

Off The Cuff



*unexpected questions
from
friends and foreigners*

Roger and Dianne Smalling

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Unexpected questions pop up in our email occasionally. Some involve personal counseling, others theological concerns. Here are a few interesting ones.

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Chapter 1: *Ouch! Everything hurts*

A friend wrote that his life was falling apart. He had lost his job, was losing his house and developed a life-threatening illness. He asked why God was doing these things. Below is my reply. Happily he has since recovered from all of these circumstances.

<><><>

Dear Justin,

Whenever someone expresses a cry of pain such as in your letter, it generates a certain frustration because I would like to say something more substantial than a spiritualized version of *buck-up*. Quoting verses is always a good idea but even that leaves me frustrated.

The reason is because I have finally realized the only solution to helping someone in pain, is to take away the pain. If I can't do that, then what am I supposed to do, as a minister?

Saying *ouch* is natural. It doesn't take away the pain, though. Asking *Why, God?* is another way of saying *ouch*. I'm not exactly sure when it is okay to ask that question and when it is not. Theologians discuss it and disagree, especially when they are not the ones in pain.

Pain does not help the reasoning faculty of the brain, either. It causes mental confusion. When hot grease hits my hand, I stop being analytical and start looking for the most immediate solution, even if it is not a good one.

Unfortunately, you expressed the hurt in the form of questions addressed to me. That puts the ball in my court as a minister, and I am supposed to answer.

Very well, I'll give you an answer. It will not take away the pain any more than the comments of your well-meaning friends you mentioned. It might even add to it. Hopefully not! It is, however, the only answer you are ever likely to get.

The answer as to why this series of events is happening is the same reason why anything else happens or ever will happen, good, bad or indifferent. It happens for the glory of God.

No other reason why anything happens.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him is glory

forever! Romans 11:36

The immediate question is, *how does Justin's distress glorify God?* I don't have a clue. But that is exactly what the Word says it does.

If that is not true, then nothing in the gospel is true.

Now this statement is both comforting and ominous at the same time.

- Comforting, in the sense that at least we know the pain is purposeful.
- Ominous, in telling us something outside of ourselves is more important than our pain, for which the pain is a perfectly valid price to pay.

To put the icing on the cake, we are then told that God is not being cruel, insensitive or egocentric. To put the cherry on the icing, then we learn it will be proven ultimately that experiencing the pain is infinitely better than not experiencing it.

You asked if this was punishment for some sin. That is possible but not likely. If it were, you would know what it is by now. Throughout scripture, such as in the chastisements of Israel, God always let them know what it is for. As one minister put it, *God is not a child abuser.*

I know that in the midst of your pain it is probably inappropriate for me to try to correct your theology. It might even sound callous, like someone rebuking me for shouting when the hot grease hits my hand. That makes me feel like delivering a knuckle sandwich and transferring some of the pain to the rebuker.

Jesus came across a blind man. The disciples asked, *was it because of this man's sin or his parents' sin that he was born blind?* Jesus said, *Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.* John 9:3

It wasn't that the man or his parents were not sinners. They were. Jesus was saying that events in people's lives may not necessary be connected to their moral state. They might be, but then again, they might not. If we did indeed live in a perfect reward-and-punishment world, the word *grace* would have no meaning.

Human nature can easily assume that if we are good enough, this will build us a shelter against bad things happening. Big mistake. Totally works-

righteousness. That's not Christianity.

I'm trying to gently lead up to a point that I hope will not cause you further distress. You said, *I have done what Jesus said to do. I love, I help, I give.*

Oh no you haven't. Jesus said, *Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.* Are you perfect? Isn't this something Jesus said to do? He also made it clear that when we have done all demanded of us, even if we *were* perfect, we are to say, *we are unprofitable servants. We have only done what we were supposed to do.* This means we don't deserve any reward at all. Why should I be rewarded for a duty?

If God rewards us, it is really a gift of grace. If God chastises us, it's because he wants to put us in a position to reward us even more.

The good news is that when we accept Jesus, we not only get our sins forgiven, we are also clothed with the legal righteousness of Christ. This free gift trumps any performance-based acceptance.

Again I am aware that even this doesn't relieve the pain. If God wants you to be in pain for a while, he will graciously circumvent all my efforts to relieve it.

Know that you are in our prayers.

Love in Christ,

Roger

Chapter 2: *Should I marry Paula?*

Dear Roger,

You know about my relationship with Paula, how we have been close friends for about a year. We have talked openly about marriage. Yet in making a decision of such magnitude, I wish to be absolutely sure of God's will. I am therefore waiting for a series of signs from God. Does this seem right to you?

<><><>

Dear Joe,

I deeply appreciate your confidence in asking me about the delicate issue of your relationship with Paula. You know me well enough to expect a clear answer to your question.

It seems to me you are treating Paula unjustly because you have been postponing indefinitely a clear decision one way or another. I base this on a biblical text that has to do with feminine psychology.

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. 37 But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. 1Corinthians 7:36-37 (ESV)

This text implies there comes a moment in a man's relationship with a

woman that he must act decisively and decide the direction of the relationship one way or another. Why?

Feminine psychology is different. A marriage relationship defines the life of a woman in a more profound manner than that of a man. A man's career is generally his focus, while a woman's orientation is toward her husband and immediate family. A wife is an important part of a man's life. A woman's husband is her life.

A woman is therefore anxious to define the rest of her life. To do this, she must define the relationship with a possible suitor and from her perspective, the sooner the better. Leaving her dangling after the relationship has become serious, treats her unjustly.

Paul is saying something like, *paint or get off the ladder*.

What then is my answer? Taking into account the above text, the decision is yours to make, not God's to reveal. God will accept your decision to marry Paula, or not.

God knows what decision you will make and has already programmed it into his plan for your life before all creation. He has the power to help us avoid wrong choices when we are honestly seeking his will.

One way God leads us is simply by our own desires. This presupposes, of course, godly desires. Decisions occur in life between equally good moral options, like in the text above, not good versus evil. For mature Christians, God permits believers the freedom to make decisions between good options based on their wisdom and character as mature people.

Paul makes that point throughout Galatians. In Christ, God treats us like adults, capable of making mature decisions without being led by *guardians*

like children (Galatians 4:1-2).

We run the risk of being misunderstood by immature Christians. They may imagine we are saying Christians may do as they please and God will approve it beforehand. I'm not writing, however, to an immature Christian, but to a mature professional capable of grasping abstract concepts...such as the freedom of maturity.

It seems God is wise in not revealing clearly his will in this matter. In the future, assuming you marry Paula, it will be better to say you married her because you loved her, not because another entity, even God, told you to do so.

Permit me to express it in a more personal way:

When I considered marrying Dianne, certain questions leaped to mind. "Can I get along and be happy single? Yes. Would life be simpler without her? Yes. Could I live without her? Yes. Am I willing to do that? No.

On that basis, I made my decision.

A friend of mine expressed it comically. "Marriage is sometimes a pain in the neck. Unexpected problems. I would never have considered it if it weren't for Susie."

Another lady said, I was perfectly happy being single. But Jack was too good to pass up.

Another point: What is this you mentioned about *signs*? Divine guidance today is based on principles of wisdom, founded on biblical concepts of

maturity as expressed in James 3:17... not by *signs*.

Yes, God sometimes leads Christians by unusual circumstances we may call *signs*. Those who depend habitually on such for guidance are showing spiritual immaturity.

Signs often guided Old Testament believers, precisely because they were still under a *guardian*, the Law, along with the infallible voice of prophets.

Not any more. We are under a fresh dispensation of grace. With grace comes a new freedom. With freedom comes risk and with risk a certain sense of insecurity. Maturity and freedom walk hand in hand. We cannot reach maturity without the risk inherent in being set free.

The formula is simple. If you want security in making decisions, go to the Law. In exchange for the security, however, you will be giving up both freedom and maturity.

