihu's offense was an unauthorized offering before the holy God. The New Testament identifies the church's own duties in 1 Timothy 4:13. The lesson is therefore practical: God's command to read, exhort, and teach must govern the service we prepare. We should tremble at the thought of neglecting what He appointed while defending an invention on the ground that people enjoy it.

John Owen likewise required the church to guard against

admitting into worship what "is not instituted and appointed by the Lord Christ." [37] Matthew 28:20 commissions Christ's servants to teach obedience to His commands. Ministerial authority is received authority. A pastor may explain the Word, apply it, and arrange for people to hear it; he may not create a rival provision for their spiritual life. His calling is wonderfully large, but it remains a servant's calling. The Lord who purchased the church has not handed its shepherds authority to replace His means of feeding it.

This feeding reaches wounded people in very ordinary circumstances. Preaching on Colossians 3:16–17, John Chrysostom urged hearers facing grief: "dive into them as into a chest of medicines; take thence comfort of your trouble." [38] He meant the Scriptures. Romans 15:4 teaches that their patience and comfort give us hope. Think of a widow hearing that death cannot separate her from Christ, or a frightened believer learning that the Father knows his needs. Sound doctrine gives them something true to hold when the service is over and their sorrow returns.

The church must therefore make room for the Word to become familiar, understood, and remembered. Among the Pietists, Philipp Jakob Spener urged, "Thought should be given to the more extensive use of the Word of God among us." [39] His concern was that congregations might hear selected passages without coming to know the fullness of Scripture. Colossians 3:16 calls for Christ's Word to dwell richly among His people. Richly means more than occasionally. Peter Masters states the order plainly: "The Bible first, and godly hymns second." [40] Let the church hear substantial readings, understand whole passages, learn biblical truths, and carry them into conversation and family life.

August Hermann Francke, another Pietist, joined Bible reading with "ardent prayers and a holy desire of knowing Christ." [41] His counsel brings Psalm 119:18 alongside Colossians 2:3: we ask God to open our eyes because the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ. Careful interpretation and prayer belong together. The words must be understood, and the heart must bow to the Savior they reveal. We should leave a sermon better able to explain the passage and more ready to trust, love, and obey Him.

George Whitefield kept that purpose before his hearers: "Look, therefore, always for Christ in the scripture." [42] John 5:39–40 records Christ's warning to people who searched Scripture yet refused to come to Him for life. A preacher can explain facts accurately while

leaving hearers admiring their own knowledge. We must show the need for Christ, the glory of His person, the sufficiency of His work, and the response He requires. Scripture is being mishandled when the sermon gives people reason to admire the preacher but little reason to come to the Savior.

Nor does doctrinal preaching require a cold heart. Jonathan Edwards wrote, "Holy affections are not heat without light." [43] In Luke 24:27–32, Christ opened the Scriptures to the disciples, and their hearts burned as they came to understand Him. Their affection grew out of truth made clear. That is the pastor's aim: understanding that awakens love, conviction that leads to repentance, promises that strengthen hope. The deeper the congregation sees Christ's mercy toward sinners, the more reason it has to rejoice. Emotion has found its proper ground when the revealed glory of Christ moves the heart.

That knowledge also changes conduct. Christ's prayer in John 17:17 places sanctification under the truth of God's Word. John MacArthur said, "Holy living is the product of the Word working in the soul." [44] A sermon on forgiveness should reach the believer who is nursing a grievance; teaching on God's providence should confront the fear that drives dishonest choices; instruction on Christ's love should expose contempt for a weaker brother. Doctrine feeds holiness when the Spirit brings its truth to bear upon the places where we actually live.

Here the movement toward theater and entertainment becomes spiritually dangerous. Charles Spurgeon warned, "True worship cannot, therefore, be will worship, and will worship cannot be true worship." [45]2 Timothy 4:3–4 describes hearers choosing teachers to satisfy their desires while turning away from truth. Imagine a planning meeting where Scripture reading is shortened to protect a dramatic presentation, and a difficult doctrine is omitted to preserve a cheerful atmosphere. The service may still include a Bible verse. Yet the congregation is being trained to expect the Word to accommodate the experience. The means God appointed is being made to wait for permission from the audience.

Someone objects, "But people will not listen to serious teaching." Then we must work harder to make the truth intelligible. 2 Timothy 2:24–25 requires the Lord's servant to teach with patience and humility. Explain unfamiliar words. Follow the argument of the passage. Use an ordinary example that clarifies the doctrine. Speak as a man who knows that these people matter to Christ. The command to

preach does not excuse dullness, confusion, or indifference. But difficulty holding attention gives us no authority to exchange the Word for something easier to sell.

Another objection sounds more spiritual: "Surely we must leave room for the Spirit to move." We must—and we must recognize the work Scripture attributes to Him. In Acts 4:31, believers were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke God's Word with boldness. Their prayerful dependence strengthened their proclamation. The Spirit is not honored when His inspired Word is crowded out and the resulting excitement is credited to Him. We should pray for conviction, conversion, understanding, and holiness while giving ourselves to the truth through which He works. The closed canon leaves the church with a living ministry of the Word.

J. C. Ryle observed that "a knowledge of the Bible is the one knowledge that is needful and eternally useful." [46] Colossians 1:9–10 connects spiritual understanding with walking worthy of the Lord and increasing in the knowledge of God. People will meet temptation, bereavement, guilt, suffering, and death. A remembered spectacle cannot explain how a guilty sinner is justified or why a dying believer may safely entrust himself to Christ. The truths we teach become provisions for trials we cannot foresee. A pastor should prepare with those future hours in mind.

Pastor, 1 Peter 5:2 calls you to "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you." Those words place real people before you and identify whose people they are. Think of the young believer ashamed of a recurring sin, the mother praying for an unbelieving child, the elderly member frightened by approaching death, and the man whose public composure hides deep doubt. They need the gospel explained, promises opened, errors corrected, and truth patiently applied. Feeding them with the Word stands at the heart of your shepherding. Visits, prayer, protection, and personal counsel carry that same care into their lives.

So examine your preaching before God. 2 Timothy 4:2 still governs you. Does the passage determine your message, or does it merely supply a sentence to support the message you already wanted to give? Could your hearers explain what the text teaches when they leave? Have you shown them Christ, addressed their sins, and called them to an obedience the passage actually requires? Put your latest sermon before trusted fellow elders. Ask them to show you where you

explained the Word and where you drifted into opinion. Receive their answer for the sake of the sheep.

Then examine your preparation. 2 Timothy 2:15: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." Approved to God: let that audience govern the hours before you meet the congregation. Peter Masters writes, "The person with reverence for the Lord and for His Word is concerned to get things right." [47] Have you read the passage carefully, followed its context, weighed its claims, tested your interpretation, and prayed over its application? Do you spend more care finding a striking illustration than understanding what God has said? Correct the imbalance in your next week of preparation. The sheep should not bear the cost of study you chose to neglect.

Examine also whether the Word reaches you before you bring it to others. George Müller meditated on Scripture "for the sake of obtaining food for my own soul." [48] 1 Timothy 4:16 joins attention to yourself with attention to doctrine. There is a difference between receiving nourishment from God and using His flock to nourish your pride. When did a passage last bring you to confess a sin that nobody in the congregation knew? When did a promise quiet your own unbelief? Set aside time to read as a needy disciple. The pastor's soul needs the grace he urges others to receive.

Hudson Taylor put the matter simply: "Of all preparation the most important is to know God." [49] Jeremiah 9:23–24 directs our confidence toward understanding and knowing the Lord. Ministry can make you familiar with religious work while you become distracted from Him. You can discuss doctrine, organize meetings, and answer questions while prayer becomes hurried and communion with Christ grows thin. Bring that condition honestly to God. Study until the truth is clear; pray over it until you have dealt honestly with its claims upon you. Your people need a shepherd who lives under the Word he opens.

Then face the warning in Ezekiel 34:2: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?" Do you select subjects that protect your standing while avoiding truths your people urgently need? Do you want their admiration more than their growth? Have you become resentful when a struggling member interrupts work that makes you visible? Peter forbids shepherding for dishonest gain in 1 Peter 5:2. The gain we covet may include applause

and influence. Name the benefit you have been protecting, and name the person or duty you have neglected to protect it.

Do not despise the sheep because there are few of them. Wycliffe warned against refusing "to preach to a people because they be few, and our fame may be little." [50] Christ's commission in John 21:15–17 directs Peter's love for Him toward caring for His sheep. The small congregation needs the whole counsel of God. The member who cannot reward you needs patient instruction. The person who asks the same question again needs to see your love survive his slowness. Prepare faithfully for the people Christ has actually entrusted to you. Their need does not shrink with the size of the room.

Feeding also requires protection. Titus 1:9 requires an elder to hold fast the faithful Word so he can exhort and convict by sound doctrine. Acts 20:27–31 joins the whole counsel of God with vigilance against destructive teachers. What truth have you left untaught because it would disturb a donor, unsettle a respected family, or expose an error you once permitted? Identify it. Study it thoroughly. Teach it patiently. Invite questions and stay beside those who struggle. A shepherd must not leave the flock defenseless merely because naming the danger will make his own life harder.

But never mistake harshness for faithfulness. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 distinguishes those needing warning, comfort, support, and patience. The frightened sheep needs more than a rebuke; the stubborn sheep needs more than reassurance. Know your people well enough to apply the Word to their actual condition. Before the next Lord's Day, identify one neglected person, one truth your congregation needs, and one change your preparation requires. Pray over them. Contact the person. Open the relevant Scripture. Make the change. Love for the flock must acquire an appointment in your calendar.

If these questions expose neglect, come to Christ with it. John 21:15–17 shows the risen Savior restoring Peter and entrusting His sheep to him after his grievous failure. Confess what you have withheld, neglected, or used for yourself. Seek forgiveness and begin the obedience repentance requires. 1 Peter 5:4 places your service beneath the coming of the Chief Shepherd. He knows the sheep, sees the hidden labor, and will judge faithfully. Let His love recover your willingness to feed those He purchased. You can return to the study and the flock with a humbled heart and renewed dependence upon Him.

This recovery brings us directly to reverence. Hebrews 12:28–29 calls us to serve God with reverence and godly fear because our God

is a consuming fire. Faithful preaching teaches us who this God is and how Christ has opened the way to Him. The Spirit uses that truth to form our worship: sin is confessed, mercy is received by faith, gratitude rises, and obedience becomes personal. Pastor, open the Word before His people. Help them hear the holy God who speaks, and lead them to the Savior through whom they may draw near.

THE THEOLOGY OF REVERENCE

Something is wrong when we enter worship ready to judge everything except ourselves. We notice a weak voice, a slow beginning, a sermon that asks more attention than we expected. But have we noticed the heart with which we have come? We may examine the service closely while leaving our own impatience unexamined. The Regulative Principle brings us beneath a more searching question: are we offering the holy God what He requires, with the reverence He deserves?

> Isaiah 6:1–3: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!'"

The seraphim cover their faces. Isaiah confesses his uncleanness. Nobody in that vision is wondering whether God has made Himself sufficiently interesting. His holiness has become impossible to overlook. Commenting on Hebrews 12:28, William Gouge gives counsel that reaches straight into our distracted worship: "Duly weigh and advisedly consider his excellency whom thou servest. This, if anything, will strike thine heart with reverence." [51] Begin there. Consider the One before whom you stand. We breathe because He sustains us; we draw near because He has shown us mercy. How did such mercy become permission to approach Him carelessly?

God Himself identifies what is at stake. After Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire, He declared in Leviticus 10:3: "By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified." Religious activity did not excuse their disobedience. Nearness increased their responsibility. Centuries later, offerings were still being brought when God asked in Malachi 1:6: "If then I am the Father, Where is My honor? And if I am a Master, Where is My reverence?" A service can continue while honor is withheld. We

should tremble at the possibility that we have congratulated ourselves over an offering we never seriously examined before God.

Yet reverence does not drain the joy from worship. It teaches us why that joy is so wonderful. Psalm 2:11: "Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling." The heart can rejoice while remaining bowed. A. W. Pink writes that "it is in the exercise of faith and fear, love and awe, that the very life and soul of spiritual worship consists." [52] These affections belong together. We love the God whose holiness exposes our sin and whose mercy receives us through Christ. His love gives us confidence to come; His majesty teaches us how to come. Forgiveness should deepen our wonder that He welcomes us.

Jesus brings this truth remarkably close in John 4:23–24. He is speaking beside a well to a woman whose sinful life He has already uncovered. Her question concerns the proper place of worship: this mountain or Jerusalem? His answer reaches beneath the location to the worshiper. The coming of the Messiah will change the administration of worship, but it will never make an unchanged heart acceptable to God. The woman needs more than the right place to stand. She needs the Savior standing before her. He teaches her that true worshipers worship the Father in spirit and truth.

> John 4:24: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Notice also the grace in John 4:23: "for the Father is seeking such to worship Him." Christ says this to a woman with sins she cannot conceal from Him. Her need does not make His invitation insincere. The Father seeks worshipers, and the Son is revealing Himself to a sinner who needs to become one. Here is hope for the person whose lips have been religious while his heart has wandered. God has not sent His Son merely to teach us how worship ought to look. Christ saves sinners and brings them into fellowship with His Father.

To worship in spirit, we must bring the heart itself before God. John Calvin describes spiritual worship in terms of "that inward faith of the heart which produces prayer." [53] Faith does something with the truth it hears: it trusts the promise, confesses the sin, receives the mercy, and yields to the command. This inward response requires the life and help of the Holy Spirit. John 3:6 distinguishes what is born of the flesh from what is born of the Spirit; Ephesians 2:18 teaches that through Christ we have access by one Spirit to the Father. No

arrangement of a service can create that life. We depend upon the Spirit who gives it.

J. C. Ryle presses Christ's teaching upon the conscience: "The heart is the principal thing in all our approaches to God." [54] Then let us ask about ours. We can sing of surrender while carefully protecting one disobedience. We can hear a prayer for forgiveness while refusing to name the resentment we intend to keep. Even our criticism of irreverent churches can become a way of avoiding repentance in ourselves. God sees through all of it. The worshiper who knows the correct doctrine of worship still needs a heart that answers God.

Worship in truth also reaches deeper than sincerity. In this conversation, Jesus announces the arrival of the fulfillment toward which Israel's appointed worship had pointed. The shadows would give way to the reality accomplished in Him. We come to the Father through the Messiah, rather than searching for another sacred place or inventing another way of access. That fulfillment leaves us under Christ's authority. Calvin concludes from John 4:24 that "we ought to seek from His word the rule by which we are governed." [55] The God we worship reveals both who He is and how we may approach Him. Our enthusiasm cannot supply what His Word has withheld.

This searches the picture of God we carry into church. Do we expect Him to bless whatever pleases us, overlook whatever troubles us, and ask nothing that interrupts our enjoyment? Such expectations can become familiar without becoming biblical. The Father revealed by Christ receives repentant sinners, searches hearts, corrects His children, and commands obedience. We must allow His Word to correct our expectations of Him. Otherwise, we can keep speaking His name while resisting the very character that name reveals.

An entertainment approach to worship encourages that resistance when it makes our enjoyment the condition under which truth may be heard. A sermon begins to expose a cherished sin, and we become impatient for something that will lighten the moment. The problem may lie in the leader who supplies the escape, or in us when we demand it. Repeatedly spared an honest encounter with God's claims, we can learn to regard conviction as a defect in the service. A congregation can ask for God's presence while arranging to remain undisturbed by His holiness. 2 Timothy 4:3–4 warns of hearers who choose teachers according to their desires and turn away from the truth. We must examine the desires we have brought with us.

God tells us what He regards with favor in Isaiah 66:2: "But on this

one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word." Trembling at His Word includes being willing to change when it contradicts us. If it exposes the quarrel we have kept alive, we must seek reconciliation. If it exposes a secret sin, we must confess and forsake it. A serious expression cannot substitute for that obedience. Reverence begins to become visible when God's verdict matters more to us than preserving our excuse.

It must enter our prayers as well. Spurgeon warns that "the mere saying of words is not prayer." [56] While someone leads the congregation, are we joining him before God, or simply waiting for the next part of the service? When he asks for forgiveness, bring your own sin into the petition. When he thanks God for redemption, remember the Savior who bore your guilt. When he pleads for a suffering member, carry that person before the Father. The words should become the congregation's prayer. This is part of the worship we must recover: people actually dealing with God together.

Pastor, this recovery must pass through your own conscience. Acts 20:28 directs the elders to take heed to themselves and to the flock. What did you introduce, tolerate, defend, or fail to teach that helped make reverence seem unnecessary? Did you hurry confession because it quieted the room? Did you make light of sin to preserve an easy atmosphere? Did you protect an entertaining feature while prayer and Scripture reading received whatever time remained? Confess the actual failure before God. Where your leadership publicly taught the wrong expectation, explain the correction to your people. They should not have to carry the blame for habits you helped them learn.

Then teach them whom they approach. Open Isaiah 6, John 4:23–24, and Hebrews 12:28–29. Show them God's holiness, Christ's mediation, the necessity of the Spirit's work, and the heart's obligation to respond. 2 Timothy 4:2 requires patient instruction as well as correction. Some believers have never been helped to understand these things. Stay with their questions. Explain what you intend to change and why Scripture requires it. When people begin to see the glory of the God they worship, they can understand why certain habits must be surrendered.

Let that teaching produce identifiable changes. Remove entertainment that displaces God's appointed worship, treats holy things flippantly, or keeps the congregation watching when it should be participating. Restore the public reading and faithful preaching of Scripture, prayer that the people can thoughtfully join, and

congregational singing rich with the Word of Christ (1 Timothy 4:13; Colossians 3:16). Give these duties the preparation and time their purpose requires. Stop an evident wrong as soon as it is recognized; patiently prepare the church for other changes that require instruction. At the next planning meeting, name the first correction, the biblical reason for it, and who will carry it out. Conviction must reach the actual service.

Remain faithful when the correction becomes costly. 1 Peter 5:2–4 places your shepherding before the Chief Shepherd, while 1 Thessalonians 5:14 requires patience with all. A confused believer needs explanation and care; criticism may expose a careless manner of reform that you should correct. But disappointment with the loss of entertainment must not govern the church's obedience. Attendance, giving, and approval cannot grant permission to restore what Scripture required you to remove. Keep teaching. Keep visiting. Listen carefully, and receive a valid correction. Lead the sheep with the tenderness of a man who knows their weakness and the courage of a man who knows whose flock they are.

Believer, bring this repentance into your own worship. Ask the Lord to forgive you where you have demanded amusement, resented searching preaching, or treated His holy presence as something familiar and cheap. Renounce the expectation that the church must entertain you before you will give God your attention. Come to the next gathering prepared to hear His Word, confess your sin, join the prayers, sing with understanding, and receive correction. Spurgeon urges, "Let the flames of love burn on the altar of the heart." [57] Ask God to kindle that love for Christ in you. Support your shepherds as they recover reverent worship; do not press them to restore the very distractions you are learning to surrender. If your attention wanders, bring it back. If the truth wounds your conscience, answer it honestly. If worship requires effort, offer that effort gladly to the Savior who gave Himself for you. Let your next Lord's Day show the change you are asking God to work in your heart.

And when this examination uncovers our guilt, let us come to Christ with it. 1 Peter 3:18 tells us that He suffered for sins to bring us to God. The Savior who spoke to the woman at the well still receives sinners who turn to Him. He can forgive our irreverence and teach us to love the holiness we have slighted. Our hope rests in His sacrifice, His intercession, and His grace. Through Him, guilty people may

draw near to the God before whom the seraphim cover their faces. And here the New Covenant makes the wonder even greater.

WE COME TO ZION THROUGH CHRIST

The New Testament does not leave believers trembling at a distance from Mount Sinai. Through Christ we have been brought near.

> Hebrews 12:22–24: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel."

Christian worship is not gloomy terror before an inaccessible God. We come with joy because Jesus is the Mediator of the new covenant. We draw near because His blood has opened the way. But grace does not make God less holy. The same chapter that tells us we have come to Zion concludes:

> Hebrews 12:28–29: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire."

Notice the balance: grace and reverence, access and godly fear, Zion and consuming fire. The gospel does not abolish reverence. It makes reverence possible without terror because the sinner approaches the Holy One through Christ.

The words "you have come" bring this truth home to us. Christ has brought His people near at the cost of His blood. What are we doing with that welcome? Let us answer before God, where religious language cannot hide what we have learned to trust.

QUESTIONS FOR CHRISTIANS

When you enter worship, what gives you confidence that God will receive you? Do you look first for a stirring feeling, or rest upon the Savior who has opened the way? Hebrews 10:19–22 grounds our boldness in His blood. If a quiet service makes you doubt that you can draw near, examine what you have begun to treat as indispensable.

Christ's sacrifice has not lost its worth because the room feels ordinary or your heart feels tired.

Would you still treasure this privilege if only a few believers gathered and there were little to impress your eyes? Hebrews 12:22–24 names realities that a head count cannot measure: the living God, the heavenly assembly, and Jesus the Mediator. Have you allowed the modest appearance of your congregation to diminish your gratitude for what Christ has given it? Before you dismiss its worship as unimpressive, consider whom you approach and what it cost to bring you there.

What happens when the God who welcomes you also corrects you? Hebrews 12:25 warns us not to refuse the One who speaks. Is there a command you have repeatedly heard but have kept outside your plans? Name it. Perhaps you have enjoyed hearing about grace while resisting an obedience grace requires. Bring that refusal to Christ. Ask His forgiveness, and take the first step the command requires. His welcome should make us more willing to hear Him.

Are you coming to worship with God's people while leaving those people outside your concern? Hebrews 10:22–25 joins drawing near with gathering, encouraging, and considering one another. Whose burden have you stopped noticing? Which struggling believer needs your prayer, a patient conversation, or help you could actually give? Christ has brought you into a people He loves. Before the next gathering, identify one neglected person and act. Let gratitude for your own welcome become care for someone else.

Dear Christian, I plead with you: do not stand hesitant before a welcome secured by your Redeemer's blood, and do not treat that welcome carelessly. Perhaps grief has exhausted you, or the remembrance of sin has made you ashamed to pray. Come to Christ honestly. Confess what needs forgiveness; bring the weakness you cannot hide. Hebrews 10:22 calls us to "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." You do not have to arrive impressive. Come trusting the Savior, ready to hear His Word and join His people in grateful worship. Let His mercy recover the heart that distraction and unbelief have drawn away.

QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS

Pastor, could your people explain why a guilty sinner may draw near to God? Have you opened Christ's priesthood, His finished sacrifice, and His continuing intercession, or left them chiefly remembering

how a service felt? Think of the member who will pray alone after receiving frightening news. What truth have you given him to rest upon when your voice and the gathered congregation are absent? Hebrews 7:25 directs him to the Savior who lives to intercede. Teach until that promise becomes intelligible and precious.

Have you helped your flock confuse a heightened atmosphere with the access Christ purchased? Review what you have said about God's presence. Have your words implied that His welcome becomes available only when the room reaches a certain intensity? If you have taught that expectation, confess your part in it and correct it from Scripture. Ephesians 2:18 directs our confidence to access through Christ, by the Spirit, to the Father. The sheep need to know whom they can trust when their feelings falter.

What will change in your teaching and preparation because you believe Christ has brought His church to Zion? Take your next sermon, the selected songs, and the congregational prayers before the elders. Ask where they help people understand and respond to God's mercy in Christ, and where a desired effect has begun to govern. Restore what has been neglected. Explain the first correction patiently, especially to those who have never been taught why it matters. Lead them into a clearer knowledge of the Savior, and help them offer worship with understanding.

Will you guard this confidence when people ask you to restore the experience they miss? Examine the fear beneath your hesitation. Are you willing to teach patiently and bear criticism for the sake of the sheep, or will their disappointment decide what you may preach? 1 Peter 5:2–4 places your labor before the Chief Shepherd. Listen carefully to struggling believers, correct any harshness of your own, and stay beside them. But do not surrender Christ's authority to recover approval. Decide with your fellow elders what obedience requires, and remain faithful when the cost arrives.

Brother pastor, I plead with you for the souls entrusted to your care: give them the Savior upon whom they can safely rest. Help the ashamed believer come honestly for mercy. Teach the grieving saint why the Father's welcome has not disappeared with his happiness. Open the Word to the confused member, and remain beside him until he understands. Christ knows these people by name, and He purchased them with His blood. Whatever your failures have been, return to Him, receive His forgiveness, and take up this care again.

Preach Christ clearly. Pray for your people. Lead them in reverence and joy before the God who has brought them near.

The welcome rests upon Christ's work, and His Word tells us how to answer it. We must now examine what happens when a church teaches people to judge nearness to God by their experience.

WHEN EXPERIENCE REPLACES TRUTH

A believer may remember a service for years: the moment the congregation rose, the tears he could not restrain, the relief with which he went home. Those memories may be precious. But what happens when someone asks whether the teaching was true? If his answer is that he felt God too deeply to question what he heard, something has changed. The experience is now protecting the teaching from examination. The Word that should judge the experience is being denied a hearing.

This is where the danger becomes doctrinal. 1 John 4:1 commands us to "test the spirits, whether they are of God." The verses that follow direct that testing to the confession of Christ and the reception of apostolic truth (1 John 4:2–6). The intensity of a religious experience cannot settle those questions. A teacher may move us profoundly and still misrepresent the Savior. A congregation may feel united while embracing error. Once a feeling is allowed to certify God's presence, the church can mistake its own skill for the Spirit's work.

Dr. Peter Masters identifies the shift: "The new worship is firmly ecstatic (and also largely mystical) rather than rational and faith-reliant." [58] His warning concerns the governing principle of worship. Scripture calls the whole person to respond to God. Paul joins spiritual engagement with understanding in prayer and song (1 Corinthians 14:15), and he joins singing with the indwelling riches of Christ's Word (Colossians 3:16). When truth becomes incidental to the desired effect, the service is teaching people how to feel without adequately teaching them whom they worship, why they may approach Him, or what He requires.

The mind matters because we worship the God who has made Himself known. Stephen Charnock wrote, "Worship is an act of the understanding, applying itself to the knowledge of the excellency of God." [59] Christ directs us to worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:23–24). We must therefore attend to what God has revealed about Himself: His holiness, His righteousness, His mercy, and the glory of His Son. As these truths are opened and believed, they give

substance to our reverence and reasons for our joy. A swelling feeling cannot tell us which god we are honoring. God's revelation identifies the One before whom we stand.

Yet understanding the words of a sermon is not, by itself, the spiritual apprehension of their glory. The new birth is the Spirit's work (John 3:6–8), and spiritual discernment depends upon His teaching (1 Corinthians 2:12–14). The same God who commanded light to shine gives the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). We need that living ministry. Speaking of discerning God's will, George Müller insisted, "Prayer, the word of God, and His Spirit should be united together." [60] That dependence belongs in our worship also. We ask the Spirit to open our eyes to what God has spoken, and we submit our impressions to that Word. We have no warrant to set an inward prompting above the truth the Spirit inspired.

This is why faithful worship must reach further than correct information. A. W. Pink described the Spirit's application of truth so that "what is written in the Word is now inscribed on the heart." [61] The sinner sees his guilt in the light of God's holiness. The promise of forgiveness becomes precious because he needs the Savior it reveals. Gratitude begins to move him toward an obedience he once resisted. Christ teaches that the Spirit glorifies Him (John 16:13–14). Where the Spirit gives understanding, Christ's person and saving work become more than familiar subjects. We begin to trust Him, love Him, and yield to Him.

Consider the order of that trust. Romans 10:17 directs us to the hearing of God's Word as the means through which faith comes. Charles Spurgeon observed, "You may get feeling from faith, and the best of it." [62] The gospel gives the trembling conscience an accomplished redemption and a trustworthy Redeemer to rest upon. As faith receives that truth, relief and joy may follow. But if a man concludes that he is reconciled to God because he was deeply moved, he has asked his feelings to establish what only the gospel can tell him. When the feeling fades, he will have to recover it or face the fear that his peace with God has disappeared.

Our Lord exposes a still more searching danger in Luke 8:13–15. Some receive the word with joy, yet have no root and fall away when testing comes. The initial joy was real as an experience; it did not prove an enduring reception of the Word. This should make us tender and careful with souls. We must not assure a person that he has been converted merely because he wept during a song, came forward, or

felt an unusual release. Has he understood the gospel? Is he turning from sin to Christ? Does he continue in the Word when obedience becomes costly? Those questions may interrupt an easy celebration, but a pastor who loves a soul will want more for it than an unexamined assurance.

Repentance makes the difference visible in ordinary life. 2 Corinthians 7:10–11 describes godly sorrow producing repentance, with earnest concern to address the wrong. Thomas Watson wrote, "Till sin is bitter, Christ will not be sweet." [63] He is exposing the heart's attachment to sin, not assigning a measure of anguish by which we purchase mercy. A man may weep over his failures and still refuse to tell the truth, end an adulterous relationship, or seek forgiveness from the person he has injured. The tears do not discharge those obligations. Grace teaches us to renounce ungodliness and live under Christ's rule (Titus 2:11–14). The mercy that receives the repentant sinner also begins to deliver him from the sins he has defended.

Nor can another moving service repair the damage done by a sin we intend to keep. John Owen warned, "An unmortified lust will drink up the spirit, and all the vigour of the soul." [64] Romans 8:13 calls believers to put sinful deeds to death by the Spirit. Ephesians 4:25–32 brings that obedience into our speech, anger, work, forgiveness, and treatment of one another; in that setting Paul warns against grieving the Holy Spirit. The man who claims unusual nearness to the Spirit while cherishing cruelty at home needs to hear that warning. His family lives with what his account of the service leaves out. Love for him requires us to bring both his worship and his conduct under the same Word.

A church that makes spiritual confidence depend upon strong impressions also leaves tender believers exposed. Pink warned that "a faith which rests on impressions is extinguished as soon as the impression wears off." [65] He is describing confidence built on an unstable foundation. A struggling Christian may wrongly conclude that the Savior has withdrawn because the joy he once knew has become faint. We must take his distress seriously and help him examine his condition honestly. Yet his changing emotions cannot overturn the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice or the truth of God's promise. Romans 5:1–2 places our peace with God and our access to grace in Jesus Christ. There is somewhere for the weary conscience to rest while it asks the Lord to restore its joy.

That restored joy is worth seeking. Müller made it his first concern

to "have my soul happy in the Lord," and described nourishing his soul through meditation on Scripture. [66] His purpose included receiving its comfort, warning, correction, and instruction. Here is a searching alternative to pursuing a sensation: remain before the Word long enough to hear what you need, including what you would rather avoid. Pray over the promise, confess the sin it uncovers, and give thanks for the Savior it reveals. Psalm 119:18 teaches us to ask for opened eyes; 1 Peter 1:8 describes love and joy in the Christ we have not seen. The church should desire such affections deeply. Their life comes from knowing and loving Him.

The decisive question, then, is what authority the experience is allowed to carry. Will we receive biblical correction even when it unsettles a cherished memory? Will we relinquish a practice if Scripture condemns it, though that practice once moved us? The Bereans examined the Scriptures even when the preacher was Paul (Acts 17:11). We do not honor the Holy Spirit by exempting ourselves from that examination. Christ's prayer in John 17:17 gives us both our hope and our rule: "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." Let us bring our worship, our assurance, and the conduct of our lives beneath that gracious authority.

QUESTIONS FOR CHRISTIANS

What experience have you made difficult to question? Recall the teaching associated with it. Can you explain that teaching from Scripture, or have you defended it chiefly by describing how it made you feel? Bring the actual claim to the Word. Ask a faithful pastor or mature believer to help you examine it. If it proves false, relinquish it. You may grieve over what you once trusted, but Christ will not be less faithful because a teacher disappointed you.

What obedience have you postponed while seeking another season of spiritual warmth? Read Ephesians 4:25–32 slowly and let its commands become particular. Is there a lie to correct, money to return, bitterness to confess, or someone from whom you must seek forgiveness? Do not wait for a stronger feeling before obeying what is already plain. Ask for the Spirit's help and take the step you have delayed. An honest confession may be less gratifying than another account of how deeply you were moved, but the injured person needs the truth from you.

Where do you go when assurance weakens? Do you revisit an emotional memory until you can persuade yourself that you must be safe,

or return to Christ as He is offered in the gospel? If your conscience accuses you of sin, confess it rather than covering it with that memory (1 John 1:9). If you are burdened by weakness, come to the merciful High Priest who invites the needy to His throne (Hebrews 4:14–16). Richard Sibbes gives the ashamed sinner this encouragement: "there is more mercy in Christ than sin in us." [67] You can afford to tell Him the whole truth.

Are you cultivating communion with God when no one is leading you? Set aside time this week to read a passage attentively, pray over its meaning, and ask how it should shape your conduct. Carry one promise into your anxieties and one command into your decisions. Give thanks when the Lord grants delight, and continue seeking Him when concentration is difficult. Psalm 1:1–3 directs us toward a life nourished by steady meditation. The Lord's care for you reaches into the quiet hours that no congregation sees.

Dear Christian, I plead with you to let the Word reach the place you have been protecting. Perhaps you have used a treasured experience to avoid a truth that would require you to change. Perhaps you have mistaken repeated sorrow for repentance, while someone near you still waits for the wrong to be put right. Come honestly to Christ. His blood is sufficient for the sins you are afraid to name, and His Spirit is able to help you obey. If you discover that you have rested in religious excitement without trusting the Savior, do not spend another day trying to revive the excitement. Turn to Him now. Ask Him for mercy, receive His promise, and entrust yourself to the One who died and rose for sinners.

QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS

Pastor, what have you taught your people to count as evidence of the Spirit's work? Review the occasions when you publicly declared that God had moved. What supported that judgment? Could you point to truth understood, Christ trusted, sin confessed, or love bearing fruit? Galatians 5:22–23 names the Spirit's fruit. If you have given people confidence chiefly because the congregation became emotional, acknowledge the mistake and reteach them. They need a shepherd willing to correct his own words before those words become the ground of someone else's false assurance.

Can a member question a teaching without being accused of resisting the Spirit? Paul joins the warning against quenching the Spirit with the command to test what is presented and hold fast to what is

good (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22). Teach that passage in its context. Welcome honest questions, open the relevant Scriptures, and distinguish reverence for God from unquestioning confidence in the pastor. If your authority has made correction dangerous, repent before those you have silenced. Give them reason to believe that the Word may examine you as freely as it examines them.

What will your elders and you change when you discover that a practice has trained the church to trust an experience Scripture does not authorize? Identify the practice clearly. Explain the biblical reason for the correction, make the necessary change, and help the people understand it. 2 Timothy 4:2–5 requires patient instruction as well as reproof. Some members may feel that you are taking away the only spiritual life they have known. Stay near them. Teach them to pray, open the gospel with them, and show them how to seek the Lord through the means He has given. They will need shepherding through the loss of a mistaken confidence.

Will you remain faithful when this care costs you approval? 1 Timothy 4:16 binds attention to your life and doctrine to the welfare of your hearers. Do not abandon a necessary correction because attendance falls or influential people complain. Equally, do not confuse severity with courage. Listen to the wounded, acknowledge any injury your methods have caused, and keep teaching with patience. Pray with your fellow elders for those most unsettled by the change. The Lord has entrusted persons to your care; their souls must weigh more heavily with you than the success of a service.

Brother pastor, bring your people to the Savior who can bear the weight of their trust. Spurgeon put the matter plainly: "you are saved by what Christ felt for you, not by what you feel." [68] He directs us to the suffering Redeemer and the redemption He accomplished. Open that gospel until the fearful believer understands why Christ is sufficient. Search out the person whose impressive testimony has concealed an unchanged life. Go after the member who thinks God has forsaken him because his feelings have grown dull. Plead with the impenitent, comfort the contrite, and give each the truth his soul needs.

I plead with you for the flock purchased at such a cost (Acts 20:28): do not let them leave your ministry knowing how to seek a feeling while remaining strangers to the Savior. Pray for the Spirit to make the preached Word effectual. Teach Christ's finished work, call sinners to repentance and faith, and walk beside believers as they learn to obey Him. When you next stand before them, remember the

souls who will carry your words home. Give them truth they can live upon, promises they can plead in trouble, and a clear view of the Lord Jesus. Keep opening that Word and caring for those souls, asking the Lord to raise up a people who know Christ, turn from sin, and help one another follow Him.

THE MODERN THEATER OF WORSHIP

Picture a service in which the room darkens, the music swells, and a familiar line is sung again. The leader speaks softly over the instruments. Faces turn upward; some worshipers begin to weep. Then comes the declaration: "The Holy Spirit is in this place." With those words, the leader has done more than describe what can be seen. He has interpreted the congregation's response and attributed it to God. What warrants that declaration? The people's tears cannot answer the question, because their tears are the very thing he has undertaken to explain.

The danger deepens when his explanation becomes the congregation's testimony. People leave saying that God moved mightily, and when asked how they know, they remember the leader's assurance. He, in turn, remembers their response. His words certify their feelings, and their feelings confirm his words. Scripture may never be consulted. Jonathan Edwards carefully denied that intensity could settle such a question: "It is no sign one way or the other, that religious affections are very great, or raised very high." [69] Deep feeling deserves examination of its object and its fruits. Its strength alone supplies no verdict.

Consider what this can do to the person who remains unmoved. He hears the room described as full of God's power, looks around at others, and begins to wonder what is wrong with him. Perhaps he is resisting the Spirit. Perhaps his doubts reveal a cold heart. He may eventually reproduce the expected response to escape the shame of being the only one without it. Once that happens, the congregation's apparent unanimity conceals a private fear. A man who needed help understanding his soul has learned how to keep his uncertainty out of sight.

The apostle Paul refused the dominion over faith that such dependence can give a leader. 2 Corinthians 1:24: "Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand." Paul possessed apostolic authority and exercised it, yet he did not make himself the foundation upon which another believer

stood. Calvin draws the boundary plainly: "faith owns no subjection except to the word of God." [70] A pastor serves that faith by opening the Word, explaining its claims, and helping the people apply it. He exceeds his commission when his personal interpretation of a meeting becomes something they must accept as God's verdict.

Even in the apostolic church, where genuine revelatory gifts were operating, a spiritual claim was subject to judgment. 1 Corinthians 14:29 directs that prophets speak and "let the others judge." The claim to speak by the Spirit did not suspend discernment. Likewise, the instruction against quenching the Spirit stands beside this command in 1 Thessalonians 5:21: "Test all things; hold fast what is good." These passages give no shelter to a leader who treats examination as hostility to God. If the congregation in the apostles' day had to weigh what it heard, no speaker today acquires immunity by announcing that the Spirit is moving.

