The Resurrection and Post-Resurrection Narratives

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Chapter 1: Prelude to Resurrection and a Harmony of the Four Accounts

The resurrection of Jesus is a fundamental truth of the gospel and a cardinal doctrine of biblical Christianity. All the gospels end their historical narratives with the climactic resurrection and exaltation of Christ (Mt. 28; Mk. 16; Lk. 24; Jn. 20; 21). In the gospel preaching recorded in the book of Acts, the resurrection and exaltation of the Savior is emphasized. The resurrection and Lordship of the Messiah forms the climax of Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Ac. 2:29-36); his preaching on Solomon’s porch (Ac. 3:15, 26); his speech to the Sanhedrin (Ac. 4:8-12); and, his and the apostles’ answer to the council (Ac. 5:31-32). The evangelist Stephen ends his defense before the Sanhedrin with the exaltation of Jesus (Ac. 7:55-56). In the first sermon preached to the Gentiles, Peter said, “And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead” (Ac. 10:39-41).

When Paul preached in Antioch after discussing the condemnation, crucifixion and burial of Christ (Ac. 13:27-29), he focused on the resurrection (Ac. 13:30-37) before his appeal to believe in the Messiah (Ac. 13:38-41). Luke gives a summation of Paul’s preaching of the gospel saying, “Then Paul, as was his custom went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and saying ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ’” (Ac. 17:3; see 17:30-32).

In the epistles the resurrection is also presented as a crucial aspect of the gospel. Paul says in Romans 10:9 that we must confess with our mouth and believe in our heart that God raised Jesus from the dead if we are to be saved. The epistles teach that our regeneration is rooted in the Redeemer’s resurrection (Eph. 2:4-6; Col. 2:13; 1 Cor. 15:45); that He “was raised because of our justification” (Rom. 4:24-25); that our sanctification and the application of redemption to us is dependent on our Lord’s resurrection (Phil. 3:10). In 1 Corinthians 15:14 the apostle even says that, if Jesus had not risen, then the preaching of the gospel is empty (i.e. void, vain, false, a waste of time, meaningless). In verse 17 of the same chapter he says, “If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.” “Everywhere in the N.T. the resurrection is proclaimed as the decisive turning point in the life of Jesus and in the history of the world’s redemption.”

Given all these considerations, our Lord’s resurrection must not be considered just an interesting epilogue to His suffering on the cross. The resurrection itself is an indispensable aspect of the redemption that Jesus had to complete. It is the exalted Savior that applies salvation to His people, that intercedes on their behalf and that judges the nations. Therefore, it will be of great value for us to study all the gospel narratives on this subject and apply what we learn to our lives.

Prelude to Resurrection

And there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre. Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, “After three days I will rise again.” Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch (Mt. 27:61-66).

And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid. And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him (Mk. 15:47; 16:1).

And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment (Lk. 23:55-56).

There are two important things to examine that form a link between the passion narratives and the record of the resurrection.

The first regards Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joses and the other women from Galilee who do two things that set up their role in the resurrection narrative. (1) They were present at or very close to the sepulcher when Jesus was buried. These women are very important because they were present at the crucifixion and burial of Christ and serve as eyewitnesses to these events. Because of their love and devotion to the Savior they insisted upon staying close to Him in life and in death. They knew exactly where the tomb was and how Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had lain the body in the sepulcher. These women had seen the linen in which the Mediator was wrapped and would be able to testify after the resurrection that the very same linen was found wrapped together in the empty tomb. To understand the importance of their role as discoverers of the empty sepulcher we must keep in mind that none of the apostles except John witnessed the crucifixion and there is no textual evidence that John stayed to watch the burial. (2) Consequently, not only was the discovery of the empty tomb dependent on their knowledge of the burial site, but it was their desire to render devotion to the body of our Lord by completing the anointing of the Redeemer’s body with prepared spices and perfumes, that led directly to the discovery of the empty tomb. Mark 16:1 informs us that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joses, and Salome purchased spices as soon as the Sabbath was over (around 6:00 pm Saturday) in order to anoint Jesus’ body. This preparation on Saturday evening made their departure right before sunrise on Sunday morning possible.

Although the preparation of spices demonstrates these women’s great love for the Savior, it also demonstrates their ignorance of or lack of faith in Christ’s coming resurrection. If they knew or believed that the Lord was going to rise from the dead early on the first day of the week, they could have saved their money and not wasted their time preparing the aromatic ointment.

The women’s obedience to the Sabbath is noted by Mark and Luke and is significant for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that the true followers of our Lord are godly. These women went about their preparations only after the Sabbath was over. Even in a task as important as anointing the Son of God these women would do no unnecessary labor on the Sabbath day. Luke
says they “rested the Sabbath day according to the commandment” (23:56). Second, their obedience to the Sabbath led to the discovery of the empty tomb instead of the sealed and guarded tomb. If they had visited the tomb on Saturday they would have been ordered to leave by the soldiers and may not have again attempted their task. But, by waiting until the Jewish Sabbath was over, they found that the guards had fled and the tomb was opened. They came to anoint the dead but instead found the author of life. Their weeping would be turned into joy.

The second thing which prepares us for the resurrection narrative is the setting of the Roman guards at the tomb. This pericope is only found in Matthew’s gospel. Apparently, Matthew believed it was significant because it so clearly exhibited the providence of God in proving the resurrection of Jesus.

Matthew’s account says that on the next day, the day after the day of preparation (which is the Jewish Sabbath), the chief priests and Pharisees came to see Pilate. Matthew makes the unusual coupling of “the chief priests and the Pharisees” (see 21:45) possibly to emphasize that although these two groups had very different views of the bodily resurrection (the chief priests were Sadducees and denied the resurrection, cf. Mt. 22:23; Mk. 12:18; Lk. 20:27; Ac. 23:8) they were united in their hatred and opposition to Christ. They likely approached Pilate early Saturday morning. Although it is possible that certain high priests and Pharisees acted on their own initiative, they probably were a delegation from the Sanhedrin. In either case, Pilate would have regarded this as an official delegation.

Interestingly, these religious leaders who had refused to enter the Praetorium on Friday when a Jewish crowd was present had no qualms about entering the Governor’s residence when the multitudes were not present. “We see how they played fast and loose with their own religious regulations. Men who had stooped to murder would certainly be capable of lesser transgressions.”

“It seems that the Pharisees, who were always insisting on strict Sabbath observance, had found an excuse for what they were doing this Saturday morning.”

The men put on an air of humility before Pilate and addressed him as “lord” or “sir” (kurie). They told Pilate of our Lord’s prophecy regarding the resurrection. “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will arise’” (Mt. 27:63). This statement raises a few important questions. How did the chief priests and Pharisees know about Jesus’ prediction? And why did the Jewish leaders understand and remember Christ’s promise when all the disciples failed to understand or regard anything our Lord said about this matter? All of this is somewhat remarkable. The unbelievers understand, while all the believers do not.

Regarding the disciples, the answer is simple. God hid the proper comprehension and understanding of the resurrection from them. The synoptic gospels record that on at least three separate occasions Jesus spoke privately to the disciples about His coming death and resurrection. The Savior explained what was going to happen in very clear, non-figurative language. Right after the pericope where Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Matthew says, “From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day” (16:21; Mk. 8:31; Lk. 9:22; see Mt. 17:22-23; Mk. 9:31; Lk. 9:45; Mt. 20:18-19; Mk. 10:33-34; Lk. 18:22-33). The first time the Savior discussed His coming death and resurrection, Peter rebuked Him and rejected what He said. The second time Christ spoke of His death and resurrection Luke says, “But they did not understand this saying, and it was hidden from them so that they did not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this saying” (9:45; cf. Mk.

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9:32). The third time the Redeemer told the apostles of His resurrection the evangelist writes, “But they understood none of these things: this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken” (Lk 18:24).

These passages tell us that it was not only the apostle’s own bad theology, presuppositions regarding the kingdom and worldly political/military expectations of the Messiah that prevented them from understanding our Lord’s teaching on His suffering, death and resurrection; but, also, God Himself did not want the disciples to understand these things until after they had already taken place. In fact after Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19), John adds the following comment: “Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the words which Jesus had said” (2:22). From this we should learn two things. First, the influence of early and repeated bad training in theology is exceedingly great. People who have held to false doctrines for a long period of time often act particularly deaf and blind when confronted with clear passages that contradict their theological system. Second, we are completely dependent upon God for spiritual illumination if we are to comprehend the Scriptures. The apostles were like undiscerning infants until God opened their eyes to the truth.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, who had only heard about the resurrection of Christ in obscure, veiled phraseology (e.g., Jn. 2:19; Mt. 12:40; 16:4) understood what Jesus was teaching. They even asked Pilate to post guards until the third day, just in case. We must remember that throughout our Lord’s ministry the scribes and Pharisees had sent men to watch the Savior very carefully and take note of anything that was unusual or could be used against Him. They had challenged Jesus to show them a sign and repeatedly had been told about the sign of Jonah. Unlike the disciples who were unwilling to contemplate the unpleasant implications of Christ’s statements, the scribes and Pharisees either came to proper conclusions or were aided by Judas Iscariot. Their request of Pilate indicates that they knew that the witnesses who came forward at Jesus’ trial who claimed that Christ was going to literally destroy the temple in Jerusalem were lying.

The understanding that the chief priests and Pharisees came to regarding the Savior’s teaching, of course, does not mean that they believed it. They most certainly did not. In fact their wickedness and spiritual blindness regarding the person and work of Christ is exhibited by their continuing accusation that Jesus is a deceiver or imposter. “This is the only place in the gospels where Jesus is called planos, ‘deceiver’ (cf. the cognate verb used in reference to Jesus in John 7:12, 47; cf. the same point but different language in Luke 23:14). Only men who are bewitched by Satan could make such an accusation after all the miracles, the raising of Lazarus, the three hours of darkness and the great earthquake that opened the tombs. God had already testified to the truth of the Savior’s person and work, but these men obstinately rejected the truth. What they did “was not to defy the clouds, but to spit in the face of God, so to speak, by ridiculing the brightness of the sun. Such examples show us that we ought, with pious and modest thoughtfulness, to direct our attention early to the glory of God when presented to our view, that our hardness of heart may not lead us to brutal and dreadful blindness.”

The Jewish leadership’s fear was not that the Nazarene would actually rise, but that the disciples would steal the body and then claim that He arose. Note their request, “Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and

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steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first” (Mt. 27:64). If the disciples were false teachers and were dishonest, as the Jewish leaders supposed, then their request made perfect sense. A Roman seal upon the tomb and a contingent of Roman soldiers would not have been overcome by our Lord’s small band of disciples. The request does, however, reveal a bit of paranoia on the part of the Jews, for Jesus’ disciples had fled for their lives and had exhibited only cowardice, fear and unbelief since Gethsemane (John excepted). However, it “is exactly because these leaders are themselves dishonest people (see 28:11-15) that they mistrust Christ’s disciples.”⁶ Their irrational paranoia is further revealed by the fact that the disciples would have absolutely nothing to gain by perpetrating a myth upon the people that Jesus arose from the dead. If the Savior did not rise, then their faith was in vain. Why would these men live lives of great sacrifice, hardship and persecution for something they knew was a gigantic fraud? If Christ did not rise then “we are of all men the most pitiable” (1 Cor. 15:19). While many people suffer and die for a delusion, for something that is false but is thought to be true; no one is willing to die for something that they know isn’t true. Perhaps, the Jewish leadership became unhinged a bit from the amazing miracles that attended the crucifixion and death of Christ. Perhaps, deep down that “which really they were afraid of, was, his resurrection; that which is most Christ’s honour and his people’s joy, is most the terror of his enemies.”⁷

What is ironic and providential regarding their request is that God used it to render a much greater historical proof of the resurrection than otherwise would have been. If the Roman guards had not been at the tomb, then the Jewish authorities’ lie about what happened to our Lord’s body (Mt. 28:11-15) would have been more plausible. But, how is anyone supposed to believe that a few cowardly disciples with only two small swords (see Lk. 22:38) could overpower trained, well-equipped Roman soldiers? As Calvin notes, “We see then how the Lord not only disappointeth the crafty, (Job v. 12), but employs even their own schemes as snares for holding them fast...let us observe that God, as if he had hired them for the purpose, employed their services for rendering the glory of Christ more illustrious; because no plausible ground for lying, in order to deny it, was left to them when they found the grave empty; not that they desisted from their wicked rage, but with all persons of correct and sober judgment it was a sufficient testimony that Christ was risen, since his body, which had been placed in a grave, and protected by guards who surrounded it on all sides, was not to be found.”⁸

Pilate granted the Jews their request in a rather curt, direct manner. “Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how’ (Mt. 27:65). The governor’s sense is “take a guard.” That is, “Here, you can have a detachment of my (Roman) auxiliary troops.” We know that Jewish police were not used because Matthew 28:12 uses the word *stratiotai* which usually refers to Roman soldiers (Matthew 27:65 uses a Latin loanword *koustodian*) and Matthew 28:14 says explicitly that the guards were answerable directly to Pilate. Further, it is unlikely that the Jewish authorities would have needed Pilate’s permission to deploy their own guards. The Jewish leaders were not taking any chances. They wanted the maximum security possible.

Under the supervision of the Jews, the Roman guards secured the tomb by “sealing the tomb and setting the guard” (Mt. 27:66). The sealing of the tomb did not involve closing the tomb with stone for Joseph and Nicodemus had already done that. Rather, it involved placing

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⁶ Ibid, 982.
⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Pub., no date), 5:436.
clay or wax on the door and side of the tomb connected by a rope. The wax or clay would be impressed with an official seal so that any tampering with the door could be easily detected. The seal stood as a warning to anyone that moving the stone and breaking the seal would involve grave consequences from the Roman authorities. The Jewish leaders had worked in league with the Roman authorities to put Jesus to death. They now worked in league with the same authorities to attempt to prevent the resurrection. Apostate religion and the heathen state combined their efforts to keep Jesus locked in a tomb; held fast in humiliation. But, “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall hold them in derision” (Ps. 2:4). “Here was all the power of earth and hell combined to keep Christ a prisoner, but all in vain, when his hour was come; death, and all those sons and heirs of death, could no longer hold him, no longer have dominion over him. To guard the sepulcher against the poor weak disciples, was folly because needless; but to think to guard it against the power of God was folly, because fruitless and to no purpose; and yet they thought they had dealt wisely.”

Christ’s Resurrection

In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre. And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said unto the women, “Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.” And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word. And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, “All hail.” And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him. Then said Jesus unto them, “Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall ye see him” (Mt. 28:1-10).

And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, “Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?” And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, “Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you.” And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid. Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not (Mk. 16:2-11).

Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord

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Jesus. And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, “Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, saying, ‘The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.’” And they remembered his words, And returned from the sepulchre, and told all these things unto the eleven, and to all the rest. It was Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them, which told these things unto the apostles. And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not. Then arose Peter, and ran unto the sepulchre; and stooping down, he beheld the linen clothes laid by themselves, and departed, wondering in himself at that which was come to pass (Lk. 24:1-12).

The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre. Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, “They have taken away the LORD out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.” Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again unto their own home. But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, and seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, “Woman, why weepest thou?” She saith unto them, “Because they have taken away my LORD, and I know not where they have laid him.” And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, “Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?” She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, “Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus saith unto her, “Mary.” She turned herself, and saith unto him, “Rabboni;” which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, ‘I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.’” Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the LORD, and that he had spoken these things unto her (Jn. 20:1-18).

All four gospel writers spend a good deal of time describing the discovery of Christ’s resurrection early on the first day of the week. This detail is to be expected since the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus forms the climax of the gospels. Interestingly, all four accounts are quite different. John’s record (as usual) is unique to himself throughout. “The differences between the gospels amount to no more than a demonstration that here we have the spontaneous evidence of witnesses, not the stereotyped repetition of an official story.”

The perceived “difficulties” are “owing to the great compression in the various narratives, due partly to the incomplete information possessed by the narrators—of whom only one was strictly an eyewitness, but chiefly to this, that to the different narrators the central point of interest lay in one of the other aspects of the circumstances connected with the Resurrection.”

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Modernists seize on the different way the stories are told as proof of the fallible nature of Scripture. The reality, however, is that the Spirit of God made good use of the evangelists to shed light on all the different aspects of these events to give us a more complete picture of the resurrection. Therefore, the best way to study the resurrection is to carefully combine all four narratives in order to reconstruct the whole story. Although it is not easy to harmonize all the accounts it can and has been done. Being inspired, infallible and inerrant, the accounts can be reconciled without any artificial twisting to the narratives of each gospel.

Before we examine these events, there are some general observations about these records that are noteworthy. First, there are no actual witnesses to the resurrection itself. The narratives describe and prove the resurrection in two different ways. There is the fact of the empty tomb. This fact is not left without interpretation, but is explained by an angel of God (Mt. 28:5-6; Mk. 16:6; Lk. 24:4-7). Also, there are the appearances of the risen Savior to His disciples. These appearances progress from Mary Magdalene, to the other women, to Peter, to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and to all the disciples. While Jesus’ followers were given the privilege of seeing the resurrected Messiah, unbelievers in that generation and all subsequent history are dependant on the eyewitness testimony of that first generation. This testimony has been infallibly recorded in Scripture for our benefit. Second, the emphasis of these narratives is not simply to prove the resurrection to an unbelieving world (although they do, indeed, do that); but, they also focus our attention on the impact of the resurrection on Christ’s “bewildered and exhilarated followers, on their fear and joy, doubt and assurance.”

A Harmony of the Gospel Resurrection Narratives

In order to prove that the four records of the resurrected Savior are not contradictory in any way, we will begin our study with a chronological synthesis of all four accounts. This will not only clear up any confusion regarding what occurred, but will also give us a coherent and more complete picture of these amazing events.

The story begins with a group of women leaving to go to the tomb on the first day of the week while it was still dark (Jn. 20:1). Matthew begins his narrative with “as it began to dawn” (28:1) which means the sun was just starting to arise. Mark and Luke say they came “very early in the morning” (Mk. 16:2; Lk. 24:1). The women involved were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary—the mother of James and other women (Jn. 20:1; Mt. 28:1; Lk. 24:10). These women came to see the sepulcher (Mt. 28:1) and anoint the body of Jesus (Lk. 24:1). On the way to the tomb the women had a discussion among themselves regarding who would roll away the stone from the sepulcher (Mt. 16:3). If Matthew 28:2-3 follows verse 1 chronologically, then while the women were on their way to the tomb there was a great earthquake that occurred when an angel from heaven came and rolled away the stone from the door of the sepulcher. This frightened the guards so they became “as dead men” (Mt. 28:4).

The women arrive at the tomb just as the tip of the sun begins to appear over the horizon (Mk. 16:2). As this group approached the tomb they noticed that the large stone had been rolled away (Mk. 16:4; Lk. 24:2; Jn. 20:1). Upon seeing this, Mary Magdalene concluded that the body of Jesus had been removed and immediately ran back to the city to tell Peter and John what she had seen (Jn. 20:1-2). While Mary Magdalene was gone, the other women that remained saw the angels in the tomb. It was the angels who announced unto them the resurrection of Christ (Mt.

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28:5-6; Mk. 16:5-6; Lk. 24:3-8). One of these angels instructed the women to tell Peter and the other disciples what they had seen (Mt. 28:7; Mk. 16:7). Since there was more than one disciple to contact, it is likely that the women split up, with some going to one house and the others to another (e.g., John Mark).

While these women had gone back into the city, Mary Magdalene went back (with Peter and John) to investigate the empty tomb (Jn. 20:2). This incident is not recorded in the synoptic gospels, but is important to John who was a participant. Although all three set out for the tomb, Peter and John were so excited they ran to the sepulcher. John, being younger, arrived first and waited for Peter. The beloved disciple looked into the tomb and saw the linen clothes. Peter being the bolder of the two went into the tomb and inspected the wrappings. John went in with Peter; after he saw “he believed” (Jn. 20:7-8). This is the first example of a disciple believing in the resurrection.

Apparently Peter and John were so excited they either left before Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb; or, they left with Mary waiting outside the sepulcher. In either case, they did not take the time to speak with her. As Mary Magdalene is outside the tomb weeping she looks into the tomb and sees two angels dressed in white, one sitting at the head, while the other was sitting at the feet of where Jesus had lain (Jn. 20:12). She does not perceive that these visitors are angels and asks them if they know where they have put the Savior (Jn. 20:13). After she spoke to the angels, she turned and saw Christ, but did not recognize Him (Jn. 20:14). When our Lord speaks with her and calls her Mary, she recognizes the Savior and clings to him (Jn. 20:16-17). Mary is the first person to actually see the resurrected Messiah. Mary then reports what she has seen to the disciples (Jn. 20:18). Later on the same day Jesus will appear to some of the women (Mt. 28:9), then to the apostle Peter (Lk. 24:34) then to the two Emmaus disciples (Mk. 16:12; Lk. 24:13ff.), then finally to all the disciples except Thomas (Mk. 16; Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:19-20).

Chapter 2: The Time of the Resurrection and the Angelic Message

All the gospel accounts note that our Lord rose from the dead very early in the morning on the first day of the week (Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:2; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1). The Jews did not have names for the days of the week as we do, so they named days according to their number in relation to the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. Thus, the time indicator could be translated as “at the dawning on the first (day) of the seven (i.e. week),” Mt. 28:1; or literally “day one of the Sabbaths” (Jn. 20:1).