The answer to your question about marrying Paula is, "Does it seem a wise and godly thing to do?"

It seems you may have already heard from God about this, all you are ever going to hear. The decision is yours. And there is no escape from having to make it, one way or another, right now.

Roger

Chapter 3: *Are there myths in the Bible?*

A ministerial candidate for ordination wrote and said, "One of the questions I am required to answer in writing for the examining board is, 'Are there myths in the Bible?' How should I answer?"

<><><>

Dear Steve,

Those who say the Bible contains myths assume the supernatural does not exist. For this assumption to be valid they must first prove there is no God or the God who exists does no miracles.

Rudolf Bultmann, a liberal German theologian, pronounced any miracle as myth. This is an extreme view not even recognized by a common dictionary. Bultmann is right only if God does not exist. But then, why was he a theologian?

What is a myth? What is the difference between a myth and a legend; between a legend and an historical legend; between figurative narrative and myth?

Is the book of Revelation a figurative narrative? The writer said so in the first chapter. Does this make it myth? Or does the intent at prophecy remove it from the domain of the mythological?

A myth is an entirely imaginary event or person in a narrative. This would take the Book of Revelation out of that category, since the writer made it clear he was using symbolic language to describe literal future events. Such

symbolism does *not* exclude the miraculous nor make Revelation mythological.

It would be no problem if myths were in the Bible, assuming the writer indicated them as such. After all, every other sort of literature is there, including poetry and prophecies, literal and figurative.

If a Bible writer meant his text to be understood as mythological for whatever purpose, he would have had the integrity to say so. I cannot think of any who did that.

I would imagine the examining board that asked you to write on the question has Genesis in mind or may be testing your attitude toward miracles. If you cannot deduce what they want, just say *NO*, even if it requires a thousand words to do so.

Roger

Chapter 4: *Christian profanity*

A teacher used vulgar language on several occasions in an adult Sunday School class. This was sporadic. We ignored it until it reached the point where we felt we must deal with it.

Roger wrote the man as courteous a letter of correction as he could. The teacher rejected it. So it seemed necessary to be more emphatic.

<><><>

Dear Ken,

Your Sunday School classes are excellent. They would be even better if the profane language came to an end. Allowing old Adam a voice to demonstrate our authenticity or that of the gospel, does not seem in line with...

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. Eph. 4:29 (ESV)

In His bonds,

Roger

.....

Ken's reply,

Oh, I agree. It is not necessary. For what it is worth, I do not consider the word *damn* unwholesome talk. I think Paul has in mind something much deeper than that. I think he is talking about gossip and slander. His concern is that we build up one another and that sort of talk is what tears us down. I would much rather be around someone who uses what we consider cuss words than I would someone who looks spiritual and then tears people apart

with their words. The first is pretty harmless; the second extremely destructive.

But I do not use that language very much, only when I get worked up. And that class has been awesome because people, including you, have opened up and been real. It gives me great hope for the ministry of the church when we see that kind of interaction.

Thanks for your gentle spirit,

Ken

.....

Roger's response to Ken,

Thank you for replying.

I used a mild verse, Eph.4:29, to be courteous. The one I had chosen originally was Col.3:8,

*But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and **obscene talk** from your mouth. (ESV)*

*But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, **filthy communication** out of your mouth. (KJV)*

Greek= **AISCHROLOGIA**= *obscene, shameful speech involving culturally disapproved themes — 'vulgar speech, obscene speech, dirty talk.'* "...get rid of ... slander and dirty talk that ever came from your lips' Col 3:8."

—Lexicon Louw and Nida

I was not referring to any one word such as *damn*, because that is only one. I was thinking of the words...*[deleted]*... along with sexual references.

1Tim. 4:12 *Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.*

Showing our *authenticity* by letting our corruption be seen is unbiblical. We are to hide our corruption but not hide that we still have corruption. This is part of being an example of a minister of the gospel. Paul's struggle with the flesh in Romans 7 shows this balance.

The kinds of struggle people have with the flesh are relatively few in kind: food, drink, sex or pride. Paul didn't think it our business to know his specifics, only that he also struggled, as do all believers. He did not seem to think this posture was unauthentic or hypocritical.

I do not intend to nit-pick over words, nor over the dubious interpretations I have heard about Paul's comments in Galatians and Philippians. My point is that profanity is unwholesome. It is sin, period.

Please keep up the excellent work and make it better still.

In His bonds,

Roger

Chapter 5: What is the sin not leading to death?

Roger, what is the meaning of 1John 5:16, since we understand that Jesus forgives all sin?

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. 1John 5:16

Trevor

<><><>

Dear Trevor,

John's First Epistle is one of the few Bible books in which the writer declares his theme plainly. Other books require us to deduce the purpose from the content. John makes his point in 5:13,

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

Eternal security for genuine believers is the theme of the letter. John wants us to have confidence in Christ to protect us from the evil one and prevent us from falling away.

This stated purpose overshadows all other verses in the letter and requires us to interpret them in that light only. Therefore, whatever V.16 means, it cannot signify that a Christian should fear losing his salvation. Such an interpretation would disregard the context of the chapter and the intent of the book as a whole.

John is probably reiterating what he affirmed in Chapter Three. (3:1-10) In that passage he explains a way to distinguish between true and false

believers. False ones practice a life of sin. They do so because the *seed* of God, Jesus Christ, is not in them.

A genuine believer can fall into a sin but will not practice a life of scandalous sin. The word *practice* in verse 9, although not in the original Greek, is justified by the continuous present tense of the verb *to sin*.

In the teaching of 1John, certain facts sometimes get overlooked:

- First John is a Jewish epistle, written by an apostle to the Jews to Jewish believers. We know John was an apostle to the Jews because this is clearly stated in Galatians 2.
- Comments in chapter two would only be said to Jews, such as an *old commandment that you had from the beginning*. Gentiles never had commandments at all.
- Jewish laws can be categorized according to their penalty. Jews knew which required the death penalty.
- The term *sin* can be used generically in the sense of a person *living in sin*, meaning he or she is in a state and condition of sinfulness due to many sins of a scandalous nature.

I am pleased that modern translators say *sin* and not *a sin*. You may recall the Greek has no indefinite article, *a*, only the definite article, *the*. Therefore, we can assume John refers more to a state of being than a particular sin.

As we add up these factors, we can come to an interpretation that fits the context of the book as a whole and the stated purpose of the writer. He seems to be saying that if you see a fellow Christian committing a sin not of a gross and scandalous nature such as one that would deserve the death penalty, then pray for him and God will forgive him even if that believer does not recognize he is sinning.

On the other hand, if he is practicing sin of a sort that would indicate the *seed of God*, Jesus Christ, is not in him, then do not pray he be forgiven because that is not what he needs. He needs to get saved.

Throughout the letter, John is walking a tight rope. He desires believers to have a sense of security in their walk with Christ, without giving them a license to sin. That would explain why the following verse says, *all wrongdoing is sin...* (V.17)

He also wishes to set a standard by which true believers can detect false ones in their midst. The early church was infested with this problem just as we are today. That standard includes things like faithfulness to the church, *remaining with us*, 2:17, loving our fellow believers and not manifesting hatred toward them. The most important characteristic, however, is righteousness, not practicing a life of sin.

If we evaluate verse 16 in the light of these purposes, it becomes clearer and fits within the hermeneutical rule that obscure texts must be interpreted in the light of clearer ones.

In His bonds,

Roger

Chapter 6: *Who created sin?*

Roger,

A student asked me, "Who created sin? If God created all things, then it follows that God also created sin and therefore is the author of evil." He then challenged me to show a specific verse in the Bible that it was Satan and not God who created sin. Can you answer this?

—Joe

<><><>

Dear Joe,

Why does your student need a verse to prove this point? Our doctrinal standards bring out that not everything we believe needs to be supported by a specific text, but that *reasonable and necessary deductions* are adequate.¹ This means the conclusion is unavoidable if we apply reason.