Over time, repeated submission to an unexamined interpretation can weaken the very judgment a pastor should cultivate. The Christian learns to ask what the leader sensed before asking what Scripture says. He may become skilled at recognizing a change in the music while remaining unable to recognize a change in the gospel. Hebrews 5:12–14 describes maturity in terms of growing competence in the word of righteousness and practiced discernment. A church that habitually supplies conclusions without teaching its people how to examine them can keep adults dependent upon someone else's spiritual confidence. Their dependence may flatter the leader while leaving the flock ill prepared for error.

Christ directs the worshiper's attention to the Father. John 4:24: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." In the conversation surrounding those words, the Samaritan woman raises the question of the proper place of worship. Jesus announces the coming hour, speaks of the Father seeking true worshipers, and identifies Himself as the Messiah (John 4:19–26). Worship must correspond to the God who reveals Himself through His Son. Neither an inherited sacred location nor the force of an inward impression can establish that correspondence. The worshiper must know whom he approaches and come according to the truth Christ gives.

That truth searches the heart beneath the visible act. A person can bow his head while quietly refusing the God to whom the prayer is addressed. He can admire the tenderness of the words without asking

for the mercy they describe. Spurgeon puts the matter searchingly: "The God of truth can never accept an untruthful devotion." [71] When the congregation confesses sin, are we confessing ours? When we ask for grace to obey, do we intend to relinquish the disobedience we have been protecting? These are personal dealings with the living God. A leader cannot supply them on our behalf by describing the room as reverent.

Jesus exposes an especially sobering form of religious deception in Matthew 15:1–9. The leaders defended a tradition by which a person could designate resources as a gift to God and evade the obligation to honor his parents. Religious language gave disobedience a respectable appearance. Christ's verdict in Matthew 15:9 is severe: "And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." The problem reached beyond a mistaken preference. Human authority had displaced a divine command, and people were being taught to feel justified while neglecting what God required.

Calvin therefore concludes that "all kinds of worship invented by men are of no estimation in his sight." [72] A church must take care when it gives spiritual standing to its own expectations. If yielding to a leader's emotional appeal becomes the accepted evidence of yielding to God, the two have been confused. The man who questions the appeal may be rebuked, while the man who complies receives reassurance without anyone asking whether he is obeying Christ. An invented test can punish a tender conscience and shelter a rebellious one. Christ's words require us to examine the authority behind the test itself.

Paul exposes a related deception in Colossians 2:20–23. Human regulations and severe treatment of the body can look impressively devout while failing to conquer sin. In Colossians 2:23, he calls this "self-imposed religion" and says such practices "are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh." His immediate subject is ascetic regulation, and we must respect that context. The principle nevertheless searches our contemporary claims: an appearance of spiritual seriousness does not establish spiritual power. A prescribed response cannot mortify pride merely because it is strenuous, conspicuous, or sincerely admired.

A worshiper may surrender himself to the momentum of a meeting while continuing to reserve one part of his life from Christ. He can weep during a song about forgiveness and refuse to forgive his brother. He can eagerly follow every instruction from the platform while evading the plain instruction of Scripture at home. Spurgeon

observed the underlying evasion: "he asks for the heart, and they present him with their lips." [73] This is why outward compliance must never be allowed to settle the church's judgment about the soul. The Lord searches the heart from which our words and actions proceed. He knows whether the language of surrender is concealing a determined refusal to yield.

QUESTIONS FOR CHRISTIANS

What have you learned to mean when you say that God was present in a service? Recall a particular occasion and put your answer into words. What truth about Christ became clearer? What sin did the Word expose? What promise gave you reason to trust Him? If your account depends entirely upon the room's intensity or the leader's declaration, you have more examination to do. Speak honestly about what you experienced, and distinguish it from what you can establish. Others may build their confidence upon your testimony; love requires care with the words you give them.

Then consider your own participation. Spurgeon asks, "When we professed to worship God, how much praise was there in the song?" [74] You may remember the music vividly and scarcely remember what you sang. Return to the words. Did you understand the truth they expressed? Did you address God with them? Where they called you to trust, thank, confess, or obey, did your heart follow? This inquiry is especially necessary if you have learned to reproduce a response because you fear how your restraint will be interpreted. Bring that fear before the Lord. Seek counsel from a faithful shepherd who will help you examine it by Scripture.

Do not leave the examination suspended in your thoughts. If the Word exposed a cherished grievance, speak to the person you have been refusing to forgive. If you repeated an extravagant account of a meeting because everyone else used the same language, correct your account. If you have withdrawn from prayer because you cannot feel what others describe, begin again with a particular promise of God before you. These small, definite acts make our profession answerable to the truth we have heard. A remembered meeting must never become our excuse for postponing present obedience.

And if you are a weary believer whose heart seems slow to respond, remember how Scripture invites you to approach God. Hebrews 10:19–22 grounds your access in the blood of Jesus and His priesthood, then calls you to "draw near with a true heart in full assurance

of faith." You are invited to come through Him while you seek the warmth and freedom you lack. Tell Him honestly of your dullness. Ask Him to teach you, forgive you, and renew your love. You need not invent a testimony about yourself in order to plead His promise. His finished sacrifice gives the repentant believer a sound reason to draw near.

QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS

Brother pastor, listen again to the words by which you interpret the congregation's response. A recording of a recent service may help you hear expressions that have become habitual. When you announced a special work of God, what did you actually know? Did you explain the biblical grounds for your judgment, or did your certainty rest upon what the room appeared to feel? 2 Corinthians 4:2 describes ministry that openly presents the truth to the conscience in God's sight. That standard reaches our passing comments as surely as our formal sermons. A sentence spoken over music can teach the congregation how to judge spiritual reality for years.

Where your words went beyond your warrant, take responsibility for them. Explain the error to those you taught and show them the Scriptures that correct it. You may need to say plainly that you treated a visible response as evidence it could not supply, or made a personal impression sound binding upon everyone. Teach your fellow leaders to distinguish biblical promises, observed facts, and judgments that require patience. Then remove appeals that make compliance with you a test of submission to the Spirit. Your willingness to be corrected by the Word will help the congregation learn that it can trust the Word when your judgment has failed.

This recovery requires personal knowledge of the flock. Richard Baxter insisted that a minister should be "known as a counsellor for their souls." [75] Speak with the person who fears he has never truly worshiped because he does not respond like those beside him. Find out what he believes about Christ, what troubles his conscience, and what he has been taught to expect. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 calls for patient care of the fainthearted and weak. Such care will uncover distinctions a platform cannot see: one person needs correction, another instruction, another help resisting a settled sin, and another reassurance concerning the Savior upon whom he already depends.

Continue that work when greater care in your language disappoints those accustomed to sweeping declarations. Give the church

reasons for confidence that can be examined in an open Bible. Follow up with those who profess repentance; teach them to obey the Lord they confess. Pray for the congregation by name. In Hebrews 10:24–25, drawing near to God is joined to considering one another and encouraging love and good works. Help your people learn that responsibility. A church grows in health as its members become more truthful before God, more attentive to His Word, and more willing to serve one another under Christ.

The declaration that God is at work is too weighty to become an easy way of sustaining a meeting. We speak of the holy God, of the Spirit who gives life, and of souls who must one day answer to Christ. Let that knowledge govern our speech and deepen our prayers. We long for the Lord to awaken sinners, strengthen faith, and fill His people with love for His Son. We should seek these mercies earnestly, use the means He has appointed, and receive the fruit with thanksgiving. As we do, we must learn to recognize the difference between what a congregation can be led to display and what the Holy Spirit alone can accomplish.

MANUFACTURED ATMOSPHERES VS. THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit does not require a smoke machine to operate. He does not need the lights dimmed to regenerate a sinner. He does not depend upon amplified bass, musical crescendos, prolonged repetition, or emotional suggestion to comfort a grieving saint. The Spirit who inspired Scripture is perfectly capable of using the truth He inspired.

Consider what Scripture attributes to the Word. 1 Peter 1:23 describes believers as born again "through the word of God which lives and abides forever." Peter sets that enduring Word beside the frailty of human life: grass withers, flowers fall, and human glory cannot preserve itself. Yet the gospel preached to these believers brings them a life that human strength could never supply (1 Peter 1:23–25). Their hope rests upon the God who speaks and gives life. No arrangement of a room can take His place, because the sinner's deepest need reaches beyond anything a room can change.

Calvin states the relationship clearly: "God alone is indeed he who regenerates us; but for that purpose he employs the ministry of men." [76] The preacher opens the Scriptures, explains the gospel, and calls sinners to Christ; God must make that truth effectual in the

heart. This dependence should make the preacher earnest in preparation and prayer. It gives him something substantial to do without placing the power of regeneration in his hands. He must tell the truth faithfully, while refusing to treat a response he can produce as the life he cannot give.

The Spirit's work also has a definite object. John 16:14: "He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you." Jesus spoke these words to His disciples as He prepared them for His departure. The surrounding promise concerns the Spirit's guidance of the apostles into the truth they would bear witness to (John 16:13–15). We receive that apostolic witness in Scripture. The Spirit does not now lead the church away from it toward a supposedly higher knowledge of Christ. Through the truth He has given, He brings us to know, trust, love, and honor the Savior it reveals.

Spurgeon states it plainly: "that which is of the Holy Spirit invariably glorifies our Lord Jesus Christ." [77] There is substance in that glory. The Son became man, obeyed His Father, bore the sins of His people, rose from the dead, and reigns as their living Lord. As the Spirit opens our understanding, these truths claim us personally. The cross exposes the seriousness of the sin we excused; the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice answers the guilt we could not remove. We begin to love the One whose mercy we once heard described without seeking it. The glory was already in Christ. Our blindness was in us.

The Spirit illuminates the Word, convicts of sin, glorifies Christ, strengthens faith, produces holiness, and comforts believers with divine promises. True worship therefore engages the mind without becoming intellectualism and moves the heart without becoming emotional manipulation. Where a church teaches people to depend upon an atmosphere, it may unintentionally train them to confuse sensation with communion.

That confusion can leave a person seeking relief from conviction while refusing the obedience conviction requires. Scripture carries the Spirit's work into the places where we actually live. Ephesians 4:30–32 joins the command against grieving Him to the removal of bitterness, malicious speech, and anger, and to kindness and forgiveness grounded in God's mercy in Christ. A man cannot honor the Spirit in the meeting while defending cruelty in his home. The truth heard in worship lays claim to his next conversation, including the apology he has postponed because he cannot bear to surrender the argument.

J. C. Ryle writes, "The seal that the Spirit stamps on Christ's people

is sanctification." [78] This is a work of grace within the person, reaching his judgments, desires, words, and conduct. Christ prays in John 17:17: "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." The believer learns to call sin what God calls it, to distrust its promises, and to seek strength to resist it. Such growth may involve painful discoveries and repeated struggles. We must not mistake that struggle for the failure of grace, or mistake a moment of relief for the completion of its work. The Spirit teaches us to obey Christ where sin still solicits our consent.

Nor does He withdraw His help when suffering exhausts our emotional strength. Romans 8:26: "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses." Paul writes of believers who await the redemption of their bodies amid groaning and hope. They do not always know how to pray, yet the Spirit intercedes for them according to God's will (Romans 8:26–27). His help reaches them precisely where their sufficiency fails. The passage gives no instruction to produce a particular sound or attain a particular feeling before that help becomes available. It directs the weak believer to the faithfulness of the divine Helper.

In expounding this passage, Spurgeon gives the credit where it belongs: "it was his secret might that made us strong." [79] A Christian may scarcely know how to describe the burden he brings before God. He may be unable to decide which outcome to request or to gather his thoughts into an orderly prayer. The Spirit's intercession is not defeated by that confusion. God knows what His child cannot adequately express. This promise enables us to keep praying when prayer feels difficult; we do not have to recover our former emotional strength before bringing our present weakness to Him.

QUESTIONS FOR CHRISTIANS

Have you begun postponing communion with God until you can recover the feeling of a remembered service? Consider what happens when you open your Bible alone. If the first minutes seem unrewarding, do you close it and search for something that will move you more quickly? Stay with the passage long enough to understand what God is saying. Name the truth about Him that it teaches, the sin it exposes, the promise it gives, or the obedience it requires. Turn that truth into prayer. Ask for the Spirit's help in receiving it, and let the passage determine what you seek from God.

If grief or weariness makes this difficult, do not add a demand for emotional achievement to the burden you already carry. Richard Sibbes reminds the weak believer, "We are weak, but we are his." [80]

Belonging to Christ gives you reason to ask for help when you have little strength to describe your need. Read Romans 8:26–27 slowly, or ask a mature Christian to read and pray with you. You may weep; you may feel strangely unable to weep. Neither condition prevents you from bringing your need to the Father who knows it. Tell Him what you can, and trust His wisdom concerning what you cannot.

Then carry the truth into a definite duty. If bitterness has governed your speech, put the words of Ephesians 4:30–32 beside the conversation in which it appeared. Confess the wrong without defending it, seek forgiveness, and consider how kindness must govern your next response. If suffering has led you to withdraw from other believers, contact someone who can pray with you and help bear the burden. These acts need not wait for an extraordinary meeting. The Spirit who teaches you through Scripture supplies grace for obedience in the circumstances to which you return each day.

QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS

Brother pastor, what are your people learning to do when they cannot reproduce Sunday's atmosphere? Think of the homebound member, the exhausted parent, and the believer sitting alone after receiving unwelcome news. Have you taught them enough of Christ to pray, trust, and obey there? Examine the ministry you have actually given them. Where you have spent your best preparation making people feel uplifted while leaving them poorly instructed, confess that failure before God and your fellow shepherds. Your people need the truth by which the Spirit will sustain them when you cannot stand beside them.

Begin the recovery by teaching the passages that establish His work. Show the congregation how the Word serves the new birth, how the Spirit glorifies Christ, and how He helps believers in weakness. Explain these truths patiently enough for people to use them. In his exposition of 2 Timothy 4:2, Calvin insists that "reproofs are founded on doctrine." [81] A rebuke against emotional dependence will accomplish little if the people remain uncertain what they should depend upon. Give them the biblical reasons for confidence in Christ, and demonstrate how those reasons become confession, thanksgiving, petition, and obedience.

Then let that teaching govern the next planning meeting. Examine whether the words being sung communicate truths the congregation understands. Give Scripture reading and prayer the attention needed for people to follow them with their minds and hearts. Teach those

who lead to serve that participation. In visits and conversations afterward, return to the passage preached and help particular people apply it to an actual fear, temptation, or duty. Such shepherding gives the congregation something to carry into the week: truth understood, promises remembered, sins named, and responsibilities accepted before the Lord.

Continue when this work demands more patience than producing an immediate response. Calvin describes faithful pastoral labor as "shrinking neither from toils nor from annoyances." [82] The charge to Timothy calls for enduring ministry even when hearers resist sound teaching (2 Timothy 4:1–5). Meet honest questions with further instruction; attend to the weak without demanding quick improvement. Ask whether your people are growing in their knowledge of Christ and learning to bring their lives beneath His Word. Give thanks for that fruit wherever it appears, including places no congregation will applaud. The Spirit's work deserves our patient attention after the service has ended.

What happens when the music stops, when the lights come on, or when suffering arrives and there is no band, no crowd, and no swelling chorus? The believer needs something stronger than an atmosphere. He needs truth. He needs promises that remain true in a hospital room, at a graveside, in persecution, in loneliness, and in the silence of the night.

THE BEAUTY OF THE ORDINARY MEANS OF GRACE

When the church turns away from spectacle and returns to the means Christ has appointed, it does not lose spiritual power. It rediscovers where spiritual power was promised. God has given His church the reading and preaching of His Word, prayer, congregational praise, baptism, the Lord's Supper, fellowship, discipline, and the ordinary ministry of shepherds and saints. These things may appear unimpressive to a culture addicted to spectacle, but God has chosen to work through them.

> 1 Corinthians 1:21: "It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."

One faithful sermon preached from an open Bible may accomplish more eternal good than a thousand carefully engineered emotional experiences. One congregation praying sincerely may be more pleasing to God than the most elaborate religious production. One believer

quietly taking the Lord's Supper in faith may commune more deeply with Christ than someone chasing extraordinary manifestations. The ordinary means of grace are not ordinary because God is absent from them; they are ordinary because God has appointed them for the ordinary life of His church.

THE DANGER OF DESPISING SIMPLICITY

The temptation toward spectacle often begins with a subtle fear: What if the ordinary means are not enough? What if preaching is too simple? What if prayer seems too quiet? What if Scripture reading does not hold people's attention? What if the Lord's Supper lacks excitement? Once a church begins asking those questions, it can slowly move from trusting God's appointed means to searching for techniques that will produce visible effects.

Paul's words to a church divided over its ministers expose the misplaced confidence beneath that fear. 1 Corinthians 3:6: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." Verse 7 directs the church's confidence away from the servants to God, who makes their labor fruitful. Planting and watering remain necessary work. Dependence upon God sends the pastor back to careful study, earnest prayer, and patient teaching, while freeing him from the illusion that greater ingenuity can create spiritual life.

Commenting on this passage, John Calvin writes that God "will have its success depend exclusively upon his blessing, that he may have the entire praise." [83] That humbles the gifted pastor and steadies the discouraged one. Neither brilliance nor weakness changes who must give the increase. Christ has entrusted His servant with a ministry; He has not required him to manufacture the life that ministry serves.

Imagine a pastor whose fellow leaders propose dropping the public Scripture reading to make room for an entertaining opening presentation. They fear visitors will not return if the service seems too plain. Before he answers, he must recognize what is being asked: a practice commanded by God is to surrender its place because it may disappoint the audience. Fear is beginning to determine how much of God's Word the congregation will hear.

At that meeting, he can open 1 Timothy 4:13: "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." Let him explain why the reading belongs there, prepare readers to read clearly, and briefly introduce the passage so people can follow its meaning. He

must help the congregation learn to listen rather than teach it that Scripture must entertain before it deserves their attention.

But that is precisely where faith is tested. Can we trust Christ to build His church by the means He has appointed? Can we believe that the Holy Spirit does not need our theatrical assistance? Can we resist the pressure to manufacture visible excitement when God calls us simply to be faithful? The Regulative Principle ultimately asks us to trust God.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

Axiom One — Christ's Ownership of the Church Governs Its Worship

Christ purchased the people who gather, and He determines the worship they owe Him. His ministers administer His commands; they cannot enlarge their commission. We receive the worship of the new covenant from Christ and His apostles; we do not carry Israel's fulfilled ceremonies unchanged into the church. Biblical warrant must govern what the church offers, however sincere its intention or impressive its results. This protects the flock from having a leader's religious invention imposed as obedience to God.

Scripture: Acts 20:28; Matthew 28:18–20; Hebrews 10:1–14; Matthew 15:9.

Axiom Two — Scripture's Sufficiency Must Govern the Service as Well as the Statement of Faith

A church can confess Scripture's sufficiency while allowing a cherished experience to overrule it. The change occurs when a practice becomes too precious to examine or too popular to surrender. A claim of revelation and a claim that God approved a meeting must both answer to the written Word. When biblical correction is forbidden because it might disturb the experience, another authority has already begun to govern.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Mark 7:8–13; 1 John 4:1–6.

Axiom Three — Practical Arrangements Must Serve Christ's Appointments without Acquiring Their Authority

A microphone can help the congregation hear; it cannot give divine

authority to the speaker. The hour, room, and practical order of a service should help people understand, participate, and obey. When an arrangement is trusted to produce God's presence or made a religious obligation for every church, it has exceeded its proper use. Love requires practical care for the people; humility requires us to distinguish our judgments from Christ's commands.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 14:9, 26, 40; Philippians 2:4; Romans 14:19.

Axiom Four — The Spirit Gives Life Through the Truth He Inspired

The completion of apostolic revelation has not ended the Spirit's ministry. Through the written Word He opens our understanding, brings sinners to Christ, and nourishes faith and holiness. Neither careful explanation nor emotional skill can produce regeneration; the minister must teach faithfully and depend upon God. The Spirit's illumination makes Christ's revealed glory precious to us without supplying another revelation for the church to obey.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 1:23–25; Acts 16:14; John 17:17.

Axiom Five — The Strength of a Feeling Cannot Establish Its Spiritual Origin

We must ask what truth has been received, whom the heart trusts, and what fruit follows. Tears may accompany repentance, but they cannot replace the confession or obedience repentance requires. The congregation's feelings do not prove the leader's claim that God moved, nor does his claim prove their feelings came from God. Genuine affection turns toward the Christ revealed in Scripture and bears fruit in a life increasingly submitted to Him.

Scripture: Luke 8:13–15; 2 Corinthians 7:10–11; Galatians 5:22–23; Ephesians 4:30–32.

Axiom Six — Worship Trains a Congregation in What to Expect and What to Do

When Scripture and prayer repeatedly yield their place to a production, people learn which activities the church considers indispensable.

When talented people do everything while the congregation watches, believers learn to expect an experience supplied by others. Christ calls His people to hear with faith, join the prayers, sing with understanding, receive His ordinances, and care for one another. Reform must restore that work; removing a performance does not, by itself, teach anyone to worship.

Scripture: Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 14:15–16; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:24–25.

Axiom Seven — Christ's Appointed Means Are Sufficient for the Work He Assigns Them

We do not confer power upon Scripture, prayer, praise, or the ordinances by making them spectacular. Their value rests upon Christ's appointment and the Spirit's gracious work. This confidence calls us to read clearly, preach carefully, pray earnestly, and participate in faith. Mere attendance earns no grace, and a quiet service does not guarantee spiritual health. God gives the increase; our calling is to use His gifts faithfully.

Scripture: Acts 2:41–42; 1 Timothy 4:13; 1 Corinthians 3:5–7; Hebrews 11:6.

Axiom Eight — Reverence Brings the Heart Under God's Word

Correct elements of worship cannot repent, believe, or love God for us. Reverence appears when we receive His correction and relinquish the sin it exposes. The same holiness that makes us tremble deepens our wonder that this God receives sinners through His Son. Such worship has room for gladness, tears, and tender affection, all governed by the truth of the One we approach. A solemn appearance cannot excuse a heart determined to remain unchanged.

Scripture: John 4:23–24; Isaiah 66:2; Psalm 2:11; Hebrews 12:22–29.

Axiom Nine — A Shepherd Must Reform the Expectations He Has Taught His People

Changing the program cannot, by itself, heal a congregation's misplaced confidence. A pastor must acknowledge what he introduced,

tolerated, or failed to teach, then open the Scriptures that correct it. He must stop evident wrong, restore neglected duties, and patiently help people understand and practice faithful worship. When reform costs approval, he must remain obedient without becoming harsh or refusing valid correction. The sheep need his continued care while they learn to trust what Christ has provided.

Scripture: Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 4:16; 2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Peter 5:2–4.

Axiom Ten — Access to God Rests Upon Christ's Finished Work, Even When Our Feelings Falter

Christ's blood opens the way to the Father, and His living priesthood sustains our confidence in coming. Grief, weariness, and faint affection do not cancel that welcome. The struggling believer may confess his sins, ask for renewed joy, and draw near while still feeling weak. Neither a powerful atmosphere nor a simple order of service makes us acceptable. We come through the Savior who brings sinners to God and supplies grace to worship Him.

Scripture: Hebrews 7:25; Hebrews 10:19–22; Romans 8:26–27; 1 Peter 3:18.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION: WHAT ARE WE TRAINING PEOPLE TO SEEK?

Christian, examine what you have come to expect from worship. Have you learned to judge a service primarily by how intensely you felt? Are you disappointed when worship is simple, reverent, Scripture-saturated, and free from spectacle? Do you secretly need the atmosphere—the darkness, the volume, the crescendo, the emotional release—to believe that God has met with you? Be careful. You may have been taught to hunger for a sensation when Christ is calling you to hunger for truth.

Do not despise the ordinary means by which your Savior has promised to feed His people. Acts 2:42 describes the church's settled devotion: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Open the Scriptures. Listen to the Word. Pray with the saints. Sing truth with understanding. Receive the ordinances in faith.

And pastor, examine what you are teaching the congregation to depend upon. Are you afraid that the Word alone will not hold them? Have you begun using atmosphere to accomplish what you no longer expect from truth? Do you feel pressure to produce an experience every Sunday so that people will say, "God really showed up today"? God does not need to be summoned. He has already told His church where to look: to Christ, through the Word, by the Spirit.

If we have substituted technique for truth, entertainment for reverence, or emotional manipulation for the Spirit's work, we should not merely adjust the service. We should repent. But do not end with Nadab and Abihu. Look to Christ. You do not come before God carrying strange fire in the hope that your creativity will make you acceptable. You come through Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, whose blood has opened the way into the presence of God. Hebrews 10:19–22 gives believers "boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus" and calls us to draw near in full assurance of faith. Charles Spurgeon pressed the same truth: "there is no access to God but by the all-powerful mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ." [84] Your confidence is not in the atmosphere you can create; it is in the Savior who has brought you near.

BRING THE WORSHIP TO THE WORD — CHAPTER 10 CHECKLIST

1. Are the actual elements of our worship commanded in Scripture? Can we identify biblical warrant for what we present to God as worship, or have preferences and traditions gradually acquired the authority of divine commands? (Matthew 15:9)
2. Are circumstances serving worship—or becoming substitutes for it? Do lighting, sound, technology, architecture, and staging simply help the congregation hear, see, and participate, or are they being used as spiritual mechanisms to manufacture an experience?
3. What is producing our emotions? Are our affections being stirred by the truth of God's Word and the glory of Christ, or primarily by musical repetition, volume, lighting, suggestion, and atmosphere?
4. How do we know the Holy Spirit is present and working? Are we identifying His work by biblical fruit—truth, conviction, faith, holiness, Christ-exaltation—or by sensations we have learned to call spiritual? (John 16:14; Galatians 5:22–23)

5. Is Christ central—or are the platform personalities central? Would the service still possess spiritual substance if the gifted musicians, dramatic lighting, large stage, and charismatic leader disappeared?
6. Have we learned to despise the ordinary means of grace? Do Scripture reading, preaching, prayer, congregational singing, baptism, and the Lord's Supper seem insufficient unless something spectacular accompanies them? (Acts 2:41–42; Colossians 3:16)
7. Are we confusing personal taste with biblical principle? Am I rejecting something merely because it is unfamiliar—or defending it merely because I enjoy it? Can I show from Scripture why my conviction should bind another Christian's conscience?
8. Are we approaching God with both joy and reverence? Does our worship reflect the full truth of Hebrews 12—that through Jesus we have come joyfully to Mount Zion, yet we still serve God "acceptably with reverence and godly fear"?
9. What must change? If our church has trained people to depend upon spectacle, manufactured emotion, or unsupported claims of divine presence, are we willing to simplify, repent, and return to the worship Christ has appointed? Name what must stop, what must be restored, and the first act of obedience you will take this week. (James 1:22–25)

The great question is not whether people leave saying, "What an experience." The question is whether God was worshiped according to His truth, Christ was exalted, His Word governed the gathering, and His people were taught to trust the Holy Spirit rather than human technique.

The church does not need strange fire. She has something infinitely better: a crucified and risen Savior, an open Bible, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and access to the throne of God through the blood of Christ.

> Hebrews 12:28–29: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire."

SOURCE NOTES

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principle. The second quotation describes a congregation he hoped to establish, not an order he claimed already to have implemented.

11 Martin Luther, *The German Mass and Order of Divine Service* (1526), section (ii), opening sentence; and section (i), description of a proposed earnest Christian congregation. Reproduced from B. J. Kidd, *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), pp. 193–202. Text: https://history.hanover.edu/texts/luthserv.html. Luther is quoted here for the centrality of the Word, prayer, and love; his position on permitted ceremonies differs from the formal Reformed regulative principle. The second quotation describes a congregation he hoped to establish, not an order he claimed already to have implemented.

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CHAPTER 11

The Merchandising of the Gospel: Selling the Sacred

2 Peter 2:3: "By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber."

The Savior who will raise His people from the dead gave His life for His sheep; He never put a price on His mercy (John 10:11; 1 Peter 1:18–19). Now picture a mother sitting beside her sick child. A preacher tells her that God is ready to heal—but first she must "sow a seed" into his ministry. Afraid to leave anything undone for her child, she reaches for her money. What has happened? Her suffering has become his leverage. A plea for prayer has become an opportunity for profit. Peter warned, "By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words" (2 Peter 2:3). The promise sounds spiritual; the purpose is to take advantage of her need. When frightened people turn to the church, will they meet a shepherd who cares for them, or a salesman who knows how to use their fear?

Paul warned Timothy about teachers "who suppose that godliness is a means of gain" (1 Timothy 6:5). Think about what that means. These men have begun treating religion as a way to make money. [1] And Paul warns that in the last days people will be "lovers of money" while retaining "a form of godliness" (2 Timothy 3:1–5). Outwardly, the ministry may look devout. Inwardly, greed may be governing its decisions. Pastor, has your congregation learned that a larger offering brings a greater claim upon God's favor? And Christian, when a preacher speaks confidently about the Holy Spirit, do you test his

words by Scripture—or assume that religious language proves his motives are pure?

Jude gives this greed a face. He describes men who "have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit" (Jude 11), and others who use impressive speech, "flattering people to gain advantage" (Jude 16). Notice how easily the methods can work together. Tell someone how specially favored he is. Promise an extraordinary blessing. Then attach that blessing to a financial gift. The hearer thinks he is exercising faith; the speaker is cultivating a customer. Have you ever felt pressured to give because you feared that refusing would mean refusing God? And pastor, have you permitted such appeals because the donations benefited your ministry? Greed does not become godliness because a preacher has learned to speak its language.

Now bring those warnings before the Lord Jesus Himself. John records that He drove sellers and money changers from the temple and commanded, "Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" (John 2:13–17). Matthew records His rebuke of those who had made the house of prayer a "den of thieves" (Matthew 21:12–13). Christ was defending His Father's honor, not prohibiting every lawful financial transaction. Scripture expressly permits the support of faithful ministers (1 Corinthians 9:14); it never permits them to sell forgiveness, healing, or access to God. Spurgeon expressed the difference plainly: "A gift is not a return for purchase-money." [2] No payment can buy the grace Christ gives freely. Before you praise a ministry for what it raises, ask what it does to the people who cannot give. Are the sheep being fed—or are the shepherds feeding themselves? God puts the question even more plainly: "Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?" (Ezekiel 34:2–4).

WHEN SHEPHERDS FEED THEMSELVES

> EZEKIEL 34:1–10 — And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.

> So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them." 'Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: "As I live," says the Lord GOD, "surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock"— therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more; for I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them."

God's indictment could hardly be more appropriate to religious merchandising. The shepherds had reversed the very purpose of their office. Instead of feeding the sheep, they fed themselves from the sheep. They took the wool, consumed the fat, and used the flock as a resource for their own comfort. In modern language, they were literally fleecing the flock.

That is the recurring anatomy of corrupt ministry. The false shepherd does not ask, How can I spend myself for these souls? He asks, What can these people provide for me? Their fear becomes leverage. Their sickness becomes a fundraising opportunity. Their hope for blessing becomes a revenue stream. Their desire to hear from God becomes something that can be packaged, branded, and sold.

> JEREMIAH 23:1–4 — "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!" says the Lord. 2 Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: "You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings," says the Lord. 3 "But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. 4 I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking," says the Lord.

Notice whose sheep are being scattered. The Lord repeatedly calls them His flock (Jeremiah 23:1–2). The rulers of Judah were entrusted with God's people; they were never their owners. Yet the Lord says they destroyed, scattered, drove away, and neglected those they should have cared for. A congregation can be damaged not only by the lie a preacher tells, but by the cry for help he refuses to hear. Think of the struggling widow whom nobody calls back, the suffering member who has been promised healing and is ashamed to admit that the disease remains, or the family that has learned to associate God's favor with its giving. Pastor, can those people speak honestly to you without fearing that they will be accused of unbelief? The flock does not become yours because you stand in the pulpit. It belongs to God (Acts 20:28).

There is a terrible reversal in verse 2. The shepherds had failed to attend to the flock; now the Lord declares that He will attend to the shepherds for their evil. The men who would not answer their sheep will have to answer their God. That ought to search us before we point a finger at famous religious profiteers. Have you allowed a visiting preacher to promise healing in exchange for an offering? If one of your people later discovered that the promise was false, would you correct it publicly where necessary, or protect the visitor because he brought money and attention to the church? Would the poorest person in your congregation receive the same prayers and care as the wealthiest? These are not questions about the size of a ministry. They are questions about what a shepherd believes the sheep are for. Peter forbids elders to shepherd for dishonest gain or to lord themselves over those entrusted to them (1 Peter 5:2–3).

But look where Jeremiah goes next. The Lord does not merely pronounce judgment upon corrupt leaders and leave the wounded sheep to find their own way home. He promises to gather His scattered remnant, restore them to their folds, and establish shepherds who will feed them rather than frighten them (Jeremiah 23:3–4). In Jeremiah's own setting, this was God's promise to His dispersed covenant people. We must not turn it into a guarantee that every injury in a present-day congregation will immediately disappear. But we dare not miss what it reveals about the Lord: He sees the sheep whom their leaders have forgotten, and He calls His shepherds to nourish and protect, not exploit. What would that require of us this week? Perhaps listening to a complaint we would rather dismiss, refusing a profitable but dishonest appeal, visiting a family that can give us nothing, or helping

someone injured by promises we should never have endorsed. Prayer, sound doctrine, truthful speech, and practical care are not inferior substitutes for spectacular ministry; they are part of the obedience Christ requires (James 5:14–16; Acts 20:28–31; Galatians 6:2).

Then Jeremiah carries the promise beyond the failures of every merely human shepherd. In the next two verses, God announces the coming righteous King from David's line, the One called THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS (Jeremiah 23:5–6). Here the passage turns our eyes to Jesus Christ. The Good Shepherd does not bargain with desperate sheep or flatter them to obtain their money. He lays down His life for them; the hired man runs when danger comes (John 10:11–13). Think about that contrast before asking whether a ministry is impressive or successful. The hired man abandons the sheep when keeping them becomes costly; Christ gave Himself when saving them cost His life. His blood—not their contributions—secured their redemption (1 Peter 1:18–19). Pastor, when those entrusted to you are weak, frightened, poor, or inconvenient, which shepherd is your example? And Christian, do not allow a man who sells spiritual favor to teach you what your Savior is like. The Lord who owns His sheep has already shown what faithful shepherding costs.

With those two prophets before us, Peter's warning becomes even more searching. He says false teachers will exploit people through covetousness and deceptive words (2 Peter 2:3). The issue is not only an improper financial transaction. It is the betrayal of people God calls His own. A shepherd sees a soul entrusted to his care; a religious merchant sees someone from whom he can obtain an advantage.

Commercialization does not begin only when money changes hands. It begins whenever ministry is reshaped to satisfy the consumer rather than faithfully serve Christ. Paul warned that a time would come when people "will not endure sound doctrine," but would "heap up for themselves teachers" according to their own desires (2 Timothy 4:3–4). When the appetite of the congregation becomes the controlling force, the pulpit is tempted to become a marketplace: truth is softened, offense is removed, personalities are marketed, and ministry is packaged to retain the customer. The faithful minister does not ask first, "What will people buy?" but, "What has Christ commanded me to preach?"

Consider several of the most serious ways Scripture has been distorted to create religious consumer demand in our generation:

1. The prosperity transaction. Promises concerning God's

provision and generous giving are turned into a financial formula: give money to this ministry and God will multiply it back to you. Grace becomes an investment strategy, despite Scripture's condemnation of those who suppose that godliness is a means of financial gain (1 Timothy 6:5–10; 2 Peter 2:3).

2. **Guaranteed healing.** Texts concerning Christ's atonement and healing are presented as guarantees that every Christian possesses a present right to physical healing if only sufficient faith is exercised. The suffering believer is then blamed when healing does not occur, despite Paul's unanswered plea concerning his thorn and the recorded illnesses of faithful believers (2 Corinthians 12:7–10; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20).
3. **Prophecy on demand.** Christians are taught to seek personalized words about marriages, careers, finances, relocations, and future events from contemporary prophets rather than resting in Scripture and biblical wisdom. The result creates an appetite for the next revelation and often places extraordinary authority in the hands of people whose words are not subjected to the biblical standards governing those who claim to speak for God (Deuteronomy 18:20–22; Jeremiah 23:25–32; 1 Thessalonians 5:21).
4. **The motivational gospel.** Verses such as "I can do all things through Christ" are detached from their context and transformed into promises of personal achievement, success, and fulfilled ambitions rather than contentment and endurance in Christ (Philippians 4:11–13). Scripture becomes a collection of slogans designed to make the consumer feel powerful rather than a Word that exposes sin and exalts Christ.
5. **Entertainment-driven worship.** The gathered church is increasingly evaluated by the standards of a concert, theater, or commercial production—whether the audience was excited, impressed, or emotionally moved—rather than by fidelity to the Word, prayer, congregational praise, the ordinances, and reverent worship (Acts 2:42; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 12:28–29). Once entertainment becomes the product, the congregation inevitably becomes the customer.
6. **The merchandising of spiritual access.** Books, conferences, prayer lines, "anointed" objects, special impartations, or privileged access to spiritual personalities can be marketed in ways that suggest that greater blessing is available to those willing to pay for it. Simon Magus attempted to attach money to spiritual

> power and was rebuked with terrifying severity: "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!" (Acts 8:18–23; cf. Matthew 10:8).

These abuses differ in form, but the underlying principle is the same: once the desires of the consumer begin determining the message, ministry ceases to ask, "What has God said?" and begins asking, "What will people purchase, applaud, attend, or come back to hear?"

If you recognize these patterns in your church, do not dismiss them as harmless differences in style. When a ministry consistently reshapes Scripture around human appetite, markets spiritual experience, flatters the flesh, or trains people to seek blessing rather than Christ, something far deeper than preference is at stake. Humble yourself before God and ask whether you have participated in that consumer spirit—whether you have chosen teachers because they told you what you wanted to hear, valued excitement more than truth, or tolerated practices you knew Scripture could not support. Repent where repentance is needed. Plead with God for courage to obey Him rather than fear man. And if the leadership refuses biblical correction and persists in making the congregation, rather than Christ, the center of ministry, you should seriously consider leaving and seeking a faithful church where the Word of God governs the pulpit, worship, giving, shepherding, and spiritual life. Do not remain indefinitely in a place that steadily trains your soul to love what Christ came to crucify. Paul commands believers to "note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them" (Romans 16:17). Christ is worthy of your allegiance, even when obedience is costly.