The first day as the day of resurrection was not arbitrary but fulfilled typology and prophecy from the Scriptures. In Genesis 1:1 the first day is the day that God created the world and light. God is telling us that the resurrection of Christ is the light of salvation that pierces through the darkness of a fallen world. The first day points to recreation and redemption. “With the resurrection of Christ a new creation began, and a new light went forth into the darkness.”

When Jesus came out of the tomb, a new age of victory over sin, Satan and death began.

Under the Old Covenant, God’s people looked to the seventh day, when Jehovah rested from His creative labor, as their day of rest and worship. But under the New Covenant, our

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Sabbath is on the first day to honor the Savior’s redemption and recreation of all things. Christ taught His disciples the significance of the first day by always appearing to them on the first day of the week in His post-resurrection appearances (Mt. 28:9; Lk. 24:15-31, 36; Jn. 20:19, 26). The resurrected Savior chose the first day of the week to strengthen the apostle’s faith, instruct them in doctrine, issue commands, engage in fellowship and partake in the breaking of bread. Thus, it is no surprise that the inspired apostles sanctified the first day of the week and called it the Lord’s day (Rev. 1:10). In obedience to our Lord’s example, the early church always met for public worship on the first day of the week (Jn. 20:19-26; Ac. 2:1; 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; Rev. 1:10).

God has given the New Covenant church the Lord’s day in which to celebrate the whole work of redemption. The annual festival observed throughout much of Christendom in commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ called Easter is pagan in origin and has no warrant from the Word of God. “The name Easter (Ger. Ostern)...is a survival from the old Teutonic mythology. According to Bede (De. Temp. Rat. c. xv.) it is derived from Eostre, or Ostara, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, to whom the month answering to our April, and called Eostur-month, was dedicated.”14 The Middle Eastern counterpart to Easter would be the fertility goddess Astarte or Istar (pl. Ashtaroth), the female consort to Baal (cf. Judg. 2:13; 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:4; 12:10). The Greek counterpart would be Artemis (e.g., Diana of the Ephesians).

In the Teutonic version of Easter, the “festival was celebrated on the day of the vernal equinox, and traditions associated with the festival survive in the familiar Easter bunny, symbol of the fertile rabbit, and in the equally familiar colored Easter eggs originally painted with gay hues to represent sunlight of spring. Such festivals, and the myths and legends which explain their origin, abounded in ancient religions.”15 The rites and rituals of the fertility cults of Canaan and the Greco-Roman world were perverse and obscene. Given the sinful nature of our human hearts and our tendency to incorporate pagan elements into the unadorned worship of Christ, we must heed the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are futile [lit. vain]” (Jer. 10:2-3).

The church in the days of the inspired apostles heeded Jeremiah’s command and God’s injunction not to add or detract human ideas or traditions to Scripture (Lev. 10:1-2; Num. 15:39-40; Dt. 4:2; 12:32; 1 Ki. 12:32-33; 1 Chr. 15:13-15; Jer. 7:24, 31; 19:5; Mt. 15:3, 9; 28:20; Col. 2:20-23). Therefore, there is no evidence whatsoever that the Easter festival was celebrated by the first generation of New Covenant believers. It also is not found in any of the writings of the apostolic fathers. The use of liturgical calendar and the sanctity of special holy days apart from the Lord’s day was completely absent from the thought and practice of the apostolic church. “The ecclesiastical historian Socrates (Hist. Eccl. v. 22) states with perfect truth, that neither the Lord nor his apostles enjoined the keeping of this or any other festival. He says: ‘The apostles had no thought of appointing festival days, but of promoting a life of blamelessness and piety’; and he attributes the observance of Easter by the church to the perpetuation of an old usage, ‘just as many other customs have been established.’”16 The Reformed churches in Scotland which achieved a greater reformation than their counterparts on the continent abolished Easter and all man-made holy days. The Westminster Assembly Directory for Publick Worship (1645) says,

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16 Thomas Macall Fallow, 7:828.
“Festival days, vulgarly called holy-days, having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued.”

In the Old Covenant administration, the eighth day or the first day of a new week typified the redeeming re-creative power of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Thus, the male children of believers were to be circumcised on the eighth day (Gen. 18:12) which is the first day of the second week of the newborn’s life. Circumcision was a sign and seal of the new birth or regeneration (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; Col. 2:11). God is teaching us that union with Christ in His first-day resurrection is the foundation of our regeneration (Eph. 2:5; Rom. 6:4ff.). Those who are united with the Savior in His death and resurrection are made a new creation. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). The eighth day was also the day of cleansing from defilement (Lev. 14:10: 15:14, 29). This ritual pointed to the fact that union with Christ in His first-day resurrection breaks the power of sin over believers (Rom. 6:4-5; 1 Jn. 2:29). “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Under the old administration the eighth day (or first day) was the day of dedication of the firstborn son. Jesus is the firstborn, or firstfruits, of all who believe. “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). Through His sacrificial death and victorious resurrection, the Savior became “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). Thus, all genuine believers are of the “church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Heb. 12:23). The dedication of the firstborn son also hearkens back to Passover where the blood of the Passover lamb saved the firstborn of Israel (Ex. 12:21-36). The Mediator’s death and resurrection gives us a glorious future of salvation and life.

The fact that Christ was dead in the tomb on the Jewish Sabbath and arose the first day of the week indicates the end of the Old Covenant Sabbath day and the inauguration of a new Sabbath day. This point is proved in two ways. First, in the restatement of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:15 the numbering connected with this special day in not simply God’s rest from creation (Ex. 20:11), but the redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Thus, the Sabbath day is set apart to commemorate the great redemptive act of the Old Testament. Redemption from Egypt was a type of a believer’s redemption from sin and spiritual bondage. Since the day of our deliverance from death, slavery to sin and Satan is Sunday, the day of resurrection, this is now the day we are called upon to remember our salvation in a special way.

Second, this is supported by the prophecy of Psalm 118:24: “This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” Peter applies Psalm 118:22 (see Ac. 4:8-12) directly to the exaltation of Christ, which began at His resurrection (cf. Mt. 28:18; Rom. 1:4). Psalm 118 identifies the day of Christ’s exaltation as a day of rejoicing and gladness. Were the disciples rejoicing on the seventh day (Saturday)? Were they glad and happy on that day? No, absolutely not. They were living in deep sorrow, mingled with fear and doubt. Jesus was dead, still in the tomb. Their cause looked defeated; their leader had been put to death as a common criminal. But on Sunday, the first day of the week, the Savior rose from the dead and their tears turned to joy, their sorrow to gladness, their doubt to hope and their defeat to victory. They were now rejoicing and fulfilling Psalm 118:24. This is the origin of the term “the Lord’s day.” It is the day on which the Christian church celebrates the victory of the Son of David. “We observe the Lord’s day as henceforth our true Sabbath day made and ordained of God, for the perpetual
remembrance of the achievements of our Redeemer…. Entering into the midst of the church of God, and beholding the Lord Jesus as all in all in the assemblies of his people, we are bound to overflow with joy. Is it not written, ‘then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord’?

The fact that the resurrection took place early in the morning while the sun was rising or about to rise teaches us that Jesus was “the Bright and Morning Star” (Rev. 22:16); “the Sun of Righteousness” (Mal. 4:2); the “light of men” who “shines in the darkness” (Jn. 1:4, 5); the one who gives light to “those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Ps. 107:10; cf. v. 14). The sun arose over a new day, a new age, a new creation.

The gospels teach that Christ arose on the third day. Jesus and the evangelists express this historical fact in different ways. There are passages which speak of the Savior rising “after three days” (e.g., Mk. 8:31; 9:31). This of course does not mean that our Lord rose after the three days were over for then the resurrection would be on the fourth day. It means that the resurrection would occur after any part of the third day is started. We know that “after three days” means “on the third day” because: a) where Mark will say “after three days” (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34) the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke will say “the third day [Jesus will] be raised up” (Mt. 16:21; 17:23; Lk. 9:22). “Mark’s phrase reflects Jewish usage, whereby ‘After three days’ would mean ‘the day after tomorrow.’” b) Matthew 27 has the chief priests defining “after the third day” as the same as “until the third day.” The account reads, “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will arise.’ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day” (vs. 63-64).

Jesus had prophesied to the Jews saying, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19). This does not necessarily mean three twenty-four hour days for the Jewish term “day” could be used in reference to any part of the day (i.e. part of Friday, the whole day Saturday, part of Sunday equals three days). The vast majority of scholars, commentators and theologians believe that all the gospel accounts teach that our Lord was in the tomb for around thirty-six hours. He was buried late Friday afternoon (around 5:00 pm) and arose around dawn Sunday morning.

Some confusion has arisen regarding the Savior’s statement in Matthew 12:40, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” Some writers argue that this verse proves that Christ could not have been crucified on Friday; that Jesus must have spent three full days and nights in the earth. This view suffers from a number of problems. a) It ignores the fact that our Lord was using a Jewish idiom which was not intended to be taken in a literal modern sense. This point is proved by Esther 4:16 where the third day obviously was not an entire day. After Esther proclaims a fast for three days and nights (4:16), the fast came to an end on third day (5:1, 4). The Savior used a colloquial expression which could be used by three parts of a day and two

19 For example, Wayne Carver writes, “The Lord Jesus Christ clearly said in Matthew 12:38-40 that He would spend ‘three days and three nights in the heart of the earth,’ just as Jonah had spent ‘three days and three nights’ in the belly of the great fish. Isn’t it strange, however, that almost universally throughout Christendom we find that the remembrance of Christ’s crucifixion is held on ‘Good Friday’ and that His resurrection is acknowledged as occurring on Sunday morning, at dawn? By no stretch of the imagination or masterful manipulation of Scripture is it possible to stretch the period from Friday evening to Sunday morning into ‘three days and three nights’! Many have attempted to do so and millions of Christians have accepted this viewpoint; but in all honesty, it just can’t be done.” (Chronology of the Crucifixion Week [Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, n. d.], 3).
nights.  

b) If our Lord arose literally after three days and three nights, then He arose on the fourth day which would explicitly contradict many passages of Scripture. The Mediator “rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4; Ac. 10:40; Lk. 9:22; 18:33; 24:46; Mt. 11:21; 17:23; 20:19, etc). c) The inspired authors of the gospels tell us that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried on Parakseue which means the day before the Jewish Sabbath or Friday (Mk. 15:42, 43; Lk. 23:46; Jn. 19:14, 30, 42). In fact, it is the same Greek word used in modern Greek to designate Friday. A day and a night was the Jewish way of indicating one time unit. Therefore, Scripture does not contradict Scripture. Jesus was buried Friday and arose early Sunday morning.

Although the only New Testament allusion to three days in the Old Testament is Christ’s reference to Jonah 1:17, there are hints of a third day redemption in other passages. In Genesis 22:4 we read, “Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place [of sacrifice] afar off.” After three days without water in the wilderness God provides Israel with water that gives life (Ex. 15:22 ff.). In Exodus 19, Jehovah makes His appearance on the third day (vs. 10, 11, 15, 16) to give the covenant nation the law as a guide for personal sanctification and godly dominion (cf. Mt. 28:18-20). Hosea 6:2 reads, “After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight.” This prophecy of the national restoration of Israel points to the ultimate spiritual restoration of the true Israel. Given the Old Testament pattern of using three days or the third day in redemptive history and prophecy we can understand Paul’s statement that Jesus “rose again according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:4; cf. Lk. 24:46).

The thirty-six to thirty-eight hours that Jesus spent in the tomb was enough time to demonstrate that our Lord was really dead and yet not too long so that our Lord would not see corruption. The Bible teaches that God would not allow His Son’s body to decay. “Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; moreover my flesh will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption” (Ac. 2:26-7; cf. 13:35; Ps. 16:9-10). God not only restricted the amount of time that Christ spent in the tomb, but also supernaturally preserved the Savior’s body from corruption.

### The Stone Rolled Away

And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men (Mt. 28:2-4).

The record of the angel who came and rolled away the stone is only found in Matthew’s gospel. It is important because it tells us how the stone was removed and explains why the Roman guards were not present when the women arrived. God sent the angel to open the tomb not to let Jesus out, but to let the women and the apostles in. The resurrection of Christ had already taken place and had been witnessed only by God. None of the gospel writers describe the resurrection itself. Our Lord arose and passed through the linen wrappings and walls of the tomb silently, without fanfare. The angel came to open an empty tomb and to make some important announcements to Mary and the other women. In this section of Scripture we want to examine three things: (1) the actions of the angel; (2) the description of the angel; and, (3) the response of the Roman guards.

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Matthew places an importance on the work of this angel by opening this pericope with the word *lo* which means “look” or “behold.” What we are about to witness is unusual and marvelous. The coming of this angel from heaven to earth results in “a great earthquake.” (Note *gar*, “for”) Supernatural earthquakes would call the Hebrew mind to a number of biblical passages. Earthquakes are associated with God’s special presence during the giving of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 19:18), and Jehovah’s wrath and judgment against sin (Is. 29:6; Rev. 6:12; 8:5 11:13, 19; 16:18). Just a few days before, a great earthquake had opened the saints’ tombs in order to set their resurrected bodies free (Mt. 27:51-53). The earthquake was a signal of Christ’s victory over sin and death as well as a sign of the Mediator’s coming judgment upon His enemies. “The earth shook again at His resurrection, which was not only proof of His divinity, but also of the wrath of God against the Jews and their land which would be destroyed and left destitute. The inhabitants would perish miserably and their religion would be taken from them and be transferred to the Gentiles. It also indicated that all temporal ceremonies were now terminated and that an unchangeable religion had taken their place.”

It is likely that this earthquake occurred as the women were on their way to the tomb. It was probably a localized earthquake, either limited to the burial site or the area of Jerusalem.

The angel then rolled away the stone from the door and sat upon it. The word “rolled away” (*apokulisen*) can mean “rolled off” or “rolled back.” The stone was either rolled away from the door and left in its groove or it may have been rolled off the groove so that it turned over on its side. The fact that the angel sat upon it indicates that the rolling away of the stone is an accomplished fact. The stone rolled away certifies the resurrection of the Redeemer. The angel rolls away the great stone in order to call us to faith in the merit of the Savior’s blood and the victory of His resurrection. “[T]hat stone rolled away was as it were, before the eyes of our faith consecrated that day as a memorial of Christ’s eternal victory over the powers of death and hell.”

The tomb will remain open and unguarded so the resurrection is known to all the disciples. Having completed his first task, the angel now waits patiently for the women to arrive.

(2) The description of the angel indicates that this was a very high ranking angel and not merely one of the angelic hosts. The angel’s appearance is so bright and radiant that he is described as being “like lightening” (cf. Dan. 10:6; Mt. 13:43). His clothes are a dazzling white, like fresh snow that sparkles in the sunshine (cf. Dn. 7:19; Mt. 17:2; Ac. 1:10; Rev. 3:4; 4:4). The angel’s bright countenance and exceedingly white, dazzling garments indicates both the reflective glory from being in heaven in the presence of God and the angel’s holiness as an unfallen being. An angel or angels are often observed at crucial periods in our Lord’s life: His birth (Lk. 2:9 ff.); His temptation (Mt. 4:11); after His period of agony at Gethsemane (Lk. 22:43); and, at His glorious resurrection. But, when the Savior was on the cross being forsaken by the Father we find no holy angels attending Him. The opening of the tomb was an event which all the holy angels longed for. It was the time when Christ would emerge victorious and resume the glory he had before the foundation of the world. Very soon Jesus would return to His white, lustrous throne to be adored and worshipped by all the angels.

(3) The appearance of this mighty angel who reflects the majesty of God terrifies the Roman guards. Roman soldiers were noted for their bravery and discipline. They were trained not to flinch in the heat of combat when blood and death was all around them. Yet the appearance of this one angel was enough to paralyze them with fear so that they fainted and fell

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flat to the ground. These men shook with fear and were frightened into unconsciousness. When they came to, they fled for their lives. These Roman guards retreated before one angel who did not even bother to draw his flaming sword. After they fled, “They were no longer an organized unit, for not ‘all’ of them but only ‘some’ came into the city.”

If one angel could cause such terror, what terror will the ungodly experience on that great day when Jesus will descend with all the hosts of heaven to take vengeance on those who have rejected Christ?

The Women Discover the Empty Tomb

Early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, a group of Jesus’ female followers came to the tomb to anoint the body of Christ. This group included Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and other women (Jn. 20:1; Lk. 24:10). They arrived at dawn as the sun was rising (Mk. 16:2; Lk. 24:1) and noticed that the stone was rolled away from the tomb (Lk. 24:2; Mk. 16:4; Jn. 20:1). At this point Mary Magdalene ran to get Simon Peter and John (Jn. 20:2) while the other women stayed behind. These women entered the tomb and could not find the body of the Lord (Lk. 24:3). Luke tells us that the women were very perplexed; that is, they had no idea of what to make of the situation before them (Lk. 24:4). We learn from Mark that after the women entered the tomb they saw an angel sitting on the right side dressed in white (16:9).

White or shining clothes are a mark of a heavenly visitor in the New Testament (cf. Mt. 28:3; Jn. 20:12; Ac. 1:10; 10:30, etc). “White clothes were, of course, a mark of festivity or of a formal occasion such as a wedding.”

(To wear white, which is an indication of celebration and victory, in a tomb where someone is supposed to be dead itself points to the resurrection.) The women’s response to the sight of this angel was amazement, surprise, shock, “alarm” (NJV). “Mark uses ekthambeomai as a particularly strong term for people’s surprise or shock on seeing something remarkable and unexpected…; the verb contains an element of fear.”

Luke’s account notes that at this time the first angel is joined by a second (Lk. 24:4). The first angel which was sitting, stands, joins the second angel and approaches the women (Lk. 24:4). People who (a priori) reject the divine inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures see great and insurmountable difficulties in the number, positions and different things said by the angels. Matthew and Mark mention one angel (Mt. 28:3, 5; 16:5), while Luke and John mention two (Jn. 20:12; Lk. 24:4). Some accounts discuss the visitor (Mk. 16:5) or visitors sitting (Jn. 20:12) while Luke has them standing (Lk. 24:4). There are also differences in the messages spoken. Does any of this indicate a real challenge to the doctrine of inspiration? No, not at all! The number of angels is easily explained because either the one angel was soon joined by another or the second angel was ignored to focus on the angel who did the speaking. It is common in the gospel narratives to mention only one person when we know that others were present (e.g., John only mentions Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb [20:1] when Luke says she was with a whole group of women [24:10]). The objection to the different positions of the angels is simply absurd. Angels move quite freely; obviously they changed positions. They were first seated and then they stood and approached the women. The objection to the different things spoken is also ludicrous. The messengers said a number of things and the evangelists recorded different things. “[W]hy should it be regarded as impossible that the messengers spoke more than

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25 Ibid, 582.
Once again the best thing to do is to weave all these glorious facts together and study them in order to increase our faith and love of Christ.

Luke says that the sight of the two angels in dazzling apparel caused the women to be frightened. “This fear probably should be understood more in the sense of reverential awe such as we find in Luke 1:12… 1:30, 2:9 rather than in the sense of their experiencing stark terror.”

Thus, rather than running away, they demonstrated respect by bowing with their faces to the ground (Lk. 24:5). The Roman soldiers, being pagans, were terrified at the sight of one angel and fainted. The women being believers were frightened, but held their composure.

The Angelic Message

This section of the synoptic gospels reveals that these angels were sent to earth with a very specific mission. After the one opened the tomb allowing the women to enter, both were to give specific instructions to the women who entered. This announcement is rather amazing, for we have angels from heaven speaking the gospel directly to mortals on earth. If we combine the record of the synoptic gospels, there are six elements to the angelic communication.

First, the women are commanded “Don’t you be afraid” (Mt. 28:5; The statement is emphatic in Greek.); “Do not be alarmed” (Mk. 16:6). The angel starts his message by calming down these surprised, frightened women. Words of reassurance are a common feature of angelic appearances (cf. Dan. 10:12, 19; Mt. 28:5; Lk. 1:13, 30; 2:10; Ac. 27:24, etc). Calvin writes, “[I]t is proper that the majesty of God should strike both terror and fear indiscriminately into the godly as well as the reprobate, that all flesh may be silent before his face. But when the Lord has humbled and subdued his elect, he immediately mitigates their dread, that they may not sink under its oppressive influence; and not only so, but by the sweetness of his grace heals the wound which he had inflicted.”

Second, the angel gives the woman a reason why they do not need to fear: “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified” (Mt. 28:5; cf. Mk. 16:6). In essence, the angel tells the women they have no reason to be afraid because he knows that they are loyal followers of Christ who have come to minister to His body. “I know, says the angel, that it is love to Him, crucified although He has been, that has brought you here.” Obviously, the angel had been informed ahead of time by God who would be coming to the tomb and why. The angel knew exactly what to say to set these women at ease.

Third, Luke tells us that the angels asked the women a question: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” (24:5). This question may be a gentle rebuke. “It appeared to them an act of folly to look for the Lord of Life in the abode of Death. They felt that His followers ought to have known that He is risen.” On the one hand, the women are to be commended for seeking Christ. Clearly, their hearts were in the right place. But, because of their failure to pay close attention to what the Savior had said and remember it, they were seeking the Lord in the wrong place. Here was the first word that Jesus is alive.

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Fourth, then immediately the angel proclaims the resurrection. “He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him” (Mk. 16:6). This announcement is found in all three synoptic gospels (Mk. 16:6; Mt. 28:6; Lk. 24:6). After comforting the women and stimulating their interest with a question, the angel delivers his main instruction. Jesus is not in this tomb because He has been raised from the dead by God. “The angels bear the same witness to the resurrection of Jesus that is to be found in the early Christian preaching (cf. Acts 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40-42; 13:30-31).”