We have no analysis in scripture on the Trinity, or whether women may take communion nor other views and practices common to Christians. We base these on unavoidable considerations in the Bible, though they may not be explicitly stated.

Numerous texts show God is holy, always does right and never tempts anyone. This is enough to deduce that God cannot be the author of evil. The burden of proof is therefore on your student to show a text that God, not Satan, is the author of evil.

You might put the question back to the student in this form: *Yes, the Bible says God is holy. But it does not say he is not unholy. Therefore maybe God is unholy after all.* This will expose the irrationality of the question.

God does not treat us like small children, unable to connect two dots on a paper. He assumes we are adults capable of simple reasoning like, *if not X then Y*. Or, *if not God, then Satan*. Or, *if God is not a tempter, and Satan is the tempter, who did the tempting?*

It might help to show your student the difference between *control* and *manipulation*. A prisoner is under the control of a warden. This means the warden limits the opportunities of the prisoner to do wrong. If the prisoner is released this gives him greater freedom to express evil. The warden is not the author of the evil a released prisoner commits.

If a man has a son who commits murder, do we hang the father? Though the parents are the *creator* of the son, this does not make them the cause of his decisions and actions. So when we say God is the creator of all things, we do not mean that God is the cause of all the actions and decisions of his creatures.

In teaching, try to remember to put the burden of proof back on the student when the student challenges reasonable and necessary deductions.

I hope this helps.

Roger

Chapter 7: *Can Calvinists explain evil?*

A friend told me Calvinists are unable to answer the problem of evil from their theological perspective. How do I answer him?

—Paul

<><><>

Dear Paul,

Calvinists cannot explain the existence of evil? What a strange thing to say! What branch of theology has *ever* explained the existence of evil?

The Bible calls evil, *the mystery of iniquity*. (2Thessalonians 2:7) So evil is a mystery.

Has your friend resolved this mystery with which theologians have struggled throughout history? If he has, then the world is waiting to hear it. Let him proceed.

Augustine had a comment I like: It would seem that God considered it a greater good for evil to exist temporarily than for it to have never existed at all. That much is obvious and it is probably best to leave it there.

This brings up a distinction that might help you answer your friend:

Evil, by definition, is a bad thing. This is not the same as saying the *fact of its existence* is a bad thing. Example: The crucifixion of Christ was an

injustice and injustices are bad things. Yet the existence of this injustice is a *good* thing. It saved us.

Without sin, attributes of God would be unknown, such as grace, agape love, patience or other virtues.

Another way to describe this is to say, *All you have to do is show that good cannot come from evil, and you will have made your point.* If your friend affirms that good cannot come from evil, then he must explain the cross. If he agrees that good can come from evil, then he already has all the explanation he and Calvinists need until Christ returns.

Does that help?

Roger

Chapter 8: *Why is the New Testament so illogical?*

From a skeptic who found an article on our web site:

In your essay on irresistible grace, you seem to be implying that although I have heard the message and gone to church for years and read the entire New Testament twice and still find it to be illogical nonsense, I cannot be saved.

How can I believe something I do not believe?

Jason

<><><>

Dear Jason,

Normally I ignore correspondence that seems to reflect more animosity than a serious search for truth. Typically, it results in two wheels spinning endlessly with no progress in any direction.

Your question interests me because it is rare to find anyone, other than a committed Christian, who has read the New Testament twice. I would like to comment first on your reaction to it, before answering your question.

When people label something *illogical nonsense*, they are often expressing dislike, not necessarily a comment about the mechanics of logic. They do not like the message because it makes them feel uncomfortable. Few I have talked to have any clear idea as to the rules of logic and whether the message meets those rules.

I assume you mean the message is false, not that the ideas are self-contradictory. You have a right to the first. No right to the second.

Why? Logic is like math. It excludes opinions and perspectives. Any line of reasoning can be reduced to symbols and shown to be consistent or not. Whether the propositions in the argument have anything to do with reality is another question.

Suppose a person says, *your math stinks*. Maybe so. Did I fail to carry a digit? Did I misalign the decimal point? Show me. If the person cannot do that, he is expressing invective not logic. Perhaps my math has nothing to do with anything real. That is beside the point when talking about consistency of logic. This is what philosophers mean when they describe the difference between validity and truth.

If your phrase *illogical nonsense* means you reject the New Testament because it contains rational inconsistencies, you have hanged yourself. Such a statement is contrary to fact, like the illustration above. The message of the New Testament follows logically from the premises given. Though I do not know if anyone has reduced these to symbolic logic, it can be done and would show internal consistency.

It would be necessary to show the point of illogic. Did an apostle commit a *non sequitur* or *ad hoc fallacy*? Without this, you are cannot call the New Testament *illogical nonsense*, regardless of the number of times you read it.

Non-Christian philosophers, even atheists, have noted the internal consistency of biblical Christianity. I read recently a comment like that by the late former atheist Mortimer Adler. The former president of the British Atheist Society, Anthony Flew, who became a theist though not a Christian, also made this admission.

If you wish to question biblical Christianity, permit me some suggestions as

to how to go about it better. Question the presuppositions. Is there such a thing as absolute truth? Is there a God? If so, what are his attributes? How do we know this? Is revelation contrary to reason? What historical evidence exists for New Testament assertions?

If you do this, you will be approaching the subject with reason and exhibiting a genuine interest in the pursuit of truth.

As to the meaning of irresistible grace in my essay:

That essay is a chapter from a manual written for my theology students. I put some of the chapters in that form to facilitate focusing on themes without having to fumble through a manual.

The answer to your question in the first paragraph, is no. I did not mean salvation is impossible even if some desire it, only that sinners are infected with sin in every faculty. They are incapable of repenting and trusting in Jesus unless God does a miracle in them first. This miracle involves a change in perceptions regarding their own condition, the worth of Christ and their need of repentance.

Your word *message* needs clarifying. I'm not sure what you have been hearing in church. Nor am I sure you have understood the New Testament even though you have read it twice.

The message of the New Testament has two simple parts: *repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 20:17*. This dual aspect exposes something in most skeptics I have met.

I have a relative who is a non-Christian yet a theist. He explained he did not believe in Jesus. Rather than arguing with him, I mentioned this verse and asked him what would prevent him from doing the first part.... *repentance*

toward God? He had no reply, so I encouraged him to go home and confess his sins to God, and ask God to show him anything else he should do to please Him.

Did he do that? No. My purpose was to expose his hypocrisy. His rejection of Christ is a product of his sinful autonomy, not intellectual considerations. When he gets fed up with his sins and sees his autonomy as rebellion, he will find a universe of reasons to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

How similar this is to your case, is a matter of your own conscience.

Your last question: *How can I believe something I do not believe?* You cannot, of course. Nor would any sensible Christian require it.

First, what does that have to do with repentance toward God? I assume you believe in God. I cannot conceive of why an atheist would attend church for years and read the New Testament twice.

Second, your definition of *believe* might be askew. To a Christian this sounds like you are asking, *How can I trust in a Person in whom I cannot trust, i.e., Jesus?* What do you find in him untrustworthy? This does not mean a blind leap into a faith devoid of fact. It means a trust based on knowledge of his character and ability.

This is the message of the New Testament and nothing about it is illogical. I hope this clears some of the air. My wife and I will pray for you.

Roger

Note: In subsequent correspondence with this young man, it came out that

he was struggling with homosexuality. As usual with skeptics, hidden sin was his problem, not intellectual considerations.

His final letter expressed, sadly, his decision to pursue his own autonomy on the grounds the New Testament does not allow his particular sin.

Chapter 9: *Who created God?*

Roger,

I have a good friend who is not a believer and likes to dabble in philosophy. He is very smart and sometimes asks me questions I can't answer. One of them was, "What is the origin of God?" You said once that you discussed this with someone else. What was your explanation?

Joshua

<><><>

Dear Joshua,

The question confuses the difference between self-created and self-existent. The first is irrational and the second is not.