Financial corruption in ministry is therefore never merely a bookkeeping problem. It can expose a distorted understanding of ministry itself. The minister begins to think like an owner rather than a steward, as though truth, spiritual authority, influence, or access to God were his private inventory. But the ministry belongs to Christ. As I have written elsewhere: "The church is therefore not a religious marketplace with a cross on the logo. It is the blood-bought household of God. Its ministers are not proprietors distributing privately owned spiritual inventory. They are stewards administering what belongs to Another." [3] A steward may administer his Master's property; he may never pretend it belongs to him.

JUDAS AND THE MONEY BOX

> John 12:6: "This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it."

John does not merely show us a thief; he shows us a thief who knew how to sound charitable. At Bethany, while Mary honored Jesus with costly perfume, Judas objected that it could have been sold to benefit the poor (John 12:3–5). His protest appeared to defend the needy, but John reveals that the man making it was stealing from the money box. He traveled with Christ, heard His teaching, participated in ministry, and handled the common purse. His position of trust gave him access to money connected with Christ's ministry, and he quietly converted stewardship into personal opportunity. The lesson is painfully relevant: proximity to sacred things does not sanctify greed. As J. C. Ryle wrote, "Privileges alone convert nobody." [4] A man can speak the language of ministry, appear concerned for the poor, handle money given for holy purposes, and still love what he can take from the bag.

> Matthew 26:14–16: "Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?' And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver. So from that time he sought opportunity to betray Him."

The progression is sobering. Judas had already stolen from the money box; now he accepted thirty pieces of silver for betraying the Lord. The man entrusted with Christ's purse put a price on Christ Himself. Judas's betrayal involved more than greed alone (Luke 22:3–6), but the money reveals the bargain he willingly made. Pastor, do your decisions about ministry finances demonstrate that you serve Christ, or have you begun to serve what His people can provide? Christian, words about helping the poor are no proof of integrity if the money is used to enrich the man who speaks them.

> 1 Timothy 3:3: "not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous;"
>
> Titus 1:7: "For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money,"

Paul does not merely advise a minister to manage money carefully; he describes the character a man must possess to shepherd Christ's church. A pastor may rightly receive support for his labor (1 Corinthians 9:14), but he may not use the needs of the flock as a means of enriching himself. A man whose ministry is governed by greed is disqualified from pastoral office, however gifted, admired, or successful he appears. God has not given the church permission to overlook a qualification He has expressly required. A congregation must judge a man's stewardship by Scripture, not excuse it because his ministry attracts a crowd.

A. W. Pink, reflecting on the hireling in John 10:12–13, wrote, "A hireling is a mercenary: has no other impulse than the lust of lucre." [5] The Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep; a mercenary looks at the sheep and calculates what he can take from them. Judas took money entrusted for the work; Simon Magus would try to use money to buy the gift of God.

SIMON MAGUS: TRYING TO BUY THE POWER OF GOD

Judas put a price on his Lord. Simon Magus wanted to put a price on the power of His Spirit. The two men approached the sacred from opposite directions, but both dragged money into a place where it had no authority. Simon had astonished Samaria with sorcery and claimed to be someone great; the people treated him as though he possessed the great power of God (Acts 8:9–11). Then Philip arrived preaching Christ. The sick were delivered, the city rejoiced, and attention began moving away from the magician toward the Savior (Acts 8:5–8, 12). Simon was willing to admire a greater power. The question was whether he would bow before its Lord—or find a way to possess it.

Luke says that Simon believed, was baptized, and continued with Philip, astonished by the signs (Acts 8:13). Do not erase his profession; expose what it could not prove. The same account later records Peter telling this baptized man that his heart was not right before God and that he remained bound by iniquity (Acts 8:21–23). A. W. Pink warned, "No one can read the New Testament attentively without discovering that there is a 'believing' in Christ which does not save." [6] Christ Himself did not entrust Himself to certain people who believed when they saw His signs, because He knew their hearts (John 2:23–25). The water of baptism testified to Simon's profession; it did not certify the condition of Simon's soul. Christian, strip away

the testimony you tell, the church you attend, the ministry friends who commend you, and the experiences you recount. What remains when Christ asks whether you love Him and keep His Word (John 14:15; 2 Corinthians 13:5)?

> Acts 8:18–19: "And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.'"

Listen carefully to what he asked. Not, "How may I be made holy?" Not, "How may these people know Christ?" He wanted hands capable of conferring the Spirit. Yesterday he stood before crowds as the man of power; today he wanted his place in the apostolic wonder. Alexander Maclaren pierced the contradiction: "He does not think at all of what is involved in the very name, 'the Holy Ghost.'" [7] He coveted the Spirit's power while ignoring the Spirit's holiness. He saw a gift that magnified Christ and imagined an instrument that could magnify Simon. The sinner who will not relinquish the throne of his heart may gladly invite religion to decorate it. Pastor, when people leave your meetings, what name fills their conversation? What power have you taught them to seek—the supposed power of your hands, or the saving power of the crucified and risen Lord (1 Corinthians 1:23–24; John 16:14)?

> Acts 8:20–23: "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."

Peter did not negotiate, reduce the price, or propose an acceptable donation. He pronounced judgment on the *idea* of a price. The price was not too low; the transaction itself was wrong. Simon had brought money before the God who gives and imagined the Giver could be turned into a vendor. Calvin saw ambition working beside greed: Simon "hunted after riches, and sought to purchase praise in the sight of the world." [8] He wanted both an income and an audience. Here is the deadly alliance: the longing to be admired discovers that religious influence can be profitable; the longing for profit discovers

that religious admiration can be cultivated. Before long the sheep no longer look like souls to be served. They look like a market to be retained. Jesus did not call this an unfortunate management problem. He said, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24).

Peter's rebuke also left a door open: "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God" (Acts 8:22). Simon's reply was a request that judgment not fall on him (Acts 8:24). Luke records no unmistakable confession of the sin Peter named and no certain account of a changed life. We must not invent Simon's final destiny; we must not miss the warning. Paul distinguishes godly sorrow, which produces repentance, from worldly sorrow, which produces death (2 Corinthians 7:10–11). A man may be horrified that his sin has been discovered while remaining devoted to the sin itself. If exposure cost you the pulpit, the salary, the donors, the television audience, and the honor of your name, which loss would grieve you most? Would you plead for a restored platform—or a clean heart (Psalm 51:10)?

The church later called the purchase or sale of sacred offices, privileges, and spiritual things *simony*, after this Samaritan. But Acts 8 gives us more than a vocabulary word. It discloses a false doctrine of God: the notion that His gifts can be acquired as property, administered as personal inventory, and distributed by financial agreement. In *The Ministry Belongs to Christ*, I wrote, "Peter's outrage is theological before it is financial." [9] The outrage begins with God's nature. Simony does not merely overcharge the customer; it misrepresents the Owner. The moment a minister presumes to sell what belongs to Christ, he stops speaking as a steward and begins behaving as a proprietor. That is why the question is not first, *Was the amount reasonable?* It is, *Who gave you authority to demand a price for this?* (1 Corinthians 4:1–2; Colossians 1:18).

Consider whose Spirit Simon proposed to obtain. The Holy Spirit is not an influence stored in a preacher's body, waiting to be released when an offering reaches the proper amount. He is the living God. Peter identified lying to the Spirit with lying to God (Acts 5:3–4), and Paul says that He distributes gifts "to each one individually as He wills" (1 Corinthians 12:11). John Owen's words expose the folly: "That which is of gift is free." [10] Paul did not ask the Galatians what they paid for the Spirit; he asked whether they received Him by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith (Galatians 3:2). You cannot put a sovereign Person behind a payment screen. Neither a famous minister

nor an obscure one can make the Comforter his private supply. He is given by God and glorifies Christ (John 14:16–17; 16:14).

Now follow the truth from the Spirit to the steward. "What do you have that you did not receive?" asks Paul (1 Corinthians 4:7). The Word was received. The opportunity to preach was received. The gifts used in preaching were received. Above all, the people were purchased by Christ, not by their pastor (Acts 20:28). Peter therefore commands ministers to serve "as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). Labor upon a gift does not give the laborer ownership of it. A shepherd may be paid for faithful work; he cannot sell the flock its rightful access to the Shepherd. A teacher may spend years preparing a lesson; years of preparation do not make divine truth a commodity. The church belongs to Christ, and no human intermediary may redraw His terms of grace.

Then hear Christ speak to the men He sent: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). In the same commission He says that a worker is worthy of his food (Matthew 10:10). Scripture never asks us to choose between a free gospel and a supported servant. Conley Owens states the distinction with memorable precision: "Ministry should be supported, not sold." [11] His *Dorean Principle* distinguishes support given in colabor for the Lord's work from payment rendered as reciprocity for spiritual service. The Lord of the harvest employs His laborers; the grain does not purchase their message (Matthew 9:37–38). The giver may help carry the burden of the ministry; the giver must not be taught that he is purchasing the favor of God. The minister's need for support is real. His supposed right to own and sell Christ's provision is not.

Paul made that difference visible to churches whose habits could have swallowed it. He defended his right to material support and then chose, when the gospel required it, to relinquish that right rather than hinder the message (1 Corinthians 9:12–18). Other believers shared his costs while he served those unable or unready to support him (2 Corinthians 11:8–9; Philippians 4:15–18). The one taught should support the teacher (Galatians 6:6); faithful elders deserve material honor (1 Timothy 5:17–18). But, as *The Ministry Belongs to Christ* states, "The minister may be supported because he labors. The spiritual gift is not therefore his property to sell." [12] Support supplies the servant. Purchase puts a tollgate before the soul. The two may appear identical on a spreadsheet; they are not identical before the Lord who commands His servants to give freely.

Open the door of an ordinary church and see where that distinction is lost. A widow cannot afford the conference where the sermon she needs will be preached. A struggling father discovers that the discipleship instruction offered to wealthier members is locked behind a fee. A desperate family hears that a special gift will bring a special prayer. None of this is made harmless by changing *price* to *seed*, *charge* to *investment*, or *customer* to *partner*. Material costs deserve honest provision, and not every charge for a room, meal, or printed object constitutes simony. But what spiritual ministry disappears when the money disappears? If the person with no money can hear substantially none of what the paying person receives, money is functioning as a gatekeeper. Isaiah deliberately calls the one with no money to come anyway (Isaiah 55:1). Has our arrangement taught him to stand outside?

Do not imagine that Simon's instinct died in Samaria. Kenneth Copeland Ministries teaches a financial "hundredfold return" and, in an October 2024 explanation, tells givers to expect that return on what they sow, including money. [13] God does command generosity, and He provides abundantly for generous service (2 Corinthians 9:6–11). But Paul's promised abundance is ordered toward further generosity and thanksgiving, not a guaranteed multiplication schedule that turns giving into a technique for securing wealth. When an offering is sold to the imagination as a route to financial increase, money has begun to tell the worshiper what faith should expect. That teaching is not the same historical act as Simon's attempt to buy apostolic power, but it invites the same dangerous confusion between trusting God and controlling a result.

Benny Hinn publicly declared in 2019 that the gospel was not for sale and rejected appeals built around a thousand-dollar gift. Yet in a July 2024 broadcast he told viewers that only those faithful in giving to God's work would be financially protected in coming dark days, while urging them to donate to his ministry. [14] Hear what such an assurance does to a frightened conscience. A mother who can scarcely pay rent is told that future security depends upon her giving. Scripture invites Christians to give cheerfully, "not grudgingly or of necessity" (2 Corinthians 9:7); it does not authorize a television preacher to assign financial protection only to his faithful contributors. Fear has entered the offering basket, and the basket is presented as the way out of fear. Does this sound like the Good Shepherd who lays down His

life for the sheep—or like the hireling who discovers a use for their terror (John 10:11–13)?

Peter Popoff Ministries provides a grimmer illustration of what happens when suffering becomes the center of a spiritual sales appeal. In 2025 the British broadcasting regulator Ofcom imposed penalties on The Word Network over broadcasts of Popoff's ministry that promoted "Miracle Spring Water" and made unsupported claims or strong implications about relief from serious illness and financial difficulty. Ofcom found that the programmes exploited viewer vulnerability and failed to protect people from harm; the penalties were imposed on the broadcaster. [15] Think of a person living with cancer watching such a programme. He is not a *prospect*. His pain is not a *market*. The afflicted are not inventory from which a religious personality may extract hope and revenue. Christ's servants must speak truth to the sick, pray with compassion, and never counterfeit divine promises (James 5:13–16; 2 Corinthians 4:2).

It would be comfortable to close the television screen and declare ourselves innocent. That is precisely where the diagnosis must come closer. Pastor, have you introduced an admired preacher because his fame fills the building though his teaching distorts Scripture? Have you given the microphone to a man whose promises you would condemn if a lesser-known minister made them? Have you defended a profitable event you could not defend from the open Bible? Elder, when did you last examine the financial appeals and spiritual claims your congregation actually hears—not merely the doctrinal statement it publishes? Church member, if a ministry you follow promised less money, fewer thrills, no private revelations, and only Christ faithfully preached, would you still return? The famous merchant needs customers; the quiet customer may already have learned to want a merchant. The problem does not end at the platform. It reaches the appetite that keeps the platform standing (2 Timothy 4:3–4).

Acts 8 also forbids the false claim that a modern celebrity possesses the apostles' transferable authority. Samaria was receiving the gospel as the risen Christ promised (Acts 1:8); Peter and John came as apostles in that foundational expansion and laid hands upon believers (Acts 8:14–17). The church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Himself the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20); their witness was attended by divine signs (Hebrews 2:3–4; 2 Corinthians 12:12). A foundation is not laid afresh whenever another preacher announces that the power is in his hands. Acts 8 does not by

itself establish the date at which extraordinary sign gifts ceased; the wider scriptural case must do that work. It certainly does not authorize anyone to sell impartations, promise the Spirit for an offering, or claim apostolic status because a crowd reports wonders. Christ's Word must judge the claimant, not the claimant's performance judge Christ's Word (1 John 4:1).

There is something more terrifying than a preacher being exposed as a religious fraud: it is a preacher dying an admired religious fraud and standing before the Christ whose name he used to enrich himself. Preacher, you may fill auditoriums, build a religious empire, collect millions in offerings, and persuade multitudes that your prosperity proves God's approval. But what if the very wealth you celebrate is evidence of the covetousness that is destroying your soul? Peter warns that false teachers will exploit God's people through greed and deception, declaring that "their destruction does not slumber" (2 Peter 2:3). Jude identifies religious men who pursued Balaam's error for profit and warns that everlasting darkness awaits such deceivers (Jude 11–13). This wickedness is as old as the false prophets themselves. Micah condemned religious leaders whose priests taught for pay and whose prophets divined for money, while confidently assuring themselves that God was among them and no judgment would overtake them (Micah 3:11). They presumed that God's name would protect the very greed that dishonored His name! But Malachi announces the coming day of divine judgment, "Burning like an oven," when the wicked will be consumed (Malachi 4:1). Isaiah describes the dreadful judgment of those who rebel against God, declaring that "their fire is not quenched" (Isaiah 66:24)—a warning the Lord Jesus Himself takes upon His lips when speaking of hell (Mark 9:43–48). The pulpit does not make a man fireproof. The office of preacher offers no shelter from the wrath of the God whose Word he has corrupted. Paul declares that the desire for riches can drown men in destruction and perdition (1 Timothy 6:9–10), and announces that the covetous man, whom God calls an idolater, has no inheritance in Christ's kingdom (Ephesians 5:5). He exposes men who suppose that godliness is a means of gain (1 Timothy 6:5), and warns that the last days will be marked by lovers of money who retain a form of godliness while denying its power (2 Timothy 3:1–5). What a fearful deception! They have not merely brought their greed into the ministry; they have made the ministry an instrument for feeding their greed!

Do you understand what God is saying? A man may become

fabulously wealthy by preaching about heaven and still perish eternally in hell! The Lord Jesus condemned religious hypocrites who devoured widows' houses (Mark 12:40). Will He overlook the preacher who exploits a widow's suffering, promises a sick man healing for an offering, or convinces the poor that God's favor can be purchased? And you who profess to follow Christ while defending such men because your own heart covets the riches they promise—do not mistake your love of money for faith in God (1 Corinthians 6:9–10; Colossians 3:5). The day is coming when the cameras will be silent, the offerings will cease, the crowds will disappear, and every man will stand before God. What will your millions purchase when Christ declares, "I never knew you; depart from Me" (Matthew 7:23)? What consolation will your religious empire offer in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15)? Oh, preacher, hear the warning of God before you hear His sentence! FLEE FROM THE WRATH TO COME! (Matthew 3:7). Do not wait until death tears the last dollar from your hands and eternity exposes the worthlessness of everything for which you sold your soul. REPENT! Stop selling what Christ has freely given. Stop exploiting the weak, deceiving the desperate, and disguising covetousness as godliness. Confess your wickedness, abandon your dishonest gain, make restitution where you have wronged others, and surrender whatever position you must rather than cling to your sin. Peter commanded Simon to repent and seek God's forgiveness (Acts 8:20–22). That same mercy is held out to the repentant sinner today. Come to Christ with nothing to offer but your guilt, and seek the cleansing that only His precious blood can provide. What unspeakable tragedy to spend your life telling others about the riches of Christ, only to discover at the judgment that you loved money more than the Savior and have lost your own soul!

PASTORAL REFORMATION — WHAT MUST THE SHEPHERD DO NOW?

Simon attempted to purchase the gift of God. But a pastor need not offer money to an apostle to repeat Simon's wickedness. He may reproduce the same corruption through his offering appeals, his ministry policies, his invited speakers, and the expectations he has taught his congregation to embrace. It is possible to denounce Simon from the pulpit while preserving Simon's bargain in the church budget.

The shepherd must therefore examine not merely what he believes

about money, but what his ministry has taught people to expect from God when they give it.

Repent

Pastor, begin before the Lord whose sheep you were entrusted to feed. What have you introduced, tolerated, defended, or quietly excused because it increased attendance, offerings, or influence? Have you promised blessings Scripture never promised? Have you allowed spiritual desperation to become a fundraising opportunity? Have you defended a popular visiting preacher whose teachings you knew were false because his presence filled the building?

Name the sin. Do not hide it beneath the language of ministry necessity. Bring the matter before qualified elders, open the financial records to proper scrutiny, and tell the truth to those who were misled. Where deception has taken money from people, pursue restitution rather than retaining dishonest gains under the excuse that the money was used for a good cause (Luke 19:8; 2 Corinthians 8:20–21).

And if your conduct has demonstrated the greed that Scripture forbids in an overseer, do not mistake public embarrassment for repentance or an apology for restoration to office (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7). A man who has exploited Christ's sheep must not presume that confessing the exploitation automatically qualifies him to continue shepherding them.

The pastor cannot call the church to repentance where he refuses to lead it in repentance before God.

Re-Teach

The congregation must understand why these practices are wrong. Otherwise, reform will look like the pastor's change of preference rather than submission to the Word of God.

Open Matthew 10:8, Acts 8:18–23, 1 Corinthians 9:12–18, and 1 Timothy 5:17–18. Establish plainly the distinction between supporting a servant of Christ and purchasing the ministry of Christ. The laborer may receive material support. The Word, the Spirit, the promises of God, and access to the ministry of the gospel are not his possessions to sell.

Teach the people that Christian generosity is not a financial strategy for compelling divine favor. God commands willing, cheerful giving, not offerings extracted through promises of guaranteed wealth, healing, or protection (2 Corinthians 9:7). Explain the

difference between sharing legitimate ministry expenses and demanding payment for supposed spiritual privileges.

And consider the congregation that has listened to these promises for years. Some gave because they feared sickness. Others gave because they desperately wanted a child healed, a marriage restored, or a debt removed. They must now hear the truth from the very pulpit that may have helped teach them error.

You cannot correct the church's financial practices without correcting what the church has been taught to believe about God.

Reform

Now put those convictions into practice.

Examine every offering appeal, fundraising campaign, conference fee, ministry resource, special-access arrangement, and visiting speaker. Ask what is being offered, what is being promised, and whether money has become a condition for receiving spiritual ministry. Remove unscriptural promises immediately. Where legitimate expenses exist, provide for them honestly and transparently. A congregation can bear costs together, underwrite resources, simplify events, or support faithful workers without turning the recipients of ministry into customers (3 John 5–8).

Establish financial oversight that does not depend upon the unquestioned authority of a gifted personality. Require that those who teach and raise funds answer to biblically qualified leadership. Where previous appeals misled people, correct the teaching publicly and take appropriate steps to repair the harm.

And do not overlook the poor. Ask whether the widow, the unemployed father, or the struggling family receives the ministry of the Word that wealthier members receive. If the financially weak are repeatedly left outside while the wealthy gain privileged spiritual access, the problem is not merely an unfortunate budget arrangement. The church has allowed money to govern something Christ entrusted to shepherds.

A ministry has not been reformed merely because it has changed its language. The practices that embodied the error must change as well.

Remain

Then prepare for the cost of obedience.

Some will accuse you of limiting God's blessing. Others will defend the very teachers whose promises you have exposed. A prominent

donor may withdraw his support. A popular speaker may take his audience elsewhere. Attendance may decline, and the financial report may become less impressive.

Will you remain faithful when obedience costs what compromise once provided?

Paul commanded Timothy to preach the Word whether people welcomed it or not, warning that men would accumulate teachers according to their own desires (2 Timothy 4:1–5). Peter commanded elders to shepherd God's flock willingly and eagerly, not for dishonest gain, remembering that they will answer to the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:2–4).

Remain steadfast in biblical conviction, but tender toward those who have been deceived. Do not ridicule the fearful believer who gave money believing that God would otherwise withhold His help. Teach him patiently. Protect the vulnerable. Give the congregation time to understand necessary practical changes, but do not allow the teaching of falsehood or financial manipulation to continue while those changes are being made.

And when the numbers fall, do not restore the false promises merely to restore the numbers. If a crowd gathered because it was promised something Christ never promised, enlarging that crowd was never the measure of faithful ministry.

It is better to stand before Christ with a diminished ministry than to stand before Him with a flourishing enterprise sustained by the exploitation of His sheep.

The sheep need the Shepherd's voice, not the salesman's assurances (John 10:27).

And now lift your eyes above Simon's hands, the celebrity's stage, and the poor person's empty purse. Peter, who condemned buying God's gift, later wrote that we were redeemed "not with corruptible things, like silver or gold," but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19). There is the answer to every attempt to monetize grace. The sinner's money could never satisfy God's justice; Christ bore the curse and secured redemption through His own sacrifice (Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 1:7). Spurgeon declared, "But though they cost us nothing, they cost the Saviour dear." [16] What no sinner can buy, the Son of God purchased at the cost of His life—and freely gives to those who come to Him. Romans calls it being justified "freely by His grace" through redemption in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24). The price was His blood. The invitation to the sinner is not a sales offer.

The exalted Savior pours out the Spirit; the Spirit glorifies Him (Acts 2:33; John 16:14). No minister's hands can command the Spirit, and no frightened sinner must bring money before he may seek Christ. Come with your guilt, not your payment. Come for forgiveness, not a bargain. Come to the One who said that whoever desires may take the water of life freely (Revelation 22:17). Pastor, put down every claim to possess what He alone bestows. Christian, withdraw every misplaced trust from the man who would sell it. Simon tried to buy what God gives. Long before Simon, Gehazi had run after a healed man to collect what his master refused to charge.

GEHAZI: WHEN GRATITUDE BECOMES A PRICE

Naaman came to Israel with the treasures of Syria and a disease that all his treasures could not cure. He commanded soldiers, possessed wealth, and enjoyed the favor of kings. Yet beneath the splendid garments of a celebrated commander was the flesh of a leper. His greatness could not make him clean. His silver could not purchase what only God could give.

And when God cleansed him, Naaman discovered something greater than the restoration of his flesh. He learned that the LORD alone is God. The man who came seeking healing departed confessing the living God (2 Kings 5:15).

That was the purpose of the miracle. The Lord was not displaying His power to entertain a crowd, enrich a prophet, or establish a successful religious enterprise. He was making Himself known.

Elisha understood this. When the grateful commander urged him to accept a gift, the prophet answered with an oath: "As the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will receive nothing" (2 Kings 5:16). Elisha would not permit Naaman to confuse divine mercy with a purchased service. The Syrian must return home knowing that the God of Israel had freely shown him mercy.

But another man was watching.

Gehazi had seen the cleansing. He had heard Naaman confess the LORD. He had watched his master refuse the gifts. Yet where Elisha saw the glory of God, Gehazi saw an opportunity for gain. The treasure that Elisha rejected had already captured the servant's imagination.

Then Scripture exposes one of the most searching contrasts in the account. Elisha invoked the living LORD to refuse payment. Gehazi invoked that same living LORD to justify pursuing it (2 Kings 5:16, 20).

The same sacred words that guarded the testimony of grace in one man's mouth became the covering for covetousness in another.

This is not merely the story of a dishonest servant. It is the story of a man who learned the language of God's work without acquiring a heart governed by God's glory.

John Trapp, commenting on 2 Kings 5:20, exposed the multiplying character of Gehazi's sin: the servant disparaged his master, spoke contemptuously of Naaman, invoked an oath, lied, and stole. Trapp concluded, "There is a mint of mischief in a worldly heart." [17]

A single ruling desire had enlisted an entire company of sins.

Gehazi ran after Naaman. When the commander saw him approaching, he descended from his chariot to meet him. Here was a man whose life had just been transformed by the power of God, receiving the prophet's servant with evident confidence. Gehazi used that confidence against him.

"My master has sent me," he claimed, before inventing a story about two young men from among the sons of the prophets who supposedly needed financial assistance (2 Kings 5:22).

Notice the construction of the lie. Gehazi did not openly demand a reward for himself. He borrowed the authority of Elisha, invented a charitable necessity, and concealed his greed beneath the appearance of ministry.

He made compassion the instrument of covetousness and the prophet's reputation the guarantee of his deception.

Naaman gave generously. Gehazi received the silver and garments, hid them, dismissed the servants who had helped carry them, and returned to Elisha with another lie (2 Kings 5:23–25). The man who had stood so near the ministry of a prophet had become a stranger to the integrity that ministry required.

Matthew Henry observed that Gehazi had misrepresented Elisha to Naaman as a man who had quickly reversed his generous refusal. The servant had made his master's integrity appear unreliable. Henry recognized that the offense was therefore larger than theft: Gehazi endangered the good impression God's work had made upon the newly converted Syrian. [18]

Consider what Gehazi had done. A miracle intended to reveal the true God had become an occasion for misrepresenting God's servant and exploiting a recipient of God's mercy. The glory belonged to God; Gehazi tried to collect the proceeds.

THE THEOLOGY OF DIVINE POWER AND THE CORRUPTION OF ITS PURPOSE

Here is the governing theology. Miraculous power belongs to God, its exercise is governed by His sovereign will, and its purpose is the revelation of His glory—not the satisfaction of an audience or the enrichment of a religious performer. The LORD alone is God, and He does according to His will (Psalm 115:3; Daniel 4:35). Biblical miracles were never autonomous powers placed at the disposal of men: Moses could not enter Canaan despite his petitions (Deuteronomy 3:23–27); Paul left Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20); and even the apostle's own thorn was not removed, though he pleaded three times (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). Christ's miracles revealed His divine identity and authenticated His saving mission (John 5:36; 10:37–38; 20:30–31; Acts 2:22). The foundational apostolic signs bore God's witness to the message of salvation (Hebrews 2:3–4; 2 Corinthians 12:12), while the apostles and prophets occupied a foundational place in the establishment of the church (Ephesians 2:20). Scripture therefore gives no warrant for modern performers to claim that they can summon divine power, schedule miraculous results, or reproduce apostolic signs at will. Nor does it permit the church to substitute a staged experience for the appointed ministry of the Word (Romans 10:17; 2 Timothy 3:16–4:2). To manufacture healings, advertise guaranteed miracles, manipulate the emotions of suffering people, and then solicit their money is not merely an abuse of fundraising. It is a theological reversal: God's sovereign power is portrayed as man's possession; the signs that directed attention to Christ become spectacles that direct attention to the performer; and people are trained to pursue religious excitement instead of the truth by which God reveals His Son. This is precisely why the commercialization of claimed miraculous power belongs within the biblical case for cessationism. It exposes what happens when men arrogate to themselves the authority and signs of Christ's foundational messengers, detach those signs from their revealed purpose, and turn the extraordinary works of God into a repeatable program for an audience. The New Testament directs us instead to the once-for-all faith delivered to the saints, the sufficient Scriptures, and the ordinary, enduring ministry of the Word through which Christ builds His church (Jude 3; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Ephesians 4:11–16).

That doctrinal distinction must govern our response to the modern healing spectacle. The objection is not that God has ceased to be

powerful, merciful, or attentive to the cries of the sick. We confess His continuing sovereignty, uphold prayer for the afflicted, and rejoice whenever He grants healing according to His will (James 5:13–16; 1 John 5:14–15). The objection is to men who claim possession of a miraculous authority Scripture identifies with the extraordinary, foundational ministry of Christ's apostles—and then use that claim to govern the expectations, emotions, and giving of God's people.

The contrast becomes especially grievous when suffering supplies the entertainment.

Imagine a crowded meeting. Music swells. The audience is told that extraordinary power is about to descend. A minister calls sufferers forward, announces healings before they have been established, and invites the congregation to celebrate what it has been told to believe. The cameras turn toward tears, trembling bodies, and jubilant faces. The spectacle rises toward its climax. Then comes the appeal for money.

Where is the sick person in all this? Has he been shepherded by truth, or has his suffering become part of the production? Has he been directed toward the sovereign Christ who may heal according to His will, or toward a man who claims the power to guarantee what only God can grant?

The sick have become the scenery, the preacher the attraction, and the miracle the advertised product.

Not every public testimony of healing is false, nor does every congregation that prays earnestly for the sick participate in such deception. The evil lies in the false claim of divine authority, the manipulation of expectations, the fabrication or careless announcement of miracles, and the conversion of another person's suffering into religious advantage.

The Lord Jesus never treated suffering people as props for His reputation. His miracles were real, His compassion genuine, and His authority divine. He had no need to manufacture an atmosphere in which the crowd would believe that power had been exercised. When He cleansed a leper, the leprosy departed (Mark 1:40–42). When He raised Lazarus, the dead man came out of the tomb (John 11:43–44). His works were not imitations designed to stimulate faith in a performance; they were the mighty works of the incarnate Son.

And His authority was never purchased.

When Jesus commissioned the Twelve and empowered them to perform extraordinary works, He commanded, "Freely you have

received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Peter likewise refused Simon's proposal to obtain divine power with money, declaring that God's gift could not be purchased (Acts 8:18–23). The point is not that every form of material support for ministry is forbidden. Scripture expressly teaches that those who preach the gospel may receive their living from the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:14; 1 Timothy 5:17–18). The prohibition is against making God's power, mercy, or message a commodity for personal profit.

Gehazi crossed that boundary. He presented the prophet's ministry as a means of securing wealth and clothed his greed in the language of religious necessity.

But Elisha's question disclosed that the matter reached still deeper.

"Is it time to receive money and to receive clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male and female servants?" (2 Kings 5:26).

Why this astonishing inventory? Gehazi had obtained silver and garments. Elisha named the possessions and comforts into which wealth might be converted. The rebuke exposed the worldly horizon of Gehazi's desire. He was no longer satisfied to serve near the work of God. His heart had begun constructing another life from its advantages.

He had placed ministry in the service of the future he wanted for himself.

This is the temptation that haunts every age of the church. A minister may begin with the language of sacrifice and end with the appetite of a merchant. He may discover that sensational claims attract crowds, that crowds create influence, that influence produces revenue, and that revenue rewards the continuation of the spectacle. Once this machinery begins to serve his ambitions, truth becomes an inconvenience whenever truth threatens the enterprise.

It is possible to keep the vocabulary of ministry while quietly surrendering its purpose.

Charles Spurgeon warned in his sermon A Lesson and a Fortune for Christian Men of Business that gold and silver can "birdlime our souls," holding them captive to their influence. [19] The image is painfully appropriate. Gehazi thought he had secured the silver. In reality, the silver had secured him.

The danger is especially acute when the supposed miracles themselves become the means of sustaining an entertainment-driven ministry. If people attend chiefly to witness extraordinary manifestations, the minister must continue supplying manifestations. If donations

rise with the intensity of the spectacle, there is a financial incentive to make each successive occasion more astonishing than the last.

The Word of God is then displaced from its rightful authority. The congregation is trained to ask, What will happen tonight? rather than, What has God said? The preacher is judged by the sensations he can produce instead of his faithfulness to Scripture. The suffering person becomes an occasion for the leader's prominence, while the glory that belongs to Christ is diverted toward the platform.

Entertainment is not an innocent addition when it becomes the machinery by which claimed miracles are made believable and financially profitable.

But Gehazi's carefully constructed future collapsed beneath a single sentence of judgment.

Elisha declared that Naaman's leprosy would cling to Gehazi and his descendants, and Gehazi departed afflicted (2 Kings 5:27). The reversal is fearful. Naaman came to the prophet diseased and departed cleansed. Gehazi went after the cleansed man seeking wealth and departed bearing the disease that had been removed.

John Trapp saw the bitter irony: Gehazi desired to improve his circumstances through dishonest gain, yet brought disaster upon himself and his household. Matthew Henry likewise described the transaction as wealth acquired together with a terrible burden. [20]

We must interpret this divine judgment with the precision Scripture requires. The passage records a particular judgment pronounced through God's prophet, including its stated consequence for Gehazi's descendants. It does not authorize us to interpret every later illness, disability, or family affliction as evidence of some specific personal sin. The Lord Jesus rejected that presumption in John 9:1–3. The text's warning is not that sickness proves greed, but that God sees, judges, and will not be mocked by those who misuse His name.

The tragedy reaches beyond Gehazi's body. Think again of Naaman. His healing had brought him to a confession of the true God. Yet the prophet's servant was willing to compromise that testimony for silver. He did not merely covet a reward. He risked obscuring the character of the God whose mercy had transformed this foreigner's life.

Pastor, what testimony are you giving the world concerning God? Do you present Him as the sovereign Lord whose mercy is free, whose Word is sufficient, and whose Son is worthy of all glory? Or have you permitted people to believe that divine favor is distributed through your personality, your platform, or their financial support?

And Christian, when a preacher promises healing in exchange for a financial seed, or implies that your sickness continues because your offering is insufficient, do not confuse his confidence with divine authority. Search the Scriptures. Test his claims. Christ does not need a salesman to make His mercy available.

Here the account presses us toward a final and greater contrast. Naaman received a cleansing he could not purchase. Gehazi sought treasure he had no right to possess. But the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to accomplish a redemption that neither man could have secured with all the wealth of Syria.

Peter tells us that sinners are redeemed not with silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19). Paul declares that salvation is by grace through faith, not the result of works (Ephesians 2:8–9). Isaiah summons those without money to receive what they cannot buy (Isaiah 55:1–3). And Revelation closes with Christ's invitation to receive the water of life freely (Revelation 22:17).

The Savior did not come to make sinners customers of divine mercy. He came to give Himself as the ransom for their souls.

The Christ who cleansed lepers, opened blind eyes, and raised the dead did not establish a theater of wonders from which His servants might draw an income. His signs revealed His glory and bore witness to His identity, and His saving mission led Him to the cross (John 20:30–31; Philippians 2:5–11). He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that through His poverty we might become rich in the grace of God (2 Corinthians 8:9).

What a dreadful contradiction, then, when a man invokes the name of this Savior to enrich himself at the expense of those who suffer.

Elisha refused the silver so that Naaman would not misunderstand the mercy of God. Gehazi pursued the silver because he cared more for what he could obtain than for what Naaman needed to understand.

Every servant of Christ must decide which of these two men his ministry will resemble.

It is better to let a thousand offerings pass you by than to allow one suffering sinner to believe that the mercy of Christ has a price.

Yet Gehazi's sin was only one form of a larger evil. What begins with selling the appearance of miraculous power can advance into the corruption of the very message entrusted to the church. The apostle Paul confronts men who do not merely use religious influence for profit, but turn the Word of God itself into merchandise.

He gives the practice its proper name.

PEDDLERS OF THE WORD

Gehazi ran after a man whom God had healed. He invented a need, invoked the authority of the prophet, and turned another man's gratitude into personal gain. But there is a corruption still more dreadful than exploiting a miracle. A man may take the very Word by which God reveals Himself, announces His salvation, and summons sinners to repentance—and turn that Word into merchandise.

The apostle Paul had seen such men. He knew that ministry could attract those who loved its influence without loving its Lord, desired its rewards without bearing its reproach, and regarded the message entrusted to them as something to be adjusted to secure a larger following.

> 2 Corinthians 2:17: "For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ."

Paul did not say that the gospel was being openly rejected. Something more deceptive was happening. Men were handling God's Word as merchants handle goods, calculating how its presentation might serve their interests. They had entered the marketplace with something that did not belong to them, and presumed to determine what could be done with it.

The preacher's first betrayal is not always the abandonment of God's Word. Sometimes it is the decision to make God's Word serve another master.

The Greek word translated "peddling" describes trading or retailing, with associations of dishonest dealing. Ancient interpreters recognized the picture of merchants who adulterated wine to increase their profits. The word does not require us to conclude that every peddler literally diluted wine, but its force in Paul's argument is unmistakable: a sacred message was being handled for selfish advantage. One can advertise unaltered merchandise while delivering something mixed and diminished.

Consider the preacher who removes divine wrath because his hearers find it offensive, softens repentance because it threatens attendance, avoids the exclusivity of Christ because it invites opposition, or substitutes promises of worldly success for the call to take up the

cross. He has not merely changed the flavor of a sermon. He has withheld from his hearers something God commanded them to receive.

John Calvin warned that the corruption of God's Word is not restricted to introducing doctrinal error. The Word can be "turned hither and thither to please men," even where its teaching has not been openly denied. A preacher who pursues applause or financial gain can make essentially sound doctrine serve an unholy end. Calvin's distinction exposes the heart of the religious merchant: truth itself can be made subordinate to ambition. [21]

The immediate context makes the issue more searching. Paul has just described the apostolic ministry as the fragrance of Christ, spreading the knowledge of Him in every place (2 Corinthians 2:14). This fragrance is life to those being saved and death to those perishing (2 Corinthians 2:15–16). The same faithful gospel may produce opposite responses because hearers stand in radically different relations to Christ. Paul therefore asks, "And who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Corinthians 2:16). His answer in verse 17 does not promise universal acceptance. It demands that the messenger remain sincere before God. The preacher cannot manipulate the message to guarantee that everyone likes its fragrance.