“Your great ground and reason for consolation, seeker, is that you do not seek a dead Christ, and you do not pray to a buried Savior; he is really alive.” The angel’s simple declaration of the fact that the Savior was raised from the dead immediately rules out all alternative and unbelieving explanations of the empty tomb. This is Jehovah’s own explanation delivered by the holy lips of an angel from heaven.

Then to aid these women’s faith and instruct them regarding the true physical-bodily nature of the resurrection, the angel asked the women to closely examine the very spot where Jesus was laid (Mt. 28:6; Mk. 16:6). These were the same women who carefully watched how Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus laid the Redeemer’s body in the tomb (Mk. 15:47; Lk. 23:55). They had seen how the Savior’s body was wrapped. They had observed the exact place where the body was laid. At the angels’ bidding they came close and stared at the burial shroud and other wrappings. They could see that they were lying there in the exact same spot where our Lord’s body was, as if He passed right through the linen shroud. With this sight their hearts must have raced within them. The shelf was empty, the body was gone, the wrappings are still there. Jesus is risen! He is alive! His glorious ministry of salvation and godly rule continues. That these women were genuinely convinced of the reality of the resurrection is proved from their “great joy” (Mt. 28:8) and their obedience to the angel’s command (Lk. 24:9-10).

These uneducated women understood the resurrection better than all the modernist theologians with their multiple degrees and honors from men who refuse to believe in the real bodily resurrection of Christ. In spite of the empty tomb, the untouched wrappings, the appearance and testimony of angels and the words, “He is not here for He is risen,” they continue in their unbelief and humanistic speculative theories. Because of their unbelieving axioms, they only cling to explanations that are contrary to the explicit and plain teaching of Scripture. As Paul says, “Professing to be wise, they became fools” (Rom. 1:22). They cheat themselves “through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8).

Fifth, the angel supported his statement about the resurrection of Christ not only by pointing to the undeniable physical evidence, but also the prophetic proof. He reminded them of what the Savior had said. What Matthew briefly alludes to, “as He said” (28:6). Luke gives the fuller account, “Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day arise again’” (24:7). God had told this angel to remind these women about the predictions they had heard directly from the lips of Jesus. The gospels record three separate occasions where our Lord spoke virtually the exact same words to His disciples (see Mt. 16:21; 17:22, 23; 20:17-19; Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33, 34; Lk. 9:22, 44; 18:31-34). It is often the case that prophecies are not understood when they are spoken but become great aids to faith only after the events have taken place. This is precisely what occurred with these women. For some reason God hid our Lord’s predictions from their remembrance and understanding. But now that these events have occurred,

God, through the use of His special messengers, calls these women to remembrance so that they can be witnesses to the resurrection and the faithfulness of the Redeemer’s prophecy. Thus Luke notes, “And they remembered His words” (24:8). We must not forget that the Word of God in the Old Testament and Jesus’ own inspired words serve as a solid testimony of our Lord’s glorious resurrection.

These women who came to lovingly care for Christ’s body are gently, yet directly corrected by these angels. We see here the tender mercies of God in guiding His saints who out of ignorance have wandered astray. These women were now somewhat ashamed of the preparations they had made. Now that God had opened their eyes to the truth they realized how often Jesus had spoken of His suffering, death and resurrection. “Note, a seasonable remembrance of the words of Christ will help us to a right understanding of his providence.”

Remembrance of God’s Word brings conviction and conviction in a true child of God leads to biblical action.

Sixth, the announcement of Jesus’ resurrection and the proof set before these women are the basis of an urgent message for the disciples. The angel said, “And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you” (Mt. 28:7). The important message of the resurrection of Christ must be conveyed as soon as possible to the remaining apostles. They must hear the women’s testimony that the Lord’s predictions regarding this marvelous event have indeed come to pass. Mark’s account (16:7) adds that the Lord’s predictions regarding this marvelous event have indeed come to pass. Mark’s account (16:7) adds that they are to remind the apostles of the Savior’s promise that He would meet them in Galilee after the resurrection (see Mk. 14:28; Mt. 26:32). “The commission to deliver the message presupposes that, despite the scattering in Gethsemane, the disciples including Peter [see Mk. 16:7] are still to be found together as a group, however demoralized. The fact that Jesus still has a message for them, and still more that it includes the repeated promise of a post-resurrection meeting, may be expected to overcome their self despair, and they may well remember that the previous prediction of a meeting in Galilee followed directly after Jesus’ prediction of their being ‘scattered’ (14:27).”

There are scholars who have a problem with the angels’ instruction because our Lord’s first appearance did not occur in Galilee, but in Jerusalem later that same day. This observation is not really a problem for the following reasons. a) The instructions do not say that Jesus would appear first in Galilee, but only that He would be going ahead of the disciples into Galilee. b) A reading of the gospels indicates that the apostles did not believe the testimony of these women (Lk. 24:11) or Mary Magdalene all of whom had seen the risen Savior Himself (Jn. 20:10-11). Thus, the Savior who is loving and merciful to His disbelieving disciples may have deemed it necessary to appear to the apostles that very day to lift up their faith and ensure their obedience to His command. This simply shows that the risen Mediator does what it takes so that His stumbling apostles will believe His promises.

Matthew and Luke’s gospel make it clear that the women’s faith in the resurrection led to an immediate obedience to the angel’s command. “So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word” (Mt. 28:8). “Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest” (Lk. 24:9). Mark’s account focuses on the women’s emotional state. “So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mk.

33 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:833.
16:8). These women were so excited and astonished by what they had seen, their bodies quivered. Their encounter with the supernatural frightened them, but their faith in the resurrection brought them great joy.

When Mark says that the women did not speak to anyone because of their fear, he means that they did not speak to anyone on the way to the disciples. What they saw was so extraordinary and shocking, they believed it would be wise not to speak to any strangers about their experience. Only someone who rejected the divine inspiration of the Scriptures and believed the gospel writers were totally incompetent would think that Matthew and Luke would explicitly contradict Mark’s account. Further, Matthew informs us that on the way to speak to the eleven the women met and saw the risen Savior Himself who repeated the command of the angels (Mt. 28:9-10). Are we to believe that these women who fervently loved and worshipped Jesus would ignore His instructions? No, of course not!

Chapter 3: Peter and John’s Encounter with the Empty Tomb

The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre. Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the LORD out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him. Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again unto their own home (Jn. 20:1-10).

Although John’s record begins essentially the same time as the synoptic gospels—very early on the first day of the week—the apostle ignores the other women’s encounter with the empty tomb and the angelic message and instead follows the actions of Mary Magdalene. (“John, of course, assumes that his readers know the account of the synoptists. What he himself adds is almost throughout new material, hence of supreme value on that account. He writes with exceptional detail and great vividness…”35). In the process we learn the important event of Peter and the beloved disciple’s examination of the empty tomb. As we study this section of Scripture we want to examine: (1) Who is Mary Magdalene and what does she do? (2) What is the significance of the apostle’s observations in the tomb? (3) What does the faith of the apostle John tell us about the evidence for the resurrection?

Mary of Magdala

Since Mary Magdalene figures so prominently in the resurrection narratives we need to look at who she was. She is first mentioned in the gospels by Luke (8:2). She is identified as

Mary, called Magdalene, out of who had come seven demons. She had been particularly afflicted by demonic oppression and her gratitude to Jesus for her deliverance was exceptionally strong. “In short, of all our Lord’s followers on earth, none seem to have loved Him so much as Mary Magdalene. None felt that they owed so much to Christ.”

Thus, with the other women she stayed at the cross even after the Savior had died and witnessed His burial. She was probably not married because she was named after her home town Magdala (from the Hebrew migdol meaning “watch tower”), a small town on the western side of the Sea of Galilee. When women were married it was common for Jews to identify them either in relation to their husband or their children (e.g., Salome “the mother of the sons of Zebedee” [Mt. 27:56]; “Mary of Clopas” [Jn. 19:25]). Given the fact she was able to support our Lord’s ministry, she may have been a widow of means who did not have any children. She is very prominent toward the close of the gospels because of her presence at the crucifixion (Jn. 19:25; Mk. 15:40; Mt. 27:56; cf. Lk. 23:49); her observation of the burial of the Savior (Mk. 15:47; Mt. 27:61; cf. Lk. 23:55); and, the events we are about to examine. She is the first person to see the resurrected Christ (Mk. 16:9-10). The human tradition that has arisen regarding Mary—that she was a young, beautiful prostitute or a woman of very loose moral character before her conversion—has no basis in the Scriptures at all.

Note that it was Mary’s great love of the Savior that led to such brave and repeated acts of devotion toward Jesus. It was her great love and the love of the other women that led to their great discovery. This great love has something to tell us. As Pink notes,

How this devotion of hers puts to shame many of us, who perhaps have greater intelligence in spiritual things, but who manifest far less love for Christ! Few were as deeply attached to the Redeemer as was this woman. Few had received as much at His gracious hands, and her gratitude knew no bounds. How this explains the listlessness and half-heartedness among us! Where there is little sense of our indebtedness to Christ, there will be little affection for Him. Where light views of our sinfulness, our depravity, our utter unworthiness, are entertained, there will be little expression of gratitude and praise. It is those who have had the clearest sight of their deservingness of hell, whose hearts are most moved at the amazing grace which snatched them as brands from the burning, that are the most devoted among Christ’s people. Let us pray daily, then, that it may please God to grant us a deeper realization of our sinfulness and a deeper apprehension of the surpassing worthiness of His Son, so that we may serve and glorify Him with increasing zeal and faithfulness.

When the women arrived at the tomb they were surprised to see the very large stone which covered the sepulcher already rolled away. After seeing this Mary quickly concluded that either some men had stolen the body, or perhaps that the owner of the tomb had his servants move the body to another sepulcher. With this conviction, she immediately left her friends at the tomb and started off to notify Peter and the beloved disciple of this shocking news. Poor Mary had come to minister to the body of the One she believed had been defeated; she was not yet defeated?

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37 “For no reason at all, church tradition identified her with the unnamed sinner of Luke 7, who anointed the feet of Jesus in the house of a wealthy Pharisee—probably because Mary of Bethany later did the same thing in the house of Lazarus, and there is a confusion of these two accounts and the two Marys. After this she was assumed to have been a prostitute before Christ saved her, and by the seventeenth century ‘Magdalene’ was being used as a word to describe a reformed prostitute” (James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, 1999], 5:1571).

aware that He was the great victor over Satan, sin and death. “She thought that she had come to put a final touch, such as only a woman can, to a life of sad and irremediable failure; but had no conception that on that morning a career had been inaugurated which was not only endless and indissoluble in itself, but was destined to vitalize uncounted myriads.”

The urgency of the situation and Mary’s excitement can be seen in the fact that she did not stay with the other women to examine the tomb, but she ran (present indicative) back to Jerusalem to tell Peter and John. Simon Peter was recognized by the other disciples as a leader of the group. Like the other women, the thought of a bodily resurrection of Jesus does not even enter her mind at this point. When she arrives at what is probably John’s residence where Peter may have been staying she says, “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him” (20:2). Mary’s “they” is left undefined because she has no idea who was involved. Her plural “we” as in “we do not know” indicates that she came to the tomb with a group of women and proves that John was aware of the accounts in the synoptics.

The Empty Tomb

After receiving this information, Peter and John go immediately to the tomb. “Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first” (20:4). It is indeed possible that all the apostles were at this residence and that John only focuses our attention upon Peter and himself because they were the only ones who went out to examine the tomb. Their running to the tomb may indicate that although their faith was very weak at this time, hope was not completely extinguished. As Calvin comments,

Some sense of faith, therefore, remained in their hearts, but quenched for a time, so that they were not aware of having what they had. Thus the Spirit of God often works in the elect in a secret manner. In short, we must believe that there was some concealed root, from which we see fruit produced. Though this feeling of piety, which they possessed, was confused, and was accompanied by much superstition, still I give to it—though inaccurately—the name of faith, because it was only by the doctrine of the Gospel that it was produced, and it had no tendency but towards Christ. From this seed there at length sprang a true and sincere faith, which leaving the sepulcher, ascended to the heavenly glory of Christ.

John being younger and faster than Peter outruns him and arrives at the tomb first, but does not go in. He does, however, stoop down to take a look. The word used (blepo) indicates a mere glance on John’s part. From his position he could see the linen clothes lying in place. Because of timidity or perhaps because he is simply waiting for Peter to arrive, he does not go into the tomb. When Peter arrived, he went right into the tomb and closely examined (theorei, to behold or take careful notice of) the linen clothes lying there (20:6). At this time John went into the tomb and also saw the linen clothes lying there. “It is noteworthy that John himself is the writer who records that ‘he went not in.’ Be the motive what it may, he generously gives his brother Peter the whole honour and credit of being the first to go inside the grave, and thoroughly

40 Some commentators believe the grammar indicates two separate residences. Frederic Louis Godet writes, “The repetition of the preposition pros, to, in ver. 2, leads us to think that the two disciples had different homes, which is natural if John lived with his mother and with Mary, the mother of Jesus” (Commentary on John’s Gospel, 974).
investigate the condition of it in every particular." Roman Catholic writers use this passage as a proof text for the primacy of the pope. They argue that John’s refusal to enter the tomb first indicates that he was bowing to the supremacy of Peter. Aside from the fact that the supremacy of Peter is rejected by the broader context of Scripture (e.g., see Gal. 2:7, 8, 11; 1 Cor. 1:12-13; 3:22; 12:28; 2 Cor. 12:11-12; Eph. 4:11), there is nothing in this passage at all that indicates John was deferring to a superior church officer.

There are a number of things that merit our attention regarding their discovery. First, there are two witnesses to the empty tomb, both of whom were chief among the apostles. Two witnesses are better than one and God’s law requires two witnesses in legal proceedings (Dt. 19:15). The group of women and Mary Magdalene were also independent witnesses of the empty tomb and wrappings. In the days of our Lord, however, the testimony of women was not accepted. This may account to some degree for the disciples’ unwillingness to believe the women’s report (Mk. 16:11; Lk. 24:11).

Second, the description of the grave clothes indicates very clearly that the body of Jesus had not been removed by men or stolen. This is seen by the following observations: a) The only thing of value in the tomb would have been the linen wrappings and the expensive spices used to freshen the corpse, yet both of these remained. A naked corpse would have been absolutely useless to thieves. b) Violent thieves who would be willing to roll back a grave stone and desecrate a tomb would not have taken the time or trouble to very carefully lay out the linen wrappings to make it appear that the body just disappeared or passed through the wrappings. If they were after the expensive spices, there would have been a corpse tossed aside with pieces of linen cloth all over the floor. c) If Joseph of Arimathea had decided to move the body of Jesus to a different tomb so that his garden tomb could have been reserved solely for his family members, then obviously the body would have been moved with the grave clothes. They would not have been left behind. d) Chrysostom has also pointed out that “John tells us by anticipation that it was buried with much myrrh, which glues linen to the body not less firmly than lead…(LXXXV.4; pp. 320f.)” Thus, the disciples would know that the remaining linen clothes and their position were remarkable and were intended to lead to belief in Christ’s resurrection. e) We must not forget that the tomb was guarded by professional, well-armed Roman soldiers. If someone wanted to steal the body of Jesus or simply remove the expensive spices they would have to either kill the soldiers or bribe them with a large sum of money. This fact alone renders all theories that the body was stolen as untenable and virtually impossible. Given the abundance of evidence one could argue that a lack of belief in the real bodily resurrection of Christ is unscientific and irrational.

Third, there is also significance in the fact that this was the only resurrection in history where the grave clothes are left behind. The Savior arose naked and was clothed with new heavenly garments. Hutcheson writes,

> It may serve to teach us, not only what he hath purchased to us by his death and resurrection, even a restitution to that blessed estate through him wherein Adam was in innocency, (when he needed no garments), though the complete enjoyment thereof be suspended till eternity, wherein we shall be perfected, and shall not only need nothing to cover our outward nakedness, but shall leave that infirmity and corruption which accompanyeth us to the grave behind us, as he left his

grave clothes; but further, it teacheth that Christ rose again, not to live any more in this world, not to die any more, but to live and reign for ever, and therefore he left his grave clothes…

The theanthropic Mediator earned His white, lustrous heavenly garments by a life of moral perfection. We, however, will receive white robes because of the merits of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, the fact that the linen wrappings were laying neatly in one place and the napkin that covered the head was rolled up apart from the body wrappings not only proves the reality of the resurrection, but also indicates the nature of the resurrection. If we know that in Jewish burials there were separate wrappings for the head and the body (e.g., Jn. 11:44) and understand the strong adhesive character of the spices used, then we must conclude that Christ’s new resurrected body passed supernaturally right through the wrappings, leaving them in place. This view is supported by other appearances in the post-resurrection narratives and other portions of the New Testament. The resurrected Savior on occasion would appear suddenly and could vanish in a supernatural manner (Lk. 24:31, 36). He could appear suddenly in a room with closed doors (Jn. 20:19). Although Jesus has a glorified, real human body and soul (i.e. in His human nature He is not omnipresent), He is not impeded by solid objects like walls, doors or burial clothes. His resurrected body could also appear as very glorious. In Acts he appeared surrounded by a blinding bright light (9:3) and the aged John, when on Patmos, described His countenance as “the sun shining in its strength” (Rev. 1:16). “All these mysterious and miraculous elements, together with the miraculous ascension show that Jesus’ body, though consisting of flesh and bones, was now in a glorified condition and capable of acting independently of the laws of time and space. This does not imply that He Himself was beyond time and space for this again would mean the annihilation of His true humanity.”

Given the state and place of the wrappings and the other resurrection narratives, one can only conclude that Jesus rose from the dead in the same body in which He died. He was not a mere spirit, ghost, apparition, vision, or hallucination. Although our Lord arose from the dead in the same body in which He was crucified (which even maintained the scars in the hands and side [Jn. 20:27]), His body had undergone a change. Christ’s resurrection was unique. The Bible contains a number of examples of people who have been raised from the dead (e.g., 1 Ki. 17:17 ff.; 2 Ki. 4:32 ff.; 13:21; Mt. 27:53; Mk. 5:41-42; Ac. 9:40-41). But all these people went on to live normal lives and then died again, were buried and suffered corruption. Jesus, however, did not rise to the normal earthly sphere of life but came alive immortal and incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:42, 50, 53). We learn of the nature of the transformation that occurred in the Savior from Paul’s discussion of what the Mediator’s resurrection will lead to in the resurrection of believers (1 Cor. 15). Paul speaks of celestial bodies (v. 40) which are incorruptible (v. 42), raised in power (v. 43), a spiritual body (v. 44), the heavenly Man (vs. 47-49), immortal (v. 53) and victorious (v. 54). Through the resurrection, Christ “became a life-giving spirit” (v. 45); “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (v. 20); and, “the firstborn of the dead” (Col. 1:18).

Although Christ rose with the same body in which He was buried, it was now remarkably different. It was glorified, imperishable, powerful and perfect. As a reward for His redemptive obedience, Jesus “was endowed with new qualities perfectly adjusted to His future heavenly environment.” When the Bible describes our Lord as having a “spiritual body,” it does not mean that He is somehow immaterial like an angel, but that He has a body perfectly suited to an

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45 J. A. Schep, “Resurrection of Jesus Christ’s Body,” 5:82.
eternal heavenly environment. Although with a real glorified human body the Savior is not omnipresent; nevertheless, he can still do amazing things. The theanthropic Messiah is able to rule the whole creation from the right hand of God. As a “life-giving spirit” He is able to redeem His own throughout history.

John Sees and Believes

After Peter and John examined the empty tomb and the linen cloths something happened in the beloved disciple’s mind. The account says that “he saw and believed.” John understood the significance of what he was observing. In the gospel of John, the word “believe” (pisteuo), when used of true Christians as here, refers to genuine faith (e.g., 5:44; 6:47; 19:25; 20:29). The beloved disciple, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says that the evidence of the empty tomb and the grave clothes is sufficient for faith in the crucified and risen Redeemer. John, obviously, is not saying that he became a true believer in Christ for the first time at the tomb. It means that the beloved disciple believed or trusted in this new crucial information about the Messiah. As he learned new things about the Savior these things became the objects of his faith. He had faith before, but it was not as mature or complete as it could be. It is one of the characteristics of the gospel of John that, when Jesus performs an amazing sign, the account will tell us that the people or the disciples believed (cf. Jn. 1:50; 2:11, 22, 23; 8:30, 31; 10:42; 11:45; 16:45; 16:30, 31). The Savior will even speak of the disciples believing in the future (Jn. 14:29).

While a believer is justified the moment he believes (Jn. 5:24), his faith continues throughout his life. It can be nurtured and can grow.

The emphasis in the text about John believing shows us the importance of personal faith in the person and work of Christ. Two men came to the empty tomb and examined the very same evidence. One “saw and believed,” while the other at this point did not. When God presents the glorious truths of the gospel before our minds, either in the preached or written word, we have a duty to accept and trust in all the truths set before us. We do not have the option of accepting only what we like or what seems reasonable to us. Further, we are to trust in the gospel for ourselves. Although the church is a corporate body consisting of many parts, we all become Christians by a personal faith. Our parents, siblings and friends cannot believe for us. We cannot rest upon our baptism, heritage, church membership or church attendance, but must personally embrace the death and resurrection of Christ by faith.