To suggest that something could create itself violates logic. A thing would have to exist before it existed in order to create itself. That is a nonsense statement. It contradicts its own premise.

No known law of logic is violated to say that something could exist from all eternity as an uncreated reality. That is not self-creation. In fact, there exists a line of logic that requires it.

That line of logic is called, *the law of causality*. In laymen's terms, it is referred to as *cause and effect*. This law says that every effect must have a cause by very definition of the word *effect*.

Further, the cause must be equal to or greater than the effect. If you wish to throw a stone, the force of your arm must be greater than the weight of the

stone.

The assumption of sufficient cause is basic to all reality and every aspect of our existence. If we call into question its absolute validity, then reason, knowledge, science and anything rational become impossible.

This, by the way, is not the same as saying ever *thing* must have a cause; only that every *effect* must have a cause. Or, every *event* must have a cause. This again is not the same as saying every *thing* must have a cause.

Another way to describe the *Argument of First Cause* is to say that for anything to be in motion or to change, something must have initiated the change. At some point, the cause of all change and motion must be something that has existed from eternity and therefore is itself unchangeable. The buck has to stop somewhere or nothing could get started.

Moreover, if there were ever a *time* when nothing existed, not even God, then nothing could exist now. Something must exist from all eternity as the basis of everything else, their motions and the changes in them and is therefore an uncaused entity.

This is what theologians mean when they say God is a *necessary being*. They mean he cannot NOT exist. Without a first cause, there can be no secondary causes. If this line of logic is invalid, then is so all knowledge.

Since the First Cause must be equal to or superior to its most obvious effect, the universe, it follows it must have certain attributes. First, it must be eternal, as shown above.

Second, it must be infinitely powerful because the energy for creation of the universe has no other source but itself.

Third, it must be omnipresent, for we live in a universe billions of light years in diameter.

It must be infinite in all respects or else its energy would be eventually depleted. From this alone we deduce the three incommunicable attributes, Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent.

This conclusion also leads to the view that the First Cause must have a quality and kind of existence infinitely different from any created thing. We call that *transcendence*. If this is not God, then what else could it be?

I hope this helps your friend.

Roger

Chapter 10: How do I *deal with an incompetent leader*?

Dear Mr. Smalling,

I work with a Christian organization where my supervisor gives me directives, forgets he said them and blames me for the result. He once told me I was a leader in training and recently asked, who told me I was a leader? I do not care if I am a leader or not. I no longer trust him and need to know how to deal with him.

I have always felt it is God who appoints leaders over me, so if I oppose my supervisor, I will go against God. I know I am supposed to share in the sufferings of Christ and do not want to grieve the Holy Spirit. I just need to know how to submit to authority over me that seems incompetent.

Rachel

<><><>

Dear Rachel,

Been there.

Parts of my book *Christian Leadership* were inspired by the stress of *having to work* under incompetent leaders. The only stress I can imagine worse, is a terminal illness.

I said *having to work* because that was my assumption. Eventually I realized I did not *have to* do any such thing. I had *chosen to* because I thought it

was my Christian duty to submit to incompetent leadership. I see no command in the New Testament telling Christians to submit to such leadership if it generates stress and unhappiness in our walk with Christ.

Someone once counseled me, "Put the stress back on those who cause it. If you cannot find ways to do that, then leave."

Fortunately, I had ways to put the stress back because our denomination has a system of church courts. I was able to use the threat of courts, along with documentation, to get results. Apologies followed. Stress relieved.

In another circumstance, a friend advised me, "Roger, you need to start praying that God will lead you to men of integrity with whom to work." That was a divine wind to my spirit. I knew God was indicating, "You do not have to work with men lacking integrity."

That's how I ended up in another organization. We treat each other with the courtesy and respect due our dignity as images of God and as fellow ministers. A genuine oasis.

In short, understand your rights in Christ. No one has a moral right to disregard your God-given dignity or abuse you. Correction for mistakes is another matter.

Your rights

1. To be addressed with the respect and courtesy due any human being.
2. To be happy. Christ purchased that for you. Do not let anyone steal it.
3. To be free of unsubstantiated accusations or blame shifting.
4. You have a right to a mediator and to present your problems to your spiritual authority, such as your husband and the leadership of your church. This is not gossip. This is accountability, both for you and the organization. You have no obligation to suffer in silence.

Rights your leader does not have:

1. He has no right to treat you with disdain.
2. He has no right to shift blame for his mistakes.
3. He has no right to claim spiritual authority over you or to be your spiritual adviser. That is a function of your husband first, then your church leaders. Your supervisor has administrative rights only. The organizational status as a Christian organization is irrelevant.

Some tips:

Clarify to your leader that you need directives in writing to avoid misunderstandings. Keep a paper trail as a record of incidents.

If the time comes you must defend yourself against him before the higher ups, you will have a portfolio of facts. You will not need to accuse him before his superiors. The papers will show the truth and the superiors will draw their own conclusions about his competency.

You said, *I have never let anyone know that he does this.* Why not? You have the right to a personal advisory group to counsel you about this problem. That is not gossip. Your husband, and maybe a couple of mature believers could agree to be your personal advisory committee to help you.

If you find yourself accused, just say, *I'll get back to you when I discuss it with my personal accountability group in my church.*

In short, I question some of your assumptions.

Your analogy about Christ and his sufferings is erroneous. Whose sins are

you dying for? Jesus suffered persecution for the sake of the truth. You are not suffering persecution. You are suffering the incompetence of a leader in an institution that happens to be Christian. Its status as Christian does not excuse incompetence nor grant the leader exemption from accountability.

You said you do not want to grieve the Holy Spirit. It is possible the Holy Spirit is already grieved for reasons you may not expect. He may be grieved because you are allowing the image of God to be abused. That image is you.

Another questionable assumption was, *I just need to know how to submit to such a person.*

No you don't. You need to deal with the abuse. It is just as wrong for you to submit in silence to abuse from a Christian as it is for him to abuse you. Jesus said, *if your brother sins against you, rebuke him...*

One of the best supervisors under whom I have worked, said he was once in a dilemma of the same sort I went through. He said, *I realized I had three options: Change the other person, change myself or change my circumstances.* In his case, he realized the first two were impossible, so he left that work and became a department head with a better ministry than before.

It will take a good dose of moral courage, whatever you do. That may be what the Holy Spirit is teaching you.

I appreciate your commitment to the Lord's work. We will pray for you.

In Christ,

Roger

[Chapter 11](#): Should I allow a woman to preach in my church?

A Colombian believer starting a church wrote asking,

I would like your counsel on the role of women in the church.

One of our members is a graduate in psychology. She has offered to give talks in the church on psychology from a biblical perspective. We are asking ourselves if she ought to give conferences only to women or would it be appropriate to include the church as a whole. We believe should not preach nor have authority over men. But we have doubts about applications of this.

Sergio

.....

Dear Sergio,

Understanding the difference between a *law* and a *principle* is at the core of this question. Violating a law is a transgression. A principle is a general guide to ordinary practice. Acting contrary to a principle is not necessarily a transgression exceptions may exist.

A key question: Will this woman be performing a function that is the domain of an ordained minister? In our denominations, we ordain men only.

As our denomination understands it, certain functions are the prerogative of ordained ministers only:

- The proclamation of the Word of God to the congregation in worship.
- The administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

These areas denote spiritual authority for leadership over God's people through preaching and teaching.

Both Old Testament priests and New Testament ministers possess these roles as a result of their calling. In theology, it is termed the *priestly functions*. These normally take place in formal public worship.

Ask yourself: Is the meeting called at a time and place where the congregation is normally gathered for public worship? Is the intent of the meeting to expound the Word of God to the congregation?

Based on the information you gave me, the purpose of the meeting is not public worship. The topic is psychology, not the Bible. It is a lecture, not a sermon. Her conference has nothing to do with the *priestly functions*, so I see no violation of biblical principles.