A crowded room cannot testify that God's Word was faithfully preached. It can only testify that people came. The true question is whether the minister has declared the truth entrusted to him in the sight of the God who knows every heart.

GOD HAS APPOINTED THE MESSAGE AND THE MEANS

The regulative principle of worship reaches the pulpit. God has not left His church free to invent its own acts of worship, nor has He surrendered to the preacher the authority to determine what spiritual nourishment His people require. The Lord forbids adding to or subtracting from His commands (Deuteronomy 12:32). Christ condemns worship that substitutes human commandments for divine authority (Mark 7:6–9). Paul warns against self-imposed religion, however impressive it may appear (Colossians 2:20–23).

This principle governs the substance and purpose of preaching itself. God has appointed the public reading and proclamation of Scripture, its faithful explanation, the declaration of Christ's saving work, the summons to repentance and faith, the instruction of believers, and the correction of error (Luke 24:46–47; Acts 20:20–27; 1 Timothy

4:13; 2 Timothy 4:1–5; Titus 1:9; 2:1). Christ commands ministers to teach all that He commanded (Matthew 28:18–20). Faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Scripture is God-breathed and sufficient to equip God's servant (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

The ministry of the Word possesses divine authority because God appointed its message, commanded its proclamation, and declared the purposes for which it must be preached. The minister may explain unfamiliar expressions, use fitting illustrations, and adapt his vocabulary so ordinary hearers understand. Paul became all things to all men in lawful service to the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). But adapting language is not altering truth; pastoral sensitivity is not permission to replace God's appointed means.

The preacher is free to bring the bread within reach of the hungry. He is not free to replace the bread with something they would rather eat.

Charles Spurgeon's direction to pastors was unmistakable. In "Feed My Sheep," he asked what Christ's servants were to do, and answered: "Feed! Feed! Feed!" He understood that preaching must provide the flock with the nourishment Christ appointed rather than a performance that merely attracts attention. [22]

WHEN ENTERTAINMENT BECOMES THE MASTER OF PREACHING

A church discovers that attendance increases when sermons become shorter, lighter, more amusing, and less demanding. Personal stories replace exposition. Humor interrupts the text whenever conscience begins to stir. Difficult doctrines are avoided; the seriousness of sin is softened; divine judgment fades. The cross is presented chiefly as relief from dissatisfaction rather than the saving accomplishment of Christ for guilty sinners. Attendance rises, visitors return, giving improves, and leaders celebrate the results. But who has examined what was lost?

Entertainment becomes the governing principle when the audience's desire for pleasure determines the sermon's content, arrangement, emphasis, and emotional movement. The central question shifts from "What has God said, and what must His people hear?" to "What will keep them interested, pleased, and coming back?"

There is nothing inherently unfaithful about a sermon that engages its hearers, employs memorable illustrations, or awakens appropriate emotion. Scripture itself contains poetry, narrative, warning, promise, and searching appeals. But Scripture's power to awaken affections

must not be confused with the minister's attempt to manufacture pleasurable sensations. In faithful preaching, illustration serves truth, emotion answers to revelation, and the preacher seeks submission to God. In entertainment-driven preaching, truth remains only insofar as it serves the desired audience experience.

The problem is not that hearers enjoy a sermon. The problem begins when their enjoyment becomes the authority that determines the sermon.

If repentance makes the room uncomfortable, it is reduced to acknowledging imperfection. If judgment seems severe, it disappears. If holiness sounds restrictive, it becomes encouragement. The words may remain religious and Christ's name may still be mentioned. Yet the governing message has changed. The congregation is trained to expect a Christianity in which God accommodates the sinner rather than the sinner submits to God.

This has particular relevance to ministries built on spectacular claims of healing, prophecy, and supernatural manifestations. Where dramatic experiences become the attraction, the performer must continue delivering something astonishing. Crowds expect excitement; donations and prestige may depend on it. A spectacle can then cease to be judged by Scripture and become the standard by which people judge whether divine power has appeared.

Such abuses are not, by themselves, exegetical proof of cessationism. That case rests on Scripture's teaching concerning foundational apostolic ministry, authenticating signs, and the faith delivered to the saints (Ephesians 2:20; Hebrews 2:3–4; Jude 3). Yet these abuses reveal the danger of claiming apostolic authority while measuring God's favor by excitement, influence, and income. Both the miracle merchant and the sermon entertainer presume to improve what God appointed.

FOUR CONTRASTS THAT EXPOSE THE FAITHFUL PREACHER

First, "as of sincerity." The faithful preacher must be free from deception in his message and motives. Paul appealed to the Thessalonians that he did not use flattery, cloak covetousness in religious language, or pursue human glory (1 Thessalonians 2:3–6). Nor did he merely avoid explicit falsehood: he declared the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). A sermon can contain nothing false and still betray the hearer by what it deliberately refuses to say.

Second, "as from God." The preacher is a messenger, not an inventor. The gospel does not originate in his creativity, and its authority does not depend on approval ratings. He is a steward of sacred truth (1 Corinthians 4:1–2; 1 Thessalonians 2:4). Jeremiah exposed false prophets who spoke visions from their own hearts and assured the unrepentant of peace (Jeremiah 23:16–22). The shepherd is not commissioned by the appetites of the sheep. A congregation's desires may reveal its condition; they cannot establish its diet.

Third, "in the sight of God." Every sermon is delivered beneath the gaze of the One who knows what the preacher concealed and why. Paul charged Timothy before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Judge of the living and dead: "Preach the word!" (2 Timothy 4:1–2). He immediately foretold hearers who would accumulate teachers to satisfy their itching ears (2 Timothy 4:3–4). Paul did not command Timothy to satisfy those ears. When the church develops itching ears, the preacher's duty is not to become a more skillful scratcher.

Pastor, whose presence weighs heaviest upon you when you enter the pulpit: the donor, the dissatisfied family, the attendance report, or the living God? Fidelity may cost support and approval. Such loss does not automatically prove faithfulness, just as numerical increase does not prove blessing. God requires stewards to be faithful (1 Corinthians 4:2–5).

Fourth, "in Christ." Paul is no independent religious entrepreneur. Christ owns the preacher, purchased His church with His blood, and commands its proclamation (Acts 20:28; Matthew 28:18–20; Colossians 1:18). "For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord" (2 Corinthians 4:5). The preacher is not the attraction to which Christ lends His name. Christ is the Lord whom the preacher has been sent to proclaim.

WHEN THE SHEPHERD BECOMES A MERCHANT

Scripture repeatedly joins false teaching to pursuit of gain. Men subvert households for dishonest profit (Titus 1:10–11); elders must not be greedy (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7); false teachers exploit believers with deceptive words (2 Peter 2:1–3), and flatter to secure advantage (Jude 16). The first compromise may seem small: an uncomfortable text postponed, a warning softened, a profitable practice left unexamined. Soon postponement becomes habit and habit a philosophy of ministry.

The minister no longer asks whether he has faithfully proclaimed

the truth. He asks whether proclaiming it would be worth the consequences. An eloquent man governed by money is not made safe by eloquence. Christ does not appoint merchants to negotiate the terms of revelation. He appoints shepherds to feed His sheep.

This does not prohibit legitimate ministerial support. Paul taught that gospel workers may receive material support (1 Corinthians 9:7–14), while sometimes refusing that right lest the gospel be hindered (1 Corinthians 9:12, 15–18). The faithful minister must remain free to proclaim whatever God commands, even where obedience threatens the support upon which he depends. Support for faithful labor and the sale of religious influence are not the same thing.

WHAT THE PEDDLER CANNOT GIVE

Entertainment can produce laughter, managed services can stir emotion, and a dramatic performance can prompt temporary resolutions. None is identical with regeneration, saving faith, repentance, or sanctification. The new birth belongs to the sovereign Spirit (John 3:3–8); the gospel is God's power for salvation (Romans 1:16); faith comes through hearing the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17); Christ sanctifies His people through truth (John 17:17).

A minister can arouse the senses while leaving conscience untouched; secure admiration while failing to proclaim the Savior; and fill a building while withholding the truth by which sinners are brought before God. The applause of an audience cannot regenerate a single soul. The Word of Christ, attended by the Spirit of God, can raise the spiritually dead.

The Savior did not commission His apostles to make the message less offensive. He commanded them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in His name (Luke 24:46–47). At Calvary the righteous Son of God bore the judgment sinners deserved. God did not dilute His holiness to make salvation appealing: His justice was satisfied through Christ, and His mercy displayed in the redemption of the guilty (Romans 3:23–26; 5:6–11; 1 Peter 2:24).

The preacher who softens sin to make Christ attractive obscures the very mercy that makes Christ glorious. If sin is mere dissatisfaction, why must the Son of God die? If repentance is unnecessary, why did Christ command it? If wrath is an embarrassment to conceal, what meaning remains in the blood that reconciles sinners to God?

Pastor, Scripture was not placed in your hands so you might negotiate its demands with the age. It was entrusted to you that the living

Christ might be faithfully proclaimed. Christian, do not confuse a sermon that pleases you with one that feeds you. Ask whether Scripture was opened faithfully, Christ was truly declared, and your conscience brought beneath His authority.

Christ's sheep belong to Him: they were bought with His blood. To adulterate the message is not merely to wrong a congregation; it is to tamper with truth entrusted by the Lord who redeemed His church. Let merchants study the appetites of customers and entertainers measure applause. Let the church hear again the solemn charge: "Preach the word!" (2 Timothy 4:2). The Word belongs to Him. The church belongs to Him. The glory belongs to Him.

And the preacher must never forget whose presence fills the room when he opens the Scriptures.

YOU CANNOT SERVE GOD AND MAMMON

> Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

The mingling of sacred ministry with covetousness is more than unwise administration. It is a collision of rival lordships. Money is not merely another administrative concern that can be permitted to sit beside Christ as an equal consideration. Jesus presents God and Mammon as rival masters. When financial gain begins governing what a minister preaches, what he promises, whom he favors, what access he provides, or how he handles the flock, money has ceased to be a servant and has become a master.

Martin Luther recognized money's power to become an idol, calling Mammon "the most common idol on earth." [23] Charles Spurgeon pressed the issue of lordship just as sharply: "if Mammon be his master Christ is not his Master." [24] From The Ministry Belongs to Christ: "The Bible tells us the preacher is worth supporting; it never tells us the sermon has a sticker price." [25]

Mammon does not become holy because it crosses the threshold of a church. Greed does not become ministry because it wears religious vocabulary. Covetousness does not cease to be idolatry because the money is deposited into a ministry account. To mingle the sacred trust of Christ with the worship of gain is an unthinkable contradiction: the minister professes Christ as Lord while allowing another master to dictate the terms of Christ's ministry.

GREED IN THE LAST DAYS

> 2 Timothy 3:1–5: "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!"

The most dangerous deception does not always ask the church to stop believing in God. Sometimes it teaches people to call disobedience faithfulness, covetousness blessing, and the voice of a man the voice of the Lord. The congregation keeps its religious vocabulary. The preacher still opens a Bible. Yet something has changed: the Word is no longer permitted to judge the ministry. The ministry has begun using the Word to protect itself from judgment.

That is the dreadful contradiction in Paul's warning. Men may be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, and lovers of pleasure while maintaining "a form of godliness" (2 Timothy 3:2–5). He is not describing the honest unbeliever who openly rejects Christianity. He is exposing people whose religious profession conceals the rule of another love. Mammon does not always enter the church dressed like an atheist. Sometimes it carries a Bible, occupies a pulpit, speaks the language of faith, and calls covetousness blessing. The disguise is effective precisely because the things being imitated—prayer, preaching, generosity, spiritual concern—are good things when they are governed by the truth.

Paul's "last days" are not a warning reserved for a few years immediately before Christ's return. Timothy himself was commanded to turn away from such people (verse 5). Since Christ's coming, the church has lived in an age in which the gospel advances while false teachers work within its visible assemblies. Calvin observes, "Under 'the last days,' he includes the universal condition of the Christian Church." [26] The danger is not rendered harmless by its familiarity, nor may the church excuse it as merely the trouble of another generation. Paul placed this warning in Timothy's hands because a shepherd would have to act upon it.

Notice what Paul means by "denying its power." He is not condemning people for questioning claims of tongues, visions, healings, or other extraordinary gifts. To make this verse a proof of either side in the debate over miraculous gifts is to turn away from Paul's argument. The power denied here is the living reality of godliness: the

grace of God that teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, to live soberly and righteously, and to belong zealously to Christ (Titus 2:11–14; Romans 8:13). A man may speak powerfully about the Spirit while resisting the Spirit's work upon his own greed. He may insist that the congregation demonstrate faith through sacrificial giving while refusing to demonstrate repentance through financial honesty. The test of godliness is not whether a man can create the appearance of spiritual power, but whether his life submits to the truth he professes to preach.

Matthew Henry saw the contradiction clearly: such people "will assume the form of godliness, to take away their reproach; but they will not submit to the power of it, to take away their sin." [27] That distinction searches more than the prosperity preacher. It searches every minister who can defend a doctrine in public while granting himself an exemption in private. It searches a church that is willing to overlook dishonesty because the services remain exciting, the offerings remain strong, or the leader seems indispensable. A religious performance becomes a refuge for sin when people treat its success as evidence that God no longer requires obedience.

Paul shows how that refuge becomes a weapon. In 2 Timothy 3:6–7, certain deceivers "creep into households" and gain control over people burdened by sin and driven by disordered desires. The apostle identifies a particular practice of predation, not a defect belonging to women as a class or a reason to despise those who have been deceived. False teachers seek access where guilt, fear, longing, and confusion have already weakened resistance. A person desperate for forgiveness, certainty, employment, reconciliation, or relief can be made to feel that questioning the teacher is questioning God. The victim is then pressed to trust the very person whose authority most needs examining.

Paul next invokes Jannes and Jambres, who opposed Moses, and says that the deceivers of his own day likewise "resist the truth" (2 Timothy 3:8–9). Their danger is not settled by their ability to stage a persuasive contest. Pharaoh's court saw imitations of divine signs, but imitation was not obedience to God (Exodus 7:10–12, 22; 8:7, 18–19). Paul's comparison exposes the spiritual posture beneath the display: men setting themselves against the truth while pretending to possess spiritual authority. Their folly will be exposed in God's time; that promise is no excuse for the church to remain passive while souls are being led astray.

Picture a family listening to a minister who announces that God has revealed a special financial instruction for those awaiting a breakthrough. They have ordinary responsibilities—rent, food, debts, children—and they want to honor Christ. The preacher does not simply invite them to give. He announces a divine condition: send the money now, prove your faith, and expect God's favor; hesitate, and you may be resisting the Holy Spirit. If an elder asks where Scripture makes such a promise, he is told not to interfere with the anointing. The family is no longer making a free and informed gift. Their fear of disobeying God is being employed to secure their obedience to a man. This is an illustrative situation, not an accusation against a named ministry; it is the kind of spiritual coercion against which the biblical warnings must train the church.

Peter goes straight to the machinery: "by covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words" (2 Peter 2:1–3). The motive is covetousness. The instrument is carefully fashioned speech. The object is the people of God, whom the teacher treats as something to be used. The result is not merely an excessive offering but a transfer of authority. When "God told me" is attached to a financial demand that Scripture has not made, the teacher is no longer simply teaching unwisely about giving. He is claiming divine warrant for his own requirement. Calvin, commenting on Peter, calls these "feigned words which are artfully formed for the purpose of deceiving." [28] Peter's language is unsparing because people redeemed by Christ must never be treated as merchandise.

These deceptive words often work by joining truths that Scripture keeps distinct. God is generous; therefore, the hearer is told, God must return a multiplied payment. God hears prayer; therefore, the hearer is told, a payment will release a promised answer. God uses ministers; therefore, the hearer is told, the minister's private impression must be received as God's command. God calls His children to sacrifice; therefore, the hearer is told, prudence, counsel, and care for dependents reveal unbelief. Each step borrows credibility from a biblical truth and then adds a requirement God has not spoken. By the end, the listener is not being taught what Scripture says. He is being trained to obey what Scripture never said.

Jeremiah names this theft of authority. The Lord rebuked prophets who spoke though He had not sent them, who stole words from one another, and who led His people astray by falsehood (Jeremiah 23:21, 30–32). The evil was not merely that their predictions might fail.

They invoked the name of the Lord to place human speech beyond ordinary testing. The same principle applies whenever a preacher employs an alleged private revelation to demand a payment, silence a question, shield his finances, or threaten a hesitant believer. The most costly thing taken from the hearer may not be the money. It may be the right to hear God's Word without another man placing himself between the soul and its Lord.

Jude traces this corruption to Balaam: men have "run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit" (Jude 11). Balaam's story is not a simple tale of a prophet who successfully sold a curse; God restrained his words (Numbers 22–24). But Balaam loved "the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Peter 2:15), and Scripture later connects his counsel with Israel's fall into idolatry and immorality (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14). His error was to bring religious influence into the service of gain, to lead others toward sin while seeking reward. Jude's warning is severe because a corrupt guide does not ruin only his own conscience. He teaches other people to walk toward the precipice.

Jude continues by describing teachers who serve themselves, flatter others for advantage, and turn grace into license (Jude 4, 12, 16). Peter describes teachers promising liberty while enslaved by corruption (2 Peter 2:18–19). Here is the spiritual damage behind the financial transaction. People are taught to measure God's favor by what they receive, to interpret disappointment as insufficient giving, and to confuse desire for prosperity with faith in Christ. Some begin to fear every unexpected expense as a sign of judgment. Others become bitter when promised blessings do not appear. Still others defend the teacher because admitting the deception would mean facing years of misplaced trust. The flock is being trained to seek the benefits of religion while growing unfamiliar with the God who is to be worshiped.

Consider what happens to the conscience. A believer should be free to examine an appeal by Scripture, provide for his household (1 Timothy 5:8), give willingly rather than under compulsion (2 Corinthians 9:7), and seek wise counsel (Proverbs 11:14). Under religious manipulation, those ordinary duties become suspect. A question is labeled rebellion. Financial accountability is described as a lack of faith. The poor are shamed for not financing what the wealthy preacher desires. The weak are told that their continued hardship proves spiritual failure. This is not pastoral care. It is the misuse of spiritual authority to make wounded people responsible for the promises another person invented.

Nor does the damage stop with the vulnerable. A congregation can learn to participate in its own deception. Members who would recognize a dishonest sales pitch in the marketplace may defend the same tactics when spoken from a pulpit. Elders may avoid examination because exposure would disturb the church or diminish giving. Supporters may point to attendance, buildings, testimonies, or public influence as though visible results could cancel a plain command of God. But Deuteronomy 13:1–3 warns that even a remarkable sign does not authorize a messenger to draw God's people away from Him; and Jesus warns that impressive religious acts do not establish that He knows the worker (Matthew 7:21–23). The question is not simply, "Did something extraordinary happen?" It is, "Does this teaching agree with the God who has spoken, and does this ministry submit to the Lord who commands it?"

John Owen warned that spiritual activity can give people "an appearance of every thing that should be in them in reality and power, when there is nothing of it in them." [29] Gifts are not the same as grace. A persuasive voice is not proof of a clean heart. The ability to move a crowd cannot discharge a pastor's duty to handle money honestly, tell the truth, welcome biblical examination, and love the sheep. A church that mistakes charisma for character will eventually regard scrutiny as an attack on God. But Scripture requires the opposite: leaders must be above reproach, not greedy for money, and examples to the flock (1 Timothy 3:2–3; Titus 1:7–9; 1 Peter 5:2–3).

What, then, must believers depart from? Paul does not say to become suspicious of every preacher or to treat the sins of one minister as proof that the church itself cannot be trusted. He says, "from such people turn away" (2 Timothy 3:5). Depart from teaching that turns greed into faith; from demands for money enforced by alleged revelations; from threats that make God's mercy depend upon a payment; from leaders who refuse biblical accountability; and from assurances that financial success proves divine approval. Refuse to repeat such promises, recruit others into them, or defend them merely because they have been profitable or emotionally powerful. Where there is credible misconduct, pursue truthful examination and proper biblical discipline rather than rumor or concealment (Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Timothy 5:19–21). The command to separate from dangerous teaching does not excuse reckless accusations, nor does the requirement for evidence excuse elders who refuse to investigate.

Pastors and elders must also ask what they have permitted. Have

we taught people to evaluate our preaching by the text of Scripture, or to accept our claims because of our position? Can members ask clear questions about money without being frightened or punished? Are compensation, offerings, designated gifts, and ministry expenditures subject to responsible oversight? Do we preach the claims of Christ as readily as we solicit the support of His people? Have we ever used an emotional moment to obtain a financial decision that calm biblical instruction might not have obtained? The pastor cannot protect the flock by warning against wolves elsewhere while leaving his own door unlocked.

The remedy is not a more impressive spiritual personality to replace the last one. Paul himself tells Timothy where to stand. After describing evil men and impostors growing worse, "deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13), he writes, "But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of" (verse 14). He directs Timothy back to the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (verse 15). The answer to counterfeit spiritual authority is not another claim of secret authority. It is the written Word God has already given His church.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God," Paul declares, and it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, "that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Do not pass too quickly over those four uses. Scripture teaches what is true when religious voices compete. It reproves the lie even when the lie is popular. It corrects the course of the deceived rather than leaving them to despair. It trains believers in righteousness so that discernment becomes a learned habit, not a desperate reaction after injury. God has not left His church dependent upon a market of supposedly privileged revelations to know how to worship, give, or obey. The Word that exposes the false shepherd also supplies what the true shepherd must teach.

That sufficiency must be visible on Sunday. Immediately after declaring the character and usefulness of Scripture, Paul charges Timothy "before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom" to "Preach the word!" (2 Timothy 4:1–2). The command is not to perform authority, manufacture an atmosphere, or discover a financial secret. It is to bring God's revealed truth to bear upon actual souls—with conviction, rebuke, exhortation, patience, and teaching. In verse 3 Paul

foresees hearers who will no longer endure sound doctrine, but will gather teachers to satisfy their own desires. Therefore the congregation as well as the preacher must repent. A church may create a market for flattery long before a flatterer offers himself for sale.

Paul presses the warning further: people will "turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Timothy 4:4). Not every audience that requests a pleasing message is innocent of the deceit it purchases. Some want a prophet who will baptize their ambitions, promise the outcome they desire, and spare them the call to deny themselves. To Timothy, therefore, Paul says, "be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry" (verse 5). The shepherd must not answer the craving for pleasant falsehood with a better-packaged falsehood. He must teach the truth even when truth costs him his audience.

Spurgeon, speaking of Christ's manner of ministry, said, "Our message is prescribed, our testimony is written." [30] That is not an argument for cold sermons or indifferent shepherds. Timothy is commanded to convince, rebuke, and exhort "with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2). Patient preaching deals with error without humiliating the wounded. It teaches a frightened giver that Christ's salvation is not for purchase, that his past gifts do not place him beyond mercy, and that he can begin again under the truth. It teaches the eager giver that generosity is a fruit of grace, not a lever by which he can move the hand of God. It tells those who profited by deception that repentance includes stopping the offense, bringing hidden practices into the light, and making restitution where appropriate (Luke 19:8; Ephesians 4:28).

Here biblical shepherding must become concrete. Elders are to watch over themselves and the flock purchased by God's own blood, aware that destructive teachers can arise even from among their own number (Acts 20:28–31). They are to shepherd willingly, not for dishonest gain, and not as lords over those entrusted to them (1 Peter 5:2–3). Faithful reform requires clear teaching on giving and financial stewardship; transparent handling of church funds; appropriate plurality and independence in oversight; credible procedures for receiving and examining complaints; protection for people who report concerns; and discipline when evidence establishes persistent, unrepentant wrongdoing (2 Corinthians 8:20–21; 1 Timothy 5:19–21). None of these practices creates holiness by itself. Each removes an excuse for operating where God's searching Word is unwelcome.

And let the people hear this with tenderness as well as warning: if you were deceived, the loss of money was not permission for someone else to own your conscience. You do not need to purchase another blessing to repair the first disappointment. You need the truth, wise shepherding, and the Christ whom that teacher misrepresented. If you have defended a corrupt system, do not make loyalty to a personality more precious than loyalty to the Savior. Confess what you excused. Stop assisting what Scripture condemns. Where others have been injured, help them find truthful care. Repentance is not treachery against the church; it is one way Christ brings His church back beneath His Word.

Nor may a pastor escape this passage merely because he has never preached prosperity. He can deny the power of godliness while being orthodox on every disputed gift. He can condemn fabricated revelations and still manipulate people through fear, status, selective teaching, or concealed self-interest. Paul directs Timothy's attention not only to doctrine but also to his manner of life, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, and sufferings (2 Timothy 3:10–12). Sound teaching is not a mask that exempts the teacher from holiness. A man who contends for the sufficiency of Scripture must be the first to submit to its correction.

The final warning belongs to all of us. Before Christ appears, men may be admired, protected, or enriched by religious deception. At His appearing, no pulpit, title, crowd, or account will be able to answer for a preacher. The Judge named in 2 Timothy 4:1 is also the Savior who gave Himself to redeem a people from lawlessness and purify them for good works (Titus 2:14). He does not feed His sheep on bargains, threats, or secrets. He calls them to hear His voice, follow Him, and rest in the life He gives (John 10:27–28). His Word frees the conscience from the rule of men and binds it gladly to Himself. Let the false promise fall; let the Scriptures be opened again; let shepherds serve rather than use the flock. One of the great tests of ministry in the last days is painfully simple: are men using money to serve Christ—or using Christ to obtain money?

That searching question must not be twisted into an attack on the honest provision of those who preach. Scripture condemns the sale of spiritual authority, not the faithful support of gospel labor. Paul himself will draw that necessary distinction in the matter to which we now turn: SUPPORT IS NOT SALE.

SUPPORT IS NOT SALE

> 1 Corinthians 9:13–14: "Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel."

A preacher can wrong the church by taking money he has no right to demand. A church can wrong its preacher by withholding support Christ has commanded it to provide. The sins are different, but their victim may be the same: the ministry of the Word. One man makes the sheep finance his appetite. Another congregation expects its shepherd to feed the sheep while his own household quietly goes without. Neither is the New Testament pattern. Christ has not given His servants a gospel to sell, nor has He given His churches servants to use up and discard.

This is why the warning against greed in the preceding section must not become a new excuse for selfishness. Paul does not follow his exposure of corrupt religion by abolishing the minister's right to support. He expressly defends that right. Soldiers are not ordinarily expected to serve at their own expense; a man who plants a vineyard shares in its fruit; a shepherd receives provision from his flock. Then Paul moves from those ordinary examples to the Lord's own command: those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:7–14). Support is not a concession to a preacher's weakness. It is a duty established by Christ.

The Lord had already joined the two truths in one commission. In Matthew 10:8–10, Jesus sent His disciples to minister freely and told them that a worker was worthy of his food. Read those instructions together. The same Lord who forbade making merchandise of the gift appointed provision for the servant carrying it. Luke 10:7 repeats the worker's right to support. Galatians 6:6 directs the person taught the Word to share material good things with the one who teaches; 1 Timothy 5:17–18 extends proper honor and wages to elders laboring in preaching and doctrine. To quote the command to give freely while refusing the command to support faithfully is not reverence for Scripture. It is selecting which part of the Lord's will will cost us nothing.

John Calvin, explaining Galatians 6:6, asked, "How disgraceful is it to defraud of their temporal support those by whom our souls

are fed!" [31] He also refused to turn the minister's right into a claim to luxury; the passage concerns honorable provision, not unlimited appetite. That is the biblical proportion. The church must not starve a faithful pastor in the name of sacrifice. The pastor must not treat the church's obedience as permission to finance his vanity. In *The Ministry Belongs to Christ*, I expressed both duties in one sentence: "The spiritual treasure is not for sale, and the servant carrying it is not disposable." [32]

But what exactly changes a gift into a sale? Here we must get beneath the price tag. A transaction can occur in the conscience before any money enters an account. A man hears a sermon and slips money to the preacher because he believes the ministry has created a personal debt that must now be settled. No fee was announced. No collector stood by the door. The gift may even have been offered gladly. Yet if the giver thinks he has paid the preacher back for the Word, he has begun thinking as a customer rather than a fellow servant. A free choice does not automatically make a gift free of commercial meaning.

Conley Owens presses precisely this neglected distinction in *The Dorean Principle*. He distinguishes *reciprocity*—money given as repayment for spiritual ministry—from *co-labor*—resources given to advance the work of a shared Lord. Both can involve money changing hands. What differs is the supposed obligation. In repayment, the hearer treats the minister as the one to whom the debt is owed. In co-labor, the believer gives out of obedience and gratitude to God, helping another servant do the work Christ has entrusted to him. Owens's governing summary remains decisive: "Ministry should be supported, not sold."[33,34] The believer does not pay for what grace has given. He helps carry its message to others.

Owens goes further than the simple contrast between an invoice and a donation. "Voluntary payment is still payment," he warns; indeed, "even that which was not requested may constitute reciprocity." [35] These are not accusations against every grateful giver or instructions to interrogate every envelope. They are a call to examine what our practices teach. Does a minister thank a donor as a partner in the gospel, or make him feel that the gift has settled the cost of being taught? Does the giver want the Word to reach others, or does he want an account closed, a favor returned, or a privileged claim upon the preacher? We may remove the cash register from the sanctuary and still leave its logic in the heart.

Paul's financial decisions become clearer in this light. He asserted

a genuine right to support in 1 Corinthians 9, yet sometimes refused it rather than hinder the gospel (verses 12, 15–18). He could work with his hands among the Thessalonians, refusing to burden those he was trying to reach (1 Thessalonians 2:5–9). He could say that, while ministering in Corinth, brothers from Macedonia supplied his need, so that the Corinthians were not charged for his preaching (2 Corinthians 11:7–9). His refusal was not a judgment that wages polluted ministry. His willingness to forego wages showed that the right was a servant of the gospel, not the gospel a servant of the right.

The other side is just as important. Paul accepted the Philippians' repeated material partnership, not as customers buying sermons but as believers sharing in gospel work (Philippians 1:5; 4:14–18). John commended those who sent traveling workers forward so that believers might become "fellow workers for the truth" (3 John 5–8). Paul also recognized a debt of spiritual blessing expressed through material help between the Gentile churches and the saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25–27); such fellowship did not make apostolic ministry a product with a price. The recipient of spiritual benefit need not always be the person who bears its immediate cost. Christians in one place can support the preaching, translating, printing, counseling, or missionary service received by people in another.

That changes what a church should ask when a ministry needs money. The first question is not, *What will the audience pay?* It is, *What has Christ commanded us to do, what does that work actually require, and how can His people bear the cost without selling the ministry?* The answer may include church offerings, individual partners, help from other congregations, a simpler operation, or a worker taking additional employment for a season. Luke 8:1–3 even records women who materially provided for Jesus and His disciples during their ministry. Gospel partnership has never meant pretending food, shelter, transportation, and time cost nothing. Free to the hearer does not mean costless to the church. It means the church has learned to carry the cost without selling the gift.

Consider the ordinary pastor in a small congregation. The church knows what he earns, but it may not know what the ministry asks of him: nights interrupted by crisis, hours in Scripture, hospital visits, counsel that cannot be hurried, the weight of false teaching resisted, and the ordinary needs of a family. To tell him that faithful men should live by faith, while refusing to examine what he needs to live, can turn pious language into a convenient excuse. The church may

genuinely have little to give; Paul himself worked while ministering (Acts 18:3; 20:33–35). Poverty is not disobedience. But indifference is. Can we afford improvements that everyone sees while treating the invisible labor of shepherding as an expense we hope someone else will absorb? A church's budget can confess its theology more candidly than its statement of faith.

Matthew Henry made the obligation difficult to evade: a minister may surrender his right, as Paul sometimes did, but those who knowingly refuse lawful provision neglect an appointment of Christ. [36] The elder who insists on a lavish life has forgotten whom he serves (1 Peter 5:2–3). The church that regards a pastor's salary as an optional kindness has forgotten who assigned it the duty (1 Timothy 5:18). Mature stewardship is neither ministerial entitlement nor congregational stinginess. It is honorable support, proportionate to real labor and the church's means, offered without the purchase of favors.

Now picture an ordinary offering. A generous member says, "I want the pastor to be free to teach the whole counsel of God." Another says, "I have given enough that the pastor ought to listen to me." The amounts may be identical. The relationships are not. One gift helps a servant obey Christ. The other attempts to make a servant answer to the giver. Spurgeon warned the controlling donor: "Esteemed sir, if you think, because you subscribe to my support, that I am bound to do your bidding, you are under a mistake." [37] He was warning both parties that the servant of Christ cannot become the property of whoever pays him. The same truth warns wealthy supporters against treating their generosity as the deed of ownership. The giver may help pay the shepherd's wages. He cannot buy the shepherd's conscience.

Let a donor insist that his gift depends upon silence about a particular sin, a seat on the governing board, a special spiritual promise, or preferential access to the pastor. The elders have a real decision to make. They may rename the condition a partnership agreement and keep the money. Or they may tell him, calmly and gratefully, that the church cannot accept a gift that compromises its obedience. Galatians 1:10 does not become less binding when a large pledge is at stake. Micah 3:11 condemns leaders who teach for pay while claiming the Lord's protection. The moment a gift gains veto power over the Word, it has ceased to behave like support and begun to govern the ministry it claims to assist.

Nor should the poor find themselves standing outside the circle of pastoral care. Suppose a mother needs counsel but cannot afford a fee,

or a student longs to study Scripture but cannot buy the course, or a pastor overseas needs a faithful book but cannot pay its shipping. The question is not merely whether a ministry has legitimate expenses. Of course it does. The searching question is whether the way we have arranged those expenses turns inability to pay into inability to receive biblical instruction. James 2:1–9 forbids the church to distribute honor according to wealth; Jesus tells His disciples to show hospitality to those who cannot repay them (Luke 14:12–14). The church must not arrange its spiritual ministry as though the poor were an inconvenient market segment.

Richard Baxter would not let shepherds keep their concern for the poor at a safe distance. "Go to the poor, and see what they want," he urged ministers in *The Reformed Pastor*. [38] That counsel gives our budget a pair of feet. A congregation can ask who lacks access to Scripture, who needs transportation to worship, who cannot obtain a sound book, and who has stopped asking for help because previous appeals made money feel like a spiritual qualification. Churches with greater means can help churches with less; givers can finance printing and distribution; pastors can set aside time for those whose circumstances would never make them profitable clients. The governing aim is not to build a ministry that attracts the most valuable buyers. It is to bring the Word where people need it.

This is not a warrant for reckless spending. A Christian publisher may pay a printer, a missionary may purchase a ticket, and a church may charge for an ordinary meal or lodging when those goods are genuinely distinct from spiritual instruction. But a conference should ask whether its ticket buys facilities and meals or whether it is the gate through which a hearer must pass to receive the teaching. A ministry offering theological training should ask whether scholarship, donor partnership, lower-cost delivery, or free access can remove a spiritual barrier. Where revenue falls short, stewardship may require scaling down, delaying, or explaining a genuine limitation. It must not begin by declaring that the person unable to purchase the ministry has no claim upon our concern. Nor does biblical freedom require that every material good be given away regardless of expense; the issue is whether the spiritual trust itself has become merchandise.

The early church recognized the tension long before modern fundraising systems existed. The *Didache* warns against a person claiming spiritual authority to obtain money for himself, yet also directs that a genuine teacher be provided for. [39] That ancient document is not an

additional canon and its assumptions about prophets do not settle the question of continuing revelation. Its relevance here is narrower and valuable: early Christians could recognize both the danger of spiritual profiteering and the duty of material support. We should not pretend that the existence of expenses excuses the first sin, or that fear of the first sin excuses neglect of the second.

Financial honesty must also begin before the account books are balanced. Paul arranged for trusted brothers to handle substantial gifts so that the ministry would be honorable before God and people (2 Corinthians 8:18–21). Can contributors understand what an appeal promises and what it does not? Are salaries approved by accountable leaders rather than by the people who receive them? Are restricted gifts used as represented? Who can inspect spending and raise a credible concern? Are costs for materials distinguished from charges for the Word itself? In *The Ministry Belongs to Christ*, I put the issue this way: "The books can balance while the transaction does not." [40] A clean ledger cannot cleanse an unbiblical exchange. An auditor may confirm where every dollar went and still leave unanswered whether the money should have been collected in that way.

This brings the whole matter home to the shepherd. Pastor, did you introduce an appeal that made people fearful of missing God's favor? Did you tolerate a donor's control because the church depended upon his money? Did you defend a fee without asking what part of the transaction purchased spiritual ministry? Have you taught your people the duty of giving but neglected to teach them the freedom of giving? Repent of the precise wrong, not merely of "poor communication." Correct the public promise publicly where necessary. Make restitution when appropriate. Teach Matthew 10:8–10, 1 Corinthians 9, Galatians 6:6, and 2 Corinthians 8–9 together, so the congregation sees both the servant's proper support and the hearer's liberty before God.

Then reform the actual practice. Let leaders who are not receiving the benefit review ministerial compensation and financial safeguards. State the need without an invented prophecy, a promised return, or a frightening deadline. Explain whether gifts will sustain ongoing gospel work, help people who cannot pay, or meet an ordinary material expense. If a distressed counselee offers a personal payment because he feels obliged to compensate the pastor for opening Scripture, the pastor may wisely decline it while inviting him, when appropriate, to share voluntarily in the church's continuing mission. A receipt is not

always a purchase; neither is an unsolicited envelope always innocent of that meaning. The shepherd must care not only that the books are clean but that the relationship remains free.

And the congregation must answer for itself. Does it praise the pastor's integrity while making proper provision for him someone else's responsibility? Does it measure a missionary's worth by visible returns instead of fidelity to the Word? Do its members threaten to withdraw support whenever biblical preaching unsettles them? Do its wealthy receive a familiarity that its poor never experience? The remedy is not to shame every giver or suspect every minister. It is to restore the fellowship of people who owe everything to Christ and therefore freely share what He has entrusted to them. Owens calls them fellow servants of a "common Employer." [41] No gift makes one believer the master of another.