John was the first apostle to believe in the resurrection. He also was the only disciple to believe in the resurrection without first having to see the resurrected Savior in person. Since the passage says nothing about Peter’s faith, at this time he still did not comprehend what was right before his eyes.

It is interesting that, even though John believed in the resurrection at this point, he along with Peter still did not understand how the resurrection fits into the teaching of Scripture. The beloved disciple writes, “For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead” (20:9). “The lack of understanding of the Scriptures concerning the Messiah’s redemptive work is beautifully illustrated in the Emmaus story (Luke 24:25-27, 32) and extended to the whole disciple group in Luke 24:44-47. The plural edeisan shows that the ignorance applied to both disciples…”47 This and other passages demonstrate that the apostles believed in the resurrection before they understood how it was foretold in the Old Testament. This proves

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that the disciples did not manipulate the evidence or make up the resurrection to agree with their interpretation of prophecy. “They were first convinced that Christ was risen. Then they came to see a fuller meaning in certain Old Testament passages.” 48 Some of the passages that would soon be used as proof for the resurrection of Christ are Psalm 16:10 (see Acts 2:24, 13:35), Psalm 2:7 (see Acts 13:33) and Psalm 110:1, 4 (see Heb. 6:20). Interestingly, the proper Messianic understanding of these passages came directly from the resurrected Savior Himself. From Luke 24:44-47, we see that Jesus used the whole Old Testament to explain His suffering and resurrection from the dead on the third day.

The fact that the disciples did not understand the Scriptures on such a fundamental point of the faith teaches us two things. First, it condemns our own carelessness in not making the necessary effort in reading and studying the Bible to learn everything we can about Jesus and His holy doctrine. At present, in the United States there is a woeful lack of knowledge of the English Bible and basic doctrines among professing Christians. Many evangelicals don’t know the ten commandments or the Lord’s prayer. They cannot even define doctrines such as justification by faith alone, the atonement or the two natures of Christ in one person. It is for this reason that in the last generation churches have been plagued with heresies, immorality, and perversions of worship. Therefore, we need to be faithful and force ourselves to study the sacred Scriptures and good Christian books everyday so we will grow in the knowledge of the excellence of our Savior and excel in personal holiness. For those of us who come home from work and are very tired and find it very difficult to study, the holy Sabbath is the perfect opportunity to catch up on our Christian reading and prepare ourselves spiritually for the battles of life.

Second, we need to be on guard that our presuppositions regarding prophecy are derived from the Bible itself and not some popular man-made system such as dispensationalism. The apostles did not understand the prophecies regarding the Savior’s suffering, death and resurrection because these events did not fit into their Messianic paradigm. Their prophetic concept of Jesus’ kingship did not take into account that humiliation must precede exaltation. While many of the Old Testament predictions regarding the Messiah to come were difficult and obscure, there were others that were much more explicit and clear. Once these amazing redemptive events occurred, the apostles no doubt understood their own blindness and stupidity in these matters.

Unbelieving Views of the Resurrection Refuted

At this point in the resurrection narratives (even before the many personal encounters with the resurrected Christ [e.g., Lk. 24:39-43; Jn. 20:27; 1 Cor. 15:1 ff.; etc]), we have already seen that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is overwhelming and irrefutable. We have noted that the evidence was sufficient for the beloved disciple to believe even before he saw the Savior. This proof, however, does not mean that everyone is willing to embrace the truth of the resurrection as it is presented in Scripture. Therefore, in order to sharpen our own presentation of the resurrection to others, we need to understand some of the unbelieving presuppositions behind the rejection of the resurrection and examine some of the ways people seek to avoid this fundamental truth of the faith. There are a number of presuppositions that undergirds lack of belief in the resurrection.

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First, there is the rejection of the resurrection based on the presuppositions of modern “science.” This assumes that if an event cannot be observed empirically (i.e. it cannot be examined by the senses in the here and now) and cannot be reproduced by man or “nature,” then it belongs forever in the realm of mystery and mythology. People who consider themselves very enlightened will embrace such arguments because: a) we have not and cannot see it; and b) it cannot be reproduced under controlled conditions.

This view must be rejected for a number of reasons. a) To deny the resurrection on the basis of the fact that we ourselves cannot observe it (if consistent) would be a denial of all meaning and scholarship related to history, literature, logic, and even science itself. History is a description of events from the past that obviously cannot be observed in the present. No one living has seen the battle of Waterloo or the carnage of Gettysburg. These events are known through the testimony of eyewitnesses who are now deceased and on rare occasions the findings of archeology. Yet, no modern unbelieving scientist argues that these events never happened. Likewise, no one has observed Shakespeare, Milton or Bunyan write their plays or books. In the realm of science, no one has actually seen a black hole or a quasar. Yet these things are accepted by everyone in the scientific community. No philosopher has been able to observe a law of logic. The fact that the empty tomb was examined by several people; that Jesus’ enemies acknowledged the tomb was empty (Mt. 28:11-15); and that our Lord was seen by over five hundred people (1 Cor. 15:1 ff.) and was even touched and handled (Lk. 24:39; Jn. 20:27) is more than sufficient to prove the historical reliability of the resurrection. It is inappropriate, absurd and inconsistent to regard a fact of history in the same manner as a lab rat that can be observed, handled and experimented upon in the present.

Second, most modern minds reject the resurrection because they think it is unnatural or against nature. That is it must be rejected because it is not a part of our everyday experience and is not comprehensible within the laws of nature or the physical universe as we know it. The problem with this kind of thinking is twofold. a) It assumes that finite sinful man, a puny fallen creature, is the final, authoritative definer of reality. It starts with the presupposition that truth and facts are only what man says they are. It also arrogantly assumes that man has an infinite knowledge of the unknown and all possible contingencies. It presupposes a closed universe where man is god, defining what can and cannot be possible. Therefore, modern man a priori (i.e. before the facts), simply by fiat definition, rules the acts of God in creation and history out of bounds. This is true of the doctrine of creation and all miracles as well as the greatest of miracles—the resurrection. b) It presupposes that either God does not exist or, if He exists, He cannot reveal Himself in propositional form to mankind. In other words, even if God exists He must forever remain an unknown God, totally irrelevant to meaning, ethics, salvation and life. Modern, so-called ‘scientific’ man does not like God, so His existence is denied or God is defined away as meaningless and totally irrelevant to our lives. This is the essence of modern humanism. It is a house of cards all built upon presuppositions that are not proven; that cannot be proven; that in fact, are contrary to all evidences and common sense.

God has revealed Himself in propositional form, the Bible, the Word of God, and this self-revelation is infallible, inerrant, trustworthy and absolutely true (Ps. 12:6; 19:7, 8; 119:140, 160; Pr. 30:5; Jn. 10:35; 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; etc). To not embrace what God has spoken regarding His own Son, which has been attested by miracles and hundreds of
eyewitnesses is to embrace meaninglessness and nihilism. It is the death of rational thought and ethics.\textsuperscript{49}

Third, there are the stepchildren of secular humanism, who are called modernists or Christian liberals and Barthians. Because of their humanistic presuppositions these schools of thought eliminate the Christian doctrine of the resurrection by redefinition. This is done in two different ways.

The older style of modernism argues that the resurrection as a literal bodily event is an embellishment of the early church. In other words, the post-apostolic church (likely following an earlier delusion or a false oral tradition) perpetuated unknowingly or perhaps even knowingly a blatant lie. If one adheres to modernism or neo-orthodoxy, then the Christian church has nothing to say in the realm of history. The church becomes a kind of club or fraternal organization which prefers certain myths or legends over others. It is all a bunch of absurd nonsense. “The insuperable problem with all such ‘theories’ that [ignore] or downplay the physical facticity of the Resurrection is that apart from the New Testament materials, no one can say anything significant about the Resurrection, and these documents insist on a physical resurrection. The resurrected Jesus is expressly distinguished from a ghost and eats fish with his disciples (Luke 24); Thomas is shown the nail prints in Jesus’ hands and the wound in his side (John 20).”\textsuperscript{50} We either must accept what the Scriptures explicitly and repeatedly say about Christ’s resurrection or we must stop claiming to be a Christian. If we do not believe that the Redeemer died and rose from the dead according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-4), then we cannot be saved. A redefinition of the resurrection in humanistic or modernistic terms is nothing but a clever tactic of Satan to destroy the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Both views approach Scripture from an unbelieving, secular humanistic standpoint. Because they a priori accept higher critical theories of scholarship which assume that the Bible is not inspired, but rather is a thoroughly human document full of mistakes, errors, myths, outmoded thoughts, practices and worldviews, they feel the need to justify their continued place in the church. This unbelieving axiom is the starting point for all their speculative, arbitrary theories. They would do better to abandon their unbelieving presuppositions and listen to Peter: “For we did not follow cunningly devised fables [Greek-mythoi] when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16).

Both views completely destroy the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone which is one of the pillars of Christianity. Paul says that Jesus was “raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). How, we ask, can a resurrection that is outside the realm of history or is a metaphor rooted in a myth going to justify anyone? Some people may find such views of the resurrection to be

\textsuperscript{49} Christianity is a religion based on historical facts such as the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The secularist or naturalist strikes at the heart of Christianity by its attack on the miraculous or the supernatural. This, in turn, is really an attack upon the Christian concept of God and the doctrines of creation and providence. Thus, we see that even in a discussion of something as simple as the resurrection of Christ, the believer is arguing from the foundation of Christian theism and the biblical worldview. Likewise, when the unbeliever challenges the reality of the resurrection of Christ, he does so from a platform of unbelieving starting points or axioms. The unbeliever must be shown that, given his own presuppositions regarding reality, knowledge and ethics, he cannot consistently deny or affirm any truths. Contrariwise, the Christian teaching regarding who God is, which lies behind the doctrine of Scripture and a believing epistemology, guarantees the truth claims of the Bible and the logical process where facts are properly interpreted. For both believers and unbelievers, any discussion of “facts” involves a philosophy of fact and a whole worldview.

interesting or intellectually stimulating. But if Christ is not risen from the dead, literally, bodily, then you are still in your sins (1 Cor. 15:17). You are without hope and without God in this world and the world to come.

Fourth, there is what called the swoon theory which says that Jesus did not really die but had only passed out. Then, when He was placed in the cool tomb, he revived and showed Himself to His disciples. The swoon theory is disproved by the following facts.

(1) The gospel narratives make it perfectly clear that Christ really did die on the cross. There was the severe blood loss from the scourging (Mt. 27:26, Mk. 15:15; Jn. 19:1) and the piercing of the hands and feet with large spikes (Mt. 27:35; Mk. 15:24; Lk. 23:33; Jn. 19:18). In fact, our Lord bled out for a period of around six full hours from nine in the morning to around 3 pm (Mk. 15:25; 33-37). It was at least another hour or two before He was removed from the cross (Mk. 15:43-46). All the gospel accounts record the fact that Jesus gave up His spirit (Mk. 15:37; Mt. 27:50; Lk. 22:46; Jn. 19:30). In order to make sure the Savior was dead, a Roman soldier thrust a spear deep into the Redeemer’s side out of which came water and blood (Jn. 19:24). This shows that the separation of the red blood cells from the serum had already begun under gravity, a process which happens after the blood stops circulating. The soldiers examined Jesus’ body to make sure He was dead (Jn. 19:33). Further, Pilate inquired from the centurion in charge of the execution to make sure Christ was dead before he handed the body over to Joseph of Arimathea.

(2) Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took possession of the dead body, washed it and wrapped it in spices and linen (Mk. 15:46). Not only would these men have noticed if the Savior was still breathing, but once the spices began to harden it would have been impossible for Jesus to free Himself of the wrappings let alone remove the giant stone and overpower the armed guards. Thus, the fact that the tomb was empty and Christ was alive can only be explained as a miracle, a supernatural act of God.

Unbelievers and enemies of the Savior can exert themselves and grasp at straws forever, but the veracity of the bodily resurrection and the biblical accounts stand. “The only reasonable explanation for the missing body, the many appearances, the transformed disciples, and the amazing origin and spread of Christianity is the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from Joseph’s tomb.”51 All unbelieving explanations of the empty tomb are foolish. They tell us more about the depravity of man and the nature of unbelieving thought than they do about redemptive history.

Having seen the empty tomb, the disciples return to their own house; or, literally in Greek “to themselves” (20:10). This indicates that at least some of the apostles were sharing a place to stay in Jerusalem. We know from John 19:26-27 that the mother of Christ was now the beloved disciple’s responsibility. John was probably eager to tell her the news of the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb after the disciples had entered and remained outside weeping. When the disciples left the sepulcher Mary stayed behind to mourn for Jesus. Apparently, the disciples left in haste and did not interact with Mary when they left. We leave this marvelous scene with John believing, Peter wandering and Mary mourning.

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Chapter 4: Mary Magdalene Meets the Risen Christ

But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my LORD, and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the LORD, and that he had spoken these things unto her (Jn. 20:11-18).

Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not (Mk. 16:9-11).

The story of Mary Magdalene meeting the resurrected Christ is peculiar to John. Mark simply records the fact that it occurred and notes the reaction of the apostles to her testimony of the event. Of all the post-resurrection appearances of our Lord, this story is perhaps the most touching and heart-stirring of them all. This account is very precious not simply because we see the love that Mary has for Jesus but primarily because we observe the Savior’s tenderness, mercy and grace toward His people in their suffering. There are a number of things that are noteworthy in our text.

Mary Waits Alone at the Tomb

The first thing to note regarding this narrative is how Mary sets a wonderful example of the need to love and seek Christ.

After examining the tomb and the grave clothes, Peter and John returned home. John, who now believed in the resurrection, obviously saw no need of staying at the tomb. Peter, who was perplexed, probably thought it wise to inform the others that the women’s testimony was indeed true. Mary, however, who either arrived after they had already left or arrived when they were in the tomb, apparently did not speak with Peter and John when they departed. This raises the question: why did Mary stay behind at the tomb?

Given the broad context of Scripture and Mary’s tears, it was her love and devotion towards the Savior which caused her to stay at the tomb and cry. At this point, Mary knew that the Lord’s body was gone. But she did not yet understand what occurred or believe in the resurrection of Christ. Therefore, she sobbed (“klaiein means loud, unrestrained weeping”\(^\text{52}\)) and remained by the tomb because this was the last place where she knew the Redeemer had been.

Perhaps she had some hope that by staying near the tomb she could find out what had happened to Jesus’ body. “Where there is a true love to Christ there will be a constant adherence to him, and a resolution with purpose of heart to cleave to him.”

Even though Mary’s knowledge was deficient, and her faith in the resurrection lacking; she acted upon the little knowledge and faith that she did have, and sought Jesus intensely and affectionately. We see in Mary a greater exhibition of love and devotion toward the Redeemer than even that of the apostles at this time. Dead or alive, she wanted to be near the Savior. Her knowledge was so deficient and her grief so strong that she simply resolved to wait near the tomb hoping to hear something about the whereabouts of Christ.

While Mary cannot be excused for her lack of knowledge and unbelief regarding the resurrection, we can still learn from her love and dedication. If there is something troubling us, or we are experiencing a trial, or we lack the biblical knowledge and faith that we ought to have, then we must imitate Mary and seek to be as close to Jesus as possible. While we obviously cannot linger near the tomb we can seek to be closer to the Savior through prayer, Bible reading and meditation upon His Word. We can pray that God would increase our faith and love toward the Mediator. We can meditate upon what Christ has done for us and ask God to increase our affection and devotion toward His Son. Mary Magdalene had been redeemed out of a great demonic oppression. She never appeared to forget or take for granted the wonderful things the Lord did for her. Oh, that we could have Mary’s love and appreciation toward Christ!

We must also linger long where the Redeemer’s Word is preached, where the doctrines of grace are exalted and biblical worship is practiced. We come closer to the Savior through the means of grace. When people talk about their great love toward Jesus yet care not for His doctrine or the worship that He authorized, then they are “talking the talk but not walking the walk.” To be closer to Christ, we must also spend time with God’s people, with the Savior’s body. People who do not go to church or who go to be entertained and then leave as soon as possible are not moving closer to Jesus. Mary had a strong, constant love and appreciation for the Savior. May God give us hearts like Mary’s so that we would never take our Lord for granted or neglect His ordinances. Hutcheson writes, “Albeit there are oftimes many errors in the way of affectionate saints, yet those whom Christ is to manifest himself most and first unto are such as cannot want [i.e. get] him but must incessantly wait till they get him…her affection…keeps her waiting on, and so though her failings were many, she gets the first sight of Christ.”

Mary’s Angelic Encounter

As Mary wept at the tomb, she decided (probably out of curiosity) to stoop down and look into the sepulcher. In the sepulcher she saw two angels in white, one at the head and the other at the foot of where Jesus body had lain. The angels’ presence and their position are interesting and raise a number of questions.

First, why did these angels appear to the women (Mt. 28:5-8; Mk. 16:2-8; Lk.24:1-8) and to Mary (Jn. 20:12), but not to Peter and John? Although the Scripture does not give any specific reason, it may be that our Lord wanted the disciples to believe based on the physical evidence alone. Only the women saw the angels and were given specific instructions to tell the apostles about what they had seen. Also, the fact that one moment the angels were there and then soon after they were not to be seen indicates that the angels of God can appear and disappear,

instantaneously and supernaturally at will. God had instructed them to appear to the women, but not to the men. It is likely that these two angels were in the tomb when Peter and John inspected the body, but purposefully remained invisible.

Second, why were the angels sitting at the foot and head of where our Lord’s body had lain? The angels were likely sitting instead of standing in order to set Mary at ease. If they were standing, Mary may have thought they were about to leave. By sitting, they indicate that they were waiting for Mary to arrive and they were not in an aggressive posture. Their position at the head and foot of where Jesus’ body had been possibly indicates that they were guardians of the Savior’s body while it was in the tomb. In Psalm 91:11 God promised His Son, “For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.” Matthew 28:2ff, however, seems to indicate that the angels came from heaven right after the resurrection took place. A number of commentators have noted the similarity of the position of the two angels to the angels at each end of the mercy seat. Pink writes, “Who can doubt that the Holy Spirit would have us link up this verse with Exodus 25:17-19—‘And thou shalt make a mercy-seat of pure gold…and thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy-seat.’ More remarkable still is the final word which Jehovah spake unto Moses concerning the mercy seat: ‘And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy-seat from between the two cherubims’ (Ex. 25:22). Here, then, in John’s Gospel, do we learn once more that Christ is the meeting-place between God and man!”

These two angels were placed in the empty tomb to honor the resurrected Savior; add to the glory and magnificence of our Lord’s resurrection; comfort the saints and communicate the reality of the resurrection to God’s people. “Christ crucified was the great propitiatory, at the head and feet of which were these two cherubim, not with flaming swords, to keep us from, but welcome messengers, to direct us to, the way of life.” Are you trusting the resurrected, living Redeemer, who died to expiate the sins of His people and propitiate the wrath of God?

Third, why doesn’t Mary act surprised, astonished or frightened at the sight of these angels like the group of women before her? These angels did appear as men; however, their white, dazzling apparel and the unusual location should have indicated to Mary that these were no ordinary visitors to the tomb. The only logical answer to this question is found in Mary’s sorely troubled state of mind. Her grief was so strong and her desire to minister to the Lord’s body was so focused that she was not thinking rationally. She was not paying close attention to what was happening around her.

The Significance of the Angel’s Question

The angels ask Mary a question: “Woman, why are you weeping?” (Jn. 20:13). This question is meant to convey a number of things to Mary in a subtle, delicate manner.

First, this question contains an implicit gentle rebuke of Mary’s grief. Mary’s sorrow and tears were rooted in a lack of knowledge, understanding and belief in things that she had been instructed in by Jesus. Therefore, her weeping was inappropriate. She was weeping because the grave was empty. If she understood the truth, she should have been rejoicing, not weeping. In fact, if the Savior’s body was still in the tomb, then Mary and everyone else would have reason to weep. For if Christ had not arisen, then we would all still be in our sins and there would be no resurrection unto life.

56 Matthew Henry, Commentary of the Whole Bible, 5:1212.
There are lessons in Mary’s weeping for all believers. (1) A lack of right biblical knowledge and faith in the Word of God will lead professing Christians into many sorrows and anxieties. Life can be very difficult when people live in family turmoil because they refuse to believe the Bible and instead turn for help to the secular priesthood of psychiatrists and psychologists. People needlessly weep and suffer because they do not believe that God is sovereign or that Christ is ruling now as the victorious King. Their theological outlook on life is one of pessimism, defeatism and retreat. If we understand who Jesus is and the implications of the resurrection, then we will lead lives of faith unto victory. (2) We often demonstrate our lack of faith in God when we fret, complain or even shed tears when we really have no cause. The Savior commands us not to worry (Mt. 6:25-34) and Paul tells us by the Spirit to be anxious for nothing (Phil. 4:6). A solid knowledge of Scripture and a hearty trust in it will dispel false sorrows, false fears, false anxieties and vain tears. J. C. Ryle writes, “She wept when the angels spoke to her: ‘Woman,’ they said, ‘why weepest thou?’—She was weeping still when our Lord spoke to her: ‘Woman,’ He also said, ‘why weepest thou?’ And the burden of her complaint was always the same: ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him.’—Yet all this time her risen Master was close to her, with ‘body, flesh, and bones, and all things pertaining to the perfection of man’s nature.’ (Article IV.) Her tears were needless. Her anxiety was unnecessary. Like Hagar in the wilderness, she had a well of water by her side, but she had not eyes to see it.”