As a church leader, it is your responsibility to see that all members have ample opportunity to express their gifts. You acknowledge this or you would not be asking the question. Women may possess any spiritual gift, including teaching. She may not, however, duplicate or replace the functions of an ordained minister in administering the Word of God and the ordinances to the congregation.

Some churches have sinned against women by not allowing them ample expression of their gifts. This is an error at least as serious as permitting her to preach the Sunday morning sermon, according to our denominational standards. If I had to make a choice, I would rather a woman inadvertently trespass biblical limitations than deprive her of her gifts. Practicing a privilege we do not merit seems more consistent with grace than taking away a blessing that is ours.

Therefore, if you must risk a mistake, err on the side of liberty rather than law. The chances of pleasing God are better.

Our churches avoid the question by having a woman use a lectern in another location than the pulpit. This is not because the pulpit is sacred. No piece of furniture is sacred in this dispensation. However, in the minds of some, the pulpit represents the place of spiritual authority and leadership through the preaching of the Word. To avoid offending, the lectern is an option.

Other ways to avoid confusion is to have an elder preside over the meetings. You can announce the meetings as, *A Lecture on Christian Psychology by Dr. Sanchez, with Elder Jones presiding*. This makes it clear you distinguish the role of the minister from a lady sharing her gifts and knowledge.

Beware of creating more rules than necessary. It would be ludicrous to start a church dedicated to God's grace and then bind it by unnecessary restrictions. The thing that laws produce most is more law. Paul says it best...

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Gal. 5:1 (ESV)

In His bonds of freedom,

Roger Smalling

Chapter 12: *Should I get re-baptized?*

Dear Dr. Smalling,

I have a question about baptism. I was baptized in a church that believes in the Trinity baptizes in the name of Jesus alone, as representing the Trinity. Teachers in the reformed church I now attend say I should be re-baptized because my baptism was not valid since the names of the other two members of the Trinity were not invoked.

What should I do?

Robert

.....

Dear Robert,

Teachers often overlook a key aspect of baptism, *the answer of a good conscience before God. 1Peter 3:21.*

If you had been denying the Trinity, then your baptism would have been an act of rebellion, not a step of obedience.

Were you attempting to obey God and honor him as best you knew? If yes, then I see no problem.

I understand the position taken by the church that baptized you. They invoke the name of Jesus as representing the Trinity. I consider that inappropriate but not sinful and would not rebaptism a person from that

church.

Sometimes reformed teachers forget the roots from which they sprang. The whole movement is about grace versus law. I fail to see how one inappropriate aspect of baptism nullifies the value of a believer's conscience.

Disregarding the conscience this way places more emphasis on the mode of baptism than the meaning. Is this what Calvin and Luther intended? Not on your life.

I once observed a minister immersing converts in dirty water. Even though water represents the Holy Spirit, he would rather baptize in dirty water than sprinkle with clean, to comply with his doctrine of immersion. This disgusted me. Yet I would not re-baptize any of those people because I have more respect for their consciences than for my own estimation of the appropriateness of the procedure.

Do your reformed teachers suppose God will do something bad to you if you do not get re-baptized? Has he been waiting all this time to punish you because you were baptized by somebody with a messy theology? If they assume such, communicate my suggestion that they re-study the meaning of grace.

In His bonds,

Roger

Chapter 13: *Should I marry my jealous fiancé?*

Dear Roger and Dianne,

You have met my fiancé John and seem to like him. You may not know that John is a very jealous man and sometimes angry. He frequently demands to know what I do in my free time and whom I am with. How can I change this about him and am I making a mistake to marry him?

Jenny

<><><>

Dear Jenny,

Let us describe the kind of man no woman in her right mind should marry. You should evaluate whether John fits any of these categories.

Extreme and persistent jealousy is a symptom of a serious emotional disorder. The cause is in the person, not in his or her relationships.

Young relationships typically experience occasional emotional turmoil. What you have described sounds outside normal limits.

John may be a personality type we call a *controller*. These have a pathological need to control everything and everyone within their domain of relationships.

Controllers tend to perceive relationships in terms of dominance rather than partnerships. Controlling men view their women and children as property. They feel they own them.

Men become controllers for a variety of reasons, often in relating to women. This may manifest as pathological jealousy.

Such men can be dangerous.

With controllers, anger is a common manipulation device. Never give in to intimidation.

Now for a reality check:

Controllers are unable to change

Their perceptions of reality make it nearly impossible to change. Whoever they cannot control, represents a threat and therefore an enemy. This may include loved ones.

To them, it *feels* right, so they assume it must actually be correct to do so. They perceive those who question their actions as committing injustices against them. Others are the problem, not they.

Controllers are quick to recognize their own rights and slow to acknowledge the rights of others. They are sensitive to their own dignity and insensitive to that of others.

A TV program we saw was about a parole board and the prisoners that appear before them. Sometimes a controller type who has abused others will appear, asking for parole. Watching them try to manipulate the parole board

is fascinating. They do not even realize they are attempting it. After years in prison, some are still unable to see themselves as they are.

A psychologist told me that in some benign cases, a controller may change but she has never seen a severe case do so.

Love will not help them

Women naturally are attracted to strong men. This explains why jealous or controlling men manage to get married. They marry women who lack discernment.

Women often imagine their love has power to change a man. This is a myth. A woman's discernment will improve the moment she realizes her love is not as powerful a force as she thought.

An ancient adage claims that a man marries a woman under the delusion she will not change; a woman marries a man under the delusion she can change him. There is some truth in that.

Attempting to please a controller makes him worse

Appeasement may bring a brief peace but it usually backfires in a demand for greater control. Placating a controller is like trying to quench a fire with gasoline.

Partnership with a controlling and pathologically jealous type is impossible. Their sense of ownership over those they control makes partnerships impossible. Equality in a relationship between two people is unlikely, if one of them is a slave.

Such a man will eventually rob the woman of her personhood if she lets him. It is like a descending spiral which gets tighter and tighter as he gains more control. Eventually, if the process is not halted, he will manipulate not only her actions but also her very thoughts. She will cease to have a mind of her own and therefore cease to be a person.

This is why some women remain married to abusive or violent men. They have lost too much personhood to be able to resist.

To women who deal with jealous men, we give the counsel below. How true this is of John is up to you to evaluate.

Do not rationalize yourself to him in matters that are none of his business. You are still an unmarried adult and not accountable to him.

Explanations are never satisfactory because the problem is in him, not in the circumstances. Do not let a jealous person treat you like a suspect in a crime. You are responsible to yourself and God.

By refusing to justify all your actions, you force him into a choice: To trust you as a responsible person or not. This puts the stress back where it belongs, squarely on him.

The problem is his, not yours

Nothing you do or say is the cause of the problem. The cause is inside him. Do not let him make you the owner of his problem. Do not waste a moment considering what you may have done wrong.

A study of the biblical relationship in marriage from Ephesians Five reveals some interesting points. A godly husband, in his relationship with his wife, will:

- Augment her personhood, not diminish it.
- Encourage her in the development of her talents and personality, not diminish these.
- Make her less dependent rather than more dependent. Any submission she gives will be voluntary, and therefore a more valuable contribution to both the relationship and to mutual goals.
- Allow her the right to her own mind, not drive her out of her mind.

- Help her carry her personal problems rather than make her the recipient of his.

In short, we are judging no one nor taking sides, just offering general guidelines.

To women contemplating marriage, we recommend they watch for certain danger signals in a man. They should not marry a man who is:

- Given to extreme and irrational jealousy
- A controller
- Given to rage
- With any history of addictions

For a woman who knowingly marries a man with any of these problems, there exists a special technical term in psychology, which in Greek is called *moronos*, in Latin *insipiens*, in French *fou* and in English *fool*. We hope you are not offended at our sarcasm.

To those who are single, the apostle Paul says, *God has called us to peace*. It is up to you to decide if that is where this relationship is leading.