Remain faithful when that recovery costs something. A ministry that gives up manipulative appeals may initially receive less money. A church that refuses a donor's conditions may lose a promised gift. Elders who insist upon honest oversight may discover practices needing correction. A pastor who surrenders a questionable source of personal income may have to live more simply. At such moments, do not measure faithfulness by the old revenue stream. Remember Paul's willingness to spend and be spent for souls (2 Corinthians 12:14–15), and Peter's charge to shepherd willingly rather than for dishonest gain (1 Peter 5:2–4). If keeping the budget requires selling what Christ entrusted freely, it is the budget—not Christ's command—that must yield.

There is a better picture of the church. The pastor opens the Scriptures without calculating which listener can afford the truth. The people support him without imagining that they have purchased his voice. The giver helps supply what the poor cannot buy. The missionary receives help from believers who may never meet those he serves. The elders keep honest accounts because they know the funds belong to their Lord. This is not financial naivete. It is stewardship under the Head of the church, in which gifts remain gifts, workers remain servants, and believers become partners rather than customers (1 Peter 4:10–11; 3 John 8).

Christ Himself stands at the center of that freedom. He purchased His people, not with silver or gold, but with His precious blood (1 Peter 1:18–19). He gives the water of life freely to the thirsty (Revelation 22:17). No minister owns that fountain. No donor can reserve its flow

for preferred customers. No impoverished sinner is told to come back when he can afford the price. Yet the Lord who freely gives also commands His people to sustain faithful laborers who make Him known. The wage of the messenger may be counted. The worth of his message cannot. Support the servant. Never sell the Savior.

And having recovered the distinction between supporting ministry and selling it, we must ask what should govern the giving itself. Scripture's answer takes us into the following section, THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN FOR GIVING.

THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN FOR GIVING

> 2 Corinthians 9:6–8: "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work."

A church may stop selling spiritual ministry and still have much to learn about giving. One member hears that no preacher has the right to manipulate him and quietly decides that no one has the right to ask anything of him. Another gives generously, but inwardly waits for God to repay him with the promotion, healing, or financial increase he was promised. The first has turned freedom into an excuse to keep his money. The second has turned giving into a way to control God. Neither has yet understood the freedom of a cheerful giver.

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians 8–9 while gathering relief for needy believers in Jerusalem. This was not a campaign to enrich an apostle or expand his personal influence. Christians who had received mercy were being invited to carry the burdens of Christians they might never meet (Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–4). To understand the gift, we must begin where Paul begins—not with the Corinthians' money, but with the grace of God among the Macedonians. Their "deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality" (2 Corinthians 8:2). They were not wealthy people buying the reputation of generosity. They were afflicted people whose joy had become larger than their means.

Then Paul reveals what made their giving different: "They first gave themselves to the Lord" (2 Corinthians 8:5). Money came afterward.

The purse followed a surrendered life. The first offering God desires is not what leaves the believer's hand, but the believer who belongs to Him. In *The Ministry Belongs to Christ*, I expressed the order this way: "Missionary giving is worship before it is transaction. The Macedonians first gave themselves to the Lord; money followed consecration." [42] We have reversed that order whenever we seek large gifts without first seeking hearts yielded to Christ.

This explains why willing giving is neither an optional hobby for generous personalities nor a tax collected by religious pressure. Paul says, "I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love" (2 Corinthians 8:8). In the next chapter he says that each must give as he purposes in his heart, "not grudgingly or of necessity" (9:7). His refusal to coerce the amount does not abolish the believer's duty to love. A command can establish responsibility without authorizing a preacher to seize control of another person's conscience. As I wrote in *The Ministry Belongs to Christ*, "Voluntary giving is not morally indifferent giving: Scripture can command generosity without turning generosity into an admission price." [43]

What, then, does freedom mean? It means the believer is not purchasing God's ear, settling an invoice for a sermon, or surrendering money because a minister has frightened him. It does not mean that the Lord's claim upon his life has ended at the door of his bank account. "You are not your own," Paul tells the Corinthians; they were bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The Christian's money is part of his stewardship because the Christian himself belongs to Christ. Grace does not free us from God's ownership. It frees us to rejoice in it.

Conley Owens locates the giver's deepest obligation where it belongs: "Duty to God must triumph over a sensed debt to any minister." [44] That is more than a safeguard against commercial ministry. It corrects the heart of the giving Christian. We do not give because a preacher owns us, nor withhold because he does not. We give before the face of the Lord who owns the giver, the gift, and the work it is meant to serve. The question is no longer, How little can I give without breaking a rule? It is, What would faithful love do with what Christ has entrusted to me?

Paul gives this willingness a practical shape. "On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper" (1 Corinthians 16:2). Notice the quiet discipline: each believer, regular preparation, a portion suited to actual provision, and

readiness before the need becomes an emergency. The apostle does not teach the church to wait for an emotional appeal before remembering the poor. Nor does he establish an unvarying payment that pretends every household has identical responsibilities. Thoughtful generosity is not less spiritual than spontaneous generosity. A heart taught by grace learns to plan for the needs of others.

That planning must be proportionate. "For if there is first a willing mind," Paul writes, "it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have" (2 Corinthians 8:12). The New Testament does not impose the Mosaic tithe as a fixed admission charge to Christian obedience; neither does it commend the person who hides behind that distinction to justify keeping everything. Some believers can give substantially without changing their comfort. Others give a much smaller amount at real personal cost. The Lord sees both the means and the heart. Christ observed the widow's two mites and declared that she had given more than those who contributed from abundance (Mark 12:41–44). He did not need a wealthy offering to recognize a costly one.

Nor did Paul intend that generosity should crush one household merely to ease another: "For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened" (2 Corinthians 8:13). A father must not neglect his children's needs in order to satisfy a preacher's demand; Scripture calls him to provide for his own household (1 Timothy 5:8). A widow must not be shamed because she cannot match a businessman's gift. A congregation with little must not pretend it has the resources of a congregation with much. But abundance carries responsibility. What one believer has in excess may become God's provision for another's real need (2 Corinthians 8:13–15). Biblical proportion protects the poor from coercion and the prosperous from self-deception.

A. W. Pink pressed the underlying duty into one sentence: "Our possessions are to be held in stewardship for God and at the disposal of the real need of our fellows." [45] The words *real need* matter. Stewardship is not indiscriminate spending whenever an appeal becomes moving. It asks whether the need is genuine, whether the work is faithful, whether the gift will actually help, and whether the giver is fulfilling other duties God has already assigned. But it refuses to use prudence as a respectable name for indifference. The believer who has enough to relieve suffering and repeatedly looks away must ask whether his money has begun to command his conscience (1 John 3:17–18).

Now we come to Paul's sowing and reaping. Few biblical images have been used more recklessly to empty the pockets of the vulnerable. A preacher announces that a particular gift is "seed," promises a multiplied financial harvest, and names a date when heaven will settle the account. The suffering person is told to increase the offering if he wants a greater return. The entire appeal may sound biblical because Paul really does write, "He who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). But a biblical phrase can become a lie when it is separated from the purpose God gave it.

Read beyond the slogan. Paul asks God to "increase the fruits of your righteousness" (2 Corinthians 9:10), and says that His provision makes believers able to show "all liberality," resulting in "thanksgiving through us to God" (9:11). The harvest includes the meeting of the saints' needs, righteousness expressed in generous action, the blessing of fellow believers, and thanksgiving rising to the Lord (9:10–12). God can provide further material resources for further generosity, but these verses give no preacher authority to guarantee a donor a larger salary, a cured disease, or a specified sum of money. In Paul's field the harvest belongs to God; in the prosperity preacher's scheme God has been made to work for the investor.

The context itself destroys the scheme. The Macedonians gave amid affliction and poverty (2 Corinthians 8:1–4); Paul knew hunger, want, and dependence even while serving faithfully (Philippians 4:11–13; 2 Corinthians 11:27). When he promised that "God is able to make all grace abound toward you," he immediately named the purpose: "that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). Sufficiency for obedience is not a promise of luxury. Grace may provide bread, strength to endure hardship, fellow believers who share a burden, or contentment when resources remain small. Faith gives because God is trustworthy, not because a preacher can calculate His return.

There is, however, a real blessing in giving, and we must not conceal it in our eagerness to condemn the counterfeit. Paul thanked the Philippians for their partnership and told them, "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account" (Philippians 4:17). He described their help as "a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God" (4:18). This is a spiritual account, not a contract for cash. The giver may never see all that his gift accomplished. A missionary may carry the Word farther, a pastor may be

freed to study, a poor family may be fed, and God may receive thanksgiving from lips the donor never hears.

Owens recognizes that "Acts of giving and hospitality are colabor" [46]—shared labor, not the purchase of spiritual benefits. A sister who prepares a room for a visiting preacher, a family that sends support across an ocean, and a laborer who sets aside part of his wages for gospel work all help carry a ministry they do not own. Their service may be hidden from public view, but it is not hidden from the Lord (Hebrews 6:10). The person who cannot stand in the pulpit may nevertheless help keep the pulpit faithful.

In the ordinary church, this pattern begins with believers willingly pooling their resources for the work of Christ. Owens calls attention to "the voluntary contributions of the congregation" [47] as an ordinary biblical means of supporting the church. Acts records believers sharing so that needs were met (Acts 2:44–45; 4:34–35), and 3 John 5–8 commends those who send faithful workers forward as "fellow workers for the truth." Giving does not make the believer a customer. It makes visible the fellowship of people serving one Master. A healthy congregation does not have to choose between supporting those who preach and making the Word available to those who cannot pay. Its generosity helps make both possible.

And because the gifts are offered to God, they must be handled honestly before men. Paul deliberately appointed respected brothers to administer the collection, guarding against blame and providing "honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men" (2 Corinthians 8:20–21). The same devotion that opens the hand must open the account books. Elders must tell the truth about needs, distinguish necessary costs from desired expansion, protect designated funds, and refuse appeals built on fear or invented promises. A sincere giver is entitled to truthful stewardship; a faithful minister need not fear responsible examination. An offering is not made holy by hiding where it goes.

Yet careful administration is not the final test. Jesus warned against giving "to be seen by men" (Matthew 6:1–4). A check may be correctly deposited while the giver quietly purchases admiration. A large gift may come with a hunger to have one's name announced; a smaller gift may carry resentment toward those who receive help. The offering plate does not weigh motives. The Lord does. Charles Spurgeon put his finger on a stubborn corner of the Christian heart: "With some the last part of their nature that ever gets sanctified is their pockets." [48]

The danger is not simply that we possess money, but that money can possess the part of us that has learned to sing about surrender.

Here is a searching test for the prosperous believer. When income increased, did generosity increase, or did every new dollar acquire a new private necessity? When the church presented a verified need, did you first ask what you could give, or what portion of your comfort must remain untouched? When no one would know the size of your offering, did the desire to give grow or diminish? These questions do not give the church authority to dictate an amount. They deny us the easier comfort of measuring our love by the amount we can spare without inconvenience (Luke 12:15, 21; 1 Timothy 6:17–19).

And here is a different test for the believer wounded by manipulation. Perhaps you were told that your sickness would remain unless you gave, that God would close a door if you refused, or that the amount you sent would determine the size of your blessing. You have reason to reject those demands. Do not permit the man who abused your generosity to teach you that generosity itself is dangerous. Return to Scripture. Decide freely, seek wise counsel, begin within your means, and give to trustworthy gospel work without expecting an earthly dividend. The false shepherd sought your money; Christ seeks your heart and teaches your hands to serve.

Pastors and elders must therefore teach giving without turning the sermon into a collection device. Teach the grace of the Macedonians before the amount of their gift. Explain the purpose and the need plainly. Never attach a promise to money that Scripture attaches to Christ. Do not invent a crisis to accelerate an offering, shame the poor into silence, or flatter the rich into greater influence. Help believers learn regular, proportionate giving, wise household provision, generosity toward real need, and confidence in accountable administration. Where an appeal has misused the promise of sowing and reaping, name the error and correct it publicly. A shepherd must not manufacture willingness by making refusal feel like rebellion against a prophecy he has invented.

The deepest motive remains the Savior Himself. Before Paul asks the Corinthians to complete their gift, he places Christ before them: "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9). The Son of God did not come among the needy to take from them. He gave Himself for sinners who could offer Him no repayment. We were not rescued because our offerings impressed heaven; we were saved by grace through faith, not by works (Ephesians

2:8–9). The Lord who "did not spare His own Son" has already shown the measure of His generosity (Romans 8:32). Every Christian gift is an answer to mercy, never the purchase price of mercy.

Look, then, at what grace has done. It has made the believer more than a payer of religious expenses. It has made him a worshiper whose possessions can serve love; a steward whose planning can relieve sorrow; a brother whose abundance can meet another's lack; a partner whose quiet sacrifice can help carry the gospel beyond his own lifetime. The question is not simply, How much did I give? It is, Did what I gave confess that Jesus Christ is my treasure? If the answer requires repentance, do not begin with an impressive promise to donate more. Begin where the Macedonians began: give yourself to the Lord.

Once we understand why the believer gives, one further truth comes into focus. The generosity of the church must never change the character of the message it supports. Gifts may sustain faithful servants and carry the gospel across the world; they do not turn the gospel into something that can be priced. What believers give willingly must help ministers offer freely. That is the New Testament harmony to which the next section calls us: FREELY RECEIVED, FREELY GIVEN.

FREELY RECEIVED, FREELY GIVEN

> Matthew 10:8: "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give."

A church may have learned to give without being coerced. But what happens when those gifts reach the hands of its ministers? Does the church use them to carry the Word to people who need it, or to build a system in which those people must pay before they may receive it? The question has moved from the conscience of the giver to the stewardship of the messenger. A gift meant to open the door must not become the money that builds a gate.

Begin where Jesus spoke. Matthew 10 does not describe an ordinary church service or a general commission to every Christian. The Lord called the Twelve, gave them authority over unclean spirits and diseases, and sent them on a particular mission to the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew 10:1, 5–8). They were to announce that the kingdom of heaven was at hand and perform extraordinary works that testified to the authority of the One who sent them. The words "freely you have received" followed the bestowal of those powers. They had

neither earned the commission nor purchased the ability to fulfill it. Why, then, should the afflicted be asked to purchase what Christ had entrusted to His messengers for their good?

We must neither overlook that history nor imitate it carelessly. The command to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, raise the dead, and cast out demons was given to those apostles in that founding mission. Scripture identifies extraordinary signs with the authentication of the apostolic witness (Hebrews 2:3–4; 2 Corinthians 12:12), and the church rests upon the foundation laid through the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Matthew 10:8 is not a license for later preachers to claim the Twelve's authority or to sell supposed healings and revelations. The signs authenticated the apostles' foundational witness; the grace proclaimed through that witness remains freely offered in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is something searching in the order of Christ's words. He does not begin with the gift the disciples will give, but with the gift they have received. Before they can imagine themselves benefactors, He reminds them they are recipients. Paul presses the same truth upon every proud servant: "And what do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). Whatever a minister knows of Christ, whatever capacity he has to teach, whatever opportunity has been opened to him, he stands before the church as a dependent man. A man who must first receive from Christ has no right to behave as though Christ's treasure originated with him.

John Calvin saw that humility at the center of the command. Commenting on Matthew 10:8, he described the disciples as "a sort of channels for transmitting the free bounty of God." [49] A channel does not create the water, and it cannot claim ownership of the spring. Its usefulness lies in carrying what it has received. When the channel begins charging the thirsty for the privilege of approaching the fountain, the servant has mistaken himself for the source. That is not merely bad fundraising. It is a false account of whose gift is being distributed.

The Twelve's first mission to Israel was temporary; the free invitation of the gospel they proclaimed was not. We are "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). Paul speaks of "the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:12). At the close of Scripture the invitation still stands: "Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17). These are not promises that salvation is

inexpensive. They declare that grace cannot be bought by the person who needs it. What God bestows through Christ is received by faith, not acquired through a transaction with a religious representative.

Consider what happens when the church tells the sinner one thing and its arrangements teach him another. The preacher declares that mercy is freely offered. Then the man seeking biblical counsel, the student longing to understand Scripture, or the new believer looking for sound instruction is told that the spiritual help itself lies beyond a fee he cannot pay. No one may have denied grace in the sermon. Yet the method has already supplied another message: what Christ freely offers may be withheld until the institution receives its price. The way we distribute the Word can either confirm our preaching about grace or contradict it before the hearer has understood a sentence.

This is not a call to pretend that buildings, paper, travel, food, and a minister's time have no cost. Jesus Himself immediately told the Twelve that "a worker is worthy of his food" (Matthew 10:10), and the preceding section has established the church's duty to support gospel labor. But an expense explains why someone must bear a cost; it does not establish that the hearer must purchase the spiritual benefit. The distinction matters especially when the one most in need is the one least able to pay. The church may need money to carry the message. It must not make money the condition for receiving the message.

> 1 Corinthians 9:18: "What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel."

Paul could have insisted upon support from the Corinthians. He had already defended the worker's right in the same chapter (1 Corinthians 9:7–14). Yet in Corinth Paul voluntarily left that right unused, determined not to 'hinder the gospel of Christ' (1 Corinthians 9:12). He could receive help from the Macedonian believers while preaching in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:7–9), and he could gratefully accept the Philippians' partnership (Philippians 4:14–18). His refusal to charge his hearers did not make the message less precious. It made unmistakable that its preciousness did not come from a price.

Notice how Paul describes his reward. He does not say that preaching without charge is an unfortunate financial sacrifice for which he hopes to be compensated later. He rejoices that he may present Christ without putting a commercial obligation upon those who hear. For Paul, the freedom of the hearer was worth the surrender of a legitimate

right. That is a searching measure for any ministry that now treats every restriction on income as an assault upon its survival. What Paul counted a privilege, we must not learn to regard as an intolerable loss.

His words elsewhere sharpen the warning: "For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God" (2 Corinthians 2:17). He speaks instead as a man sent from God, in the sight of God, in Christ. Nor would he allow covetousness to hide behind pious speech: "For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness" (1 Thessalonians 2:5). The issue penetrates beyond an advertised fee. Does the preacher speak as a steward accountable to God, or as a man calculating what his hearers can be persuaded to pay? The audience may not see the calculation. God does.

Here is how that calculation changes a ministry. At first, an institution simply has expenses to meet. Then it discovers that certain parts of its teaching produce more revenue than others. Before long, access to deeper instruction, private counsel, or special attention is arranged around payment. Leaders learn which appeals move the wealthy, which warnings make the fearful give, and which biblical truths may jeopardize the next financial campaign. The change may come without anyone announcing a new doctrine. The treasury becomes the silent editor of the ministry.

Imagine a young mother who has been wounded by false teaching. She enters a church asking for help to understand the Scriptures. She is told that an ordinary meeting is free, but the instruction she actually needs is available only through a paid spiritual program. Next to her stands a prosperous man who can purchase every level of access. What have we taught these two people about their place among Christ's sheep? One learns that his money opens doors. The other learns that her poverty closes them. James condemns partiality that distributes honor according to wealth (James 2:1–9). How much more carefully should we guard the ministry of the Word itself?

When a minister claims a fresh word from God or a power to heal, and then charges the desperate for access, the error is not merely expensive religion: he has presumed divine authority and turned human need into revenue (2 Peter 2:3). But the same spirit can also enter respectable arrangements defended as efficient and necessary. A ministry may call a required payment a contribution, a partnership, a resource fee, or an expression of commitment. Names do not determine the moral meaning of the arrangement. Ask what happens when

a sincere hearer cannot pay. Does the ministry still seek a faithful way to place the teaching in his hands? Or does the conversation end at the price? The answer reveals whether the fee serves the ministry or governs access to it.

That question is not answered by declaring every ordinary material charge sinful. A printed book has production costs; a conference facility and a meal have costs; transportation and lodging have costs. Such realities call for honest stewardship. But when the price of an accompanying good becomes the required gate through which spiritual instruction must be purchased, the ministry must examine whether it has quietly attached a commercial condition to what Christ commissioned it to proclaim. Often the answer will require other believers to bear the expense, a simpler form of distribution, or a deliberate willingness to serve people who cannot repay (Luke 14:12–14; 3 John 5–8).

What would the opposite arrangement look like? A church funds its pastor so that he can open the Scriptures to rich and poor alike. Its members give for translations and sound books that may reach men they will never meet. A missionary receives support from distant brothers and sisters so that the people hearing him do not become his customers. A frightened counselee meets a shepherd rather than a cashier. This is not a ministry without costs. It is a ministry in which the church carries the costs as an act of love and refuses to make spiritual need a market opportunity.

The minister himself must learn the difference between stewardship and ownership. Paul calls gospel workers "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God," adding, "it is required in stewards that one be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:1–2). The truth has been entrusted to them for faithful proclamation and transmission (2 Timothy 2:2). A steward may manage the means of service. He may not alter the Master's terms of access. To treat revelation, pastoral care, or spiritual authority as private inventory is to forget who entrusted the treasure and why.

Martin Luther, confronting the sale of indulgences, declared in Thesis 62: "The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God." [50] His next theses sharpened the contrast: the nets once used to gather people through the gospel had become a means of gathering people's wealth through indulgences (Theses 65–66). His historical controversy was not identical to every modern question about books, conferences, or support. But the

underlying danger is recognizable. A church may keep the word *gospel* while slowly reorganizing its work around the money the gospel can attract. When the church begins fishing for the wealth of men instead of the souls of men, something sacred has been reversed.

Pastor, bring this matter into the light of an ordinary week. Watch what happens when a poor believer requests the same spiritual instruction that a generous donor has received. Examine whether your counseling calendar, classes, digital resources, and access to leaders quietly distinguish between those who can pay and those who cannot. Read the actual fundraising appeals. Do they describe a real need and invite free partnership, or do they threaten the hearer with missed favor or promised disaster? Do not answer only with the intention you believe you had. The policy, the website, the invoice, and the person turned away may tell a fuller story.

If you find that money has acquired that power, repentance must become visible. Before reforming a policy, name the part you played in establishing or defending it. What did you introduce, tolerate, or excuse because it kept the money coming? The shepherd must lead the repentance he calls the flock to practice. Correct the theology before defending the budget. Teach the congregation Matthew 10:8–10 and 1 Corinthians 9 in their proper contexts, so they see both the freeness of ministry and the rightful support of ministers. Remove conditions that make spiritual help dependent upon purchase; establish clear safeguards for gifts and expenses; invite faithful churches and believers to bear the costs of distribution. If an old practice cannot continue without violating the Lord's command, do not rename it and preserve it. Change the practice.

Then remain faithful when those changes cost you. An offering may diminish. A paid program may end. A wealthy supporter may object when his donation no longer entitles him to special authority. Such resistance does not automatically prove that every decision was wise; elders must still examine stewardship carefully. But neither does lost revenue prove that obedience was mistaken. The servant who must keep a purchaser pleased before he can speak the whole counsel of God has surrendered too much already (Galatians 1:10; 1 Peter 5:2–3).

And to the soul who has been told that spiritual help belongs to people with means, hear what Christ's gospel actually announces. You are not asked to impress God with your poverty, and the wealthy are not permitted to approach Him by a more expensive door. Charles

Spurgeon, preaching from Isaiah 55:1, rejoiced that "no creature can be too poor, too wicked, or too vile to receive it." [51] The invitation is wide because its authority rests upon the Giver, not upon the qualifications or wealth of the recipient. "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink" (John 7:37).

The freeness of the gospel does not begin with a generous church. It begins with the Savior who gave Himself. The Lord Jesus did not come into a needy world to collect payment from the needy. He came "to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Every faithful act of free ministry must point beyond the generosity of the church to the immeasurably greater generosity of its Head. He is no merchant waiting for a customer to meet His price. He is the Savior calling sinners who have nothing with which to bargain. A gospel minister must never place his own tollbooth on the road to a Savior who welcomes the empty-handed.

Yet there is a final question. If the sinner comes without money, does that mean redemption itself cost nothing? No. The grace we receive without payment was obtained at a cost no sinner could meet. Scripture now takes us from the freeness of the invitation to the preciousness of the redemption that makes it possible: THE PRICE HAS ALREADY BEEN PAID.

THE PRICE HAS ALREADY BEEN PAID

> 1 Peter 1:18–19: "Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."

Peter places the finest currency men possess beside the price of redemption, and the comparison ends before it begins. Silver may settle a debt between men. Gold may purchase a man's freedom from an earthly master. Neither can erase one sin, silence a guilty conscience before the judgment of God, or give life to a soul dead in trespasses. The problem was never that sinners could not afford enough. It was that they had nothing with which to purchase what they needed most.

But notice what Peter says Christ redeemed His people from. His words are not merely about relief from financial distress or escape from difficult circumstances. He says they were redeemed "from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers" (1 Peter 1:18). Their old way of life had an inheritance, habits, loyalties, and perhaps the approval of everyone around them. It still could not bring

them to God. The Redeemer did not come to make the old captivity more comfortable. He came to bring His people out of it (Titus 2:14). Christ did not pay for the chains to be polished. He paid to break them.

And who could accomplish such a deliverance? Peter does not direct us to a rich benefactor, an extraordinary minister, or a religious institution. He directs us to a Lamb "without blemish and without spot." The sacrifices of the old covenant continually confessed the need for atonement; they could not themselves take away sins (Hebrews 10:1–4). Here stands the sinless Son of God, who needed no sacrifice for His own guilt and who freely gave Himself for ours. Peter goes on to say that Christ was foreordained before the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20). Redemption was God's purpose long before any sinner could offer Him anything. The Father sent the Son in love, and the Son willingly laid down His life (1 John 4:10; John 10:17–18).

His blood is precious because of whose blood it is and what His death accomplished. He bore the curse due to lawbreakers (Galatians 3:13). God set Him forth as a propitiation by His blood, displaying His righteousness even as He justifies the one who believes in Jesus (Romans 3:25–26). He entered the Most Holy Place with His own blood, "having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12). John Owen called the ransom's "value, worth, and dignity" "infinite and immeasurable." [52] The cross was not an attempt to persuade God to overlook sin. In the death of His Son, God dealt with sin justly and opened the way for guilty sinners to be reconciled to Himself.

When the dying Savior cried, "It is finished!" (John 19:30), He announced the completion of the work the Father had given Him. Scripture does not describe His sacrifice as the first installment of a debt that the church must go on collecting. "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). There is nothing a sinner can add to that sacrifice, nothing a minister can charge for its effectiveness, and nothing a donor can contribute to make Christ's blood more sufficient. The cross has no unpaid balance.

No sinner can purchase forgiveness because Christ has already purchased His people. No donor can buy divine favor. No offering can force God to heal. No "seed" payment can obligate heaven to produce a financial harvest. The highest price imaginable has already been paid, and it was paid by Christ.

The pulpit is not a retail counter, and the pastor is not a salesman.

When a preacher tells the suffering that a particular offering will release a healing, or tells the anxious that money will unlock a special word from God, the question is no longer merely whether his fundraising is excessive. By whose authority has he attached a human price to divine mercy? Simon tried to buy God's gift and heard Peter's judgment: "Your money perish with you" (Acts 8:20). An offering may help carry the gospel to another person. It cannot purchase the power of the gospel for the giver.

Nor does redemption in Christ mean that the Christian can demand immediate escape from sickness, loss, or sorrow. Peter speaks of an inheritance that cannot perish while acknowledging that believers may be "grieved by various trials" and that their faith may be tested like gold in the fire (1 Peter 1:4, 6–7). The Savior has secured their final redemption; they still await the redemption of the body (Romans 8:23). This distinction protects suffering Christians from one of the cruelest lies preached in Christ's name: that a withheld financial gift explains an unanswered prayer. What the preacher promised for money may never have been what God promised at all.

There is a further consequence of the price Christ paid. The redeemed are no longer their own. "You were bought at a price," Paul tells believers, and therefore they must glorify God (1 Corinthians 6:20). Peter's appeal to the precious blood likewise belongs to a call to holy living in the fear of God (1 Peter 1:15–19). Calvin saw why remembering redemption should govern conduct: there is "nothing which ought so much to stimulate us to the practice of holiness." [53] The blood that frees a sinner from condemnation also claims his life for the Redeemer. Grace cannot be purchased; neither can it be enlisted in the service of greed.

Pastor, the souls before you are not a congregation of potential purchasers. They are people for whom Christ shed His blood, or sinners whom you must summon to Him while there is time. Paul charged the Ephesian elders to shepherd the church of God "which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Before you consider what a believer might give, remember whose sheep that believer is. Before you defend a profitable practice, ask whether it tells the truth about the Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. A man must not build his ministry by charging Christ's people for access to Christ.

And you who fear you have too little to bring—hear where your hope belongs. Spurgeon said of the Savior's redeeming blood, "There is no getting near to God, except as we get near to the cross." [54] Come,

then, not to a minister's promise of special access but to the crucified and risen Christ. Come confessing the sin you cannot cleanse, needing the mercy you cannot earn, trusting the sacrifice you cannot improve. He has not left the hardest part of your redemption for you to finance. He has done what no sinner could do, and He receives those who come to God through Him (Hebrews 7:25).

Here, then, is the distinction by which every offering, appeal, and ministry practice must be judged. Believers may give because Christ has redeemed them; they must never be taught to give in order to purchase His redemption. The church may rightly bear the cost of sending messengers, supplying books, and caring for the flock. But what the Savior accomplished by His blood cannot be turned into a commodity in His name. That truth must now follow us into the ordinary decisions where money and ministry meet.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION: WHEN MONEY AND MINISTRY MEET

We have considered the price Christ paid. Now bring the appeals we hear, the gifts we make, and the accounts our churches keep into the light of that price. The test is not merely whether a ministry raises money. Faithful ministry requires support. The test is what the ministry teaches people about God while it is asking for their money. A financial appeal may sound like a minor announcement after the sermon. Sometimes it preaches another sermon altogether—one in which the Lord's mercy waits for a payment, the fearful become profitable, and a minister's promise begins to carry more authority than the written Word.

Peter describes the machinery of this evil with terrifying economy: "By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words" (2 Peter 2:3). Notice the order. Covetousness supplies the appetite; deceptive words become the instrument; people become the merchandise. The minister need not say openly, "I am selling God's favor." He need only persuade the hearer that a gift will release a healing, unlock a revelation, avert calamity, or produce a guaranteed financial return. What began as a request for support has become a claim to control what belongs to God. The offering is no longer an expression of gratitude. It has been made into the price of hope.

Picture a widow at her kitchen table. The utility bill lies open, medicine must be paid for, and the balance in her account will scarcely carry her through the month. A preacher on the screen assures her

that the Lord has shown him a special blessing for those who respond *today*. He gives the amount, attaches a promise, and warns against missing the appointed moment. She is not weighing an ordinary charitable request. She has been made to fear that keeping money for necessities may mean turning away the help of God. The check she writes may look voluntary to the person who receives it. But fear has been standing over her shoulder while she signs.

Martin Luther confronted this invasion of the household purse in Thesis 46 of his *Ninety-Five Theses*: "Christians are to be taught that unless they have more than they need, they are bound to keep back what is necessary for their own families, and by no means to squander it on pardons." [55] He was addressing indulgences, but his warning exposes a familiar cruelty: religious sellers persuading people to surrender necessities for a spiritual benefit they cannot sell. Scripture commands care for one's household (1 Timothy 5:8), and Paul explains that a willing gift is accepted according to what a person has, not what he does not have (2 Corinthians 8:12). The preacher who makes a mother feel guilty for buying food for her children has set his demand against duties God has actually commanded. He has taught her to neglect a real obligation in order to purchase an invented promise.

Here Scripture makes a connection no shepherd should dare overlook. Immediately before Mark tells us about the poor widow who put her two mites into the treasury, Jesus warns against scribes who "devour widows' houses" (Mark 12:40–44). He sees her gift; He also condemns religious men who prey upon women like her. Whatever further lessons we draw from the widow's offering, her poverty is not permission for a preacher to demand her last coins as the purchase price of God's favor. Before a minister praises the widow's generosity, let him hear Christ's judgment against those who devour widows' houses. The Savior sees the woman. The exploiter sees what remains in her purse.

Luther's Thesis 50 brings the sheep themselves into view: "Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the pardon-preachers, he would rather that St. Peter's church should go to ashes, than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep." [56] His words strip the grandeur from a religious project financed by the suffering of those it claims to serve. Look again at the magnificent building, the expanding platform, the celebrated campaign. What paid for it? Were believers freely supporting faithful work, or were frightened people surrendering money for promises

made in God's name? A ministry's visible growth may conceal the wounds of the people who financed it. No building, broadcast, or reputation can make the devouring of Christ's sheep an act of service to Christ.

The deepest tragedy of the prosperity gospel is not found in the sprawling mansions or private jets of the false teachers. The true tragedy is found in the living rooms of the elderly, the sick, and the destitute. Vulnerable widows are persuaded to part with money needed for ordinary living; the chronically ill are urged to empty savings because one more financial "seed" supposedly stands between them and healing. Such appeals do more than transfer funds. They transfer a sufferer's expectation from the promises God has actually given to the conditions a man has invented. A weakened body and a frightened conscience are made to bear the cost of another man's greed.

Then the promised breakthrough does not come. The widow is still poor; the sick man is still sick. What happens to the promise? Too often the person who made it retains his authority, while the person who believed it is accused of insufficient faith. The money is taken first; the blame is returned afterward. The false promise survives by putting its own failure on trial in the conscience of its victim. The frightened giver is told to search for some hidden unbelief, some missed instruction, some further offering that might finally move heaven. One invented condition produces another, until the soul is exhausted and the demands have no end.

When the breakthrough never comes and the bank account is entirely drained, these precious souls are left in absolute ruin. They may lose not only their money but their confidence in everything they have been taught about Christ. They may conclude that God has lied, that He has abandoned them, or that their suffering proves He will not receive them. The teacher has placed his own word where God's Word belongs. When his word collapses, the wounded person may think the promises of God have collapsed with it. But the promise was never God's to break. Christ knows His sheep and holds them fast (John 10:27–29); the ruin of a deceiver's claim must never be mistaken for the failure of the Shepherd.

Nor is this merely an abuse of fundraising technique. Paul warns of men who suppose that "godliness is a means of gain" (1 Timothy 6:5); Peter warns of destructive teachers whose covetousness exploits the flock (2 Peter 2:1–3); Jude remembers those who ran greedily in Balaam's error for profit (Jude 11). The prosperity gospel exchanges

the riches of God's grace for an imagined system of payments and rewards, then teaches sinners to approach the Lord with a bargain instead of repentance and faith. We must withdraw from these false teachers. We must call the prosperity gospel what it is: a damnable heresy that leads many to hell with a smile on its face and a hand in their pockets. To turn souls from the sufficiency of Christ toward a purchasable blessing is no harmless difference in emphasis. It strikes at the truth of the gospel.

But what shall we say to the believer who has already been wounded? Not another demand. Not a fresh technique for obtaining what the first preacher promised. Open the Scriptures beside the appeal that terrified you. Peter speaks of saints who possess an imperishable inheritance while they are, for a little while, "grieved by various trials"; their faith may be tested like gold in the fire (1 Peter 1:3–7). Paul's thorn remained after earnest prayer, and Christ answered him with sufficient grace rather than the removal of every affliction (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). A sick Christian may have a strong Savior while his body remains weak. The cross does not authorize a preacher to guarantee immediate health, and the absence of a cure does not prove the absence of Christ's love.

Perhaps you sent money because you were told your child's recovery depended on it. Perhaps you were promised freedom from debt and now have less than before. You may feel foolish, ashamed, or afraid to tell your pastor. Do not allow the one who misused God's name to become the judge of your spiritual condition. Bring the actual appeal, the promised result, and the Scriptures to trustworthy elders who will examine them without demanding another payment (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21). Where fraud or financial abuse is established, seek appropriate protection and accountability. You do not honor Christ by keeping another man's deception secret.

Rest in the sufficiency of the written Word and in the Savior to whom it bears witness. Peter says tested faith is more precious than perishing gold (1 Peter 1:7). Your savings may have been taken. Your confidence in religious leaders may have been shaken. But the treasure held out in the gospel is not in the custody of the preacher who deceived you. Anchor your soul to the true treasure, and you will never be defrauded. A thief may take your money; he cannot purchase, cancel, or confiscate the redemption Christ has accomplished. The bruised reed is not disposable to Him (Matthew 12:20).

Now we must guard against another danger. Anger at spiritual

profiteering can harden into a refusal to give anything at all. That would allow a false minister to rob the church twice: first of its gifts, and then of its freedom to be generous. Paul defended the rightful support of gospel workers (1 Corinthians 9:14; Galatians 6:6); he also forbade peddling the Word of God (2 Corinthians 2:17). The church must support faithful pastors, send missionaries, care for the poor, and bear the real costs of gospel work. Support keeps the messenger free to serve; a sale makes the hearer pay for the service. The duty to support faithful workers and the duty to give spiritual ministry freely are not rivals. Both are obligations under the lordship of Christ.

The New Testament calls for giving that is purposeful, free, and cheerful—not extracted by alarm. "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). The promise of sowing and reaping in that chapter is not a secret formula for turning an offering into personal wealth. Paul speaks of God's provision making believers sufficient for "every good work," of generosity supplying the needs of the saints, and of thanksgiving rising to God (2 Corinthians 9:8–12). The harvest is larger than the donor's bank account. Charles Spurgeon caught the difference between worship and speculation: "if they give to receive again, they do not give at all—they are only investing for themselves." [57] The minister who converts generosity into a promised investment teaches people to give for gain instead of out of grace.

What does faithful giving look like when this distortion has been removed? A family can hear the gospel whether it can contribute or not. A poor believer receives the same biblical counsel and the same shepherd's attention as the largest donor. Gifts pay for ministry without purchasing influence over it. Financial need may be stated plainly, without a counterfeit revelation, an invented deadline from heaven, or threats of spiritual loss. The church can say, "Here is the need; give as you purpose before the Lord," and leave the conscience under Scripture rather than under the fundraiser. Money still serves the ministry. It no longer governs the relationship between the minister and the soul.

Pastor, the examination must now turn toward your own pulpit. Paul says the overseer must be "not greedy for money" (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7), and Peter commands shepherds to serve "not for dishonest gain, but eagerly" (1 Peter 5:2). Those qualifications do not stop at the pastor's salary. They reach his motives, appeals, donor relationships, spending, promises, and treatment of the poor. Do not ask only whether the books balance. Ask whether the ministry has made

a spiritual advantage seem available to those who can pay. An honest ledger cannot sanctify a dishonest appeal.