Second, the angels’ question is designed to point Mary to the truth without directly stating it. When the women had encountered the angels in the tomb a little earlier, they announced the resurrection immediately in a clear, dramatic manner (Mt. 28:6-7; Mk. 16:6-7; Lk. 24:5-6). But, here, they inquire about her sorrow. The question has the same sense of “do you really have a reason to weep?” They want Mary to search her heart (“Do you not remember the words Jesus spoke to you?”) and take account of the evidence before her (“Do you not see the grave clothes lying there between us neatly in place? Do you really think that we would allow the body of Christ to be stolen?”)

Third, the angels (and, in a moment, Jesus) ask Mary a question about her weeping instead of directly announcing the resurrection because our Lord wants to surprise her with His own presence. This was a great condescension and act of mercy on Christ’s part. He overlooks her faults and gives her precisely what she desires and needs—Himself. Poor Mary was weeping when she should have been rejoicing. She was looking for the Savior in the wrong place—the sepulcher. She was looking into a place for the dead, for the living and risen Mediator. She was undergoing her own inward emotional agony because she wanted so much to be with Jesus. And all the sorrow and folly was her fault. It all was the result of spiritual blindness and a lack of faith. But in spite of Mary’s failures, our Lord will have mercy on her and reveal Himself to her. Mary’s love, dedication and commitment to the Redeemer are greatly rewarded, while her many faults are dealt with as gently as possible.

Mary’s Answer

Mary said to the angels, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him” (Jn. 20:13). The word for “they” used here is indefinite, indicating

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that she has no idea who could have taken the body. There are two things noteworthy about her response.

First, Mary openly acknowledged that Jesus is her Lord. Earlier, when she had spoken to Peter and John she said, “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb” (Jn. 20:2); but here when talking to complete strangers (there is no evidence from the passage that she regarded these visitors as angels) she says, “They have taken away my Lord” (Jn. 20:13). Although her weeping was unjustified, we still see in Mary a great faith and commitment to Christ. She had given herself to the Savior and had bowed the knee to Him as her royal sovereign. Although in her mind the kingdom was shattered or at least postponed, her attachment to the King never wavered. As Spurgeon says, “Whether you see him or do not see him, he is still yours; and you must hold to it that he is still your own. ‘My beloved is mine, and I am his,’ and if I do not just now behold the smilings of his face, yet he is my Lord…. Come death, come life, come darkness of soul, or joy of spirit, whatever happens, I am my Lord’s. Such holy constancy will be rewarded.”

Can you say, “Jesus is my Lord?” Not one person on earth will go to heaven that does not speak of the Redeemer as “my Lord.” With David we must say, “The Lord is my Shepherd” (Ps. 23:1). With Solomon we must say of Christ, “My beloved is mine, and I am his” (Song of Sol. 2:16). Every knee must bow to the resurrected King and “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11). Oh Lord, commend Christ to our hearts above all things and make us resolve by the power of Your Spirit to wage war with every known transgression against His throne.

Second, Mary’s obsession was finding Christ and ministering to Him, to the exclusion of all else. Mary’s love for Jesus is so strong that just to be near Him, even near His dead body, is all she longs for at this moment. Her obsession and grief are so strong she doesn’t even concern herself regarding who the two inquirers in the tomb are. She was so absorbed by her grief and so occupied with her thoughts about Jesus that she did not even concern herself with speaking to angels.

Jesus Appears to Mary

As soon as Mary stops speaking, “she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, ‘Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to Him, ‘Rabboni!’ (which is to say, teacher)” (Jn. 20:15-17). There are a number of things to note regarding this incident.

First, why does Mary turn around at this precise moment? The text does not specifically say. Perhaps she sensed someone standing behind her. Maybe she heard a footstep behind her. It could simply be that she was done examining the tomb and talking with the angels and turned to move away from the sepulcher. If the tomb faced the east, then our Lord’s shadow would have been observable on the entrance to the sepulcher. There is a distinct possibility that when the Savior appeared behind Mary, the angels saw Him and rose in respect to their Ruler and showed awe and devotion on their faces at the presence of Christ. This would have caused Mary to immediately turn to look behind her.

Second, why doesn’t Mary recognize Jesus who is standing so close, right in front of her? In verse 15, it says that Mary thought He was the gardener (i.e. the caretaker of Joseph of Arimathea’s garden property surrounding the tomb). The phenomenon of not recognizing the risen Savior was not limited to Mary. When our Lord appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke says, “Their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him” (24:16). Mark says that “He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked” (16:12). After Christ spent a long time with these disciples instructing them; “Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him” (Lk. 24:31). Similarly, when the disciples were fishing and Jesus stood on the shore, the disciples did not recognize Him until His instructions lead to a great catch of fish (see Jn. 21:4-7). Given these examples where our Lord was not recognized because He did not yet want to be recognized, it is best to view her non-recognition in supernatural terms rather than natural. While it is true that she was not expecting to see the Savior, this expectation cannot account for not recognizing Him from only a foot or so away.

Third, Christ’s questions to Mary are calculated to focus her attention on Him. He repeats verbatim the question the angels had just asked, “Woman, why are you weeping?” Jesus, of course, knows why she is weeping. Thus, this question (as noted) is designed to teach Mary a lesson about the need to pay closer attention to what she had been taught and to believe it. Interestingly, the fact that this question is identical to the angels’ indicates how perfectly the angels carry out their instructions from the Son of God. The second question, “Whom are you seeking?” is even more searching and revealing than the first. How did this Man that Mary thought was a gardener know that she was seeking anyone? Perhaps, Mary thought that He overheard her conversation with the angels. Once again, note that the Savior is stimulating Mary’s mind to remembrance of the things she had been taught as a follower of Christ.

If we compare this passage with the Redeemer’s encounter with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we see by application that our Lord wants us to find Him through His Word. “How many are ever mourning and sorrowing, and have no comfort in their religion, while Christ is close to them.”59 Thus, the Mediator draws her attention by His Word. We must remember that physical proximity to the risen Savior is not what is crucial to the Christian. For, it is His spiritual presence in the soul that brings life and understanding. Jesus’ mercy condescends to Mary’s weakness, but He does so in a way that is best calculated to benefit her spiritually. If the Redeemer is close to us and we do not sense it, then we must meditate on the Word of God and trust in its glorious promises.

Our Lord’s question, “Why are you weeping?” demonstrates that the Savior is very concerned about each one of His saint’s tears and anxieties personally. This is part of His high priestly work, to care for us, to comfort us and guide us into spiritual safety. With the crucifixion in the past and the foundation of our redemption complete and perfect, the exalted Redeemer is now very active in watching over, praying over and guiding His sheep. This incident with Mary ought to greatly strengthen our faith in Christ as our Savior. For in spite of her ignorance and unbelief, Jesus comes to Mary and tenderly gives her the desire of her heart. She asked for a dead body and received the living exalted King. She only wanted to minister to a corpse, but the living Savior came and ministered to her heart.

Fourth, Mary assumes that at that early hour the person questioning her must be the gardener. Her answer reveals her continuing ignorance and her deep love. It is very touching. She said, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Mary is so caught up in her quest for Jesus and her grief that her offer is not in

accordance with reality. She was ignoring the fact that the grave clothes were lying neatly in the place where our Lord’s body had laid. Also, even if the body of the Savior had been produced, she would have been unable to carry it off to a safe place. “Note, Troubled spirits, in a cloudy and dark day are apt to misrepresent Christ to themselves, and to put wrong constructions upon the methods of his providence and grace.”

She was gravely mistaken because she did not interpret the things before her in light of divine revelation, but was speculating about a great redemptive event. Her heart was in the right place, but it was not informed by Scripture or the verbal teachings of Jesus.

Jesus Makes Himself Known

The Savior has been present before Mary, but she has not recognized Him and His questions have not brought her to an understanding of the truth. Therefore, “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to Him, ‘Rabboni!’ (which is to say, Teacher)” (Jn. 20:16). There are a number of things to note regarding how Mary came to know that it was the Lord.

First, Christ makes Himself known by the use of only one word which was Mary’s own name. It is likely that two things about this caught her attention. For one, a gardener would not have known who she was. Thus, the stranger was not a stranger at all but a friend. Also, there was probably something distinctly recognizable in the manner in which Jesus called her name. She had heard the Savior speak her name many times before and, thus, the Lord’s voice was immediately recognizable. “One single word was enough to open her eyes, to let the whole truth shine upon her mind, and to reveal the great fact that her Savior was not dead but alive, and that He had won a victory over the grave.”

“Never was there a one-word utterance more charged with emotion than this.”

The Redeemer is teaching Mary and every one of us something very important about the doctrine of salvation. He wants us to know that salvation is very personal and definite. When Jesus said, “Woman,” which is indefinite and can be applied to the class of adult females in general, Mary was not enlightened. But when our Lord addressed Mary by name, the Savior’s love and the knowledge of the resurrection came home to her heart. “The life that the good Shepherd has laid down for the sheep had been down for each separate sheep;” and now that He has risen He applies that salvation to the elect sinner personally, lovingly, savingly. “It is as though he had said, ‘I have called thee by thy name: though art mine.’” This was as our Lord promised, “The sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (Jn. 10:3-4). “Jesus, as the good shepherd, has an intimate personal knowledge of all those whom he intends to save. And just as the shepherd leads his own sheep out of the fold, so also the tender and loving shepherd, Jesus, gathers his flock, leading them out of the fold of [apostate] Israel (10:3; cf. 1:11-13; Mic. 2:12) and of heathenism (10:16).”

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60 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1213.
61 “The original Aramaic name [‘Miriam’] by which her parents and friends must have addressed her many a time, the name which Jesus always used in speaking to her, is employed also in this instance. Jesus addresses her by her native name, in her native tongue” (William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 455).
64 Ibid.
When our Lord calls us personally through the Word of God accompanied by the enlightening, vivifying, drawing power of the Holy Spirit, we will hear His voice and will obey His call and pick up our cross and follow Him. The Scriptures must be to us the same in importance, power and authority as if Christ was speaking directly to us from only a few feet away. Calvin writes, “Thus in Mary we have a lively image of our calling; for the only way in which we are admitted to the true knowledge of Christ is, when he first knows us, and then familiarly invites us to himself, not by that ordinary voice which sounds indiscriminately in the ears of all, but by that voice with which he especially calls the sheep which the Father hath given to him. Thus Paul says, After that you have known God, or rather, after that you have been known by him (Gal. iv.9).”

With one word Jesus shows His boundless compassion toward Mary. He knew that Mary had been careless regarding His teaching on the resurrection. He knew that she had not believed and had forgotten His promises that He would rise from the dead. Yet, He forgives her unbelief and carelessness and graciously rewards her seeking and loving of Himself. God is slow to anger and indeed is very kind, compassionate and merciful. He covers her sins and rewards her obedience. What a precious Savior. This incident ought to greatly stimulate our faith, for Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). These events were recorded for our benefit. The Lord does not love us any less than He did Mary. He knows our infirmities and weaknesses. He knows when we are full of sorrow and heartache. He will not leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5; Mt. 28:20). If you are ever tempted to doubt the love of Christ, then remember this passage and trust in its teaching.

Second, when Mary heard Christ say her name she “turned herself back” to look into the eyes of Jesus. This indicates that after briefly conversing with our Lord, whom she supposed was the gardener, Mary turned back toward the sepulcher. Her turning to focus on the Savior teaches us that if the Redeemer is to occupy the first place in our lives, then we must look away from the things of this world and place our faith and spiritual affection solely upon Christ. “How searching is this: if Christ really occupied the throne of our hearts, the poor things of this world would make no appeal to us. It is because we are so little absorbed with Him, and therefore so little acquainted with His soul-satisfying perfection, that the things of time and sense are so highly esteemed.”

Once we understand who Jesus is and behold Him with the eye of faith, we must never turn back to our old unregenerate, unprofitable lives. We cannot find truth, salvation and peace by looking back at our old dead self; trusting in our feelings; or, delighting in this present evil world which is passing away. Like Mary, who was seeking the Savior with every fiber of her being, we must look to Christ as the pearl of great price (Mt. 13:46) and the apple of our eye. Seek Jesus until you find Him and then when you find Him never let go of Him. When the Spirit moves upon your heart, you will not rest and will never be content until you cling tightly to Christ. Christ has died, has risen and now in a special redemptive sense is ours. Let us learn from Mary’s love, so that our love will never grow cold.

Third, Mary answered Jesus in the same manner that she was accustomed before the passion. Her one word response, “Rabboni,” corresponds to Christ’s affectionate “Mary.” John gives the translation of the word telling us it means “teacher.” “All the love and faith and joy of which her illuminated heart and mind were capable were poured into that word: ‘Teacher!’ The Shepherd had called his sheep by name, and the sheep heard and joyfully responded (Jn. 10:3).”

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Jesus thereby re-established the personal relationship that Mary thought she had forever lost; only now it was to be set on a deeper level than had been possible when Mary knew Jesus as ‘Rabbi.”

Do Not Cling to Me

When Mary greeted Christ, she (following eastern custom) fell prostrate before Jesus and clasped his feet. This act was the normal response of affection and indicated both Mary’s joy to see the Savior and her desire never to lose Him again. This clasping of our Lord resulted in an interesting response from Christ. “Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God’” (Jn. 20:17).

This section of Scripture has presented difficulties to commentators and raises two important questions. First, why is Mary told not to cling to the Savior when only minutes later the other women who had been inside the tomb beheld Jesus and “came and held Him by the feet and worshipped Him” (Mt. 28:9)? When our Lord appeared later to the disciples, He invited Thomas to place his finger into the scars on His hands and his hand into the wound on His side (Jn. 20:27).

The key to understanding why Mary was not to cling to the Redeemer is found in the verb used and the reason the Mediator Himself gives for her to release Him. The Greek word (haptou) rendered “touch” in the KJV means “fasten oneself to, cling to, hang on by, lay hold of, or grasp.”

“The verb is not thinganein, to touch lightly, or pselaphan, to feel over, but haptesthai, to cling to, to grasp tightly.” Mary had missed Jesus so much and sought Him with such passion, that when she found Him she tightly clung to Him hoping never, ever, to lose Him again. She wanted things to return to what she considered “the good old days” before the tragic events of Golgotha. She wanted Jesus to stay with her and the disciples and be with them just as He had before the crucifixion. Therefore, given these considerations, at least part of the reason that our Lord tells Mary to stop clinging to Him is her need to realize that, now that redemption has been accomplished and Jesus has arisen from the dead, things cannot go back to what they were. Everything is now different. As Paul says, “Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh [i.e. during His earthly ministry], yet now we know Him thus no longer” (2 Cor. 5:16).

The resurrection and ascension are the transition points from the Savior’s earthly ministry to His work in heaven at the right hand of God. It is the point of demarcation from humiliation to exaltation. As the exalted King, the Mediator will rule the earth and minister to His saints by His Holy Spirit. Mary needs to view her relationship with the Redeemer in its proper redemptive-historical context. She needs to place the kingdom of God’s interest above her own heart’s desire to spend time in Christ’s personal physical presence. This interpretation is supported by our Lord’s own reasons why Mary needs to let go.

69 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 375.
70 Liddell and Scott as quoted in J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:425.
71 R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel, 1360. Our Lord’s command to Mary, “Do not cling to Me,” demonstrates that the resurrected Savior had a real human body and was not an apparition, hallucination, or merely a spirit. The resurrected Mediator could be touched, handled and clung to. Obviously, Jesus would not command her to stop doing something that was impossible in the first place.
When Christ explains his request He says, “for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go tell the brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God’” (Jn. 20:17). This statement about the ascension raises the second difficult question about our text. How or in what manner does the ascension have any bearing on Mary’s clinging to Jesus? This statement has resulted in a variety of interpretations and speculations.

Perhaps the best view is that Christ is telling Mary not to detain Him at that moment for He must ascend and still has important work to do with all the disciples. “Do not spend so much precious time clinging to My feet, but rather go be a witness of My glorious resurrection to the disciples and go and tell them that I am going to ascend to our covenant God. Indeed, My ascension has been definitively accomplished in the resurrection. In a sense, I am on My way. I am in the process of going, so make haste—go!” “Think of others; and do not occupy yourself, as you are disposed to do, in touching my feet and gratifying your own feelings. Natural as it is, there is other work to do now.”

As noted, part of this explanation is related to the fact that Jesus is not returning to His old life of humiliation, but has begun His exaltation, His heavenly mode of existence. “The resurrection has made possible a new more intimate spiritual union between Jesus and his disciples; the old physical contacts are no longer appropriate, though touch may yet be appealed to in proof that the glorified Lord is none other than he who was crucified.”

**Jesus’ Message to the Disciples**

The message to the disciples contains more than the announcement regarding the ascension. It also contains some crucial information about Christ’s and all true believers’ relationship with the Father. As the Mediator of the New Covenant who has perfectly accomplished the work of redemption and has risen from the dead victorious, our Lord said, “Go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God’” (Jn. 20:17). There are a number of noteworthy things about this statement.

First, this is the first time that Jesus calls His disciples’ brethren. Likewise, when our Lord conveyed a message through the women in Matthew 28:10 only moments after this, He once again refers to the disciples as “My brethren.” This terminology indicates that as a result of the cross, believers have been adopted into God’s own family and have a new special relationship with Jesus and each other. The Redeemer by His vicarious sacrifice and by His

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72 Some of the views of this passage are as follows: (1) One view is that Jesus having accomplished the sacrifice “was on His way to present the sacred blood in heaven; and, between the meeting with Mary in the garden and the meeting of Mt. 28:9, He had so ascended and returned” (C. I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1989], 1304). This view is extremely unlikely because a) Mt. 28:9 occurs only minutes after this scene; b) It presupposes a literal blood offering in heaven; and, c) It assumes more that one ascension which is not provable. (2) Some think (e.g., Melancthon) that Christ was speaking about His second coming and kingdom, “when all who have known and loved Him on earth, shall at length dwell with Him in holy familiarity, and go out from His presence no more” (J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:426). This view has to be read into the text. (3) Still others teach that until the actual ascension the Savior’s work was not complete. Therefore, our Lord commands Mary not to slow His work and detain Him on the earth. This view is refuted by the fact that others were permitted to touch Him and even hold His feet.

73 J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:426. C. Stanford writes, “It is almost as if He had said: ‘Mary, there is no time now for tender intimacies, and protracted intercourse; I have this more important employment for you; go to them at once, for they must make haste if they would see Me; and you must make haste if you would give them fair notice’” (“From Calvary to Olivet,” p. 125 as quoted in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed. *The Sermon Outline Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker. 1987], 8:287).

victorious resurrection makes us sons of the Father and the people of God. This statement is all the more remarkable when we consider that it was made toward a group of men that had abandoned Him at Gethsemane and fled for their lives. It is obvious from this statement that salvation is solely through Christ and is not something achieved by good works or “covenant faithfulness.” The Savior graciously confronts His errant apostles by speaking of their filial relationship to God as their Father. As Paul says, “For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out ‘Abba, Father’” (Rom. 8:15). Luther writes, “If now Christ is our brother, I would like to know what we still lack? Brethren in the flesh have common possessions, have together one father, one inheritance, otherwise they would not be brethren; so we have common possessions with Christ and have together one Father and one inheritance, which does not grow less when divided, but whoever has one part of the spiritual inheritance has it all.”

The fact that Jesus makes this statement after His blood sacrifice on Golgotha and the resurrection refutes the modernist, ecumenical, pluralistic theology which teaches “the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.” No. Only those who place their trust in Christ and His sacrificial death and resurrection are adopted into the family of God. God’s family is based on the blood of the Son of God, not fallen humanity. “We are not naturally born into God’s family. We are alienated from God and are born outside it as heirs of sin and death. But God is gracious; therefore, by the death of Christ and by the application of that death to us by the Holy Spirit, God brings us back into fellowship with himself and grants us family privileges.”

It is interesting that in Psalm 22 (one of the great messianic psalms), after a very graphic description of the crucifixion (vs. 1-18) mingled with prayers for deliverance (vs. 1, 11, 19, 20, 21a, b), the Messiah says “You have answered Me” (21e) and then we hear the words, “I will declare Your name to My brethren” (v. 22). With Calvin we see in John’s passage a fulfillment of that prediction.

What is implied by the word “brethren” is stated explicitly in the message itself, “I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God” (Jn. 20:17). Because of the work of Christ, His Father in heaven is now our Father, His God is now our God. “Now therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). We must always remember that it is solely on the basis of Christ’s shed blood and the imputation of His perfect righteousness that we are designated sons by adoption. This is because judicially, in God’s sight, we are clothed with the Savior’s righteousness. When God looks upon us He doesn’t see our filthy rags but rather the ethical perfection of His dear Son.

Second, the message conveyed is focused on the ascension of Jesus and its effects. Only moments before when our Lord appeared to Mary, the angelic message to the other women was: “He is not here, but is risen” (Lk. 24:6; cf. Mt. 28:6; Mk. 16:6). The virtual replacement of the language of resurrection with that of ascension is an indication that we should view these two as one fundamental act of glorification. The adoption of sons that the Savior mentions only comes

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76 James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, 99), 5:1578. Calvin’s thoughts on this passage are excellent: “It is, unquestionably, an invaluable blessing, that believers can safely believe that He who is the God of Christ is their God, and that He who is the Father of Christ is their Father. Nor have we any reason to fear that this confidence will be charged with rashness, since it is founded on Christ, or that it will be proud boasting, since Christ himself has dictated it to us with his own mouth” (*Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 2:262).
about as a result of the resurrection, the ascension, the Redeemer’s rule at the right hand of God and His bestowal of the Holy Spirit unto His church. Further, Jesus mentioning of the ascension should instruct the apostles that the reason He rose was to ascend and rule. The Mediator must enter into His heavenly Kingship in order to apply redemption to all His sheep and bring them into the heavenly family with Him. Thus, the apostles and all Christians must not view the resurrection only as an isolated event, but as part of the seamless garment of His glorification and salvific Kingship.