We pray this helps. Your relationship with us is valuable enough to take the time for this letter.

In his bonds,

Roger and Dianne

Chapter 14: *Is it all right for Christians to practice Yoga?*

Dear Roger,

I know some Christians involved in Yoga. Is this okay?

Brianna

<><><>

Dear Brianna,

Probably not.

Though I know next to nothing about Yoga, I am aware it was originally intended as a technique to facilitate Transcendental Meditation (TM). Westerners use it as an exercise to relieve stress and attain a peaceful state of mind.

A friend who is a former practitioner of TM, explained that the idea is to empty the mind in order to *transcend* the present reality and receive into oneself the mystical forces of the universe. Doing this corrects the unbalanced forces caused by life's struggles.

She stressed that during the TM sessions, something indeed was happening beyond emptying the mind. Something was coming in. That was the part that alarmed her.

To endorse the practice of Yoga by Christians, I would need these questions answered:

- Why would a Christian want to indulge in a practice central to Hinduism, the most idolatrous and demonic religion known to man?

...be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing. 2Cor.6:17 (ESV)

- Why would a Christian want to empty his or her mind when the word of God commands us to fill it with thoughts of God?

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Is. 26:3

The teaching of scripture about the use of the believer's mind is the exact opposite of TM. In Christianity, we obtain peace by doing a conscious activity, prayer.

...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Phil.4:6-7

- Why would a Christian want to think of nothing when the word of God gives us specific things to think about?

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Phil.3:8

- Why would a Christian want to practice something fundamentally contrary to a biblical worldview?

In mysticism, reality is divided into separate spheres, like the two stories of a building. On the bottom floor is the tangible world of matter, logic and fact. While this bottom level is solid, it contains no spirituality, meaning or moral values.

The upper story is ethereal and non-rational where a sense of meaning and

moral values can be found, if one can attain to that level. The only thing to discuss is the best technique for reaching the upper story.

If this worldview were correct, the most obvious thing one must do is find a way to escape the lower story. This means bypassing logic, fact, reason and the entire material reality. Yoga and TM come in as a technique to accomplish that.

We call this view of reality, *mysticism*. Although some Christians throughout history have held to this worldview, it is totally pagan and anti-biblical.

In the Bible, both domains are inseparably mixed. There is no upper story. This is illustrated in the incarnation of Jesus. We know he is both God and man at the same time. Where does the one leave off and the other start?

Numerous Old Testament stories show God intermingled with human affairs in such a way that without this mixture, we would have no stories.

If a Christian finds the biblical worldview inadequate for his or her needs, then the problem is in the Christian, not in the biblical injunctions on how to obtain peace. Something is wrong in his or her relationship with God the Father.

Why would I want to indulge in an exercise with dubious origins when a good trot and a nap will do?

Personally, I like to examine the origins of ideas and practices. If I see one crawling out of a dark pit, I feel no need to descend into the pit to get the details.

A suggestion for Christians who practice Yoga:

Let me put it delicately so there will be no confusion. The reason why a Christian may feel the need of Yoga or TM for relaxation and peace, could be unconfessed sin. If he or she wants to practice a Yoga position, let me suggest a good posture that beats anything Yoga has to offer:

One: Place the knees firmly on the floor.

Two: Fold the hands on the lap.

Three: Bend the head down toward the knees.

Four: Repeat this mantra several times, *Oh, God, please show me where I have blown it.*

It will not be long before a spiritual experience occurs, though he or she might not like it. The Holy Spirit may point out something in their conscience they were suppressing because they did not want to face it.

I hope this helps,

Roger

Chapter 15: Prosperity victims

*I just wanted to say "thank you" for being an instrument of God in writing the book: **THE PROSPERITY MOVEMENT**. We have friends in the movement and would like some clues as to how to help them when they eventually they crash into the hard wall of reality and get their faith damaged, as has happened with others.*

Thanks,

Judy

<><><>

Dear Judy,

To help your friends, stick to the doctrine of God. Brush aside comments about healing, prosperity or quality of faith. They have been taught that we lack faith for these things. They have not been prepared to hear they are breaking the First and Second commandments by serving a god invented out of the imaginations of their teachers. Their god is not sovereign.

Remind them that the first commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before me." Worshiping a mental concept of God that is false is no different than making an image and bowing down to it.

The degree of aggressiveness with which we express this point depends on the person and our own temperament. With sensitive people, we can say, "I have no quarrel at all with Christians prospering or getting healed. My concern is that you may be sinning by worshiping a distorted view of God. The god of this movement is not the Sovereign Lord of the Bible."

Stick to this point. They will invariably return to the topic of *faith* for healing and prosperity. Although their concept of faith is no more biblical than their god, it will not help at this juncture to point that out.

It helps to acknowledge that most Christians have seen divine provision or experienced healing in them, or seen it others. You have no problem with that. Express that you fear they may eventually incur chastisement from God for worshipping a seriously distorted view of him.

Once the concept of sovereignty penetrates their minds, the whole system collapses.

Give it a try.

Roger

Chapter 16: What is a weaker brother?

A Bible study leader in Bolivia wrote,

In our study group, we had a lively discussion about what is a weaker believer according to Romans 14, along with how to live out our freedom in Christ. Can you elaborate on this?

—Nicolas

<><><><>

Dear Nicolas,

Based on the three examples Paul gives, a weak believer is one who applies to himself ethical norms not commanded by God and assumes doing so will make him more acceptable. The term for such people is *legalist*.

Since Paul's examples are unambiguous, the discussion in your group must have touched on some other point. I will venture a guess. In discussions about Christian liberties, I notice the word offend often takes the spotlight. What does it mean to offend a weaker brother?

It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.V.21 (NKJV)

This involves definitions. The term *offend* normally means to cause another to feel disgusted. If this were Paul's intent in Romans 14, it would compel us to refrain from whatever another believer finds objectionable.

Fortunately for our Christian freedom, that is not the meaning in the original Greek. The word for offend is *skandalizo* and denotes, to entice another to sin. That is vastly different from provoking repugnance.

The word offend as used by Paul, signifies we should refrain from enticing another to violate his or her conscience. If a Christian believes wine is sin,

do not offer him any. If he thinks refraining from meat makes him more pleasing to God, serve him vegetables. If he supposes going to the park after church and kicking a football violates the Lord's day, do not invite him.

On the other hand, neither should he impose his criteria on others about wine or playing a game on the Lord's day.

Paul makes this point with,

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, V.13

Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; V.16 (ESV)

I once performed a slight-of-hand trick with a coin to amuse some children. A Christian lady who saw it was angry and offended. She alleged it was evil because she associated it with *magic* and rebuked me. My argument that a trick with a coin can hardly be associated with occult practices, left her unconvinced. So I made it clear I would not do it in her presence again.

That was not good enough for her. She tried to compel me to agree never to do it again. That was where I drew the line. Her personal offense gave her no right to impose that on me.

If I had pressured her to perform that trick, I would have been enticing her to sin because she believed it was wrong. If I had yielded to her pressure, I would have sinned by allowing another to supersede Christ as Lord of my conscience.

A similar incident occurred in Guatemala where my wife and I were studying Spanish. We were living on a missionary compound with other students. The director was an avid sportsman and I did some hunting with him.

One day, at a meal table, I mentioned the good time we had the previous Saturday. One of the girls was offended. She somehow evolved the notion that hunting was ungodly. How she managed to develop such a notion is a mystery to me since no law of God forbids it.

The director suggested I refrain from talking about hunting at the table. That was fine with me. However, she wanted us to stop hunting altogether. That is where we drew the line. She had no right to impose that.

If we had tried to put a shotgun in her hand and convinced her to shoot a wild turkey, I would have been enticing her to sin by violating her weak conscience. On the other hand, neither did I let her take my shotgun from me. This is what Paul meant by *scandalize, offend*.