Richard Baxter confronted ministers whose worldly interests kept them from necessary duties. Remembering Simon Magus, he asked, "what is it to sell his gift, his cause, and the souls of men for money?" [58] His question reaches beyond the obvious deceiver on a television screen. What have *we* tolerated because a wealthy supporter liked it? What truth have we left unspoken because it might disturb giving? Have we received a gift as partnership in the gospel, or treated it as a claim upon our judgment? The pastor cannot call the church to repentance where he refuses to lead it in repentance before God.

REPENT. Name what you introduced, tolerated, defended, or normalized. If you joined a biblical promise to an amount of money, withdraw that claim plainly. If you shamed believers who could not give, seek them out and ask forgiveness. If church policy has put a poor believer behind a paying customer, admit what the policy has taught about Christ. Do not substitute a vague confession of "communication mistakes" for repentance where the offense was spiritual manipulation. Zacchaeus showed that repentance can reach the purse when he promised to restore what he had wrongly taken (Luke 19:8). Where restitution is due and possible, pursue it. A corrected sermon does not by itself correct a wrong done to a sheep.

RE-TEACH. Lead the congregation patiently through Matthew 10:8, 1 Corinthians 9:14, 2 Corinthians 2:17, and 2 Corinthians 8–9. Show why the gospel is given freely and why workers may nevertheless receive willing support. Explain why a preacher's private assurance cannot bind God to heal or enrich a donor. Teach what the Lord actually promises to His people amid affliction, and let the poor hear those promises without embarrassment. The aim is not merely to stop one abusive practice. It is to rebuild a church's understanding of grace so thoroughly that the next counterfeit bargain sounds false the moment it is offered.

REFORM. Bring the appeal, the policy, and the account into the same light as the sermon. Remove payments tied to prophecy, healing, special prayer, or privileged pastoral attention. End donor arrangements that buy spiritual influence. Establish financial safeguards that elders can inspect, honest records the congregation can trust, and a means for the vulnerable to receive care without financial pressure. Paul arranged for recognized brothers to accompany a substantial gift, taking precautions so that no one could blame the administration of

the funds (2 Corinthians 8:18–21). Calvin observed that Paul "was not so lifted up, as not to be under control equally with any individual of the flock." [59] If an apostle welcomed accountability, what minister may demand exemption from it? Secrecy is no mark of spiritual authority.

REMAIN. A reformed appeal may raise less money. Someone may threaten to stop giving unless his preferences govern the church. A familiar campaign may have to end; a cherished privilege may have to disappear. Hear legitimate concerns and correct your own poor judgment where necessary, but never restore a false promise merely because it once paid the bills. Paul asked whether he sought to please men or God (Galatians 1:10). Peter reminds elders that the Chief Shepherd will appear and call them to account (1 Peter 5:2–4). You may need to explain reform patiently to weaker sheep; you must not surrender it to the strongest purse. A pastor who cannot afford to lose a donor has begun to put a price upon his freedom to preach.

And before we put a final question to the reader, look at the Savior whom all this religious bargaining misrepresents. Jesus saw multitudes as "sheep not having a shepherd," and He taught them (Mark 6:34). He did not calculate how much their desperation could yield. He received the burdened, touched lepers, welcomed the despised, spoke truth to the rich, and gave Himself for sinners. The Lord who condemns men for devouring widows' houses does not despise the widow. The Shepherd who purchased His flock does not measure it by what it can pay. What kind of minister uses the wounds of the sheep to enrich himself when his Master received wounds to save them?

BRING THE MONEY TO THE WORD — CHAPTER 11 CHECKLIST

Do not leave these matters at the level of indignation against notorious personalities. Take the last appeal you heard, the last gift you gave, or the last policy you approved and place it beside the passages below. For each answer, identify what you have actually seen, heard, promised, paid, or permitted. Then name the obedience that follows.

1. **WHAT AM I BEING ASKED TO PURCHASE?** Is the money supporting legitimate gospel work, or is it presented as the condition for healing, prophecy, anointing, divine favor, spiritual access, or a financial return? Compare the offer with Matthew 10:8 and Acts 8:18–20. If mercy has a price, who authorized the seller?

2. **IS THE GIFT TRULY FREE?** Could I decline without being told that I lack faith, will miss God's blessing, or will suffer spiritual consequences? Does the appeal respect giving "not grudgingly or of necessity" (2 Corinthians 9:7)? Name any threat that has been dressed up as an invitation.
3. **IS SCRIPTURE BEING READ OR USED?** Does the preacher explain the text in context, or turn sowing and reaping, healing, or divine blessing into a financial guarantee? Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–12 before accepting a promise built upon verse 6 alone. What did God say, and what did the fundraiser add?
4. **DOES THE POOR BELIEVER RECEIVE THE SAME CARE?** Can a widow, a laborer, or a sick person receive teaching, counsel, prayer, and ordinary pastoral attention without buying a place near the leader? James 2:1–6 condemns partiality toward the wealthy. Look at the actual practice, not merely the church's statement of welcome.
5. **WHO CAN EXAMINE THE MONEY?** Are gifts recorded and administered with meaningful oversight, clear purposes, and accountable people? Paul took visible precautions in handling contributions (2 Corinthians 8:20–21). If financial questions are treated as rebellion, what is authority being used to protect?
6. **IS THIS SUPPORT OR SALE?** Am I joining others in bearing the costs of the gospel, or must I pay to receive the spiritual ministry itself? Hold 1 Corinthians 9:14 beside 2 Corinthians 2:17. The laborer may be supported; the Word must not become his inventory.
7. **DOES THE SHEPHERD MEET SCRIPTURE'S TEST?** Is he demonstrably "not greedy for money" (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7), and does he serve "not for dishonest gain" (1 Peter 5:2)? Examine how he treats donors, handles criticism, explains need, and relates to the poor. Character is disclosed by practice.
8. **WHAT MUST I STOP OR MAKE RIGHT?** If I financed a manipulative ministry, will I cease enabling it? If I pressured people to give, will I retract the claim, repent, and seek appropriate restitution? Remember Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8). Conviction that refuses a concrete act of obedience is still hiding.
9. **HAS GODLINESS BECOME A BUSINESS MODEL?** Do I see the love of money joined to religious appearance—the danger exposed in 1 Timothy 6:5–10 and 2 Timothy 3:1–5? Has financial gain become the practical proof of spirituality? Do

not confuse a *form* of godliness with the holy life produced by God's Spirit.

10. **ARE PEOPLE BEING SHEPHERDED OR EXPLOITED?** Does the ministry reflect Christ's care for the weak, or the deceptive words of 2 Peter 2:3 and the self-feeding shepherds of Ezekiel 34:2–4? When promises fail, who bears the blame—the claimant or the sufferer?
11. **HAS CELEBRITY DISARMED MY DISCERNMENT?** Would I recognize the same threats, secrecy, favoritism, or greed if a less admired person practiced them? Romans 16:17–18 warns that smooth speech can deceive the unsuspecting. A crowd is not a certificate of God's approval.

Now give with clean hands and a free heart where Christ's work is faithfully done. Support faithful pastors. Help send the gospel where it has not been heard. Care for those who cannot repay you. But do not confuse generosity with gullibility, and do not let the disgust of having been deceived make you suspicious of every true call to sacrifice. The Lord does not need deception to sustain His work. He loves willing obedience, not a frightened attempt to buy His favor.

And if you have been the one who sold a promise, repent and come to the Savior whose name you misused. If you have been the one who bought it, come to Him also. Neither the guilty minister nor the wounded giver can cleanse himself with money. Christ receives sinners who come confessing their need and trusting His finished work. The gospel ends the bargaining. The sinner does not come with money in his hand. He comes empty. He comes to the One who gave His life for the sheep and who will not cast out those who come to Him (John 10:11; John 6:37).

> Isaiah 55:1: "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

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56 Martin Luther, *Ninety-Five Theses*, Thesis 50, same English text, PDF pages 5–6. The quotation retains Luther's conditional statement concerning the pope and his condemnation of the indulgence preachers' exactions. Its application here concerns religious projects financed by exploiting the very sheep their leaders are called to feed and protect.

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CHAPTER 12

The Dorean Principle: Ministry without Merchandise

Matthew 10:8: "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give."

The sale of supposed spiritual access can become a lucrative trade. Imagine a believer looking at a payment screen that promises a personal word from God. He hesitates. There are bills to pay, but the appeal has made refusal feel dangerous: what if God has an answer for him and his unwillingness to give shuts him out? Before money leaves his account, something has already happened to his conscience. A man's demand has begun to sound like God's requirement.

When a leader claims to possess a new word from God that others cannot hear without him, he may begin to act as a gatekeeper to the divine. Scripture, by contrast, gives the church a public and accessible apostolic witness. No minister owns it or may charge for access to it.

A claimed exclusive revelation can create artificial scarcity. When the supposed word is available only through a paid event or private access to its messenger, spiritual dependence becomes a source of revenue. The danger reaches beyond the money lost. The believer is being taught where to turn when he is afraid. Instead of learning to search the Scriptures and pray through Christ, he learns to wait for the next offer. The ministry can grow while his confidence in the sufficiency of God's Word shrinks.

Christ's command at the head of this chapter confronts that dependence. In Matthew 10:5–10, He was sending the Twelve to Israel with authority to proclaim the kingdom and perform signs. Their power

was received from Him; it was never theirs to sell. Albert Barnes put the prohibition plainly: "They were not to make a money-making business of it." [1] That apostolic commission does not confer the same miracle-working authority upon every later minister. It does expose the offense of treating God's bounty as a possession from which the messenger may exact a price.

Christ also provided for His messengers' support in that same commission. The church must not use His generosity as an excuse for its own stinginess. 1 Corinthians 9:14: "Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel." Paul affirmed that right while refusing to let its exercise hinder the gospel. Christians should sustain faithful workers generously, enabling them to give themselves to the work. Such support serves the free ministry of the Word; it does not purchase a place nearer to God. A pastor's need for provision gives him no ownership of the grace he proclaims.

Greed in a shepherd is idolatry conducted in the language of ministry. Colossians 3:5 identifies "covetousness, which is idolatry." A. W. Pink explains that those ruled by this lust "adore their gold and put their trust in it, making a god of it." [2] A pastor may continue saying God's name while money decides what he promises, whom he flatters, and which sins he refuses to confront. The sheep have become a means of feeding the shepherd's idol. Here the warning reaches the heart of this book. God has given His church the faith delivered once for all, and His inspired Scriptures equip His servant for every good work (Jude 3; 2 Timothy 3:16–17). When a leader claims new revelation or apostolic power and sells access to it, he invites believers to depend on an authority beyond the written Word. He claims the right to bind their consciences where Scripture has given him no command to impose. The closed canon and the sufficiency of Scripture expose that usurpation; the Spirit's true work exposes the greed concealed beneath it. The Spirit glorifies Christ, while this man makes access to himself indispensable (John 16:14). Martin Luther warned that a pastor mastered by avarice becomes prepared "for a few pieces of silver, to betray Christ and his Word and his Church." [3] The betrayal deepens when the man invokes the Holy Spirit to defend the very sin the Spirit condemns.

God has also announced where unrepented greed ends. Ephesians 5:5–6 excludes the covetous idolater from Christ's kingdom and warns of divine wrath. Peter applies that judgment directly to teachers who exploit believers through deceptive speech: 2 Peter 2:3 declares,

"for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber." Their ministry may still be expanding while their judgment is drawing near. Christ likewise warned that scribes who consumed widows' property while displaying their piety would receive greater condemnation (Luke 20:45–47). Religious authority makes the betrayal more grievous when the trust it creates becomes the means of exploitation. Spurgeon wrote, "Grace may exist where there are many occasional sins, but never where there is abiding covetousness." [4] Saving grace makes war upon greed; persistent, defended exploitation contradicts a man's profession of having received that grace. This is why defending the true work of the Spirit requires more than denying false claims to His power: it requires exposing the unholy allegiance those claims can conceal. Preaching on Ephesians 5:5, Martyn Lloyd-Jones explained, "These great warnings, these threatenings, these alarming statements, these are the things that God uses to sanctify us." [5] A shepherd must bring himself beneath that warning before he brings another appeal for money before the flock.

This warning also belongs in the sanctuary when entertainment is allowed to govern worship. Nadab and Abihu died after offering worship God had not commanded; their priestly office did not shelter them from His holiness (Leviticus 10:1–3). The church does not acquire permission to disregard His Word because the resulting service fills the room. Hebrews 12:28–29 requires reverent worship from Christians precisely because the God they approach remains holy and judges sin. When leaders suppress unwelcome truth, turn sacred things into amusement, or present manufactured excitement as the Spirit's work, they train people to trust an experience that may conceal disobedience. This book's defense of the Spirit's true ministry must therefore reach the platform as well as the pulpit: we must not attribute to Him what human manipulation has produced. Christ warns that even appeals to prophecy and mighty works performed in His name will not secure acceptance for those who practice lawlessness (Matthew 7:21–23). The approval of a congregation cannot overturn the verdict of its Lord. Pastor, if keeping people entertained requires keeping them untroubled by God's Word, you are teaching them to prefer the very silence that leaves them unprepared for judgment.

Christian, do not surrender your conscience to someone who claims that refusing his financial demand means resisting the Holy Spirit. Test the teacher and his message by God's Word (1 John 4:1). Refuse to purchase supposed revelations or promised miracles, and

seek help from faithful elders if fear has kept you paying. Stop defending a worship practice merely because it entertains you; ask whether it honors the God before whom you gather. Support servants who open the Scriptures freely and submit to their authority. Your access to the Father rests upon Christ's priesthood, not a preacher's private message or your ability to meet his price (Hebrews 4:14–16). Do not pay a man to stand where Christ alone belongs.

Pastor, Christian worker, put your own claims, appeals, and accounts beneath the Word you teach. Matthew Henry wrote, "The consideration of Christ's freeness in doing good to us, should make us free in doing good to others." [6] Withdraw promises God has not authorized. Renounce claims of revelation or spiritual power that you cannot establish from Scripture. Confess deception to those you deceived, restore what you obtained through fraud, and submit your teaching and finances to honest scrutiny by faithful elders. Where entertainment has displaced reverence, lead the congregation in repentance and restore the primacy of Scripture, prayer, and worship directed toward God. You cannot defend Scripture's sufficiency while protecting an income or an audience that depends upon teaching people it is insufficient. Peter answered Simon's attempt to purchase God's gift with a summons to repentance and prayer for forgiveness (Acts 8:20–23). Hear that summons yourself. Flee to Christ for mercy, and let repentance cost you the money, reputation, and control that greed taught you to protect. Nothing you gain by abusing His name can shelter you from His judgment.

The church must therefore examine what its financial practices teach about the Savior it proclaims. Christ's generosity should be recognizable in the hands of His servants. When those hands begin closing around what He commanded them to give, an old corruption has returned. The church has confronted it before; the history that follows brings us back to the question of what its true treasure is.

THE CHURCH'S TRUE TREASURE

In 1517, Martin Luther challenged the preaching of indulgences in his Ninety-Five Theses. Against the claim that the church's spiritual treasure could be dispensed for money, he declared in Thesis 62: "The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God." [7] Whenever the church treats grace as merchandise, it obscures this treasure.

The injury reaches deepest when a frightened soul begins treating a

payment as evidence that all is well with God. The money has changed hands, but the sin may remain unconfessed and the Savior untrusted; the transaction has supplied a reason to feel safe. 1 Peter 1:18–19 places redemption beyond the reach of silver and gold: it was accomplished "with the precious blood of Christ." The gospel is free to the sinner because the Son of God bore its cost. His sacrifice cannot be improved by a contribution or placed under a minister's control. A troubled believer needs the comfort of what Christ has accomplished and promised. An unrepentant hearer needs the summons to repent and believe in Him. Reassurance purchased from a preacher can leave both without the counsel they need. The church recovers its treasure when it opens the Scriptures and brings the guilty to the crucified and risen Savior, whose mercy no minister has the authority to sell.

That recovery belongs to this book's defense of Scripture's sufficiency and the closed canon. God has given His church a written apostolic testimony by which believers may know that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). A ministry that makes assurance depend on a purchased revelation teaches people to distrust the provision God has already made. Acts 8:18–23 exposes the attempt to bring divine power under human control: Simon offered money for authority to impart the Holy Spirit, and Peter answered him with a warning of judgment and a command to repent. The church must therefore judge every promise of privileged spiritual access by the Word entrusted to it. A preacher's claim to extraordinary power cannot authorize him to change the terms of God's grace.

Christian, examine what steadies your heart when guilt returns. If you are leaning on money you have given or a preacher's claim to revelation, confess that misplaced trust and seek your assurance in Christ's promises. Pastor, open those promises with the troubled soul before you. Teach him how Christ meets his guilt, and help him trust the written Word when your voice is no longer in the room. Teach the congregation to give from gratitude for mercy received.

WHEN THE LORD OVERTURNS THE TABLES

Long before Luther protested the sale of indulgences, Jesus overturned the money changers' tables. John describes coins poured out and traders driven from the temple, then gives the command that explains the upheaval. John 2:16: "Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" The Son confronted what men had made of His Father's house. Religious activity continued around those tables,

but its presence could not make their business holy. A ministry can retain the vocabulary of worship while turning the worshiper into a source of income.

This was an abomination committed under the cover of religion. The house set apart for God's honor had been made to serve men's appetite for gain. Colossians 3:5 calls covetousness "idolatry"; here that idol had carried its business into the sanctuary. Sacred things were being made servants of greed. Mark 11:17: Christ called it a "den of thieves." His overturned tables declared how intolerable that profanation was to the God whose name the temple bore.

Christ's words settle the question of ownership. Those who conducted the trade had no authority to redefine the house that belonged to His Father. Here the overturned tables reach into the modern church: a minister's opportunity to profit does not give him permission to profit from what God entrusted to his care. Calvin drew the governing lesson from this passage: "nothing shall be admitted into it that is at variance with the word of God." [8] A profitable practice must still answer to Scripture. The money it brings in cannot supply the authority it lacks.

Mark 11:15–17 records Christ teaching as He cleanses the temple. He appeals to what God had written about prayer for all nations and condemns the corruption He finds. His reference to Jeremiah's warning carries a terrible exposure: men can continue entering God's house while imagining that their religious standing shelters the sins they refuse to forsake (Jeremiah 7:8–11). A preacher who sells supposed revelations and then invokes his spiritual office to silence correction repeats that evasion. He is using the ministry itself as protection from the Word that judges his conduct.

Pastor, would you welcome Christ's correction if obeying it dismantled an income your ministry has learned to need? The question becomes concrete when a promised blessing is tied to a payment and you are asked to defend that promise from Scripture. At that moment, protecting the arrangement means protecting the claim you made in God's name. J. C. Ryle warns, "They may deceive men, but they cannot deceive Christ." [9] The Lord knows whether you are shepherding a troubled conscience or pressing upon its fear until money comes. Tell the truth about what you promised. Withdraw the claim, and care for the person who believed you.

John carries us from the overturned tables to Christ's own body. When His authority is challenged, Jesus speaks of the temple's

destruction and its raising in three days; John explains that He was speaking of His body and resurrection (John 2:18–22). The hands that scattered the coins would be pierced for sinners. Hebrews 10:19–22 directs believers to draw near to God through His blood, with Christ Himself as their High Priest. Christian, the Savior who condemns the misuse of holy things has opened the way for guilty people to come to God. Bring Him the guilt you cannot pay away. His finished sacrifice gives the repentant believer a welcome that no spiritual merchant can improve.

Receiving that mercy must change how we handle what belongs to Christ. His servants are entrusted with proclaiming the way He opened; to exploit someone seeking that way is to betray the One who opened it. A servant who sees generosity as an opportunity for gain must reckon with God's verdict upon Gehazi.

THE GEHAZI SYNDROME

Naaman was going home healed. Gehazi was watching the money go with him. The Syrian had confessed the God of Israel, and Elisha had refused his gift. Here was mercy that a wealthy man could receive without purchasing it. Yet the prophet's servant looked upon that generosity and found something to resent: his master had let a rich man leave with his riches. God's kindness had become, in Gehazi's reckoning, a wasted opportunity. The miracle had cleansed Naaman's flesh; the prospect of profit exposed the corruption in the man who served the prophet.

That corruption was already governing him before he ran. Matthew Henry locates the root in "The love of money, that root of all evil." [10] Gehazi wanted what Naaman carried, and wanting it taught him to find fault with the man who refused it. Greed had begun revising his judgment. Holy restraint appeared foolish; dishonest acquisition appeared sensible. This is how lust for material things can capture a minister: the life he wants to possess begins deciding which commands he can afford to obey. Eventually, obedience itself feels like someone depriving him of what should have been his.

The oath in 2 Kings 5:20 makes his resolve especially dreadful: "as the LORD lives." Elisha had invoked the living God when refusing the gift; Gehazi invoked Him when determining to pursue it. He carried the language of reverence into his rebellion. There is an appalling familiarity with holy things that leaves a man fluent in God's name while scarcely trembling before God Himself. Gehazi could speak

solemnly about the Lord and hurry toward sin in the same breath. A minister's religious vocabulary may remain intact long after his conscience has learned to serve his appetite.

His deception then took a form calculated to awaken generosity. 2 Kings 5:22 records his claim: "My master has sent me." He invented the arrival of two young men from the sons of the prophets and requested silver and clothing for them. Elisha's name supplied the authority; an invented need supplied the appeal. Gehazi made service to others the disguise for serving himself. He was willing to make an honest prophet appear changeable and to endanger Naaman's understanding of freely given mercy, provided the money reached his own hands. The ugliness lies in that bargain: another man's trust, a faithful servant's name, and the honor of God could all be spent to furnish Gehazi's life.

His place beside Elisha aggravated the betrayal. J. C. Ryle, expressly including Gehazi in his warning, writes that "it is grace, not place, which makes people believers." [11] Nearness to a faithful ministry can give a man opportunities to hear the truth while also giving him a reputation he has never earned. Gehazi used the trust attached to his position to make his lie believable. Pastor, the years behind your pulpit, the books on your shelves, and the believers who speak warmly of you cannot answer for the condition of your soul. A man may learn how faithful shepherds sound while refusing the Lord who makes them faithful.

The silver reached Gehazi's house. He dismissed the men who carried it, returned to Elisha, and denied having gone anywhere. One concealed act now required another. Greed had enlisted deceit to obtain its reward and needed deceit again to retain it. In 2 Kings 5:26, Elisha's searching question widens from money and clothing to groves, vineyards, livestock, and servants. The text does not say Gehazi purchased these things; the question exposes the appetite for an enlarged estate. A servant's calling had become small beside the life possessions seemed to promise. He had found somewhere to put the silver. He had found nowhere to hide himself from God.

Then came the sentence. 2 Kings 5:27 declares, "Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever." He left Elisha diseased, and the sentence extended to his descendants. What had looked like an opportunity to enrich himself became a calamity extending beyond him. Scripture identifies this particular affliction as God's judgment; it gives us no license to pronounce the

same verdict upon every sick person. It does, however, forbid us to make light of the sin God exposed. The Lord who gave healing judged its exploitation. Gehazi's access to the prophet had furnished him with opportunity, never immunity.

Pastor, bring that warning into the room where you plan the next appeal for money. If you invent a divine message to finance your desires, you are using God's name to secure what honesty would not obtain. If you describe personal luxury as a necessity of the kingdom, you are teaching the sheep to subsidize your covetousness. If you promise healing or financial deliverance in return for a gift, you are exploiting suffering under the authority of Christ. Richard Baxter warned ministers, "lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues." [12] Such conduct teaches a cruel lesson about the Savior, whatever the sermon may have said about His generosity.

Consider what that exploitation asks of a frightened person. Suppose a woman struggling to pay her bills believes your claim that sending money will secure God's intervention. You know the promised guarantee is absent from Scripture, yet her fear makes the appeal profitable. She parts with money she needs because she trusts the Lord whose name you have used. Can you receive it comfortably? Can you enjoy what it buys? To turn that trust into personal advantage is a foul betrayal of pastoral care. The hand she expected to help her has reached into her hardship for gain. Christ entrusted you to feed His sheep, and you have discovered a way to feed upon them.

Nor may those of us who reject claims to new revelation dismiss Gehazi as another preacher's problem. A cessationist confession cannot sanctify a covetous heart. Greed also enters through preferential attention to wealthy members, evasive accounts, resentment over another pastor's income, or the quiet conviction that years of service have earned the right to be indulged. Ask what you conceal, what you envy, and whose correction you refuse. Would you still speak the whole truth to the donor whose displeasure could diminish your comfort? 1 Peter 5:2–4 places the shepherd's conduct beneath the approaching appearance of the Chief Shepherd. His flock belongs to Him, including the members whose giving contributes nothing impressive to the budget.

That appearance must govern the present. 2 Corinthians 5:10 begins, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." Pastor, you will stand there. So will I. The Lord will expose hidden things and disclose the purposes of hearts (1 Corinthians 4:5). The

explanation that satisfied a trusting congregation will have no power to mislead Him. He knows what the appeal promised, where the money went, and why you wanted it. Baxter's warning strips away the refuge of office: "God never saved any man for being a preacher." [13] Having spoken of Christ to thousands cannot substitute for belonging to Christ yourself.

You have often reminded the congregation of its obligations. Remember your own. Hebrews 13:17 describes shepherds as men who must give account, and James 3:1 warns teachers of stricter judgment. Your knowledge increases your responsibility; the trust placed in you deepens the wrong when you betray it. Ephesians 5:5–6 identifies the covetous man as an idolater and warns of exclusion from God's kingdom and of divine wrath. Do not reduce that warning to a threat of diminished ministerial rewards. A man determined to keep his greed has no warrant to soothe himself with his ordination. If you refuse repentance, you are refusing the Lord whose mercy you claim to preach.

I plead with you: repent while you can still hear the warning. Do not wait for an investigation to force the truth from you, or for death to end the opportunity you are now being given. Get alone before God and name what you have done without the language that made it sound respectable. Then tell the truth to those you deceived. Identify the false claim, the money received, and the use you made of it. Return what you wrongfully obtained; where immediate repayment is impossible, submit to an honest and accountable plan. Let the elders examine the records you have protected. Repentance must become costly at the very place where sin became profitable.

The lies must also be corrected in the minds you taught to believe them. Withdraw fraudulent appeals immediately and publicly correct promises you made publicly. Explain from Scripture why giving cannot purchase healing, forgiveness, or control over God. The church should support faithful labor; that support never authorizes a pastor to sell divine favor. Establish oversight that can refuse your demands, and submit your fitness for office to the biblical qualifications, including freedom from covetousness (1 Timothy 3:2–3). John Owen's counsel reaches the appetite beneath the accounting: "be killing sin or it will be killing you." [14] Financial controls are necessary, but the heart that resents them still needs the searching, sanctifying work of God.

Remain under that correction when the first relief of confession passes. Accept the loss of income, position, or reputation that honest

obedience may require. Forgiveness does not confer a right to resume the pulpit, and tears do not cancel the need for tested character. Do not punish those who ask necessary questions or make the injured congregation responsible for restoring your importance. Learn to receive a rebuke without preparing your defense. Practice generosity where it brings you no influence. Let Christ become dearer to you than the life you were using His ministry to obtain. The surrender will expose how tightly greed held you; continued obedience will require His continuing grace.

And come to Him with the guilt you cannot repair by repayment. Restitution cannot purchase pardon any more than an offering can purchase a miracle. Christ saves through His own finished work. Titus 2:14 sets His redeeming self-giving beside His purpose to purify a people eager to do good; the mercy that forgives also turns the sinner toward holiness. The Savior you have dishonored is the Savior you must seek. Confess your sin and trust His sufficient sacrifice. Pastor, your next appeal for money can wait. Your repentance must not. Before you speak again of what the people should give, hear what the Lord requires of the servant who receives so much from His hand.

THE DOREAN MANDATE AND THE SINCERITY OF MINISTRY

When Jesus Christ commissioned His apostles, He anticipated this exact temptation. In Matthew 10:8, Jesus commands, 'Freely you have received, freely give.' The word translated 'freely' is *dōrean* (δωρεάν), from which the Dorean Principle takes its name. In the same commission, He recognizes the worker's right to food (Matthew 10:10). His servants must give freely while receiving the support He appoints.

In *The Dorean Principle: A Biblical Response to the Commercialization of Christianity*, Conley Owens distinguishes support offered in service to God from payment owed to a minister in exchange for ministry. His discussion begins with the force of Christ's command:

"The phrase 'freely give' may seem to indicate encouragement toward offering ministry bountifully rather than a prohibition against compensation. However, translations that say 'give without pay' are not mistaken. The Greek word used here, dorean, indicates the giving of something apart from any remuneration. In a context explicitly concerning money, this is the same word Paul uses to describe his gratuitous (freely offered) preaching." [15]

The Dorean Principle presents support as willing partnership in

gospel ministry. Owens describes ministerial colabor as "the product of fellow servants working toward a common goal of a common Employer." [16] Giving need not wait until the supporter has received a sermon, counsel, or some other personal benefit. As I wrote in *The Ministry Belongs to Christ*, "The operating model has been set before us: honorably supported workers, truthful appeals, voluntary generosity, accountable administration, practical access for the poor, and institutions that serve the church." [17] Such gifts can carry the gospel to people the supporter will never meet. In 3 John 5–8, those who receive and help Christ's messengers become fellow workers for the truth; in Philippians 4:15–18, the Philippians' repeated provision for Paul expresses their partnership and rises before God as an acceptable sacrifice. This partnership carries a real duty to God. He commands His people to sustain gospel laborers (1 Corinthians 9:14), share with those who teach them (Galatians 6:6), and honor elders who labor faithfully in the Word (1 Timothy 5:17–18). Yet that duty must be fulfilled with a willing heart. Addressing the collection for needy saints, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9:7 that giving must be "not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver." Cheerfulness does not cancel obedience; it is the spirit in which obedience should be offered. Intimidation and promises of purchasable blessing corrupt that willingness. But the absence of pressure does not settle everything: a person may volunteer money while believing he owes the minister payment for a sermon, counsel, or prayer. Owens calls this ministerial reciprocity. Gratitude for ministry received may rightly prompt generosity, but the gift must express service to God rather than settlement of a spiritual bill. A congregation may therefore provide a regular salary while its pastor freely ministers to rich and poor alike. The church supports the worker so the Word may be freely given; the hearer does not purchase the right to receive it.

Paul placed his conduct before the Ephesian elders as evidence of the generosity he taught. Acts 20:33, 35 records his testimony: "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ... I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Pastor, will the person who cannot give receive the same patient attention as the person whose gifts sustain the budget? Examine your invitations, your counseling arrangements, and your appeals for support. Teach the church to care generously for its workers, and make sure the poorest hearer can receive the Word

without buying access to you. Christ's command must govern both what you receive and what you give. That obedience brings us to the question every freely serving minister must face: how shall the work be sustained?

TRUSTING THE PROVIDER: THE WITNESS OF TAYLOR AND MÜLLER

The test of freely given ministry comes when obedience meets an unpaid bill. A pastor may condemn the sale of spiritual things and still fear that refusing to charge for ministry will leave his family without bread. Hebrews 13:5–6 joins freedom from covetousness to God's promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." God answers our fear with His presence; He does not give fear authority to rewrite His commands. J. Hudson Taylor expressed his confidence in God's provision in a much-quoted maxim:

"God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply." [18]

George Müller cared for thousands of orphans through prayer and voluntary gifts, without charging for their care or appealing to individuals for money. Before the orphan work began, he recorded the same dependence in providing for his own household. On December 31, 1833, he wrote:

"During the last three years and three months, I never have asked anyone for anything. The Lord has graciously supplied all my needs as I bring them to Him." [19]

The faith that sustained Taylor and Müller rested upon the character of the God who had spoken. Hebrews 11:1, 6 teaches us to approach the unseen God with settled confidence that "He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." The empty cupboard may be visible, but it cannot tell us everything that is true about the Father. In Matthew 6:31–33, Jesus joins His command to seek God's kingdom and righteousness with His assurance that the Father knows and provides for His children's daily needs. Romans 8:32 carries that confidence to the cross: the God who gave His own Son has supplied the strongest reason to trust His care. Faith therefore brings an actual need before God and obeys His Word while waiting for His provision. When Paul assured the Philippians of God's supply in Philippians 4:18–20, he had just received their generous gift; the Father's care was reaching His servant through His people's open hands. Here is the theology of a faith ministry: the worker depends upon God, the church shares

in the work, and the Lord receives the glory for sustaining both. The God we commend to others is worthy of our own dependence.

Müller's refusal to solicit gifts was his own practice; Paul openly directed Titus to provide for fellow workers on their journey (Titus 3:13). Trust in God can therefore be expressed through a truthful request for help as well as through an unsolicited gift. The Lord who strengthened Paul in hunger and plenty can keep His servants faithful when support is small (Philippians 4:11–13).

Pastor, bring the need to God and lay the accounts honestly before your fellow elders. Invite the church to share the burden without attaching spiritual privileges to its gifts. If an expense must be reduced, reduce it; if an appeal has used fear or promised what God has not promised, withdraw it. The Savior whose care you proclaim must govern the way you seek support. When the budget begins deciding what may be promised in God's name, the servant is becoming a salesman.

THE PEDDLERS OF THE WORD

When a ministry makes supposed prophecy, healing, spiritual counsel, or teaching conditional on payment, it teaches the hearer to approach spiritual things as a customer. A conference tier, a subscription, or a promise of privileged access can become the price of receiving what the minister claims to offer in God's name. Peter exposes the appetite behind the transaction:

> 2 Peter 2:3: "By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber."

Notice what is being traded: words that claim spiritual authority, offered by men who covet the hearer's money. Greed does more than collect the proceeds; it begins deciding what will be said. A promise can be enlarged, a warning withheld, or an emotional experience repeated because it brings people back to pay again. The hearer needs truth; the seller needs the next sale.

When a preacher alters or withholds God's truth to protect his income, the evil takes several forms:

1. He gives money the obedience that belongs to God. What will preserve the income begins deciding what may be preached.

Matthew 6:24 rules out this divided service: God and mammon cannot both be his master.

2. He withholds truth the hearer needs. The warning that might cost him a donor is the warning that donor may most need to hear. Acts 20:26–27 connects Paul's clear conscience with his refusal to withhold God's whole counsel.
3. He invents promises in God's name because those promises persuade people to give more. A claim of divine authority makes the appeal harder to question and the falsehood more grievous. In Jeremiah 23:31–32, God declares Himself against prophets who claim His authority for their own words and lead His people astray.
4. He reshapes his message around the suffering person's desperation, presenting a financial gift as the means of obtaining the relief God has not promised through that payment. The hearer's fear, sickness, or poverty becomes an opportunity to obtain money. Ezekiel 34:2–4 condemns shepherds who feed themselves while neglecting the flock; 2 Peter 2:3 exposes exploitation through deceptive words.
5. He turns support for his ministry into an invented divine obligation, teaching people to fear God's displeasure if they withhold their money. The preacher secures income by adding a demand to God's Word and binding the hearer's conscience to it. Such pressure corrupts the willing, cheerful giving required in 2 Corinthians 9:7.
6. He changes the terms on which God's blessings are presented, teaching hearers that payment to his ministry secures what God has never authorized him to sell. He adds a purchase condition to the promise he claims to proclaim. In 2 Corinthians 2:17, Paul rejects peddling God's Word and places the preacher before God as His accountable servant.
7. He preaches giving as a way to become rich because the hearer's appetite for wealth increases the preacher's income. He gives the desire for gain the vocabulary of faith, so that the congregation learns to defend the appetite he is feeding. In 1 Timothy 6:5–10, Paul exposes this corruption and traces greed toward ruin.
8. He suppresses Scripture's warnings against greed while announcing blessings that keep the money coming; the message suggests God's approval where God's Word threatens judgment. A successful collection cannot cancel the condemnation in 2 Peter 2:3 or

the stricter judgment awaiting teachers in James 3:1. The money received will not answer the God whose Word was misused.

9. He changes the measure of godliness to favor those who can enrich him. Wealth is preached as evidence of faith, large offerings as proof of devotion, and poverty as evidence of spiritual failure. Such teaching gives the people most able to fund him the highest spiritual standing. James 2:1–5 condemns partiality toward the rich and reminds the church that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. The preacher has rewritten the congregation's understanding of godliness to serve the collection.
10. He makes Christ bear the public disgrace of a message altered for profit. When a preacher enlarges God's promises to increase the offerings, the hearer may mistake those invented assurances for Christianity itself. Their failure can leave him believing that Christ deceived him. Romans 2:21–24 exposes the horror of religious hypocrisy bringing God's name into disrepute among unbelievers. The preacher gains money by changing the message, then leaves the Savior's name attached to the falsehood.
11. He trains future preachers to let revenue interpret Scripture. Younger ministers watching his success may learn which commands to soften, which promises to exaggerate, and which passages to avoid if they want the giving to continue. The altered message becomes a pattern they carry into other pulpits. 1 Peter 5:2–3 joins freedom from dishonest gain to the shepherd's duty to be an example. His profitable distortions can keep corrupting the church's preaching long after his own voice is silent.
12. He makes correcting the message a financial threat to the institution. Once salaries, buildings, and public prestige depend upon an invented promise, teaching the passage honestly may endanger the income. The preacher is then tempted to defend an interpretation he should retract because too much money rests upon it. In Acts 19:24–27, Demetrius rallied men whose income depended on idolatry. A church should tremble when its reason for preserving a teaching resembles the silversmiths' reason for defending their trade.

The appeal may promise a supernatural return. In a February 28, 2026 article, Benny Hinn Ministries connects giving to the miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth. It tells the giver, "you activate the same supernatural cycle of provision," and assures supporters that their harvest is already coming. [20] Yet Matthew 17:24–27 records no

financial gift from Peter that released the miracle. Jesus instructed him to catch a fish and use the coin to pay the temple tax. The appeal puts a promise into Christ's mouth and uses it to solicit money.

God hates falsehood. Proverbs 12:22 declares, "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, But those who deal truthfully are His delight." In Jeremiah 23:31–32, He declares His opposition to prophets who use His name to authorize their own words and lead His people astray. That warning exposes the gravity of this appeal: God's authority is being invoked for a financial assurance He has not given. His character is misrepresented, His Word is mishandled, and His hearers are directed toward a false expectation. This dishonors Him and provokes His holy anger. A ministry cannot justify such teaching by pointing to the money it raises or the crowds it gathers.