The Redeemer, as God, raised Himself from the dead and now He is the Lord of life, “a life-giving Spirit.” As the ascended, victorious Savior He raises and quickens every believer. Life is given to us by Christ our brother who has taken our nature and earned a title to eternal life by His sacrificial death and His sinless life. Jesus said, “A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also” (Jn. 14:19).

Third, in considering our text we must not overlook the fact that Jesus first appeared to a woman and conveys His message to the apostles through her. (The message of the resurrection given to the other women by the two angels was also to be delivered to the disciples [cf. Mt. 28:7; Mk. 16:7; Lk. 24:10]). Although the narratives give no specific reasons for this, one can infer that Mary and the other women were rewarded for their devotion to the Redeemer and the apostles were, in a sense, rebuked for their lack of faith in the resurrection. The women were guilty of unbelief also, but they had not received the same training and responsibility as had the apostles. Calvin writes, “This is a mild and gentle chastisement, when Christ thus sends his disciples to the school of the women, that, by their agency, he may bring them back to himself. Here we behold also the inconceivable kindness of Christ, in choosing and appointing women to be the witnesses of his resurrection to the Apostles; for the commission which is given to them is the only foundation of our salvation…”

Chapter 5: Excursus on the Theological Implications and Aspects of the Resurrection

In order to better understand Christ and the doctrine of salvation we need to consider the theological aspects of the resurrection or the significance of the resurrection in New Testament theology. We have already studied to some degree the empty tomb and the appearances which prove the historicity of the resurrection. The resurrection was a literal, historical, objective event that is a crucial part of the redemption achieved by the Savior. Now let us turn our attention to the resurrection as it fits into the work of Christ overall. There are a number of important teachings related to the resurrection of Christ.

Christ’s Own Power

The Bible teaches that the Mediator’s resurrection occurred as a result of His own power no less than that of the Father. This point is crucial because it demonstrates the importance and necessity of Jesus’ true divine nature for the achieving of redemption. Our Lord’s divinity is necessary for rendering a sacrifice of infinite value and for raising His own dead body out of the

78 Ibid, 2:262.
The Mediator Himself achieved a victory over death, decay and hell. By raising Himself out of the jaws of death the Savior became an active victor, the very fountain and author of life.

That Christ was made alive by His own power is evident from the following passages. “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up’” (Jn. 2:19). “For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will” (Jn. 5:21). Our Lord has the identical power and ability of God the Father. His power resides in His own divine nature and is not dependent upon anything outside of Himself. “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (Jn. 10:17-18). Beasley-Murray writes, “Here two thoughts coalesce: the unity of the death and resurrection of the Son for the salvation of the world, and the attribution of the resurrection to the Son...in the Fourth Gospel the Resurrection is the completion of the works given by the Father to the Son to do; but like the rest of those works it is ultimately the work of the Father through the Son (the principle is applied in 5:19-30 to the resurrection and judgment of the world).”

“Jesus said to her [Martha], ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live’” (Jn. 11:25). Christ is not merely a conduit of salvation, but the very foundation of salvation and resurrection life. “[I]t was necessary that He would resurrect Himself, for the Surety who took this suffering upon Himself would also have to triumph over it. If someone else had resurrected Him, He would neither have triumphed over death, nor delivered Himself, and consequently would also not be able to deliver others.” “Jesus is the resurrection and the life in person...the full, blessed life of God, all his glorious attributes: omniscience, wisdom, omnipotence, love, holiness, etc. As such he is also the cause, source, or fountain of the believer’s glorious resurrection and of their everlasting life.”

Since the Bible emphasizes that our Lord arose through His own power, why then is the resurrection also ascribed to the power of God (Ac. 2:24, 32; 3:26; 5:30; 1 Cor. 6:14; Eph. 1:20) or the Father (Rom. 6:4; Gal. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:3)? The answer is found in the biblical teaching regarding the trinity that whatever the Father does, the Son in like manner does (Jn. 5:19). The Father, Son and Spirit are one and the same God. Each person of the godhead is operative in the works of the other. Another reason why it is ascribed to the Father is the fact that since God the Father (acting as a divine judge against the elect’s sin imputed to the Savior) poured out His wrath upon Jesus; He also raised up the Mediator as a public testimony that His Son rendered a full satisfaction for sin.

The Ultimate Sign

The resurrection was the ultimate sign from God. When the Jews asked Jesus for a sign to demonstrate His authority, He answered, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19). In fact, on a number of occasions our Lord pointed to His resurrection as the validation of His ministry and proof of who He was (cf. Lk. 11:29; 12:39-42; 16:4). The miracles that Christ did are all lesser signs which point to the ultimate sign—the resurrection. “All the signs in the Gospel are related to the supreme sign, above all as revelations of the divine sovereignty which comes through Christ in his total ministry, culminating in his lifting up on the

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cross and to heaven. Precisely because it is the final and all-inclusive sign, it transcends all others. The preliminary signs had only temporary effects, and that within a limited area; the wine that was so lavishly provided at the wedding feast finally ran out, the multitude which ate the loaves in the wilderness grew hungry again, and Lazarus was raised, but to die once more.”\(^{82}\) But with the resurrection Christ is risen to live forever in exaltation. History is changed forever as the Savior rules from the right hand of God over the kingdom of His grace. The cross leads to the empty tomb and to the throne of God. Although, with the close of the canon and the death of the apostles, the validating sign gifts have ceased, preachers of the gospel still focus upon the resurrection and the living, ruling Savior as the ultimate sign from God.

**Justification**

The word of God connects the resurrection of Jesus to our justification. “It [the righteousness of Christ] shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification” (Rom. 4:24-25). It is important to understand what Paul means in this passage for the New Testament virtually always relates justification directly to Christ’s death, blood, suffering or atonement (cf. Rom. 3:24; 5:9; 6:7; 8:33, 34; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; 2:13; Col. 2:14; Heb. 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10, 12, 14; etc). The blood of the Savior washes away our sins and the resurrection strictly speaking is not in any way expiation for sin.

Paul connects the resurrection with justification because the resurrection is a vindication of the person and work of Christ. “The resurrection expresses God’s satisfaction with what Christ has done. The exaltation of the person is the vindication of his mission. If Christ had not been raised there would have been no certainty that his death affected anything. Man would, as Paul says, still be in his sins.”\(^{83}\) Thus, we understand why the resurrection is so important to our faith and the preaching of the gospel. The fact that the Redeemer is living and exalted points to the efficacy of the Mediator’s death. It demonstrates that the price has been paid in full; that the judgment of Golgotha has led to glorification, eternal life and adoption into God’s own family. The cross leads to the empty tomb and the empty tomb proves the power, efficacy and acceptance of the cross. “As the death of Christ, according to the determinate counsel of a holy and righteous God, was a demonstration of the guilt of His people, so His resurrection was their acquittal from every charge.”\(^{84}\) “Our sin had killed Him; our justification raised Him again….

\(^{82}\) George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 361.  
Calvin writes, “But the meaning is, that when we possess the benefit of Christ’s death and resurrection, there is nothing wanting to the completion of perfect righteousness. By separating his death from his resurrection, he no doubt accommodates what he says to our ignorance; for it is also true that righteousness has been obtained for us by that obedience of Christ, which he exhibited in his death, as the Apostle himself teaches us in the following chapter. But as Christ, by rising from the dead, made known how much he had effected by his death, this distinction is calculated to teach us that our salvation was begun by the sacrifice, by which our sins were expiated, and was at length completed by his resurrection: for the beginning of righteousness is to be reconciled to God, and its completion is to attain life by having death abolished…. As it would not have been enough for Christ to undergo the wrath and judgment of God, and to endure the curse due to our sins, without his coming forth a conqueror, and without being received into celestial glory, that by his intercession he might reconcile God to us, the efficacy of justification is ascribed to his resurrection, by which death was overcome; not that the sacrifice of the cross, by which we are reconciled to God, contributes nothing towards our justification, but the completeness of his favor
His resurrection was the proof of our justification only because it was the necessary effect of it. Obviously, we could not place our faith in Jesus and His sacrificial death if Christ was still under the power of death, rotting in the tomb. The fact that the Mediator is risen from the dead means that God is smiling upon Him and His work and through Him smiles upon all those who believe.

John Murray gives five reasons why the apostle connects the resurrection with the justification of sinners:

1. We are justified by faith, and this faith must be directed to Jesus (3:22, 26). But only as the living Lord can he be the object of faith. (2) It is in union with Christ that we are justified (cf. 8:1; II Cor. 5:21). Only as active through the resurrection can any virtue proceed from Christ to us and only with a living Christ can union have efficacy. (3) The righteousness of Christ by which we are justified (5:17, 18, 19) has its embodiment in Christ; it can never be thought of in abstraction from him as a reservoir of merit stored up. Only as the living one can Christ be the embodiment of righteousness and be made to us righteousness from God (I Cor. 1:30). (4) The death and resurrection of Christ are inseparable. Hence even the death or blood of Christ as related to our justification (3:24, 25; 5:9; 8:33, 34) could have no efficacy to that end in isolation from the resurrection. (5) It is through the mediation of Christ that we come to stand in the grace of justification (5:2). But the mediation of Christ could not be operative if he were still under the power of death.

Exaltation

The Resurrection begins the exaltation of Christ. The divine-human Mediator’s ministry can be divided into two phases: humiliation and then exaltation. The humiliation encompassed the Redeemer’s whole life, but was greatly intensified in His suffering and death on the cross. His exaltation began at the resurrection and lasts for eternity. Regarding the exaltation, Berkhof writes,

Reformed theology…regards the person of the Mediator, that is, the God-man, as the subject of the exaltation, but stresses the fact that it was, of course, the human nature in which the exaltation took place. The divine nature is not capable of humiliation or exaltation. In the
exaltation the God-man, Jesus Christ, (a) passed from under the law in its federal and penal aspects, and consequently from under the burden of the law as the condition of the covenant of works, and from under the curse of the law; (b) exchanged the penal for the righteous relation to the law, and as Mediator entered in to possession of the blessings of salvation which He merited for sinners; and (c) was crowned with a corresponding honor and glory. It had to appear also in His condition that the curse of sin was lifted. His exaltation was also His glorification.87

While it is true that our Lord’s foundational redemptive work is completed (i.e. His perfect, sinless life and sacrificial death), Jesus in His exalted state as prophet, priest and king is very active at the right hand of God in applying redemption to His people. He pours out His Spirit in regenerating hearts. He continually intercedes for His people; and, He judges His enemies in history and at the end of history. There are a number of areas regarding our Lord’s exaltation that need to be considered.

First, note that Christ was well aware of his coming exaltation before the crucifixion. Indeed, He emphasized it to a degree in His teaching ministry. When many disciples had a difficult time with Jesus’ doctrine and were even complaining about His teaching our Lord mentioned the ascension (Jn. 17:5). Our Lord often directed the disciples’ attention to His exaltation when He discussed the coming judgment. “For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels” (Mk 8:38). Jesus told the high priest at His trial, “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mk. 14:62). Christ made it very clear that as the exalted king He would return in judgment to destroy the nation that rejected Him and persecuted His church. “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mt. 24:30). Jesus often also discussed His central role as Judge in the final judgment (Mt. 7:22-23; 25:31; Lk. 13:27 ff.; Jn. 5:25-29). God “has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man” (Jn. 5:27). He will sit as the exalted king “on the throne of His glory” (Mt. 25:30) and judge all nations. God has taken the Messiah who was despised and rejected of man (Isa. 53:3) who was unjustly prosecuted and murdered by evil men (Jn. 18:23) and made Him the king and judge. The defendant has become king, judge and executioner. The tables have been turned.

Second, the exaltation of Christ is emphasized in apostolic preaching. When Peter preached to the Jews on the day of Pentecost he connected Jesus’ resurrection to His exaltation and heavenly rule (Ac. 2:32-33). Then after quoting Psalm 110:1 which speaks of the enthronement of the Messiah (Ac. 2:34-35) he said, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac. 2:36). Peter in essence is saying, “The very One you humiliated, rejected and murdered, God has exalted and made Lord over all.” The “you killed Him, but God raised Him up” theme is prominent in the book of Acts. Note Peter's second sermon: “But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses” (Ac. 3:14-15). When Peter and the other apostles were commanded by the Jewish counsel not to teach the gospel, they responded by saying, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and

forgiveness of sins” (Ac. 5:30-31). After severely rebuking the Jews as “betrayers and murderers” of Christ, Stephen said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Ac. 7:56). That our Lord is at God’s right hand refers to the fact that Jesus has been given the preeminent place of honor and power in the universe. The Jews emphatically said “no,” but God says to the Savior—“yes and amen!” Peter continued this theme when he introduced the gospel to the Gentiles: Jesus, “whom they [the Jews] killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly...it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead” (Ac. 10:39-40, 42). Years later Paul preached the identical message in Athens, “He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Ac. 17:31). For Paul, the first act of exaltation—the resurrection—is proof positive that Jesus will judge the world (the historical climax of Christ’s exaltation).

Christianity is truly unique in that the gospel is not just the acceptance of certain doctrines, but also involves belief in and submission unto the living, exalted Redeemer. Because Jesus lives, God commands “all men everywhere to repent” (Ac. 17:30). Believers are to submit to the heavenly King. They are to pray to God only through a living Mediator. They commune with the living Savior (especially during the Lord’s supper). Christians are protected by an all-powerful King. As we consider the coming judgment, we know that we shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. And we live with hope and confidence that the Savior is the white horse rider who is progressively conquering the world through His holy Word (Rev. 19:11 ff.). The exaltation permeates the whole life of the church because the Redeemer’s presence and ministry as “Prince” continues.

Third, the exaltation of Jesus is an essential aspect of New Testament theology. In Romans 1:4 Paul says that Christ was “declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.” The word translated “declared” (horisthentos) is better translated as “appointed” or “constituted” or “designated.” The apostle says that, at the resurrection, the incarnate Son (the theanthropic Messiah) is appointed the Son of God with power. In other words, our Lord enters a new phase of His ministry. He has gone from the suffering servant to a position of supreme power and exaltation. This teaching reflects the statement of Jesus that, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Mt. 28:18). Paul says that the exaltation of Christ is the reward for His redemptive obedience. Jesus “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:7-11). In the incarnation our Lord (figuratively speaking) descended a staircase of degradation and progressive humiliation and suffering which culminated in the cross. In the resurrection (whereby Jesus achieved a definitive victory), one discovers the starting point or beginning of an ever-present exaltation. “He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:20-22). “Such language not only witnesses to a defendant whose cause has been vindicated; it is the language of
enthronement, drawing especially from such royal psalms as Psalms 2 and 110. Jesus is the messianic king. (Eph. 1:22 links Ps. 110 with Ps. 8:6) More than that, he is Lord of all, the Son of God in power, now and forever ‘at the right hand of God.”

The exaltation theme is not limited to Paul. Peter urges Christians to be holy because: God is holy (1 Pet. 1:16); Jesus redeemed the church with His own precious blood (1 Pet. 1:18-20); and God “raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God” (1 Pet. 1:21). The author of Hebrews says, “when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:3; cf. 10:12). The book of Hebrews emphasized Christ’s role as a high priest at God’s right hand who intercedes for the church in the heavenly sanctuary (cf. Heb. 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:3, 17, 21; especially 8:1-2). Jesus’ exaltation is paramount in the book of Revelation where our Lord Himself declares, “I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forever more” (1:18). As the message or prophecy of the ascended Lord unfolds, the fact that only Jesus is worthy to open the seven-sealed scroll is noted. No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth is worthy or able to unfold its contents (5:3-4) except “a Lamb as though it had been slain” (5:6). The Man who was rejected, tortured and murdered is now “the white horse rider” (6:2; 19:11) the victor (19:21) and judge (20:11ff.), who will crush all opposition to Him and His people. He will rule until “He has put all enemies under His feet” (1 Cor. 15:25).

Fourth, the exaltation of Christ is necessary in order to vindicate His person and ministry against the charges and accusations of His enemies, chiefly the leaders of the Jews. Jesus was convicted in an ecclesiastical court of being an imposter and committing blasphemy. His miracles were said to have been committed by the power of Satan (Mt. 12:24) and that He was nothing more than a sorcerer. The Jews with their carnal, worldly concept of the Messianic kingdom did not believe that a man from Nazareth of such humble appearance and behavior could be their King; their great deliverer from the bondage of Rome. Further, the fact that God had allowed Jesus to be delivered up to the Romans to be tortured and crucified confirmed the Jews’ unbelieving, perverted thinking about Christ. Surely, they reasoned, “God would not allow the Messiah, the Son of God to suffer such indignities at the hands of the heathen if he was the Messiah. Therefore, he must be a wicked imposter and not our King.”

Our Lord’s resurrection from the dead by the power of God demonstrated that the Father openly acknowledged Jesus to be His Son and His servant. God had allowed the Savior’s life to be taken away as a sacrifice for the sins of His people. The resurrection showed that the demands of divine justice were satisfied. It demonstrated that the Jewish leaders were wrong, corrupt, apostate, dishonest and wicked. The Redeemer was innocent. He was righteous and sinless. And, as a result of His redemptive obedience, He has been given all power and authority (Mt. 28:18); He has been “declared to be the Son of God with power” (Rom. 1:4). The “God of peace…brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb. 13:20). This vindication extends to the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70 and Christ’s role as judge in the final judgment. By the resurrection and exaltation of the Mediator, God acknowledged Him to be His Son, the Messiah and King over all.

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Victory

The resurrection of Christ means victory both for Jesus and for his people. Our Lord died as the head and representative of his sheep. When He arose victorious He secured glorified life for the elect. “As He lives, they shall live also. If He remained under the power of death, there is no source of spiritual life to men; for He is the vine, and we are the branches; if the vine be dead the branches must be dead also.” Although the Savior’s victory should be viewed in the widest sense possible, we will focus on three areas that are emphasized in Scripture: His victory over sin, death and Satan. Note the following.

First, the resurrection of Jesus proves that the atoning work of Christ was a complete success; that our Lord’s vicarious suffering removed all the guilt and penalty of sin for the elect. The resurrection is the Father's seal of approval on the completed work of Christ. It is God’s public declaration of a perfect, complete and satisfactory mission of the Son of God on earth. Paul said, “If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). In other words, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then His whole ministry, suffering and death accomplished nothing. We saw in our consideration of the resurrection and justification that the efficacy of our Lord’s death cannot be separated from His resurrection. When Christ suffered and died on the cross, He said “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30) because the foundation of redemption was complete. The price for sin had been paid in full by the Redeemer’s atoning death. That accomplished redemption, however, does not actually save anyone in space and time unless it is applied by the living Christ, our Mediator and high priest. The resurrection and exaltation of Jesus guarantees that redemption will be applied. Not one of our Lord’s sheep will be lost. Thus, the resurrection should be viewed as a natural consequence of the victory at Calvary and as crucial in achieving salvation itself. As Paul said, “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Rom. 5:10). Hodge writes,

The meaning is obvious: “If while we were enemies, we were restored to the favour of God by the death of his Son, the fact that he lives will certainly secure our final salvation.” 1. His life is a pledge and security for the life of all his people; see John xiv. 19, “Because I live, ye shall live also;” Rom. vii.11; 1 Cor. xv.23. 2. He is able to save to the uttermost, “because he ever lives to make intercession for us,” Heb. vii.25, &c. 3. At his resurrection, all power in heaven and earth was committed to his hands, Matt. xxvii.18; and this power he exercises for the salvation of his people; Eph. i.22, “He is head over all things, for the benefit of his Church;” Rev. 1.18; Heb. ii.10; 1 Cor. xv.25, &c.: see also the passages cited on the last clause of ver. 9. There is, therefore, most abundant ground for confidence for the final blessedness of believers, not only in the amazing love of God, by which, though sinners and enemies, they have been justified and reconciled by the death of his Son, but also in the consideration that this same Saviour that died for them still lives, and ever lives to sanctify, protect, and save them.

Thus, when we examine the biblical definition of the victory of the cross and resurrection we immediately note that modern evangelicalism (which for the most part is Arminian in doctrine) does not really accept or teach the biblical definition of the victory of the resurrection.

[90] Charles Hodge, Romans, 140.
[91] “For Arminius, election was subsequent to grace. God decrees to save all who repent, believe and persevere. Election is conditional on man’s response, dependent on God’s foreknowledge of his faith and perseverance. The
The resurrection means that the sacrificial death of Christ was accepted by God and was a success that will be applied by the exalted Savior in history. Therefore, the Arminian view (that the death of Christ only makes salvation possible if men [of their own free will] cooperate with Jesus’ work) is heretical. They accept the resurrection as a historical fact, but ignore its theological significance. They believe that the Redeemer died to eliminate sin and guilt, but deny that He arose to apply that work directly to specific individuals as an all-powerful, exalted Priest-King. Their perversion of the implications of the resurrection is rooted in their defective view of the cross. For the Bible-believing Christian, the resurrection truly means victory, not just the possibility of victory if sinful, autonomous men cooperate with God’s plan.