Another point of confusion about Christian liberties revolves around the question, is it possible for a Christian to be strong in one way and weak in another? Does a weak conscience in one domain make a believer weak overall?

Occasionally I hear new converts labeled as weak. That may not be scripturally sound. I find no clear indication in scripture that the apostles necessarily perceived new believers as weak. New converts often appear more committed than older ones. So I am reluctant to make chronology a reference point in the definition of weak.

That alone may answer your question for clarification. If not, it might be worthwhile to review Paul's examples. From these, we infer the definition of weaker believer.

Vegetarians

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. V.2

Vegetarianism is Paul's first example. Some are vegetarians for dietary or health reasons. Others imagine abstaining from meat makes them morally

superior. These are vegetarians of conscience. Paul reveals they are mistaken and labels them *weak*.

For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. V.2

Paul clarified to Timothy that Old Testament dietary restrictions no longer apply. We are free to eat what we wish, giving thanks to God.

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. 1Tim.4:3

Strict Sabbatarians

These believe it is inherently wrong to do any activity on the Sabbath. Some Christians believe Jesus changed the Sabbath day from Saturday to Sunday. They feel the general rules of Old Testament Sabbath observance apply to Christians.

Another branch regards the Sabbath as the godly principle of resting in Christ from one's own righteousness, not a day at all, as opposed to pursuing righteousness by the law.

The arguments for these positions are secondary to the theme Paul expresses in Romans 14. A lot depends on the attitude of the person. He indicates observance of days is intimately linked to the conscience.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. Rom. 14:5

Alcoholic beverages

Some regard alcoholic beverages as inherently sinful. Paul clarifies this is incorrect.

It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. V.21

Apparently the question of wine drinking was also a topic. Paul implies it is

no more sinful to drink wine than to eat a beefsteak. Those who feel they would be sinning by drinking any amount of wine with their meal, identify themselves as weaker brothers.

Paul ends his discourse by warning us not to flaunt our freedom around others. Keep it to ourselves. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. V.22

Living out our freedom

The first way we live out our Christian freedom is with an accurate focus. A Christian intent on righteousness, peace and joy is less likely to be concerned about food, drink or Sabbaths.

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Rom. 14:17

In a group of Christians at a Bible study, just before the meeting began, two men were discussing their favorite wines. They did this with apparent disregard for others attending. Fortunately, no weaker believers overheard.

These gentlemen were flaunting their freedom unwisely. Enjoying our freedom is legitimate. Risking the welfare of a weaker brother is not.

A second guideline therefore is, do not flaunt your freedom.

The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. v.22

Think through ethical questions. Some Christians may be mentally lazy and adopt whatever norms their evangelical culture dictates on minor issue. Whatever the question we face regarding matters of conscience, the answer is always one of two things: Either it is wrong or it is right. If we find ourselves in a gray area, unsure of which, that is when we are danger of sinning. Paul said in V.23, *But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith.*

The third guideline for freedom in minor issues is, think it through.

Though we avoid wounding the consciences of weaker believers, neither do we grant them a right to impose their norms on us.

Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. Rom. 14:22

A fourth guideline for freedom of conscience is not allowing others to force unbiblical norms on us.

So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. Rom. 14:16

A tension exists between two principles: Avoid wounding the weak conscience of others versus refusing to allow weaker believers to impose their criteria on us. That alone is a good reason to keep questions of conscience to ourselves.

Conclusion

If a person eats meat or drinks wine or plays games with his kids on the Lord's day, thinking it is sinful, then it becomes sin for him. In minor issues not commanded by God, our personal conscience rules.

We are commanded by God to avoid enticing others to sin by tempting them to do something contrary to their consciences that we ourselves approve. Neither do we allow others to rob us of our freedom.

Believers who understand this are the stronger.

Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.
Rom. 14:18

Roger

Chapter 17: On Protestant-Catholic Ecumenism

Dear Roger,

In a ministry training seminar, the speaker declared we should associate with any Christian movement where the Holy Spirit seems to be moving and assist them. He included Catholicism in the groups mentioned as examples.

I felt uncomfortable because others have said catholic-protestant ecumenism is wrong. What do you think?

—Joe

<><><>

Dear Joe,

The speaker held to this premise:

A sincere verbal profession of faith in Jesus Christ is sufficient grounds for Christian fellowship and unity.

That sounds charitable. It is also dead wrong.

The ecumenist assumes a *necessary* condition is a *sufficient* condition. That's like saying an engine is necessary for a vehicle to move without considering whether it has wheels. Both are *essential*. Neither by itself is *sufficient*.

The New Testament requires three conditions for fellowship and cooperation in Christian work. The speaker's premise is correct as far as it goes. Fellowship with those who lack a profession of faith in Christ is impossible by definition.

The gospel

A person must profess the biblical gospel. Only one gospel exists, according to Gal.1:5-6, *...a different gospel—not that there is another one...*

Throughout Galatians, Paul clarifies that justification by faith alone in Christ alone is the gospel. Any variation is a non-gospel, an anti-gospel. Those who hold to any other gospel are *anathema*, cursed of God.

Paul is normally conciliatory and benevolent. He sounds totally fed up here. Why?

Paul had to confront determined people who insisted gentile converts observe the Law of Moses and be circumcised and as a condition of salvation. Those we call *judiaizers*. They held to a formula: Faith plus works equals salvation.

Here's the key question: Were the judiaizers professing Christians? Yes! They even had enough influence in the Jerusalem general assembly to cause a dispute over the question of circumcision.

Yet Paul would tolerate none of them.

...to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. Gal. 2:5

That alone explodes the ecumenist assumption that a profession of faith in Christ is sufficient grounds for unity. A profession of the biblical gospel is the second necessary grounds.

Lifestyle

I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 1Cor.5:9

A life free from scandalous sins that would dishonor the name of Christ, is the third necessary condition for fellowship and unity.

All three are necessary. None alone is sufficient. If any are absent in a church, organization or individuals professing to be Christian, then it is incumbent upon a believer to avoid association with such.

Catholicism and the gospel

How does this apply to Catholicism? The Roman Catholic Church holds to the same formula as the judiaizers: Faith plus works equals salvation. Catholicism simply adds a different set of works than did the judiaizers.

At the Anti-Reformation Council in 1545, Rome declared that anyone who teaches justification by faith alone and not also by works, is *anathema*.

No fundamental difference exists between Rome and the kind of gospel the judiaizers were teaching. Both are *anathema*.

Ecumenist mindset

The ecumenist holds unity as a supreme value. In the word of God, unity is strongly urged but never at the expense of truth. Nor is it higher than the three criteria mentioned above.

Division among Christians is an unthinkable evil in the mindset of the ecumenist. He is right. What he fails to grasp is that false gospels are infinitely worse.

Ecumenists frequently mention the virtues of love and tolerance among

believers as justification for his high esteem of unity. In the process, they tend to forfeit protection for God's sheep from wolves.

Paul never exhorted us to be vindictive, not even to professors of false gospels. Though we must *exhort, with complete patience and teaching*, (2Tim.4:2), we are not allowed to regard them as Christian brothers nor pursue spiritual unity with them until they repent.

The teacher mentioned in your question above, was wrong.

Roger

Chapter 18: How can a Christian combat apostasy?

A believer in Colombia asked, *How can a Christian combat apostasy? Can a genuine Christian apostatize?*

Dear José,

How do we combat apostasy? My answer may appear strange but it seems to me the biblical one: Don't combat it!

Instead of fighting those who have left Christianity, it is better to minister to the faithful, teaching them how to lead others to Christ.

For example, our seminaries teach how to refute the arguments of theological liberals. I do not know of a single theological liberal who has ever been persuaded and converted by such arguments. That is like arguing with the devil. It is a waste of time.

Apostasy, as I see it, involves the abandonment of the Christian faith. This definition does not include Christians who hold to seriously false doctrines. The preferred term for that is *heresy*. While apostasy may include heresy, not all heresy is apostasy.

Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, 12 in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. 2 Thessalonians 2:11,12

These verses show how God may give a person over to apostasy because they lack a love for truth. It may be God's will to leave such people in his hands.

When supposed "disciples" turned their back on Jesus because of some

difficult sayings, he did not pursue them for restoration.

When I encounter a truly apostate individual, one who previously professed the Christian faith but since abandoned it, my procedure is to make one attempt to persuade and warn him of impending judgment. With these, as well as blatant heretics, the apostle warns us to show no patience.

As for a person who stirs up division, [or heresy] after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, Titus 3:10

Can a genuine, born again Christian fall into apostasy?

No. Jesus will preserve him from that.

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

1 John 3:9

We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. 1 John 5:18

A central theme of 1 John is how to distinguish between true Christians and those who merely concur with a Christian worldview as a wholesome way of life. John gives us a clue,

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. 1 John 2:19

Nevertheless, the Westminster Confession says a genuine Christian may fall into a serious sin, but that will be temporary because God will restore him.

This complicates the question. If apostasy or serious sin in the life of a believer were a simple matter, First John would not exist. The apostle himself insinuates it may be difficult to discern the difference between a Christian temporarily in a state of sin, versus those who were never converted in the first place. Paul recommends,

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, 25 correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. 2 Timothy 2:24-26

The issues are complex but God will give you discernment in the context of your ministry.

Blessings,

Roger

Chapter 19: How can God be holy and decree evil should exist?

A Christian wrote and asked, *How can God limit sin and control the circumstances of its manifestation, without being guilty of being the cause of sin?*

—David

He used the example of Absalom who committed incest with the wives of David and showed it was God himself who raised up Absalom against David as judgment. Yet Absalom was considered guilty, even though his sins were decreed by God. How can God be exempt from the charge of being the cause of evil?

Dear David,

Your question brings up an entire branch of theology called *theodicy* which deals with the goodness of God and the presence of evil. This is a difficult aspect of theology and philosophy because it involves free will, justice and God's sovereignty. To what decree is the will free? Does a divine decree involve application of force? Is the presence of evil a good thing?

Partial answers exist but they are partial only and may not satisfy inquisitive minds such as yours. After considering some of the answers, you will come to a point where you must decide if you will be satisfied with partial answers.

Remember, we are dealing with an infinite mind which sees the end from the beginning and has not revealed everything about his eternal purposes. God is gracious to give us partial answers because the mere existence of the

partial suggests that final answers must exist somewhere or at some time, though we are not yet equipped to see them. At some point we must decide to trust him or not.

Let's take a look at the supreme example of the interplay between good and evil and the outcome of it — the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ as described in the apostle's prayer in Acts 4:27,28 —

...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

As we look at the entire prayer starting from verse 24, we note these particulars:

- In the beginning of the prayer, the apostles addressed God as *sovereign Lord*. No question existed in their minds as to God's control over the circumstances.
- They expressed God's authority over his creation.
- They quoted from Psalm 2, which is a declaration of God's ultimate triumph over the forces of evil and the establishment of justice in the earth.

None of that is particularly controversial. Then comes one of the most remarkable statements in the study of theodicy:

The apostles state that the enemies of Christ gathered together to do what God predestined them to do, yet those people acted freely. Everything was done by his plan.

Notice also the apostles had no philosophical problems with any of this. Why not?

Here is where partial answers come in.

They saw clearly the results of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus — the salvation of all believers throughout all the ages. They saw an infinitely greater good came out of the evil than the significance of the evil itself at the time. It was so great a good that it makes the evil recede into insignificance.

We can deduce from the tone of the apostles that they saw no reason why an omniscient holy mind could not use evil as a tool to produce grace, glory and holiness for his people. It cannot be intrinsically wrong to decree that evil people should be allowed to do as they please, if the final outcome is good.

What an incredible paradox! What military general would deliberately arrange his own defeat as the main tool for victory? No human thinks like this, which shows that the entire plan was not human.

Because the crucifixion is in the past, we observe this pattern accurately. Hindsight is accurate. But what about the present? Or the future? Is it possible that God is now working out the same kind of strategic pattern, of which the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus was the supreme example?

If we can perceive the righteousness of God in the past, in the way he used evil to produce a greater good, then can we trust him with the future?

Is such a divine strategy exceptional? Let's look at some examples:

Was the apostasy of Israel in the Old Testament a good thing or a bad thing? Obviously apostasy is a bad thing and Israel got what it had coming. However, is it a bad thing that we have the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel and the Minor Prophets, with all their exhortations, pleas for holiness and predictions of a coming messiah with the glories to follow? Would we be pleased that those books be removed because apostasy is a bad thing?

And what about the fall of Adam? Was Adam's disobedience a good thing? Certainly not. It was not only wrong but the consequence brought four things on his descendants: Sin, death, judgment and condemnation. (Romans 5:12-19) That's a heavy load to carry.

Of course there are the four things provided by the Second Adam: Wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption. (1Corinthians 1:30) Those four things may sound a bit ambiguous for the moment but we will have all eternity to unpack each one and enjoy their contents.

The free will dilemma

We have looked at God's will and long-term strategy. Now let's look at the will of the people involved.

Did God oblige Pontius Pilate, Herod and the Jews to do anything they did not want to do? Clearly not. Nothing indicates they were acting under compulsion. They acted freely.

Could they have done otherwise with better knowledge? Yes. Paul said so. 1Corinthians 2:7,8 says,

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

This is a remarkable statement! If the rulers mentioned in this verse had known the hidden wisdom of God, they would not have crucified Christ. Why did God hide it from them? Because it is wisdom intended for our glory, not theirs.

Your original question was expressed using the incident with Absalom. God decreed judgment on David and that the application of it would be by allowing Absalom to commit incest with David's wives. A decree is the not same as the act that fulfills the degree. Saying that a thing must be done is not the same as doing it yourself.

That may not answer our questions as we may like. God's boldness in doing this sort of thing generates emotions along with questions. It could be doubts with fears; or trust with awe. The choice is ours.

As we look back on the events surrounding Jesus, we see the divine strategy is not fundamentally different than that involving judgment on David. Hindsight is easy. Foresight is hard. During the three years the apostles were with Jesus, they understood little about God's plan. The little they grasped was distorted. Even after the resurrection, during the days before his ascension, they supposed Jesus might be a military leader and restore Israel. (Acts 1:6)

This brings up the question: Was the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus the best possible display of God's holiness for the purpose of bringing about salvation? Yes! In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, asking the Father to remove this *cup* of suffering from him, *if it is possible*. (Matthew 26:39)

Apparently nothing else was possible. Why? Because God is infinitely holy. Therefore, whatever he does must reflect that attribute in the greatest possible way.

At this point in time, we are in the same posture as the disciples before the crucifixion. We don't see the whole picture yet. In fact, we may not be seeing any more of our own picture now than the disciples did in their time.

We can, however, reason it through. The first coming of Christ involved a divine strategy that displayed the holiness of God against the backdrop of human depravity in a manner that could not happen otherwise.

At the second coming of Christ, will we find ourselves in the same posture as the disciples were when they prayed that prayer in Acts Chapter 4? Will we look back and see that of all the ways God could have displayed his holiness, this current world was the greatest of all possibilities?

I warned you at the beginning that the answers to your questions would only be partial. This causes us to face a moral choice. Either be satisfied with the partial and therefore trust God with the rest, or demand full answers before we trust him.

We have been given enough clues to see that God's decree to permit evil actions throughout history is holy because we see the outcome. Therefore our faith in him is not blind. Shortsighted indeed, but not blind.

It appears that for time being, we must be satisfied with that.

Yours in His bonds,

Roger

Smalling's books and essays are available at www.smallings.com

¹ Westminster Confession, 1648, Chapter 1. This confession is the doctrinal standard of Presbyterian churches and significant portions used by Baptist denominations. It is viewed by theologians as an accurate portrayal of historic protestant theology.