God also condemns the profaning of His name for material gain. Addressing false prophetesses in Israel, He asks in Ezekiel 13:19, "And will you profane Me among My people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread..." The rest of the verse exposes the harm their lies inflicted upon His people. The offense reached beyond the goods they received: they dishonored God among those who trusted their words. The same moral issue confronts a preacher who invokes God's authority for an unfounded financial promise. A religious purpose for the collection cannot cleanse the falsehood used to obtain it.

Paul's language is equally severe. Titus 1:11 condemns "teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain." Titus 1:16 describes those whose conduct contradicts their profession of knowing God as "being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work." These words expose the vileness of using religious profession to shelter corrupt conduct. The church must confront teaching that misuses God's Word to obtain money. In Titus 1:13, Paul commands elders to "rebuke them sharply," with the aim of restoring soundness in the faith. Hinn's appeal must be corrected with that seriousness; the hearers' trust in God is at stake.

Consider the burden this can lay upon a struggling hearer. Someone may give money needed for food or rent because the appeal has persuaded him that a supernatural return is coming. When it fails to arrive, he may condemn himself for deficient faith or believe that God has broken His word. The preacher has created an expectation and left the hearer to bear its disappointment. Christian, God has not failed to keep a promise that He never made. Reject this assurance, and stop supporting appeals that trade upon it.

Hinn must repent of this teaching, withdraw the claim publicly, and correct it before the people who received it. Where money was obtained through the false assurance, he must address the wrong and return what was wrongfully received. James 3:1 warns teachers of stricter judgment. A large following will provide no shelter from that judgment, and a successful appeal cannot turn false teaching into obedience. He must seek Christ's forgiveness and submit his teaching and fundraising to the Word he has misused. The hearer needs release from the false promise; the preacher needs repentance before the God whose name he has invoked.

The appeal may instead threaten the person who withholds payment. On July 16, 2020, the official account of David Oyedepo's Winners' Chapel called tithing "an inescapable covenant obligation" and said that a person who does not tithe is under a financial curse. [21] Such teaching presses upon the hearer's fear: failure to pay is presented as exposure to divine financial judgment. Under the distinction established by the Dorean Principle, this is coercion through a claimed spiritual penalty. The pastor must prove that claim from Scripture; his office cannot make it true.

A third practice makes recorded teaching a subscription benefit. Chris Oyakhilome's official website promoted access to his message for 2018 and hundreds of other titles through a Gold membership in the Pastor Chris Digital Library. [22] The same page describes the message's worldwide broadcast, so the claim here concerns the paid recording service. Under the Dorean Principle, purchasing access to spiritual instruction is ministerial reciprocity. The buyer may subscribe willingly, yet willingness alone cannot turn the purchase into partnership that enables the Word to be freely given.

Pastor, I plead with you: look beyond the offering and see the people who must live with what you have promised. Imagine a family giving money needed for necessities because your words have persuaded them that a supernatural return is coming. When it does not come, the unpaid bill is only the beginning. Husband and wife may turn upon each other; a mother may lie awake accusing herself of insufficient faith; children may hear the name of God spoken with a bitterness they cannot understand. You have used that holy name to secure their confidence, and now your false assurance may poison their confidence in Him. Where will they turn when suffering comes again? Will they open their Bibles, or remember the preacher who opened his Bible and misled them? Have mercy upon the souls who

believe you. Do not leave them struggling to distinguish your broken word from their Father's faithfulness. And you who recognize the distortion yet welcome it because it promises the prosperity you crave—I plead with you, consider what your applause is encouraging. You may be helping another desperate family trust the very falsehood you refuse to question. Your desire for gain can become indifference to your neighbor's grief. Meanwhile, preacher and willing hearer can grow so accustomed to defending the message that correction feels like persecution and repentance feels like defeat. What agony follows when conscience finally awakens to the money taken, the trust betrayed, the people driven toward despair, and the dishonor brought upon Christ! Yet a conscience that never awakens is more dreadful still. 1 Timothy 6:9 warns of desires that "drown men in destruction and perdition." These sins reach beyond the collection, beyond the ruined household, into the judgment of God. For the sake of those wounded people, for your own soul, and for the honor of the Savior whose name you bear, stop. Tell the truth publicly. Seek out those you have wronged. Return what you obtained through false assurances, and bear the cost of putting matters right. Dear wounded believer, the preacher's promise may have failed you, but his words never bound your Savior. Bring Him your grief. And preacher, come to Christ confessing the sin you have defended; do not protect your reputation at the expense of your soul.

The church's duty to support its workers remains. Galatians 6:6 calls the taught to share with the teacher; 3 John 5–8 calls believers to sustain those who go out for Christ's name. Such support serves God and advances a common work. It may be regular, sacrificial, and offered before the supporter receives any personal ministry. But 2 Corinthians 9:7 requires willing, cheerful giving. A threatened curse, an invented guarantee of return, or a charge for receiving spiritual instruction changes the character of the appeal. Pastor, ask what your hearer believes the money will obtain.

Paul brings the preacher before the God whose Word he handles. In 2 Corinthians 2:17 he writes, "*For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.*" Every ministry appeal takes place before that same Witness. The man who invokes God's name must answer to God for the use he makes of it.

A preacher may continue speaking about repentance and the cross while refusing the self-denial they require of him. When income

governs his message, even solemn religious language can be pressed into the service of greed. Paul describes the danger in 1 Timothy 6:9: "*But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition*."

Commenting on 1 Timothy 6:6, Calvin condemned those who turn teaching into a means of gain. He put the rebuke this way:

"They do wrong and wickedly, who make merchandise of the doctrine of Christ, as if 'godliness were gain.'" [23]

Richard Baxter pressed the matter upon the minister himself: "*Self-denial is of absolute necessity in every Christian, but it is doubly necessary in a minister.*" [24] Pastor, which truth have you withheld because someone might stop giving? Put that truth back into your preaching. Where you have dressed a financial demand in the language of divine command, retract the claim and teach the passage honestly. In 2 Corinthians 4:2, Paul renounces craftiness and deceitful handling of God's Word. A profitable falsehood still has to be renounced.

Pastor, consider what obedience to 2 Corinthians 4:2 will require when you stand again before the people who trusted your appeal. The promise that brought the money in must be withdrawn where they can hear you. Some may ask why you taught them to expect what Scripture never promised. Some may need money returned that the ministry has already spent. Will you tell them the truth while you can still seek to put matters right? Dear hearer, withdraw your applause from the falsehood you now recognize. Your hope of wealth cannot excuse your part in encouraging it. Every delay leaves injured people waiting while preacher and hearer learn to defend what they should confess. Death will end that defense, and God will judge the use made of His name. Revelation 21:8 warns that "all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone." Persist in deceit and unbelief to the end, refusing repentance, and the fires of hell await you. Your pulpit will provide no shelter there. The people who applauded cannot answer for you, and the money you collected cannot purchase your release. Jesus Himself commands us in Matthew 10:28 to fear Him who can "destroy both soul and body in hell." Oh, do not protect a profitable lie until you lose your soul! I plead with you: flee from the wrath to come. Come to the crucified and risen Christ for mercy while you are being called to repent. Confess the falsehood without dressing it in excuses. Withdraw it before those who heard it, restore what you wrongfully obtained, and help the wounded recover their

confidence in God's actual promises. Let repentance cost you the income, the applause, even the ministry you have built upon this sin. Those losses can be endured. To die clinging to the lie and face the holy God without Christ is a ruin from which no congregation, fortune, or religious reputation can rescue you.

The gospel is a gift of grace purchased by Christ's blood. When a minister makes access to a supposed spiritual blessing depend on payment, he invites people to treat that gift as a transaction. Christ has given His church the Scriptures to equip His servants for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). A church anchored in that sufficient Word must ask every seller of supposed revelation: where has God promised what you are selling?

THE FREEDOM OF THE CLOSED CANON

Here is the glorious liberty of the Cessationist position: because the canon of Scripture is closed, no claimant to new revelation has authority to bind our consciences beyond the Word God has given. The spiritual marketplace may threaten us, but it cannot turn a seller's demand into God's command.

1. No man may turn his private revelation into your divine obligation. The closed canon denies every would-be prophet the power to manufacture new commands from God. Before a minister binds your conscience, he must establish his claim from Scripture. His certainty cannot create your duty, and his office cannot turn his wishes into God's law. God alone is the Lawgiver, and Christ condemns the elevation of human commands into divine requirements (James 4:12; Mark 7:7–9). You can refuse an invented command without carrying the guilt of disobeying God.

The Westminster Confession states the principle plainly: "God alone is Lord of the conscience." [25] Its rejection of blind obedience exposes the usurpation: a minister who demands unquestioning submission to his own claims asks for a lordship God has reserved to Himself.

John Murray pressed the same boundary: "we dare not impose upon the Christian's conscience what does not have the authority of divine institution." [26]1 Corinthians 7:23 gives that freedom its costly foundation: "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men." Christ has not sold your conscience to His servants.

2. No leader may hold your salvation hostage to your loyalty. A tyrant gains terrible power when he persuades people that displeasing him means forfeiting God's favor. The closed canon fixes the gospel beyond his reach: he cannot announce a new revelation that makes allegiance to his ministry a condition of acceptance with God. Paul places even an apostle or an angel under judgment for preaching another gospel (Galatians 1:8–9). The man who threatens your soul with a different gospel stands condemned by the very Word he claims the authority to supplement.

Hear the verdict of Romans 8:33: "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies." A minister cannot reverse God's justification because you refuse an unscriptural demand. Your standing before God rests on the work of Christ.

3. No spiritual office places its occupant beyond correction. Tyranny flourishes when the man making the claim also forbids anyone to examine it. A closed canon gives the whole church a public, enduring standard by which the preacher himself must be judged. The Bereans searched the Scriptures to test apostolic preaching, and Peter forbids elders to lord it over the flock (Acts 17:11; 1 Peter 5:2–3). A minister cannot claim authority to teach the Bible while demanding immunity from its verdict. The humblest church member may bring an open Bible to the most powerful preacher.

Paul drew this boundary in 2 Corinthians 1:24: "Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy." What Paul refused to exercise, no modern claimant to apostolic authority may demand.

B. B. Warfield exposed the danger of "substituting our own passing impulses, interpreted as inspirations, for the one final revelation of God as the guide of life." [27] Isaiah 8:20 summons every claimant to the test: "To the law and to the testimony!" No claim to new light escapes judgment by the light God has already given.

4. No self-appointed prophet owns your future. A threat against your marriage, your children, or your safety can make submission feel like the only way to keep disaster away. But a prediction does not become God's decree because it frightens you. The closed canon denies such threats the authority of fresh revelation. Scripture teaches you to leave God's secrets with Him and obey what

He has revealed (Deuteronomy 29:29). You need not purchase peace by surrendering to a man who claims to know what God will do to you if you refuse him.

Psalm 56:3–4 teaches the frightened believer where to turn: "Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You." David goes on to praise God's word and rest in Him. Bring the threat that frightens you before the God whose promises cannot fail.

5. No religious ruler can make himself indispensable to your access to God. In the completed Scriptures, God has named the Mediator: Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). No later revelation can install another man between your soul and your Savior. Because Christ is your great High Priest, you may approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:14–16). The weakest believer who comes through Christ needs no spiritual celebrity to make the Father listen. A minister may pray with you, teach you, and care for you; he cannot make his permission the price of approaching your Father.

This freedom becomes visible when a church member can open his Bible before his pastor without first preparing for punishment. The pastor shows where his counsel comes from, welcomes examination, and corrects his own error when Scripture exposes it. The elders protect the person who asks an honest question instead of treating his question as a threat. A trembling believer learns that questioning an unsupported claim does not place him beyond Christ's care. The closed canon has begun to govern the church when the shepherd receives correction from the same Word he requires the flock to obey (1 Peter 5:2–4).

A. W. Pink gave this counsel: "Suffer none to have dominion over your mind and conscience." [28] A faithful shepherd welcomes the questions that arise from his people's obedience to Christ.

You do not need to buy a plane ticket to a charismatic conference to hear what God has to say about your life. You do not need to "sow a seed" of a thousand dollars to unlock a prophetic destiny. You do not need to purchase a backstage pass to get closer to the anointing.

The anointing you need was purchased in full by the blood of Jesus Christ, and His complete, perfect, and infallible counsel is sitting on your desk. The Word of God is not behind a gate. It is not locked inside an apostle's private journal. It is open, it is finished, and it is free.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Christian, do not read this chapter merely as an exposure of other people's greed. Bring the matter before Christ and let Him search your own heart. Have you allowed money, fear, promised blessing, or spiritual pressure to come between your soul and the Savior? Have you begun to think that a larger gift can purchase greater favor, quicker healing, special access, or a more certain answer from God? No offering can buy what Jesus Christ purchased with His own blood.

The gospel is not a transaction between you and a religious salesman. Christ did not hang upon the cross so that another man could place a price tag on access to Him. Forgiveness is in Christ. Acceptance with God is in Christ. Access to the Father is through Christ. The Spirit is given because of Christ. The promises of God are Yes and Amen in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). You cannot purchase one drop of His grace, and no minister has the right to sell what belongs to the crucified and risen Lord.

If you have been manipulated, do not confuse the faithlessness of men with the faithfulness of Christ. Perhaps you gave because you were afraid not to give. Perhaps someone told you your healing, your child's future, your financial breakthrough, or God's protection depended upon your seed. Bring that burden into the light of Scripture. Christ does not extort His sheep. He calls the weary and heavy laden to Himself, and He gives rest (Matthew 11:28).

If you have supported a ministry that merchandises spiritual things, do not defend it simply because you have invested money, affection, years, or reputation in it. Truth is worth more than sunk cost. Stop financing what Scripture condemns. Where repentance is necessary, repent. Where restitution or correction is appropriate, pursue it. Seek a sound church. Support faithful gospel ministry generously and joyfully—but support it as worship, never as payment for grace (1 Corinthians 9:14; 2 Corinthians 9:7).

And minister, preacher, author, conference leader: this word comes to us too. Would we preach the same truth if there were no financial advantage attached to it? Would we counsel the same way if the person before us could never repay us? Have we ever used fear, urgency, access, titles, promises, or spiritual language to produce money? Christ's sheep are not customers. His gospel is not inventory. His pulpit is not a marketplace. If we have treated holy things as merchandise, the command is not to improve our marketing. It is to repent.

Pastor, begin with the appeal you can no longer defend from an

open Bible. Put it before the elders. Name the promise you made, the pressure you applied, or the deception you permitted by remaining silent. If the claim was public, let its correction reach the people who heard it. Teach again why Christ's grace is freely given and why His servants should be faithfully supported. Then withdraw the false promise, remove the demand attached to it, and return what you obtained through deception. Give the wounded room to speak. A person should not have to survive another accusation in order to tell the shepherd where he was hurt.

If a smaller offering follows, do not put the old threat back into your preaching. Examine the budget with the elders and reduce what the ministry can no longer honestly sustain. The people who questioned the appeal must be protected from blame for the shortfall. A church has begun to recover when its leaders would rather explain an empty account than fill it by frightening Christ's sheep. Acts 20:28 places the price of the flock before every shepherd: Christ purchased His church with His own blood. Remember what they cost Him when you are tempted to measure what they can bring you.

BRING THE MINISTRY TO THE WORD — CHAPTER 12 CHECKLIST

Take one ministry, fundraising appeal, conference, product, or spiritual claim you presently support and ask these questions before Christ:

- Am I being invited to support ministry freely, or is access to teaching, prophecy, healing, counsel, prayer, or spiritual favor being conditioned upon payment?
- Is money being connected to a promised spiritual result—healing, protection, prosperity, prophetic guidance, answered prayer, or a special anointing—that Scripture does not connect to my gift?
- What is motivating my giving? Am I giving freely to God, or am I giving because I am afraid that withholding money will cause me to lose His favor or miss a promised blessing?
- Does this ministry make Christ and His Word freely accessible, or does it create tiers of spiritual access through VIP treatment, private sessions, paid revelation, subscriptions, or privileged proximity to a leader?
- How does the ministry respond when its financial methods are questioned? Does it open the Bible and welcome accountability, or use guilt, threats, spiritual status, and accusations of unbelief to silence questions?

- Would the minister still preach, counsel, pray, write, and serve with the same faithfulness if there were no financial advantage attached to the ministry? Would I still support the work if no personal return were promised to me?
- What obedience is Christ requiring from me now? Is there a payment I should stop, a manipulative appeal I should refuse, a ministry I should confront or leave, a faithful work I should support, or a sin of greed or superstition I need to confess?

Put the actual appeal beside an open Bible. Write down what Scripture promises and whether the ministry's claim agrees with it. A man can reject a false promise in his mind while his next payment continues to finance it. Where the Word exposes that contradiction, let repentance reach the payment, the endorsement, and the recommendation you keep passing to others. James 1:22 warns us against hearing the Word while deceiving ourselves about our obedience.

Do not postpone your answer because obedience may be costly. Money exposes loyalties very quickly. In Matthew 6:24, Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and mammon." If Christ has shown you that you are participating in the sale of sacred things, obey Him now. Better to lose money, access, approval, or a cherished ministry connection than to continue supporting what dishonors the Lord who bought you.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

Axiom One — What Christ Gives Freely Is Not Ours to Sell

The minister receives a trust, not a title deed to God's gifts. Christ's command to give freely governs the servant precisely where opportunity offers him a profit. No claim to spiritual power can authorize a price upon what belongs to the Lord.

Scripture: Matthew 10:8–10; Acts 8:18–23.

Axiom Two — Support Enables Ministry to Be Given without a Price

God commands His people to sustain faithful workers. Such support joins believers in serving their common Lord; it does not make the hearer a customer who owes payment for receiving the Word. The church's generosity should open the way for another person to hear, including the person who can give nothing.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:14–18; Galatians 6:6; 3 John 5–8.

Axiom Three — A Financial Need Cannot Create a Divine Promise

The size of an unpaid bill gives a preacher no authority to guarantee healing, prosperity, protection, or revelation in return for money. Once the budget determines what may be promised in God's name, financial need has begun rewriting the message. God's Word must judge the appeal before the appeal reaches the people.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:2; 2 Peter 2:3.

Axiom Four — The Collection Also Teaches a Doctrine of God

An appeal teaches hearers what God is like and how they may approach Him. When payment is presented as the condition of His favor, the collection contradicts the gospel the sermon professes. Christ's blood supplies the believer's access to the Father; no offering can purchase a nearer place.

Scripture: Romans 3:24–25; 1 Peter 1:18–19; Hebrews 10:19–22.

Axiom Five — Repentance Must Reach What Deception Obtained

Confessing a false appeal while protecting its proceeds leaves the injured person carrying a loss the preacher refuses to face. Repentance tells the truth, withdraws the promise, and pursues restitution for what was wrongfully taken. Returning money cannot buy forgiveness, but receiving forgiveness never makes retaining stolen money righteous.

Scripture: Luke 19:8–10; Ephesians 4:28; Proverbs 28:13.

Axiom Six — Christ's Sheep Must Never Finance Their Own Neglect

A congregation may support a ministry generously while its weakest members remain unheard. The shepherd's task is to care for the flock Christ purchased, including those whose gifts add little to the accounts. Wealth must not buy protection from correction, and poverty must not cost a believer the pastor's attention.

Scripture: Acts 20:28, 33–35; James 2:1–5; 1 Peter 5:2–4.

PASTORAL REFORMATION — WHAT MUST THE SHEPHERD DO NOW?

Pastor, follow one offering all the way back to the words that obtained it. The accounts may tell you how much arrived without telling you what a frightened person believed he was buying. Did he give to help the gospel reach others, or because your appeal made him fear for his child, his health, or his standing with God? An accurate ledger can record the proceeds of a dishonest promise. The shepherd must

examine both the money and the teaching that brought it in (2 Corinthians 4:2; 8:20–21).

Repent — Name the Sin Before You Repair the Appeal

Gather the elders around the actual words: the recording, letter, payment page, or conversation you authorized. Identify what you introduced, tolerated, defended, or left uncorrected. If you attached God's name to a promise He did not make, confess that offense before Him without sheltering behind the ministry's needs. Richard Baxter urged that "when the sin is public, the confession should also be public." [29] Your people need to hear which claim was false and why they may no longer trust it. A vague apology can leave a specific deception alive.

Then ask whom the appeal injured. Give those people a way to speak to elders who can hear them without protecting your reputation. Examine the records, correct the falsehood before its hearers, and return what was obtained through deception; where repayment cannot be immediate, establish a truthful, accountable plan. Zacchaeus's response to Christ reached the people he had defrauded (Luke 19:8–10). Do not require the wounded to praise your repentance before receiving the help you owe them. Their distress is not an interruption of the reform. It identifies some of the work repentance must do.

Submit your own continued service to the qualifications you have taught others to respect. First Timothy 3:2–3 requires an overseer whose character is above reproach and free from covetousness; 1 Timothy 5:19–21 requires both just examination and correction without partiality. A confession does not settle fitness for office. Neither the congregation's affection nor its dependence upon your preaching can replace that examination. You cannot teach submission to Christ while reserving the decision about your own conduct entirely to yourself.

Re-Teach — Show the Church What Its Generosity Is For

Open Matthew 10:8–10 and 1 Corinthians 9:14–18 together. Christ commands freely given ministry and provides for the support of His servants; Paul affirms that provision while explaining his determination to preach without charge. Teach the congregation to recognize both obligations. Workers must not sell access to spiritual ministry, and believers must not use its freeness as an excuse to leave faithful

workers unsupported. Matthew Henry joined the two directions of generosity: "The consideration of Christ's freeness in doing good to us, should make us free in doing good to others." [30] Grace received should become willing service and generous partnership.

Put the former appeal beside the passage used to support it and explain exactly where the claim outran the text. Then show how a truthful appeal differs: here is the work, here is the need, here is how the gift will be used. Giving may involve real sacrifice, but the sacrifice must arise from faith and love rather than an invented guarantee of profit. Second Corinthians 9:7 addresses willing, cheerful giving; it does not authorize the preacher to make refusal sound like exposure to a curse. Teach people to ask what God has promised before they ask what return they might receive.

Reform — Make the Freedom Visible in the Ministry

Remove fraudulent promises and charges for spiritual access immediately, and correct the messages through which they are still circulating. Where teaching has been placed behind payment, open access and explain how voluntary support will sustain the work. Prepare staff and volunteers to answer questions truthfully, and give the elders responsibility for specific changes and dates. The church may need time to revise spending and reorganize its work; it does not need another season of misleading people while those arrangements are made. Ephesians 4:25 requires truth now. Administrative inconvenience cannot extend a false promise's permission to speak.

Bring the handling of money under oversight that can actually restrain you. Let more than one trustworthy person review receipts, spending, compensation, and appeals; give the congregation intelligible accounts while protecting the privacy of those receiving care. Paul arranged the administration of a generous gift so that his conduct would be honorable before God and people (2 Corinthians 8:20–21). That openness protects both the giver and the worker. Baxter warned against being "so tender of ourselves, and so loath to confess." [31] If every necessary question feels like an attack, examine what you are still defending.

Make care for the injured as deliberate as the financial correction. A believer who gave under a threat may still tremble after the appeal disappears. Sit with him, open the passage, and show why the preacher's threat never became God's decree. First Thessalonians 5:14 calls for patience with the weak and fainthearted. Assign someone to remain

in contact, help with needs the deception aggravated, and protect him from accusations that his questions harmed the ministry. Removing a payment page takes minutes. Recovering trust may require months of truthful, gentle shepherding.

Remain — Let Obedience Govern the Budget

Decide with the elders what expenses can be reduced before a shortfall tempts you to revive the old appeal. Report the need honestly and invite support without selling spiritual benefits. A smaller program may expose how much you had come to regard as indispensable. Hebrews 13:5–6 joins freedom from covetousness to the Lord's abiding care; Philippians 4:11–13 shows Paul learning faithfulness in both scarcity and abundance. Neither passage promises that every ministry expense will survive reform. They give the servant reason to trust Christ when obedience changes what he can afford.

When criticism comes, ask whether it exposes careless leadership or demands a return to wrongdoing. Receive correction where you have explained poorly or neglected someone's needs; refuse the demand to recover income through claims you have confessed were false. Do not turn those who leave into public enemies, or make those who stay carry the guilt for a reduced offering. First Peter 5:2–4 calls the shepherd to willing service, freedom from dishonest gain, and an exemplary life beneath the Chief Shepherd's approaching judgment. Christ's approval must remain weightier than the relief a profitable compromise could bring.

Before the next appeal goes out, bring the elders four concrete answers: the claim to retract, the truth to reteach, the practice to change, and the cost you are prepared to bear. Pray over the Scriptures that establish each answer and assign the first action. Then follow the money back to the person once more. Can the poorest hearer now receive the Word without fear of a demand? Can the injured member speak without punishment? Can the pastor serve without bargaining? These are places where Christ's generosity should become recognizable in the life of His church (Acts 20:35).

And if you have never truly come to Christ, do not imagine that recognizing religious profiteering makes you a Christian. You may reject every false prophet and still remain under the judgment of God for your own sin. The wonder of the gospel is that the salvation you desperately need cannot be bought because Christ has already paid its entire price. He bore the judgment sinners deserved. He rose from the

dead. He now commands you to repent and believe. Come to Him empty-handed. Come without bargaining. Come without money. Come now.

The final answer to the spiritual marketplace is not merely better financial ethics. It is Jesus Christ—the Son of God who gives Himself freely to undeserving sinners. Treasure Him more than money. Trust Him more than promises of prosperity. Follow Him when obedience costs you. Give because you have received, serve because you have been served, and never permit anyone to place a price tag on the grace for which Christ paid with His blood.

> Revelation 22:17: "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely."

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CHAPTER 13

The Peace of the Old Paths

> Jeremiah 6:16: "Thus says the LORD: 'Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls.' But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'"

We have examined claims about revelation and spiritual gifts, the apostolic foundation of the church, the testing of miracles, the danger of counterfeit spiritual authority, and the temptation to sell what Christ has freely given. These matters are more than a debate over terminology. They affect how Christians hear God's Word, understand the Holy Spirit, seek guidance, worship, suffer, give, and follow Jesus Christ.

But I did not write this book merely to win a theological argument or catalogue the errors of the charismatic movement. I wrote it as a pastoral rescue line.

I have particular concern for readers who have been burdened by claims they could never verify and demands they could never satisfy. Perhaps you have spent years wondering whether you missed God's voice, failed to recognize a prophetic sign, lacked sufficient faith for healing, or somehow forfeited His will because you did not interpret an impression correctly.

If that describes you, Scripture offers firmer ground for your soul.

Dear reader, I appeal to your desire to be honest before God, objective in examining the evidence, teachable under His Word, and sincere in following His Son. Will you allow Scripture to correct a cherished belief, even when that correction brings you into disagreement with a teacher you love? Bring that question before your conscience: are you

following a man, or are you following Christ? Gratitude for a man's ministry must never give him authority to silence what God has said. Please do not let the pain of admitting you were mistaken keep you from the peace of walking in the truth. Changing convictions held for years can be hard. Pastor, acknowledging error before the congregation you have taught may be harder still. You may face disappointment, criticism, and the painful question of why you did not see these things sooner. Yet obedience to Scripture pleases God, and His approval is worth the cost of correction (2 Corinthians 5:9). When you stand before Christ, you will not regret having humbled yourself to obey Him. Look to Him now, and ask for the wisdom you need to follow Him faithfully. James 1:5: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him." Come with an open Bible and an honest prayer: "Lord, show me where I have been wrong. Teach me from Your Word, and give me grace to obey You, whatever that obedience may cost." The God who invites you to ask for wisdom will not reproach you for admitting that you need it.

THE CRUELTY OF THE TREADMILL

A religious system that makes spiritual maturity depend upon receiving the next message, attending the next conference, experiencing the next manifestation, or discovering the next hidden direction from God can become an exhausting taskmaster.

You may fear that a missed dream or prophecy has cost you God's will. You may feel pressured to display an emotion that proves you are spiritual. You may be told that if your healing has not come, your faith is deficient. And when money is connected to promised blessing, an already-burdened soul may be left carrying guilt, disappointment, and financial loss at the same time.

Christ does not call His sheep to buy His favor or manufacture His presence. He calls them to hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:27). His commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3), and His shepherding does not drive His people into perpetual fear that one missed impression has ruined their lives.

There is a better way.

THE OLD PATHS ARE NOT NOSTALGIA

When Jeremiah called Judah to ask for "the old paths," he was not

telling the people to romanticize the past. He was calling them back to the revealed way of God that they had abandoned.

The old paths are not old merely because they are ancient. They are good because God marked them out.

That distinction matters. Biblical Christianity does not ask us to imitate every custom of an earlier century, reproduce a particular cultural style, or assume that anything old is automatically holy. The church must continually be reformed by the Word of God.

The old paths are the paths of revealed truth: Christ crucified and risen, justification by faith, the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, prayer, holiness, fellowship, worship according to God's Word, faithful shepherding, and ordinary obedience empowered by the Holy Spirit.

These things may appear unspectacular in an age addicted to novelty. But they are the appointed paths upon which generations of saints have walked with God.

THE GLORY OF THE ORDINARY MEANS OF GRACE

One of the great recoveries awaiting an exhausted Christian is the discovery that God ordinarily nourishes His people through means He has already appointed.

The first church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). Paul commanded Timothy to "give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1 Timothy 4:13) and later charged him simply to "Preach the word!" (2 Timothy 4:2). Christians are commanded to teach and admonish one another through "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16), to gather rather than forsake assembling together (Hebrews 10:24–25), to baptize disciples in Christ's name (Matthew 28:19), and to remember Him at His table (1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

These means are ordinary, but they are not powerless.

Their power does not come from novelty, atmosphere, celebrity, emotional manipulation, or manufactured excitement. Their effectiveness depends upon Christ blessing His appointed means by His Spirit.

A faithful sermon may seem ordinary. A congregation praying together may seem ordinary. A Christian quietly reading Scripture before work may seem ordinary. A broken believer receiving the Lord's Supper with trembling faith may seem ordinary.

But Christ delights to use ordinary means to accomplish extraordinary spiritual ends.

The risen Christ opened the Scriptures to His disciples, and their hearts burned within them as He spoke (Luke 24:27, 32). The same Spirit who inspired the Word still opens minds, convicts consciences, comforts sufferers, strengthens faith, and turns the eyes of God's people toward Jesus Christ.

You do not need spiritual theater to encounter the living God. You need the means He has appointed, received by faith and blessed by His Spirit.

COMING HOME TO THE FINISHED WORK

Spurgeon insisted that the preacher must receive God's truth as given rather than reshape it to suit the preferences of his hearers. He expressed the principle memorably:

"I cannot shape the truth; I know of no such thing as paring off the rough edges of a doctrine." [1]

There is profound peace in the old paths because the old paths lead us again and again to finished works.

The apostolic foundation is finished. The canon is complete. Christ's authoritative witnesses delivered the faith once for all entrusted to the saints. The church does not need another foundation, another canon, or another class of revelators.

But above all stands another finished work—the finished saving work of Jesus Christ.

Our peace with God does not rest upon our ability to identify every theological error, interpret every difficult passage perfectly, or defend cessationism without weakness. It rests upon the Son of God who obeyed where we disobeyed, bore our sins in His own body on the tree, satisfied divine justice, rose from the dead, and gives His righteousness to everyone who believes.

Romans 5:1: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

2 Corinthians 5:21 declares that God made Christ, who knew no sin, "to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

The weary believer therefore rests not merely because revelation is finished, but because redemption is finished.

The closed canon points us to Christ and His completed work, a

completed atonement, and a righteousness that does not need one contribution from us.

When Jesus cried, "It is finished!" (John 19:30), He was not announcing that man had finally done enough for God. He was announcing the completion of the work the Father had given Him to accomplish. The sacrifice was offered. The debt was paid. Divine justice was satisfied. The righteousness God requires was accomplished by Christ.

The sinner who trusts Him does not labor to earn acceptance. He rests in the acceptance Christ purchased.

That is where peace begins.

THE PEACE OF A FINISHED WORD

You do not have to wonder whether the foundation of the church is secure; Christ laid it through His apostles and prophets.

You do not have to purchase spiritual access; Christ opened the way to the Father through His own blood (Hebrews 10:19–22).

You do not have to chase a traveling prophet to discover whether God loves you; look to the cross (Romans 5:8).

You do not have to interpret every coincidence as a secret message; God has given you His written Word.

You do not have to manufacture spiritual power. The Holy Spirit continues to regenerate sinners, indwells every true believer, and works in sanctification, illumination, prayer, fruitfulness, and conformity to Christ.

The once-for-all work of redemptive revelation is complete. That does not leave the church empty. It leaves us with Christ, His finished Word, His indwelling Spirit, His appointed means of grace, and His promises.

That is not spiritual poverty.

That is spiritual wealth.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Perhaps you have lived for years on a spiritual treadmill. You have chased words, signs, manifestations, conferences, prophetic personalities, or experiences because you were afraid that ordinary Christianity was not enough. If so, do not merely exchange one religious tribe for another. Come back to Jesus Christ.

Leave whatever teaches you to place human impressions above Scripture. Withdraw from ministries that exploit fear, manipulate

emotions, merchandise spiritual blessings, or bind your conscience where Christ has not bound it. But do not respond by becoming isolated, bitter, suspicious of every Christian, or detached from the local church.

Find a faithful congregation where Scripture is preached, Christ is exalted, prayer is practiced, worship is governed by the Word, the ordinances are honored, sin is taken seriously, and shepherds serve rather than dominate. Submit gladly to legitimate pastoral care while refusing the counterfeit authority of men who claim revelatory power Christ never gave them.

Then learn the quiet disciplines of the old paths again. Open your Bible without demanding a private message. Pray without trying to manufacture a sensation. Worship without needing entertainment. Receive the Lord's Supper with gratitude. Fellowship with ordinary saints. Serve unnoticed. Confess sin quickly. Forgive freely. Bear suffering patiently. Walk with Christ one obedient step at a time.

And above everything else, rest your soul in Christ Himself.

BRING YOUR REST TO THE WORD — CHAPTER 13 CHECKLIST

• Is my peace resting in Jesus Christ and His finished work, or am I still looking for an experience, prophecy, manifestation, or human personality to make me feel secure?

• Have I confused spiritual excitement with spiritual maturity?

• Do I genuinely believe that Scripture gives me everything necessary to know God, trust Christ, and obey Him, or do I still feel spiritually deprived without private revelation?

• Am I faithfully using the ordinary means Christ has appointed—Scripture, prayer, fellowship, preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper—or am I neglecting them while pursuing extraordinary experiences?

• Has disappointment or deception made me bitter, isolated, cynical, or unwilling to trust any faithful church or pastor?

• Am I willing to leave practices, ministries, or relationships that repeatedly place human authority above the Word of God, even if doing so is painful or costly?

• Is my life increasingly marked by the quiet fruit of walking with Christ—repentance, holiness, love, obedience, humility, perseverance, and peace?

CLOSING APPLICATION

Reader, the final question of this book is not whether you can now win an argument about spiritual gifts.

The final question is whether you will come to Christ.

If you have been deceived, come to Christ. If you have been manipulated, come to Christ. If you are exhausted, come to Christ. If you are angry, confused, embarrassed, disappointed, or afraid, come to Christ.

Do not spend the rest of your life looking backward at everything that was wrong. Look upward to the Savior who is right.

The purpose of exposing counterfeit spiritual gifts is not to leave you staring at the counterfeit. It is to turn your eyes toward the genuine—Jesus Christ, His finished work, His sufficient Word, and the real ministry of His Holy Spirit.

And if you have never truly known Christ, do not mistake doctrinal agreement for salvation. You can become a convinced cessationist and still perish in your sins. You need more than the correct position on spiritual gifts. You need a Savior.

Christ receives sinners.

He lived the righteousness you have not lived. He bore the judgment sinners deserve. He rose from the grave. He commands you to repent and believe the gospel. Come to Him with nothing to offer but your guilt and need.

And Christian, having come to Him, remain there.

When fear rises, return to His promises. When suffering comes, return to His cross. When sin wounds your conscience, confess it and return to His cleansing blood. When the world dazzles you with novelty, return to the old paths. When religious voices clamor for your allegiance, return to the Shepherd whose sheep know His voice.

You do not need another Christ.

You do not need another gospel.

You do not need another foundation.

And you do not need another Word from God.

You need to believe, love, obey, and rest in the Christ whom God has already revealed.

> Matthew 11:28–29: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

1 Corinthians 3:11: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

SOURCE NOTES

1 C. H. Spurgeon, "A Defense of Calvinism," opening paragraphs.

APPENDIX A

Reading and Applying Scripture Faithfully

A Brief Guide to Biblical Interpretation

God has given His Word to be understood, believed, and obeyed. Careful interpretation helps us receive what He has said rather than attach His authority to our own ideas. These principles are intended for ordinary Bible study as well as for testing the claims examined throughout this book.

Biblical interpretation begins with submission. We do not stand over Scripture as judges, nor do we search beneath its words for a private message known only to us. We come under the text and ask what God intended to communicate through the inspired human author. The Holy Spirit illumines our minds to understand, receive, and obey what He inspired; He does not detach us from the text or give it a second, private meaning.

WHAT HERMENEUTICS MEANS

Hermeneutics is the disciplined study of the principles by which a text is interpreted. Biblical hermeneutics seeks the meaning God communicated through the words of Scripture in their grammatical, historical, literary, and redemptive context. Sound interpretation requires both dependence upon the Holy Spirit and diligent study (Psalm 119:18; 2 Timothy 2:15). Illumination is not a substitute for interpretation; it enables us to understand, receive, and obey the truth Scripture actually contains.

MAJOR APPROACHES TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The names given to interpretive approaches vary, and some methods overlap. The following five categories are sufficient to orient the reader to the major approaches most often encountered. "Literal" interpretation is not a wooden refusal to recognize figures of speech; in sound grammatical-historical interpretation it means reading words according to their normal literary sense.