Second, Christ’s resurrection proves that He conquered death and merited life in its fullest sense. Jesus said, “I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the key of Hades and Death” (Rev. 1:18). When our Lord spoke these words to John on Patmos, the Roman Empire claimed authority over life and death of its people. The Savior, however, declares that He—the risen One, not the heathen emperor, or the so-called gods, or the state has command over all things including death and hell. The Redeemer has what no one on the face of this earth has, which is the power to free men from the jaws of death, the grave and hell. Because He shed His blood and triumphed over death and the grave He has the authority or keys to unlock them. “He is the victor who has absolute power,”92 As Paul says, “For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:21-22). All those who are in Christ shall receive life in the fullest sense of the term. At the second coming of Christ there will be a general resurrection from the dead where believers will be raised to everlasting life and unbelievers to everlasting destruction (2 Th. 1:9). Therefore, Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (Jn. 11:25).

Third, the Mediator’s resurrection proves that He has defeated and subdued Satan. “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). “The Son came into the world precisely for the purpose, that through death, his death, he might render ineffective our enemy the devil who wields the power of death.”93 Before the death and resurrection of Christ, Satan had full control over men, society, religion and culture throughout the entire earth, except for the tiny nation of Israel. Before the resurrection, our Lord instructed His disciples to limit the gospel message to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt. 10:6). But immediately after the resurrection Satan is bound. “Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years...so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished” (Rev. 20:1-3). After the resurrection the disciples are ordered to preach the gospel throughout the entire world (Mk. 16:15; Ac. 1:8), to disciple all nations (Mt. 28:19). Because of possibility of a true believer totally or finally falling from grace and perishing is not denied. Consequently, there could be no assurance of ultimate salvation. Moreover, God gives sufficient grace so that man may believe on Christ if he will. His will is free. He can believe or he can resist God’s grace. Redemptive grace is universal not particular, sufficient not irresistible; man’s will is free not bound and cooperates with God’s grace rather than being vivified by it. Effectively, Arminius was saying that God does not choose anyone but instead forsees that some will choose him. This was a position with Pelagian and Gk. patristic roots” (R. W. A. Lethan, “Arminianism” in Sinclair Ferguson, David F. Wright, J. I Packer, eds. New Dictionary of Theology [Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988], 45). Simon J. Kistemaker, 1 Corinthians (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1993), 550. Philip Edgcumbe-Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 111.
Jesus’ death and resurrection Satan (in principle) no longer has dominion over the earth. By His death and resurrection Christ has achieved a definite victory over death, Satan and the forces of evil. Therefore, throughout the history between the first and second coming of Christ there is progressive growth in our Lord’s kingdom (Mt. 13:31-33). The forces of Messiah the Prince will progressively (through the preaching of the gospel and discipling of nations) beat back the forces of evil in the world. As our Lord promised, “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it [i.e. the church]” (Mt. 16:18).

Salvation

There is a direct connection between Christ’s resurrection and salvation in the broad sense of the term. Certain crucial aspects of a believer’s salvation are spoken of in Scripture as flowing from or being fruits of our Lord’s resurrection. That is one reason why Jesus is referred to as the “author,” “captain” or “pioneer” of salvation. There is a vital union that exists between the elect sinner and the Savior during His life, death and resurrection that leads to spiritual life in the believer. Thus, the Mediator is the trunk and we are the branches (Jn. 15:5). He is the fountain of living water (Jn. 4:10), “the resurrection and the life” (Jn. 11:25) and “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18). From Him and Him alone we derive spiritual life and nourishment. There are at least four important spiritual benefits that flow from Christ’s resurrection.

The first fruit of our Lord’s resurrection toward the elect is regeneration. “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-6). “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses” (Col. 2:13). In Christ we are “born again” (Jn. 3:3), “regenerated” (Tit. 3:5) or “made alive” (Eph. 2:5). Thus we are called a “new creation” (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17), a “new man” (Eph. 4:24). Why are some people born again while others are not? The reason some are regenerated while others remain spiritually dead is that only the elect were united with Jesus in His death and resurrection. Hodge writes, “It is in virtue of their union with Christ that believers are partakers of his life and exaltation. They are to reign with him. The blessings, then, of which the apostle speaks, are represented as already conferred for two reasons, -first, because they are in a measure already enjoyed; and, secondly, because the continuance and consummation of these blessings are rendered certain by the nature of the union between Christ and his people. In him they are already raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God.”

The apostle John also teaches that believers are regenerated as a consequence of their union with Christ in His resurrection. The apostle speaks of a first resurrection that occurs long before the final resurrection at the end of human history. “Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be kings and priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years” (Rev. 20:6). The first resurrection refers to the resurrection of Christ of which all believers partake. Consequently they cannot be harmed by the second death. In John’s gospel, Jesus also spoke of two resurrections. The first resurrection refers to regeneration and salvation (Jn. 5:24-25). It occurs when a person hears the word of God; Jesus speaks life to a dead soul;

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94 Charles Hodge, Ephesians (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1856]), 75.
and the person believes in Christ. The second resurrection refers to the bodily, physical resurrection that occurs at the second coming (Jn. 5:28-29). Those who partake of a spiritual resurrection (the first resurrection) are raised to life. Those who do not partake of the first resurrection are raised to condemnation.

Paul says that our Lord became a life-giving Spirit at the resurrection. “The first man Adam became a living being. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45). At His resurrection Christ received a supernatural, spiritual (glorified) body. Thus, the resurrected Messiah (the second or last Adam) is the representative Man; “the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18); the pioneer or lead climber for the elect in redemptive life; and, He Himself is the source for the new life: both the new life of regeneration and the new life at the bodily resurrection where all believers receive spiritual, glorified bodies. Matthew Poole writes, “The last Adam, by which he meaneth Christ, who in time was after the first Adam, and was born in the last days, and was last common Head; as Adam was the first, with respect of grace and spiritual regeneration, he was made a quickening spirit: he was made so, not when he was conceived and born, for he had a body subject to the same natural infirmities that ours are; but upon his resurrection from the dead, when, though he had the same body, in respect of the substance of it, yet it differed in qualities, and was much more spiritual; with which body he ascended up into spiritual life, so also to quicken our mortal bodies at his second coming, when he shall raise the dead out of their graves.”

As the rays of the sun give light, warm and life to plants in the spring, the resurrected Son imparts spiritual light and life to His own people. “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself” (Jn. 5:26). “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation” (Gal. 6:15).

The second fruit of Christ's resurrection is sanctification. The most detailed and systematic discussion of sanctification in the New Testament is found in Romans 6:1-7:6. In this section of Scripture, Paul discusses at length the foundation for personal godliness in the Christian life. The apostle teaches that all the imperatives relating to a believer's progressive sanctification are grounded upon a definitive sanctification achieved by Christ Himself. By virtue of the believer’s intimate union with our Lord in His death and resurrection, Christians have been delivered from the power of sin. Paul writes, “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.... Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God” (Rom. 6:4-5, 8-10). Jesus’ death is the reason that Christians have died to the reigning, enslaving, defiling power of sin. His resurrection is the reason that believers have and live in newness of life. The “Prince of life” (Ac. 3:15) was and is the first and only fully sanctified man. He imparts this sanctification to others first in regeneration (or, as the Puritans often called it, initial sanctification) and then progressively through renewal by the Holy Spirit. The Confession of

Matthew Poole, A Commentary on the Holy Bible (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1865]), 3:597. Note that the teaching of Paul in this passage corresponds to the teaching of Jesus in John’s gospel (discussed above; Jn. 5:24-25, 28-29), where our Lord sets regeneration-salvation in parallel with the last bodily resurrection unto life. Christ is the source and fountain of life. We live only because He lives. “For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you” (2 Cor. 13:4).
Faith says, “They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection” (15:1).

The ethical imperatives in the epistles arise out of and are rooted in the gracious indicatives [i.e. Jesus’ past redemptive acts in history] of the gospel. “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God...Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:1-5, 5). “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9). “He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (Gal. 3:15-17). When the apostle says that we no longer know Jesus after the flesh, he is pointing to the historical fact that our Lord has been resurrected and glorified and thus lives in a new, exalted, victorious state. The word “therefore” proceeds from this historical reality. When Paul says that for those in Christ old things have passed away, the verb tense (aorist) points to the moment in time when the Holy Spirit regenerated them. But then when the apostle says, “all things have become new” he changes the verb tense (this time perfect), indicating that old things became and continue to be new. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection Christians are regenerated and progressively sanctified. As there was a radical discontinuity between the state of humiliation (“Christ according to the flesh”), there is a radical discontinuity from the state of being unregenerate (spiritually dead) and being born again (alive in Christ). The old mode of thinking and living (i.e. world and life view, passions, lusts, affections and actions) has been definitively slain with Christ and in regeneration is replaced with a whole new way of thinking and living. Since we have been raised with Jesus, we must continue to walk consistently with that new and continuous life. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

The third fruit of our Lord’s resurrection is glorification. After writing that we [i.e. the apostles] have seen, looked upon and even handled the Word of life (1 Jn. 1:1) John says, “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn. 3:2). Paul says that Christ Himself will transform our bodies into glorified bodies. “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself” (Phil. 3:20-21). The foundation of this transformation is the resurrection of Christ. “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming” (1 Cor. 15:20-23). The apostle is not merely discussing the
resurrection in general but the resurrection unto life. That is a resurrection that results in immortal glorified bodies. Paul writes,

The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man. Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:47-53).

The salvation that our Lord achieved affects the whole man—body and soul. When Jesus rose in a glorious immortal, spiritual body, He established the redemptive foundation and thus guaranteed every believer’s regeneration as well as their future resurrection in a similar glorified body. All believers long for the day when they shall receive such a wonderful body. “For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation, which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (2 Cor. 5:1-5). Although we [i.e. true believers] all share in Christ’s resurrected life in this life (note the sections above on regeneration, justification and sanctification), the full realization of this new life must await the second coming when our salvation is brought to completion. “The picture conveyed is that of the heavenly body being put on, like an outer vesture, over the earthly body, with which the apostle is as it were clad, so as not only to cover it but to absorb and transfigure it. In this way ideas both of continuity and of transformation, which are also prominent in the great resurrection chapter of 1 Cor. 15, are effectively communicated.”

The fourth fruit of Christ’s resurrection is the restoration of the whole created order. As the fall of the first Adam resulted in a curse upon creation and a derailment of the God-glorying nature of the dominion mandate, the redemptive work of Jesus is directed to the salvation of the elect, the re-institution and enabling of the original dominion mandate and the salvation of the whole created order. The Son of God, through His redemptive work, makes sure that God’s original purpose for mankind and the creation is not lost. To save a multitude and then leave them forever in a fallen corrupt world would be a contradiction of God’s original purpose for mankind. Therefore, the scope of Christ’s mission is cosmic. He not only makes His people a new creation by His resurrection power, He also makes a “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13).

Jesus spoke of a coming restoration of the world in Matthew 19:28. “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” The word translated “regeneration” (NKJV, KJV, ASV, NASB, YLTB), “new world” (RSV) or “renewal of all things” (NIV) is palingenesia. It only occurs one other time in the New Testament in Titus

3:5 in reference to a Christian’s new birth. It literally means re-generation, re-birth or re-creation. This passage can be interpreted in two different ways, both of which support the idea that in Jesus’ resurrection there is a restoration of the whole created order. The first interpretation takes the word “regeneration” in a definitive sense. That is, the regeneration of the world in principle is an accomplished fact in the Savior’s resurrection and ascension to the throne of glory. The judging of the twelve tribes by the apostles would then refer to the preaching of the gospel and the establishment of church discipline throughout Israel after the great commission (Mt. 28:19ff.). The second view (which is held by the great majority of commentators) is that it refers to the final day—the Day of Judgment. When Christ returns, the saints will receive their glorified bodies and there will be a glorious restitution of all things. It will be a cosmic regeneration, a new creation, a new Genesis.

This concept of restoration or re-creation is common in the New Testament. Peter spoke of the “restoration of all things” (Ac. 3:21) in his preaching and the creation of a “new heavens and a new earth” in his second epistle (3:13). The apostle John tells us of the re-creation as the climax of human history in the book of Revelation. “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...the former things have passed” (21:1, 4). While describing a new paradise, the Apocalypse clearly points back to the original pre-fall Eden. In the new world there is no more death, tears, suffering or pain (21:4). There is a pure river of water of life that flows from God and the Lamb’s throne (22:1). The “tree of life” is found in abundance (22:2) and there is “no more curse” (22:3) or “night” (22:5). All those who have not been cleansed by Jesus Christ who continue in sin and immorality are cast into the lake of fire (21:8) and excluded from the new creation (22:15). Best of all there is a continuous light (22:5), love and fellowship with God and Christ (22:3-5). The salvation that our Lord achieved gives the church and the creation even greater blessings than the original Eden.

Paul also discusses a comprehensive, cosmic reconciliation. “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Col. 1:18-20). Jesus is not only the mediator of the original creation (Col. 1:15), but also the mediator and the first born of the second creation. “No domain is left in which the absolute supremacy of Christ and of his work is not fully effective.” “Whatever is needed to save a fallen world, and restore harmony to the universe, is treasured up in Him—is in Him.” “By his power and authority, he will correct every aspect of creation. Ultimately he will present this properly arranged universe to God who will be glorified in all.”

In Romans, Paul even personifies the non-rational and inanimate creation to emphasize the future hope of believers in the coming glory: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious

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liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (8:18-23). The power of Christ’s resurrection will overturn the frustration (mataiotes), emptiness or futility of the present world order. The creation which is presently subject to decay (phthora), to corruption and the evils of disease, death, predation and pain will be freed by our Lord’s liberation from the tomb.

The resurrection of Christ is at the heart of a vibrant faith. The Bible tells us that our Lord has won the war against sin, Satan and death. This glorious victory extends to the whole man (body and soul) as well as to the whole world. This is the great truth by which the church is to live. There is no excuse to retreat from battle, or to shrink back in fear, or to shudder at the trials and tribulations of life. The victory has already been achieved. Believers are not to be afraid of their persecutors. Our courage, hope, endurance and patience are rooted in the fact that Christ has triumphed over all. “The power of Christ’s resurrection means that a redeeming force and people are now at work in history, bringing all things into captivity to Christ. The scope of the resurrected Christ’s redeeming power is cosmic and eternal.”

Let us march forth into victory in Christ who has made us “more than conquerors” through the power of his resurrection.

Chapter 6: The Jewish Authorities’ Great Lie

Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day (Mt. 28:11-15).

Of all the gospels only Matthew records the bribery of the Roman guards and the fabrication by the Sanhedrin of the story of the stolen body. This is to be expected because Matthew had set the foundation for this story in 27:62-66 where he described the Pharisees’ request for a watch at the tomb. This request was based on their supposition that the disciples of Jesus were untrustworthy and may attempt to manipulate a resurrection scene. Therefore, in this pericope Matthew turns the tables: “and those who predicted deceit on the part of Jesus’ disciples (27:63-64) finish up perpetrating deceit themselves in their futile attempt to thwart his triumph.”

The story begins while the women disciples, who had encountered the angels in the empty tomb, were on their way to tell the apostles what they had seen. Matthew notes the irony of the timing that, while the faithful women were on their way to report the resurrection to the disciples in Jerusalem, some of the Roman guards were on their way to tell the Sanhedrin virtually the same news. This event is so astonishing that Matthew introduces it with a “lo” or “behold.” It is as though he says, “Look, the very persons who had been given the assignment of making sure nothing of interest could take place are now the eyewitnesses who are on their way

100 Rousas John Rushdoony, Romans and Galatians (Vallecito, CA.: Ross House Books, 1997), 139.
to the chief priests and elders who had employed them.” What a marvelous sight indeed! As we study this record we need to examine: (1) the story of the soldiers; (2) the deceit of the Sanhedrin; and (3) the consequences of the evil cover-up.

The Soldiers’ Report

Matthew notes that “some,” not all the Roman guards came into the city to speak to the chief priests. The events of early Sunday morning had scattered the guards and some of these guards decided to tell the Jewish authorities what had happened. The other guards who did not go to the chief priests may have fled the area (i.e. they went A.W.O.L.). Or they were in collusion with the soldiers who went to the Sanhedrinists, but simply waited behind to await the outcome of the report.

In any case, this incident raises a question: Why did the Roman guards go to the chief priests and not to Pilate? The answer to this question lies in the fact that the resurrection of Jesus was a very serious problem for both these guards and the Jewish authorities. If the guards went to their superiors with the story of the angel, the earthquake and the resurrection, they probably would not have been believed. They could even have been accused of sleeping on the job, or even more likely, accepting a bribe so the body could be removed. These guards according to Roman law could have received capital punishment for such a blatant dereliction of duty.

The guards, however, knew that the empty tomb was even more of a problem for the Sanhedrin who had condemned Jesus to death. If the truth of what really happened at the tomb was spread abroad by the soldiers, Christ would have been vindicated; the Jewish leadership revealed as thoroughly corrupt; and, the movement the Savior started greatly furthered. The chief priests did not want to lose their grip on the people or be known as the ones who murdered the Messiah. The soldiers took advantage of the chief priests’ plight as a way of saving their own necks; if they could make some money in the process through a bribe, so much the better.

Regarding the soldiers’ report, Matthew says they “reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened” (28:11). This means they relayed everything that they had seen or witnessed. Therefore, this report would have included the great earthquake; the angel who descended from heaven whose countenance was like lightning; and the angel rolling away the door and sitting upon it. The guards may have told the chief priests that they became so frightened at this event that they fainted. If they had investigated the tomb after they came to, they would have seen the grave clothes neatly lying where Jesus’ body had been.

It is interesting that in God’s providence the very men who had been sent to prevent the resurrection, or at least any event that would lead people to believe the resurrection took place, are the same men who report the resurrection to the chief priests. The chief priests who were the official leaders of the Sanhedrin and the great power brokers in Jerusalem were the first men to hear the news of the resurrection and they heard it from the most independent and unimpeachable witnesses possible. God’s outworking of these events is astonishing and marvelous.

The Deceit of the Sanhedrin

When the chief priests heard the report from the soldiers, the effect it had on them was astounding. These men knew that Jesus had promised to rise from the dead on the third day. They had now been presented with unbiased, credible and multiple eyewitness accounts that a
resurrection had indeed taken place. Yet, this earth-shattering news, which proves that Christ is the Son of God—the Messiah, is not embraced. Their response indicates that either: a) The Jewish leadership believed the report to be true but did not care; or, b) chose to interpret the soldiers’ account as a delusion, exaggeration or hallucination. From the account one thing is clear. The Jewish authorities did not offer any complaints regarding the soldiers’ performance. This clearly indicates that the Sanhedrinists did not believe that the body was stolen or that the guards were hallucinating. They accepted the guards’ testimony at face value and therefore we can only conclude that they believed something miraculous occurred, but deliberately chose to cover it up. “The high priests have no excuse; they cannot say that they were misinformed or not fully informed…. Although their report contains the most astounding facts, the high priests do not for a moment attempt to question those facts. They think of only one thing: to nullify them.”

“It might justly have been expected that they should now have believed in Christ, and repented their putting him to death; but they were obstinate in their infidelity, and therefore sealed up under it.” The guards’ report “brought fresh terror to the priests, and led to further sin on their part.”

In response to the soldiers’ testimony the chief priests assembled or “took counsel together” (sambouion lambontes) with the elders. “These two groups are frequently mentioned together in Matthew as representative of the Jewish authorities, especially in the passion narrative (cf. 16:21; 21:23; 26:3; 27:1, 3, 12, 20).” Matthew’s notation is important for it demonstrates that the cover-up of the resurrection of Christ was a deliberate, premeditated, carefully considered act of the Sanhedrin. “Sambouion lambanein means more than ‘to take counsel;’ it includes the discussion and the final passing of a resolution. The expression is a Latinism, consilium apere, and is repeatedly used by Matthew (12:14; 22:15; 27:1, 7)...Thus by a formal resolution the ruling body of the Jewish nation determines on the rankest lie and the most flagrant bribery.”

“Christ’s malicious enemies are of the devil’s nature; they will never cease to oppose him, though they know him to be the Son of God, as appears in these chief priests and elders.” The Jewish leadership’s corporate wickedness continued even after the greatest sign was set in plain sight before them.

These prominent Sanhedrinists decided to do three things to counteract the soldiers’ report of the resurrection. First, they decided to bribe the soldiers with a large sum of money in order to change their story. The expression “large money” (KJV) comes from Tyndale’s translation. The Greek expression “arguria hikana” means literally “money enough.” “The use of the plural for pieces of silver (arguria) is common. The papyri have many instances of hikana for considerable (from hikano, to reach to, attain to).” The chief priests and elders gave the soldiers a large sum of money or what was enough to strike a deal regarding the cover-up. The Sanhedrinists had brought out silver to cause Judas to betray Jesus and now they used silver to suppress the truth of the resurrection. The tithe money that was given by the people of God to be used for the service of Jehovah was used in the advancement of a great and bold lie.

By way of application there are three things noteworthy regarding this bribe.

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103 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:443.
(1) The actions of the Jewish leadership demonstrate that a refusal to repent of gross, scandalous sin will lead a person deeper into other sins as a consequence. Everyone knows that adulterers, thieves and damnable heretics must continually manufacture lies to cover their sins. The person who refuses to repent of sin becomes entangled in a web of iniquity and deceit. The lies and hypocrisy can never really come to an end until genuine repentance and restitution (where applicable) is made. When the Sanhedrin chose to cover up the evidence for the resurrection and replace it with a lie, they were choosing a life-long path of evil and treachery. “The more men be engaged in a sin they are the more forward to go on in it, and will spare no cost to gain their point, for these priests and elders gave but thirty pieces of silver to have Christ crucified, but here they gave large money to keep down the report of his resurrection.”