1. **Allegorical or spiritualizing approach.** Seeks a deeper or hidden spiritual meaning behind the wording of the text, sometimes with only a loose connection to its grammatical and historical sense. Scripture itself uses symbols, types, and figurative language, but uncontrolled allegorizing allows the interpreter to supply meanings the text never gives.
2. **Grammatical-historical, or literal-normal, approach.** Seeks the author's intended meaning by examining grammar, syntax, normal word usage, context, literary form, historical setting, purpose, and the progress of revelation. It recognizes genuine metaphor, symbolism, typology, and prophecy where the text warrants them. This is the controlling method employed in this book.
3. **Historical-critical approach.** Uses historical investigation and critical tools to study sources, forms, traditions, editing, authorship, and development behind a text. Such research can provide useful historical information, but when critical assumptions are allowed to override the final text or bracket its divine authority, the method becomes an unreliable controlling hermeneutic.
4. **Canonical or theological approach.** Reads a passage within the final form and theological unity of the whole canon. This can be valuable when it grows out of careful exegesis, but later theology or canonical themes must not erase what the passage communicated in its own historical and literary setting.
5. **Reader-response or subjective approach.** Places strong emphasis on the reader or interpretive community in producing meaning. It can remind us that every reader brings assumptions to the text, but meaning becomes unstable when the reader's experience, community, or response is allowed to determine what the text means.

HOW THE BIBLE INTERPRETS ITSELF

Sound hermeneutics is not a system forced upon the Bible from outside. Scripture itself demonstrates how God intends His Word to be read. Jesus and the apostles repeatedly interpreted earlier Scripture according to recognizable principles that remain basic to faithful biblical interpretation.

1. Scripture interprets Scripture. Clearer passages help explain more difficult ones, and no passage should be interpreted in a way that contradicts the teaching of Scripture as a whole. When Satan quoted Psalm 91, Jesus answered with another Scripture that prevented its misuse (Matthew 4:6–7; Deuteronomy 6:16). The Bible is its own best interpreter (Luke 24:27; Acts 17:11).
2. Context controls meaning. A statement must be understood in the argument and circumstances in which it appears. Scripture warns that biblical writings can be "twisted" when mishandled (2 Peter 3:15–16). Philip did not isolate a sentence from Isaiah; he identified whom the prophet was speaking about and explained the passage in its setting (Acts 8:30–35).
3. The exact wording of the text matters. Jesus and the apostles reasoned carefully from the actual words of Scripture. Jesus defended the resurrection from God's declaration, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Matthew 22:31–32; Exodus 3:6). He also pressed the Pharisees on David's precise words concerning the Messiah: "The LORD said to my Lord" (Psalm 110:1; Matthew 22:41–45). Faithful interpretation therefore pays attention not merely to general ideas, but to the words, grammar, and relationships God actually inspired.
4. Historical circumstances must be respected. The Bible itself distinguishes between what God originally established and what He permitted because of particular historical circumstances. Jesus explained Moses' regulation concerning divorce in light of Israel's hardness of heart and then returned to God's original creation design (Matthew 19:4–8).
5. Literary forms and symbols must be read as Scripture uses them. Parables, symbols, poetry, prophecy, and figures of speech are not interpreted as ordinary prose when the text itself indicates otherwise. Jesus explained the meaning of the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:18–23), and Revelation itself identifies the

symbolic meaning of the stars and lampstands (Revelation 1:20). Symbolism is interpreted from biblical warrant, not imagination.

6. Later revelation clarifies earlier revelation. God revealed His truth progressively. Earlier revelation is not false or deficient, but later revelation brings greater clarity and fulfillment. Jesus interpreted Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms in light of His own person and redemptive work (Luke 24:27, 44–47; Hebrews 1:1–2).
7. Description is not automatically prescription. The fact that Scripture records an event does not by itself command Christians to reproduce it. Scripture itself tells us when historical events function as examples or warnings: "these things became our examples" and "were written for our admonition" (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; Romans 15:4). The text must establish the lesson to be drawn from the event.
8. Necessary inference is legitimate; speculation is not. A truth may be taught explicitly or follow necessarily from what Scripture says. Jesus reasoned from God's words to Moses to establish the resurrection (Matthew 22:31–32), and He reasoned from David's actions and the purpose of the Sabbath to answer the Pharisees (Mark 2:23–28). But a conclusion that is merely possible must never be presented as though God revealed it.

These principles show that faithful interpretation is neither mystical nor arbitrary. Scripture calls us to read words carefully, respect their context, compare Scripture with Scripture, recognize the progress of revelation, and draw only those conclusions the inspired text warrants. The goal is not ingenuity but submission—to hear from the text what God has actually said.

THIRTEEN ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

1. Submit to Scripture. Approach the Bible as God's authoritative Word, with humility, faith, prayer, and a willingness to obey. Our feelings, traditions, theological systems, experiences, and preferred conclusions must be corrected by Scripture rather than allowed to control it. Depend upon the Holy Spirit to illumine the mind, convict the conscience, and enable a believing response to the truth He inspired (Psalm 119:18; 1 Corinthians 2:12–14; Ephesians 1:17–18). But illumination does not give the text a new or private meaning, nor does it excuse careless study. The

Spirit who inspired Scripture does not lead the reader away from the words He inspired. Illumination enables us to understand and receive revelation; it does not create additional revelation.

2. Seek the single intended meaning. Ask what God intended to communicate through the inspired human author in the words and context of the passage. Scripture does not possess multiple unrelated meanings that change according to the reader. Meaning is discovered from the text; it is not created by the preacher, experience, tradition, or inward impression. Yet because God is the ultimate Author of Scripture, the full reach of a passage may include divinely intended implications, typological correspondences, or prophetic fulfillments that become clearer through later revelation. These never contradict or replace the original sense, and they must be established by Scripture rather than imagination.
3. Determine the author's purpose, scope, structure, and flow of argument. Before interpreting an isolated verse, determine why the book or section was written, what issue the author is addressing, how he develops his thought, and how the passage contributes to his larger purpose. Pay special attention to transitions, conclusions, repeated themes, questions and answers, contrasts, and connecting words such as therefore, for, but, and because. Individual statements must be understood as parts of the writer's developing argument rather than as detached sayings. Never interpret a verse as though the author wrote only that verse.
4. Read every text in context. Begin with the immediate sentence and paragraph, then move outward to the surrounding section, the purpose and argument of the biblical book, its historical setting, its place within the Testament, and finally the whole canon. Ask who is speaking or writing, to whom, about what, why, and under what circumstances. The nearer context ordinarily has priority in establishing the meaning of a statement; the wider biblical context confirms, clarifies, and completes that meaning rather than replacing it. Start near; then move outward.
5. Follow grammar, syntax, and normal word usage. Words receive their meaning from their actual use in sentences and contexts, not merely from roots, etymologies, dictionary lists, or every possible definition. A word may have several possible meanings, but the context determines which sense the writer intends in a particular passage. Do not import the entire range of a word's

possible meanings into a single occurrence. Notice subjects, verbs, objects, conditions, contrasts, connecting words, and sentence structure. When an important conclusion depends upon Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, consult reliable language tools or qualified help.

6. Respect the historical and cultural setting. Understand the author, original audience, occasion, geography, customs, institutions, controversies, and relevant cultural background. Such information can clarify why something was said and how the first readers would have understood it. But historical reconstruction must remain subordinate to the inspired text. Background evidence may illuminate what Scripture says; it must never be used to make the text say the opposite of what its grammar and context require. Where historical information is uncertain or disputed, distinguish established fact from reasonable reconstruction and speculation.
7. Interpret according to literary form. Narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, parable, epistle, apocalyptic literature, metaphor, symbolism, typology, hyperbole, and other figures must be read according to the conventions of the form being used. Literal interpretation does not mean literalistic interpretation. It means seeking the normal literary sense intended by the writer. When the writer speaks historically, read the statement as history; when he uses metaphor, symbolism, poetry, or another figure, recognize the figure and determine what truth it communicates from its context. Jesus' statement, "I am the door" (John 10:9), is literally understood when it is recognized as a metaphor communicating that access to salvation is through Him—not when it is treated as a physical description. Genre does not give the interpreter permission to invent meaning; it tells him how the author is communicating meaning.
8. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. First determine the meaning of a passage in its own context, then compare it with genuinely parallel Scriptures. Allow clearer and fuller teaching to illuminate difficult texts. A parallel must be related in thought and subject, not merely share the same word. Cross-references should clarify a text, not replace its immediate context. Major doctrines should rest chiefly on passages where those doctrines are actually taught rather than on incidental, obscure, or ambiguous references.
9. Honor progressive revelation and redemptive fulfillment. Locate

every passage within God's unfolding revelation. Do not force later revelation prematurely into an earlier text, but allow later Scripture—especially the New Testament—to disclose the divinely intended fulfillment of earlier revelation in Christ. Distinguish commands, offices, covenants, and circumstances that are unique from obligations that continue for believers. Later revelation unfolds the fullness of earlier revelation; it does not manufacture an unrelated meaning that was never present in God's intention.

10. Distinguish description from prescription. Something recorded in Scripture is not automatically commanded for reproduction, and a promise given to a particular person is not automatically a promise to everyone. At the same time, biblical narratives may contain examples God intends His people to imitate or avoid when the text itself commends them, condemns them, or when clearer teaching elsewhere establishes the principle. Determine whether the passage presents an event as unique history, an approved example, a warning, a command, a promise, or a continuing pattern. Do not turn every event into a rule—but do not dismiss a divinely approved example merely because it appears in narrative.
11. Draw only conclusions the text warrants. Distinguish carefully between what Scripture explicitly states, what necessarily follows from what Scripture states, and what is merely possible, plausible, or speculative. A legitimate inference must arise from biblical premises and be required by them; it cannot rest merely on the fact that a conclusion is conceivable or that Scripture does not explicitly deny it. Jesus Himself reasoned by necessary inference when He established the resurrection from God's words, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Matthew 22:31–32). Theology must be built from what Scripture teaches either explicitly or by sound and necessary consequence—not from possibilities we attach to the text. "Could this be true?" is not the same question as "Does this text teach it?"
12. Interpret before you apply. First determine what the passage meant in its own grammatical, historical, literary, and redemptive context. Only then ask how its truth applies to believers today. Interpretation identifies the meaning of the text; application identifies the legitimate consequences of that meaning for faith and obedience. A passage has an intended meaning, but

that truth may have many appropriate applications in different circumstances. Never turn a personal application, devotional insight, or contemporary analogy into the meaning of the passage itself. Application must cross the bridge of principle. The question "How does this speak to me?" must come after "What did God actually say?"

13. Reject arbitrary allegory, numerology, and hidden codes. Scripture sometimes uses numbers, persons, objects, places, events, and historical patterns symbolically. It also contains genuine types, figures, parables, and prophetic symbols. When Scripture itself establishes such significance, the interpreter should recognize and explain it. But the interpreter has no authority to create spiritual meanings that the text does not reveal or warrant. We must not build doctrine, predictions, personal guidance, or supposed revelations from numerical patterns, letter values, names, colors, dates, repeated words, imagined correspondences, or allegorical associations merely because they appear interesting or suggestive. A symbolic meaning must arise from the language, context, literary form, or the Bible's own interpretation of that symbol. Similarity alone does not establish divine intention. Scripture sometimes gives numbers recognizable significance, but that does not mean every occurrence of seven, twelve, forty, or another number carries a secret theological message. The same safeguard applies to allegory. The interpreter must not move from "This reminds me of..." to "Therefore God means..." without textual warrant. Where Scripture identifies symbolism, receive it. Where Scripture warrants typology, follow it. Where Scripture gives no warrant, do not invent one.

A useful control is this: no interpretation should be accepted until it can survive the grammar, context, historical setting, literary form, authorial purpose and argument, and the broader witness of Scripture.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND FOLLOW-THROUGH

Read the whole paragraph or section before using this checklist. The goal is not merely to complete questions, but to understand God's Word accurately and respond to it faithfully.

1. Who is speaking or writing, to whom, about what, and in what circumstances?

2. What is the purpose of this book or section, and how does this passage advance the author's argument?
3. What comes before and after this passage, and how does it fit the sentence, paragraph, section, and book?
4. What do the grammar, syntax, repeated words, conditions, contrasts, and connecting words require?
5. What historical or cultural information is genuinely necessary to understand the passage, and how certain is that background information?
6. What kind of literature is this, and is any language figurative, symbolic, poetic, typological, prophetic, or idiomatic?
7. What is the main point in one clear sentence, and which words or features of the text establish that conclusion?
8. Which genuinely parallel Scriptures clarify the passage? Does clearer biblical teaching challenge my interpretation?
9. Where does this passage stand in the progress of revelation, and how does Scripture itself relate it to Christ and His redemptive work?
10. Is this text describing an event, giving an example, issuing a command, making a promise, or teaching a doctrine? What warrants applying it to believers today?
11. Am I distinguishing what the text explicitly states, what necessarily follows, and what is merely possible or speculative?
12. Am I approaching this passage willing to be corrected by it, or am I trying to make it confirm what I already believe or want? Have I prayed for the Holy Spirit to illumine my understanding while still submitting my interpretation to the words He inspired?
13. After establishing what the passage means, what truth must I believe, sin must I confess, promise may I trust, or duty must I obey? Does that application genuinely arise from the meaning of the text rather than from a personal association or impression?

A SIMPLE EXAMPLE

A biblical account of God healing someone establishes that the healing occurred. By itself, it does not establish that a modern preacher can promise your recovery by Friday. The particular prediction requires biblical warrant; merely agreeing that God can heal does not supply it. Likewise, the fact that a claim does not immediately contradict Scripture does not prove that God revealed it.

The same safeguard applies to numbers and symbols. If Scripture

itself assigns significance to a number or symbol, that significance should be respected. But finding the same number several times, assigning numerical values to letters, or constructing hidden patterns does not give an interpreter authority to announce a doctrine or prediction that the text never states.

Keep the passage open while you examine the claim. Receive its comfort, submit to its correction, and obey its commands. Accurate interpretation should bring us under God's Word, not leave us standing over it as detached observers.

SHORT GLOSSARY OF HERMENEUTICAL TERMS

Hermeneutics: The principles and methods used to determine the meaning of a biblical text.

Interpretation: The process of determining accurately what a passage means—the thought God communicated through the inspired human author.

Exegesis: Careful analysis that draws the meaning out of the text rather than placing a meaning into it, especially through attention to wording, grammar, syntax, and context.

Eisegesis: Reading into a passage a meaning that the text itself does not contain or warrant.

Exposition: Clearly explaining or setting forth the meaning of Scripture so that others can understand it; exposition normally moves from interpretation toward communication and application.

Application: Bringing the properly interpreted truth of Scripture to bear upon present belief and life. Application follows interpretation and must be governed by it.

Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Reading Scripture according to its grammar, normal language, literary form, historical setting, and authorial purpose in order to discover the intended meaning.

Usus Loquendi: The ordinary or customary use of words in a particular language, time, and culture. Context determines which legitimate sense is intended.

Literal or Normal Sense: The meaning conveyed by language according to its normal literary use. It includes recognizing metaphors, poetry, symbols, and figures when the text uses them.

Analogy of Faith: The principle that Scripture is internally consistent and that clearer passages help interpret more difficult ones.

Context: The material surrounding a passage—including sentence, paragraph, section, book, historical situation, and ultimately the whole canon—which helps determine meaning.

Genre: The kind of literature being interpreted, such as narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, parable, epistle, or apocalyptic literature.

Typology: A divinely intended correspondence in which an earlier person, event, institution, or pattern anticipates a later redemptive fulfillment, especially in Christ.

Progressive Revelation: The unfolding of God's revelation through biblical history, in which later revelation brings greater clarity and fulfillment without contradicting what God revealed earlier.

Spiritualizing or Arbitrary Allegorizing: Assigning a hidden or supposedly spiritual meaning to a passage without textual or biblical warrant.

SOURCE NOTES

W. R. Downing, An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Issues, History, and Principles of Biblical Interpretation (FirstLove Publications), especially the historico-grammatical method, context, lexical and syntactical analysis, normal usage, progressive revelation, covenantal distinction, Scripture interpreting Scripture, figurative language, necessary inference, and the distinction between interpretation and application.

Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics, 3rd revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), especially the discussions of normal interpretation, context, word usage, grammar, historical setting, progressive revelation, theological interpretation, literary forms, and the distinction between interpretation and application.

Louis Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation, consulted especially for grammatical, historical, and theological interpretation; unity of meaning; authorial scope; context; parallel passages; and the treatment of symbols, types, and prophecy.

Milton S. Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments, consulted especially

for grammatical-historical interpretation, context, scope and plan, parallel passages, historical standpoint, progress of doctrine, and safeguards governing special forms of interpretation.

For further biblical study: Nehemiah 8:8; Psalm 119:18; Luke 24:27; Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 2:15.

APPENDIX B

The Witness of History

(From the Early Church to the Puritans)

The conviction that certain apostolic gifts and offices were temporary is older than the modern debate. These witnesses testify to that conviction in different ways. Their words must also be read in context: the passing of a particular sign is not the same claim as the end of every miracle.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354–430 AD)

In Homilies on the First Epistle of John (6.10), Augustine called tongues "signs adapted to the time" and said the sign had passed away. In The City of God (22.8), however, he reported miracles in his own day. His point about tongues should not be read as a denial of every later miracle.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (347–407 AD)

Preaching on 1 Corinthians 12 in Homily 29, Chrysostom said of the gifts under discussion: "This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place."

JOHN CALVIN (1509–1564)

Commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:28, Calvin distinguished offices that endure from offices given for the church's founding: "To the first class belongs the office of Teacher, to the second the office of Apostle."

MATTHEW HENRY (1662–1714)

In the preface to volume IV of his Commentary on the Whole Bible, Henry wrote of tongues and other prophetic gifts: "These and other gifts of prophecy, being for a sign, have long since ceased and laid aside." He then directed readers to Scripture as the more sure word of prophecy.

APPENDIX C

A Biblical Guide to Leaving a Mystical Church

If you have realized that your current church is steeped in the errors of modern mysticism, the prosperity gospel, or the New Apostolic Reformation, it is your spiritual duty to protect yourself and your family. Leaving a church is difficult, but remaining in a place that abuses the Word of God is spiritually dangerous.

MAKE SURE THE ISSUE IS BIBLICAL

Do not leave a church because every preference is not met, because a sermon offended you, or because another believer disappointed you. Churches are made of redeemed sinners, and no congregation is free from weakness. The issue here is more serious: teaching or practice that displaces the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, corrupts the gospel, claims divine authority for new revelations, abuses pastoral authority, manipulates consciences, commercializes spiritual ministry, or persists in serious unrepentant error. Before you leave, put your reasons into biblical words. Ask not merely, 'Am I uncomfortable?' but, 'Is Christ's Word being contradicted, displaced, or abused?' (Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Jude 3).

DO NOT CREATE A FACTION

Your goal is to honor Christ, not to start a church war. Do not use your departure to sow division, gossip, or pull a faction of people away with you. If people ask why you are leaving, point them clearly and respectfully to the Scriptures. Avoid personal retaliation, but speak truthfully when others need warning about serious doctrinal error.

MEET WITH THE LEADERSHIP — IF SAFE

If your church leadership is open to biblical dialogue, request a meeting. Humbly present your concerns regarding the sufficiency of Scripture, biblical worship, and the completed canon. If the leadership is abusive, authoritarian, or claims unquestionable apostolic authority, a formal written resignation may be sufficient.

SEVER FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR FALSE MINISTRY

Do not fund the commercialization of the gospel. Cease financial support to ministries that peddle false prophecies, sell the anointing, or demand seed-faith offerings. Direct your giving toward faithful gospel ministry and genuine needs.

FIND A FAITHFUL CHURCH

Seek a local body anchored to historic Christian orthodoxy, where Scripture is preached expositionally, church discipline is practiced, worship is governed by the Word, and the sufficiency of Scripture is honored. Do not let disappointment with one church drive you away from Christ's people. Seek membership, pastoral care, and regular fellowship in a faithful congregation.

WHEN FAMILY AND FRIENDS DO NOT UNDERSTAND

Leaving a church can cost more than a Sunday routine. It may strain friendships, disturb family expectations, and bring accusations that you are proud, divisive, unloving, or spiritually deceived. Some of the strongest pressure may come from people you love. Jesus never hid that cost. He warned that allegiance to Him can bring painful division even within a household and that whoever loves father or mother more than Him is not worthy of Him (Matthew 10:34-39). He required disciples to count the cost of following Him above every competing loyalty (Luke 14:26-33). Yet He also pictured the kingdom as a treasure and a pearl worth surrendering everything to possess (Matthew 13:44-46), and He promised that sacrifices made for His sake and the gospel will never finally impoverish His people (Mark 10:29-30).

Do not use those texts as permission to become harsh. Honor parents, love family, speak gently, refuse slander, and keep the door open for patient conversation. But do not surrender a conscience bound to Scripture merely to preserve relational peace. The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe

(Proverbs 29:25). There are times when costly obedience is one of God's appointed means of exposing whom we fear most.

The cost of discipleship is not merely a doctrine to admire; sooner or later it becomes a road we must walk. Jesus said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). Sometimes that cross includes the painful misunderstanding of people we dearly love. Following Christ may cost approval, familiarity, cherished relationships, or the security of remaining where we have always been. But Christ never calls His sheep to sacrifice truth in order to preserve peace at any price.

This does not mean that every disagreement requires separation, nor does it give us permission to become reckless or self-righteous. It means that when Scripture has made the path of obedience clear, the disciple must finally ask: Whose approval governs my conscience? Christ did not call us to preserve our lives at all costs, but to entrust them to Him. What appears to be loss for His sake is never ultimate loss. The Shepherd who calls us to follow Him also assumes responsibility for the sheep who follow His voice.

THE COURAGE TO STAND: LUTHER AND BUNYAN

Martin Luther knew what it was to stand almost alone against enormous religious and political pressure. At Worms he refused to retract what he believed Scripture required him to confess: 'My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Therefore I cannot and will not recant.' [1] Luther was not teaching stubborn individualism. His point was that conscience must finally answer to God's Word, not to the threats or prestige of men. A believer leaving a church dominated by mystical claims may feel very small, but obedience does not become wrong because obedience is lonely.

John Bunyan knew another form of pressure. Imprisoned for preaching outside the restrictions imposed upon him, he was offered liberty at the price of silence. His answer was simple and costly: 'If I was out of prison to-day I would preach the gospel again to-morrow, by the help of God.' [2] Bunyan's example is not a call to romanticize conflict. It is encouragement to the frightened believer: there are moments when faithfulness costs something, and Christ is worth the cost. The same Lord who sustained Bunyan in prison can sustain

a believer through the loss of approval, friendships, familiarity, or position.

A PRACTICAL PATH OUT

If you have concluded from Scripture that you must leave, proceed deliberately, peacefully, and courageously. The following steps are not a mechanical formula, but they provide a biblical path for disentangling yourself from serious spiritual error without becoming bitter or isolated.

1. Write down the biblical reasons for leaving. Distinguish doctrine from preference. Identify the teachings or practices that conflict with Scripture and record the passages that govern your conscience.
2. Pray for wisdom, courage, humility, and a clean conscience. Ask God to keep you from fear, revenge, pride, and impulsiveness (James 1:5; Psalm 139:23-24).
3. Seek counsel from mature, trustworthy believers outside the controlling influence of the church. You need biblical perspective, not another personality to dominate your conscience (Proverbs 11:14).
4. Count the cost honestly before you act. Jesus taught His disciples to count the cost of following Him (Luke 14:28-33). Think soberly about what obedience may involve. You may lose friendships, ministry roles, financial assistance, family approval, familiar routines, or a sense of belonging. If your spouse and children are involved, consider carefully how the transition will affect them and prepare to shepherd them through it. Counting the cost does not mean allowing the cost to decide the issue. It means refusing to walk blindly into difficulty while also refusing to let difficulty become your master. Once Scripture has made your duty clear, the question is no longer, "What will this cost me?" but, "Is Jesus Christ worthy of the cost?" He is.
5. Protect your household. If a spouse or children are being spiritually manipulated, frightened by false prophecy, pressured for money, or subjected to abusive authority, do not treat their safety as a secondary issue (Ephesians 6:4; 1 Timothy 5:8).
6. Meet with the leadership if it is safe and useful. State your concerns from Scripture, listen carefully, and avoid unnecessary accusation. If leaders are coercive, threatening, or claim unquestionable divine authority, you are not required to place

yourself back under manipulation merely to satisfy their preferred exit procedure.

7. Refuse to create a faction. Do not campaign for followers. Do not turn your departure into a personal crusade. Speak truth when warning is necessary, but resist gossip, exaggeration, and retaliation (Romans 12:18; Ephesians 4:15).
8. Communicate your departure plainly. A brief written statement may be appropriate: you are leaving because specific teachings or practices violate your conscience under Scripture. You do not need to argue endlessly after your reasons have been made clear.
9. Stop financing the error. Redirect your giving away from manipulative or commercialized ministry and toward faithful gospel work and genuine needs (Matthew 10:8; 2 Corinthians 9:7).
10. Expect pressure after you leave. You may be told that you have left your covering, resisted the Spirit, forfeited blessing, invited judgment, or rebelled against God's anointed leader. Test every such claim by Scripture. No human leader owns your conscience (Acts 5:29; Colossians 2:18-23).
11. Find a faithful church without unnecessary delay. Do not let one abusive or unbiblical church teach you to live without Christ's church. Look for careful exposition of Scripture, qualified elders, biblical discipline, reverent worship, transparent stewardship, and ordinary Christian fellowship (Acts 2:42; Titus 1:5-9).
12. Rebuild your Christian life around the ordinary means Christ has appointed. Read the Word, pray, gather with the saints, sit under faithful preaching, receive pastoral care, participate in the ordinances, and learn again the quiet strength of ordinary obedience. Recovery may take time. Do not confuse the absence of spiritual spectacle with the absence of the Holy Spirit.

RECOVERING IN HEALTHY FELLOWSHIP

People leaving mystical or authoritarian churches often carry wounds that are not immediately visible. Some have been taught to distrust their own judgment. Others have been frightened by predictions, shamed for asking questions, pressured to give money, or made dependent upon a leader's claimed access to God. Be patient with yourself. You may need time to learn that biblical shepherding does not control the sheep; it feeds them. Faithful pastors do not stand between Christ and His people. They point the flock to Christ through His Word (1 Peter 5:2-4).

Do not replace one form of bondage with another. The answer to abusive authority is not spiritual independence. The answer to counterfeit fellowship is not isolation. Christ gathers His sheep into a body. Receive the care of qualified elders, form ordinary friendships with believers, serve quietly, and allow trust to grow through truth and faithfulness. Healthy church life may at first feel almost uneventful. That can be a mercy. There is deep grace in a congregation where the Bible is opened, Christ is preached, prayers are offered, ordinances are observed, burdens are carried, and no one must manufacture a miracle to prove that God is present.

APPLICATION: WHEN OBEDIENCE FEELS COSTLY

Perhaps you already know what Scripture requires, but you are afraid of the consequences. You fear losing friends. You fear disappointing family. You fear what the pastor will say about you. You fear being called rebellious. You fear that you will never again feel the excitement you once associated with God's presence. Bring those fears into the light. The question is not whether obedience will cost you something. The question is whether Christ is worthy of what obedience costs.

God may use this very trial to break the fear of man that has held you captive. 'The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe' (Proverbs 29:25). He has not given His people 'a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind' (2 Timothy 1:7). Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). When human authority commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands, the apostolic answer remains: 'We ought to obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29). And when loneliness whispers that obedience has left you abandoned, answer with God's promise: 'I will never leave you nor forsake you,' so that you may boldly say, 'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?' (Hebrews 13:5-6).

Do not leave merely because you are angry. Leave, if you must, because you belong to Christ. Do not walk away nursing hatred. Walk toward truth. Do not make your former church the center of your testimony. Make Christ the center. Thank Him for opening your eyes. Ask Him to forgive whatever compromises were your own. Pray for those who remain. Warn where love requires warning. Then move forward. The Shepherd who led you out of confusion is able to lead you into green pastures again.

A SEVEN-QUESTION CHECKLIST FOR THE CONSCIENCE

Use these questions slowly and honestly. They are not weapons for judging other people. They are meant to help you examine whether your conscience, loyalties, fears, and decisions are being governed by Christ through His Word.

1. Can the teaching and practices troubling me be defended from Scripture in context, or do they depend upon private revelation, personality, pressure, or tradition?
2. Am I dealing with an ordinary church imperfection or disagreement, or with serious doctrinal error, a false gospel, abusive authority, manipulation, exploitation, or a persistent denial of Scripture's sufficiency?
3. Have I allowed fear of a leader, family member, friend, or congregation to carry more weight in my conscience than the clear teaching of Christ?
4. If I remain, what am I teaching my spouse, children, or weaker believers about the authority of Scripture and the cost of obedience?
5. Can I leave without gossip, revenge, faction-building, or exaggeration, while still speaking truthfully enough to protect others from serious error?
6. Have I made a concrete plan to enter a faithful local church where I can receive biblical preaching, pastoral care, fellowship, discipline, prayer, and the ordinances?
7. Am I willing to trust Christ with the relationships, reputation, familiarity, and security that obedience may cost me?

Do not rush through these questions. Pray over them. Write down your answers. Open the cited passages. Seek counsel from faithful pastors or mature believers who are not invested in preserving the system you are evaluating. The purpose is not to make departure easy. It is to help you act with a conscience informed by Scripture, a heart free from bitterness, and a settled allegiance to Christ.

DO NOT ABANDON THE ASSEMBLY

Leaving an unfaithful church is not the same as leaving the church of Jesus Christ. The goal is not escape from Christian fellowship but recovery of it. The New Testament knows nothing of a healthy Christian life permanently detached from the gathered people of

God. Christ saves His people into a body, gives shepherds to care for them, and commands believers to encourage one another as the Day approaches.

Hebrews 10:24-25: 'And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.'

If you must leave, leave toward Christ, toward His Word, and toward a faithful congregation of His people. The path may be costly, but you do not walk it alone. The same Shepherd who calls His sheep out of danger also gathers, feeds, guards, and keeps them.

SOURCE NOTES

1 Martin Luther, reply at the Diet of Worms, April 18, 1521, in "Luther and Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms (1521)," section A, "Luther at the Diet of Worms, Broadsheet," *German History in Documents and Images*, German Historical Institute, https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/luther-and-emperor-charles-v-at-the-diet-of-worms-1521. English translation reproduced from Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

2 John Bunyan, *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*, account of his examination before Justice Keelin, p. 9 in the digital edition hosted by Sermon-Online, https://dir.sermon-online.com/english/JohnBunyan/A_Relation_Of_The_Imprisonment_Of_Mr_John_Bunyan_166011.pdf.

APPENDIX D

Glossary and Further Reading

GLOSSARY OF ESSENTIAL THEOLOGICAL TERMS

Apostle / Apostleship: An apostle is a messenger sent with a commission. In its foundational sense, apostleship refers to the unique office of men personally commissioned by the risen Christ as His authoritative witnesses. The New Testament also uses the term more broadly for messengers sent by churches.

Canon: Derived from the Greek word for "measuring rod." The closed, completed, and authoritative list of the sixty-six books of the Bible.

Cessationism: The doctrine that the foundational apostolic office and the extraordinary revelatory and sign gifts served a temporary purpose and ceased with the close of the apostolic age and the completion of New Testament revelation. God continues to answer prayer, heal according to His will, and work powerfully through His Word and Spirit.

Continuationism: The belief that spiritual gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and healing continue in the church today.

Dorean Principle: The biblical mandate, derived from Matthew 10:8 ("freely you have received, freely give"), that the gospel and the ministry of the Word must never be sold, merchandised, or treated as commercial inventory.

Illumination: The Holy Spirit's work of opening our minds and hearts to understand, receive, and obey the truth already revealed in

Scripture. Illumination gives no new revelation and does not make our interpretations infallible.

Inspiration: God's work through the Holy Spirit by which the human authors of Scripture wrote His Word. Using their own vocabulary and style, they recorded exactly what God intended, so that the original writings are wholly trustworthy and without error.

Miracle: An extraordinary act of God that displays His power beyond the ordinary course of His providence. God's freedom to perform miracles must be distinguished from the possession of a spiritual gift through which a person regularly performs miraculous works.

Mysticism: As used in this book, the pursuit of direct spiritual knowledge or guidance through inward impressions, visions, or extraordinary experiences that are treated as divine authority alongside or above Scripture. The criticism concerns that claim to authority, not the reality of communion with God.

New Apostolic Reformation (NAR): A movement of independent charismatic churches and ministry networks that teaches the restoration of governing apostles and prophets and promotes present-day revelations to guide the church.

Ordinary Means of Grace: The appointed ways through which Christ, by His Spirit, brings people to faith and nourishes His people: especially the reading and preaching of Scripture, prayer, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Their spiritual power depends on Christ's blessing and the Spirit's work.

Prophecy: In its revelatory sense, the communication of a message received from God, spoken with His authority. Biblical prophecy includes declaring God's truth, commands, judgments, and promises, as well as foretelling events. Faithful preaching explains and applies revelation already given in Scripture.

Prophetic Telescoping: The presentation of future events together in a prophetic passage without fully disclosing the intervals between their fulfillment. Events separated by considerable time may appear side by side, like distant mountain peaks whose intervening valleys are hidden from view.

Providence: God's continual preservation and government of His

creation, directing all things according to His wise and holy purposes. His providential care includes ordinary circumstances and answers to prayer; it continues fully even where miraculous sign gifts have ceased.

Regulative Principle of Worship: The doctrine that God determines how His people worship Him. The church must receive its elements of worship from Scripture rather than invent its own. Practical circumstances, such as meeting times and places, are ordered by Christian wisdom under the general rules of Scripture.

Revelation: God's making Himself and His truth known. General revelation displays His power and character through creation and conscience; special revelation makes known His saving purpose through His words and acts, supremely in Jesus Christ. Scripture is the inspired written record and authoritative rule of that special revelation.

Semeion (Sign): A Greek word meaning 'sign,' often used in the New Testament for a miraculous sign. Such miraculous signs were not arbitrary displays of power, but signs that pointed beyond themselves to God's activity and, in the apostolic context, authenticated the divine origin of the message.

Sign Gifts: A term used in this book for extraordinary spiritual gifts, such as tongues and healing, that accompanied the apostolic witness and confirmed the divine origin of its message. The book argues that these gifts served a temporary purpose in the church's foundation.

Simony: The buying or selling of spiritual office, authority, gifts, privileges, or sacred ministry. The term comes from Simon Magus, who offered the apostles money in an attempt to obtain the power associated with the giving of the Holy Spirit, prompting Peter's severe rebuke (Acts 8:18–24). Historically, the term became especially associated with purchasing church offices, but the underlying sin is broader: treating the things of God as merchandise or attempting to obtain spiritual power, favor, or ministry through money.

Sola Scriptura: "Scripture Alone." The foundational Protestant doctrine that the Bible is the sole, final, and infallible authority for Christian faith and practice.

Sufficiency of Scripture: The doctrine that Scripture contains everything necessary for salvation and for the faith and obedience God

requires, so that no additional revelation is needed as an authoritative rule for the Christian life.

Tongues: The Spirit-given ability to speak in languages the speaker had not learned. At Pentecost, hearers recognized their own languages. Paul required interpretation when tongues were spoken publicly in the church so that the congregation could understand and be edified.

RECOMMENDED READING AND RESOURCES

These works offer further study of cessationism, the sufficiency of Scripture, spiritual discernment, biblical worship, and the faithful support of gospel ministry.

Counterfeit Miracles by Benjamin B. Warfield

Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship by John MacArthur

A Biblical Case for Cessationism: Why the Miraculous Gifts of the Spirit Have Ended by Tom Pennington

The Final Word: A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today by O. Palmer Robertson

Worship in the Melting Pot by Peter Masters

The Dorean Principle: A Biblical Response to the Commercialization of Christianity by Conley Owens

To Be Continued? Are the Miraculous Gifts for Today? by Samuel E. Waldron

The Religious Affections by Jonathan Edwards

What Does the Bible Teach about Spiritual Gifts? An Examination of 1 Corinthians 12–14 by Keith Underhill

The Modern Tongues Movement by Robert G. Gromacki

Now Concerning Spiritual Gifts: A Case for Cessationism by Franco Brits

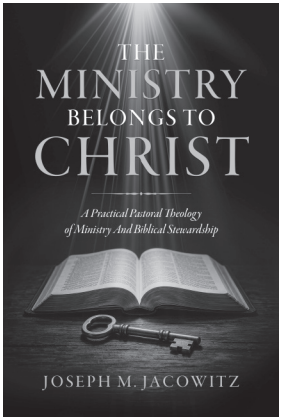
Signs of the Apostles: Observations on Pentecostalism Old and New by Walter J. Chantry

The Life of Edward Irving by Arnold Dallimore

THE MINISTRY BELONGS TO CHRIST

A Practical Pastoral Theology of Ministry and Biblical Stewardship

Joseph M. Jacowitz



Christ owns the ministry. Does He govern the way we serve?

We confess that the ministry belongs to Christ. But what happens when obedience threatens our income, influence, or plans? This book brings that searching question into the everyday life of the church.

Joseph M. Jacowitz examines leadership, money, spiritual authority, and the responsibility to make biblical teaching freely available. He addresses publishing, pastoral training, counseling, missions, and the needs of believers who cannot afford Christian resources.

Written for pastors, ministry leaders, and concerned Christians, this book calls us to honest self-examination, faithful stewardship, and renewed dependence on the Lord. Its aim is to help us serve with the humility and freedom of stewards who answer to Christ.

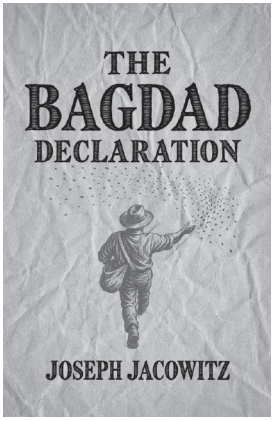
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THE BAGDAD DECLARATION

A call to faithful, freely given ministry

Joseph M. Jacowitz



**When truth is freely received,
how should it be shared?**

The gospel is a gift. What does that mean for the way we teach, lead, fund, and organize Christian ministry? The Bagdad Declaration calls believers to bring these questions under the authority of Jesus Christ.

A companion to The Ministry Belongs to Christ, it sets out eight articles addressing Christ's headship, access to biblical truth, doctrinal purity, servant leadership, voluntary support, and spiritual accountability. Supporting sections examine the commercialization of ministry and respond to practical objections.

For pastors, churches, and ministry workers seeking a clearer foundation for service, this book offers principles to study, discuss, and apply together. It calls us to remove financial barriers around biblical teaching and to trust the Lord as we freely share what He has entrusted to us.

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