Thus it is evident that the reprobate, after having once given themselves up to a course of sinning, are continually entangled in new crimes, and this arises out of their desire to conceal their shame before men, while they give themselves no concern about the offense committed against God.”

(2) Let us be aware that money is often used as a motivation to commit evil. As Paul says, “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. 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. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6:10).

For those who are evil and seek power and control over others money is the lubricant of the machinery of iniquity. The reason for this is simple, “There is no kind of evil to which the love of money may not lead men, when it once fairly takes hold of them.” Money was one of the motivating factors in the chief priests’ decision to destroy Christ (cf. Mk. 11:15-18; Jn. 2:14-17). Money was used to incite men to betray Jesus and cover up the resurrection. “It caused the man with very many flocks and herds (in Nathan’s parable) to steal the poor man’s little ewe lamb, the rich young ruler to turn away from Christ, the rich fool (of Christ’s parable) to deceive himself into thinking all was well, the rich man (of another parable told by the Lord) to neglect poor Lazarus…, Ananias and Sapphira to tell lies, and the rich oppressors of James’ epistle (cf. Amos 2:6, 7) to exploit those who worked for them. None of these escaped punishment.” The love of money is the chief reason for Sabbath desecration. It is the root of organized crime, the dealing of drugs, prostitution, the pornography industry and many other crimes. It is one of the chief causes of divorce, warfare, robbery, fraud and even murder.

(3) We should learn from this bribe not to support wicked church authorities with our tithes. Believers have a moral responsibility not to subsidize denominations and churches that are unorthodox in doctrine or behavior. When the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. went apostate in the early twentieth century, the denomination did far greater damage to families, the nation and the world because most conservatives and evangelicals did not secede and support the truth and the faithful ministers. Professing Christians who tolerate heresy and corruption and support it with their money share in the sins of their leaders. The Jews before the death and resurrection of Christ could do little in that the visible church was bound by one nation, one locality and one

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temple. But now that the church is multinational, believers must seek out and support the churches that are the most faithful to Scripture and the attainments of the Protestant Reformation.

Second, the Jewish leaders made up a false story that the soldiers were to spread. The Sanhedrinists said, “Tell them, His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.” There are a number of things to note regarding this lie.

(1) The falsehood to cover up the truth of the resurrection is absurd and self-contradictory. If the soldiers were sound asleep while the body was stolen, then how can they assert that our Lord’s disciples stole the body? If any of the guards were awake so as to identify who took the body, then why did they not wake the others and put a stop to this crime? Further, if they knew it was the disciples, then why didn’t they pursue them or arrest them? The theft of a corpse was a serious crime punishable by death in the Roman Empire. The Jewish leadership’s false account doesn’t make any sense at all.

(2) How could all the guards remain sound asleep while the apostles pried open the great stone? Once a large gravestone is placed into its special slot carved in the rock, it can only be removed with great difficulty. It would take a number of strong men with pry bars to move the stone aside. The idea that such a difficult, noisy, time-consuming project could occur without waking the guards is ridiculous. Only someone grasping after an excuse to disbelieve and reject the gospel would embrace such a thought.

(3) According to scholars the number of soldiers guarding the tomb would have been probably between twelve to sixteen men. These men would have been well armed and trained. The idea that the poor, weak, cowardly, dispirited disciples (who abandoned their Savior at Gethsemane and fled for their lives) would attempt what would amount to a virtual suicide mission to recover a dead body is ludicrous. If they were unwilling to take a stand and fight for Jesus when He was alive and well, why would they risk their lives for a corpse? What would they have to gain from perpetrating such a fraud? “Moreover, had they took it away by stealth, it is not reasonable to think that they would afterwards have reported such a lie everywhere, that He was risen from the dead, when they were sure to obtain nothing by it, but reproach, afflictions, persecutions and death.”

(4) It is clear from both the narrow and broad context of Scripture that the chief priests and elders were fully convinced in their own minds that the resurrection of Jesus actually took place. They never for a moment doubted the guards’ story, upbraided them, or threatened to complain to Pilate if the guards’ dereliction of duty. Further, there is no indication that the guards’ behavior was ever investigated. Moreover, if the disciples were guilty of such a serious offense why were they allowed to walk about openly and preach on the day of Pentecost? If the story of the stolen body was true, they would have been rounded up and arrested immediately when they appeared in public.

Everyone who rejects the resurrection of Christ must attempt to explain away the empty tomb, the grave clothes, the eyewitnesses, the many post-resurrection appearances and the radical change in the apostles. The truth of the resurrection, however, has been so strongly proved by the testimony of Scripture and history that disproving the resurrection has always been a major problem for unbelievers. Therefore, unbelievers like the Jewish leadership can only rely

on falsehood to deny it. The falsehoods of unbelief, however, are so obvious that true believers can only laugh at such arguments. It is only because fallen man’s hearts are depraved and blind that such stupid, inconsistent and arbitrary theories are embraced. The simple truth is that unregenerate man would rather embrace the ridiculous than bow the knee to the resurrected King. “Calumnies and lies devised by Christ’s adversaries are the special engine which they use against the gospel. When all other devices fail they make service to Satan by this means such as this lie here.” 114

(5) The fact that these guards were willing to accept a bribe and lie about what occurred, even though they were eyewitnesses to an obviously miraculous event, proves that objective sensible proof of the gospel will not convince men unless it is attended by a powerful work of the Holy Spirit. In other words regeneration logically proceeds saving faith. Men who are dead in their trespasses and sins cannot be convinced of the truth of the gospel by evidences and arguments alone. But, when the Holy Spirit raises dead hearts and opens blind eyes, the gospel is embraced. It is important that we understand that faith itself is a gift of God merited by Jesus’ work and applied by Christ Himself. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

Third, the bribe and the lie are accompanied by a promise of protection. “And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure” (28:14). In order for the chief priests and elders to close their deal with the soldiers, they offered to smooth things over with the guards’ superiors. This part of the deal was important for sooner or later this false story would be reported back to Pilate, their supreme commanding officer (cf. Mt. 27:65). If the governor was not somehow appeased these guards could be in serious trouble. They could be imprisoned or even executed for dereliction of duty. The Sanhedrinists’ promise contains two elements.

(1) The Jewish leaders promise to appease or persuade Pilate that everything regarding this matter was satisfactory. What this specifically involved, we are not told. It involved a meeting with the governor where the Jews may have admitted to Pilate what really occurred. In this scenario the chief priests would persuade Pilate that a lie was necessary to suppress the Jesus movement. Perhaps the Jews simply bribed Pilate with a large sum of money to avoid any investigation or both. “Wet. gives several passages of Greek authors in which mention is made of persuading men by means of money. Philo expressly states…that Pilate was a brietaker, as we know was true of Felix.” 115 The word “persuade” “meant more than it would have been quite polite to have expressed. We shall see to it that he be satisfied. You understand us? We have the means, as you can readily apprehend, of getting such things hushed; and you may depend on us using these means.” 116 Keep in mind that the Jewish leadership was not really concerned about the soldiers’ welfare. What they were afraid of was an official Roman investigation which would prove the soldiers had lied. In any case the governor was conciliated and the matter was dropped.

(2) The soldiers are assured that they have nothing to worry about. The phrase “make you secure” (humpa amerimmous poisemen) literally means, “make you worryless” or “rid you of care.” “They would try money also on Pilate and assume all responsibility. Hence the soldiers have no anxiety (amerimmous, alpha privative and merimnno, to be anxious). They lived up to their bargain and this lie lives on through the ages.” 117

114 David Dickson, Matthew, 412.  
115 John A. Broadus, Commentary on Matthew (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1886] 1990), 586.  
The Consequences of the Cover-up

After Matthew says that the guards took the bribe money and did as they were instructed, he tells us their lie was particularly effective among the Jews: “and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day” (28:15). There are a number of things to note regarding this statement.

First, it demonstrates from the inspired Word of God that modern Judaism is a religion founded upon a bribe and a lie. The Jewish leaders were so corrupt and wicked that they were willing to drag the whole Jewish nation and religion into the abyss with them in order to preserve their own reputations and hang on to their power. “It was bad enough that they themselves willfully rejected the truth, but infinitely worse that they misled their nation.”¹¹⁸

The widespread acceptance of the Sanhedrin’s falsehood can be explained as a result of three factors.

(1) The propagation of this lie by the Jews teaches us that the rejection of the truth about Christ always involves the acceptance of a lie as an alternative. There can be no neutrality when it comes to the gospel of Jesus. There is really no such thing as an agnostic. Those who do not embrace the gospel must come up with a false reason as an excuse. Modern secularists simply dismiss the resurrection as a myth. Christian liberals redefine it out of true historical existence. Many scholars assert that the whole thing was made up long after the death of Jesus by the second-century church. Is there any evidence for any of these assertions? No. There is absolutely no evidence. Such arguments are no more reasonable or trustworthy than the lie of the Sanhedrinists. But, because people do not believe in Christ, they embrace the lie. Their whole lives are built on the shifting sands of humanism.

(2) Both in Scripture and history we see a tendency of people to follow their political and religious leaders. The shepherds of the visible-national church in Israel took a stand against God’s anointed and most people followed their lead. “A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have its so” (Jer. 5:29-31).

Throughout history, many professing believers have not carefully studied their Bibles and theology as a bulwark against the corruption of doctrine and worship, with the result that many people have blindly followed their leaders when they apostatize. This sad reality is as true today as it was in the first century or the Middle Ages. Every Christian (especially covenant heads) has a biblical responsibility to test all things, to hold fast what is good (1 Th. 5:21). When the leaders turn from the truth they must be rejected and abandoned by the people. “It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes” (Ps. 118:8-9).

(3) It also shows that the people in Israel had been taught bad doctrine for a long period of time. The central message of the ceremonial law that forgiveness and redemption can only be secured by the sacrifice of a perfect substitute was ignored or downplayed and replaced by Pharisaical legalism—the idea that man can obey the law and, in effect, earn his salvation before God. The connection that the people should have made between the sacrificial system and the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus was not made clear to the people. The cross of Christ was a great stumbling block to Jews (1 Cor. 1:23), because they had been indoctrinated in salvation by works.

Second, the fact that the large majority of Jews followed their leaders into apostasy reflects a pattern that is found throughout the Old Testament. When Paul discussed the fact that most of national Israel did not believe in Christ, he explained that “at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace…. Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Rom. 11:5, 7). There is national election—the nation of Israel or the visible church—and within Israel, the visible church, there is true Israel—the invisible church. Throughout the history of Israel, God preserved a godly remnant within the nation, even during times of great declension and apostasy. When Elijah was disheartened by the widespread idolatry around him, God assured him that He had reserved to Himself 7000 men who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Ki. 19:18; cf. Rom. 11:3-4). When Isaiah prophesied, things in the nation were so bad spiritually that he wrote, “Unless the LORD of hosts had left to us a very small remnant we would have become like Sodom” (1:9). During the captivity there was a godly remnant represented in people such as Esther, Mordecai, Ezekiel, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. After the Babylonian captivity, only a small remnant returned under Ezra and Nehemiah. When Jesus was born there were people such as Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zachariah, Simeon and Anna “who looked for redemption in Israel” (Lk. 2:38). Even in times of widespread apostasy, “God has not cast away people whom He foreknew” (Rom. 11:2). God, according to His sovereign plan, only directs His eternal-unchanging-electing love toward some and the rest are passed by and hardened. The widespread acceptance of the Jewish leaders’ lie by the Jews was used by God, according to His sovereign plan, to benefit the Gentiles. As Paul says, “Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness…. For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead” (Rom. 11:12, 15)?

Third, the invention and spread of this horrible lie was intended by God as a judgment against the Jews for their rejection and murder of His beloved Son. God had placed the light of Christ in their nation. The Jews had rejected that light and thus were rewarded with an even greater darkness and delusion for their sin. Because they stumbled at the truth presented so vividly before them, God gave them over to an intellectual and religious madness. This great lie kept the nation in the dark and thus was instrumental in the destruction of the nation by the Romans in A.D. 70. If they had not believed this falsehood and had embraced their Messiah, the great rebellion against Rome would have never taken place.

It is often the case that God rewards those who embrace darkness and falsehood with even greater delusions and foolishness. Calvin writes, “For God would never have permitted them to be deceived by such foolish credulity, but in order that those who had despised the Redeemer might be shut out from the hope of salvation; as he now inflicts a similar punishment on the ingratitude of the world, by giving loose reins to the reprobate, that they may go from bad to worse.” Since the so-called “enlightenment,” the Western nations have completely abandoned any professed commitment to Christ and have become more wicked and irrational in their worldviews. Germany, which is the fatherland of unbelieving higher critical views of Scripture, had a large shift toward secularism, atheism, the occult and mysticism which led to the rise of the Nazi movement. Western nations today are, for the most part, statist, socialistic and Darwinian in their approach to reality and ethics. Having cast off Christ they are increasingly in bondage to their new false god—corrupt humanity. “They who are entered in the service of ungodly masters can hardly win out; still new and worse employment is furnished to them…”

120 David Dickson, Matthew, 412.
Fourth, we learn from this scene that the propagation of false teaching can be one the most long-term, destructive forces upon a people or nation. Matthew reports that this damnable lie was accepted among the Jews “until this day” (28:15). That is the day when Matthew penned this section of the gospel (probably around A. D. 63) about thirty years after the death of Christ. In fact, this blatant falsehood has been accepted by the Jewish community throughout its history to our own time. In the second century Justin Martyr (c. A. D. 114-165) wrote in his Dialogue with the Jew Trypho (c. A. D. 148): “You have sent chosen and ordained men throughout the whole world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilean deceiver…whose disciples stole him by night from the tomb.”\(^{121}\) The African church father Tertullian (c. A. D. 150-220) wrote also about the Jewish tradition: “This is He whom His disciples secretly stole away… (de Spec. 30).”\(^{122}\)

The physical destruction of war is usually repaired within one generation. This was certainly true of Europe after WW II. But the devastation to families, communities and even whole nations through the propagation of false doctrine and deadly lies can last for thousands of years. Think of all the Jews doomed to hell during the last twenty centuries because of the deception of the Sanhedrin. How many millions of people lie in darkness because of the deceit of the Jewish leaders? How many millions of people lie in darkness because of the lies of Mohammed? How many multitudes have existed in spiritual darkness through the centuries because of Roman Catholicism?

From the deadly effect of this falsehood over the centuries we need to learn and apply some important truths. (1) The propagation of false doctrine can have severe negative consequences. One lie about the divinity of Christ (Arianism), or Jesus’ sacrificial death (Romanism), or the resurrection (Judaism), or the doctrine of salvation (Islam, Judaism, Catholicism, etc) over time is more destructive than all the bombs of World War II. Therefore, it is very important that we preserve and pass on to our children the true biblical religion delivered to us by the apostles and emphasized by the Protestant reformers. Where the truth is fervently taught the lies of the devil will be rejected. Where the truth of God is neglected, falsehoods are easily embraced. Aggressive cults (Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, etc) have learned from experience that the seeds of deception are most effective upon the fertile soil of a nominal Christian household. The covenant head that is irresponsible and does not indoctrinate his children in the truths of a full-orbed Reformed system of doctrine is placing his whole heritage in grave spiritual danger. If his children succumb to the lies of this world or the heresies of Satan, every subsequent generation may be condemned to the pit of hell with them. It is a very sobering fact to consider that the millions of people who now attend modernistic, unbelieving, thoroughly wicked, mainline Protestant churches had ancestors that were very orthodox in their confession and walk. All it takes to destroy one’s heritage for generations or perhaps even forever is one person’s spiritual carelessness or sloth. Thus, we must be diligent and bring up our families to be fervent for the truth.

There must also be great carefulness in choosing which church and communion we attend and support. If one’s denomination is careless about doctrine and regards the Westminster Standards as something that can be disregarded at will as long as the church bureaucracy allows


exception after exception, then it is time to find a more faithful church. If our church officers or denomination departs from any of the foundational, essential doctrines of the faith (e.g., by embracing sacramentalism, the Auburn Ave heresy, Shepherdism, Arminianism, etc), then we must fight against this heretical departure with every fiber of our being. And, if the church courts do not care, or attempt to simply smooth over the heresy with equivocations and talk about love and unity, then it is time to separate from such corruption. A lie or heresy that is allowed to spread and take root is one of the most dangerous and destructive forces known to mankind. To tolerate it or ignore it, or compromise with it in the name of compassion, brotherly love or so-called unity is wicked and foolish. If we leave our children in a backsliding, deforming denomination, then we are placing our children and grandchildren in grave spiritual danger.

(2) The rejection of the establishment principle or the idea of an explicitly Christian state for the acceptance of post-enlightenment pluralism is anti-Christian and destructive of society and culture. When a state allows Jewish synagogues, Islamic mosques, Hindu Temples, Jehovah’s Witness congregations, Mormon churches to openly propagate their lies about Christ, it has taken a position antithetical to Scripture. The Bible teaches that the foreigner, stranger or sojourner in the land is not required to convert to the true religion or participate in the worship of Jehovah. Thus, in a Christian nation people who are not believers are free to live in peace. But, they are not allowed to spread their false teachings openly among the population (read Dt. 13). To allow such behavior is to allow the subversion of a Christian law-order and worldview. In modern pluralistic states all religions are treated as both equally true and equally false and laws are determined by the secular humanistic elite or by majority vote. Thus, Scripture and the truth of the resurrection are relegated to the prayer closet or the heart of the believer. Since Scripture says that Judaism is founded upon a falsehood, then, by way of application, synagogues should not be allowed in a Christian commonwealth. This does not mean that Jews should be persecuted, hated or mistreated; but only that their false, blasphemous religion not be allowed to publicly function in a Christian society. This, of course, sounds radical to modern ears. But the only alternative is secular humanistic pluralism which will eventually lead to the persecution of Christians through pro-sodomite rights laws and so-called anti-hate speech legislation.

Chapter 7: Jesus’ Appearance on the Road to Emmaus

And, behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about threescore furlongs. And they talked together of all these things which had happened. And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden that they should not know him. And he said unto them, “What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?” And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, “Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days?” And he said unto them, “What things?” And they said unto him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people: And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him. But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, to day is the third day since these things were done. Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished, which were early at the sepulchre; And when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that
he was alive. And certain of them which were with us went to the sepulchre, and found it even so as the women had said: but him they saw not.” Then he said unto them, “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. But they constrained him, saying, “Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.” And he went in to tarry with them. And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight. And they said one to another, “Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?” And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, Saying, “The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon.” And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread (Lk. 13:35; cf. Mk. 16:12-13).

The story of Jesus’ appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is briefly noted by Mark (16:12-13) and is discussed in detail in Luke’s gospel. This story is one of the longest and most fascinating accounts of a post-resurrection encounter between Christ and His disciples. It is the first resurrection encounter between Christ and his disciples. It is the first resurrection appearance noted by Luke and is introduced with the word “lo” or “behold” because the events recorded are astonishing and noteworthy. The main purpose of this story is not to establish the reality of the resurrection. The narrative of the empty tomb has already proved it (Lk. 24:1-10). Here Luke’s central purpose is to show Christ’s rebuke (with His careful argumentation) to the disciples for their lack of faith and understanding. This story would be very precious to the first saints because these two disciples are in their lack of faith representative of virtually all the disciples at that time.

Preliminary Comments

The story begins with two disciples on the way to a village called Emmaus. Nothing is known about these disciples except that they belonged to the wider circle of disciples that followed the Savior and one of them is named Cleopas (v. 18). “There is something very moving in one of the Lord’s few appearances being given to the humble, quite unknown disciples.” From these men’s discussion of recent events with Christ, it is quite clear that the disciples who followed Jesus were a close knit group. On the very same day the resurrection occurred (note, “that same day” in 24:13), these men were already well aware of the report from the women who saw the empty tomb (cf. 24:22-24).

These men were either on their way home or to a place which they were renting in order to attend the Passover festivities. “It is possible that some of those who were crammed into (greater-) Jerusalem to meet the Passover requirement that they reside there for Passover moved away from the crowding for the remaining days of Unleavened Bread.” The exact whereabouts of Emmaus is difficult to ascertain in that there were at least three towns with the name Emmaus outside of Jerusalem. The distance of “three score furlongs” or “sixty stadia” narrows it down to two towns. (A stadion is 607 feet. Therefore, 60 stadia are about 7 miles in distance.) The town

which the crusaders identified as Emmaus is 7.1 miles from Jerusalem. Another possibility (if by 7 miles from Jerusalem Luke is referring to a round trip) is the Emmaus identified by Josephus (*War* 7:215) which is 30 stadia or around 3.5 miles from the holy city. This small village is mentioned not because there was anything noteworthy about it, but because Luke wants to emphasize the historicity of the narrative. Luke, who is aware that he is recording very important redemptive history, wants to emphasize the reality of these marvelous events.

As these men were walking home they were talking to each other about “all the things which happened.” It is a very common thing for persons walking together or riding together on a road to speak of the news of recent events especially when recent events were shocking and extraordinary. The “all these things” obviously included at a minimum: the trial, crucifixion, miraculous phenomena and the reports of the empty tomb. This assertion is proved by Cleopas’ comments to Jesus in verses 19-24.

These men, being disciples, had a personal stake in these events and were perplexed and sad because of them. Therefore, they sought out answers and relief by speaking to each other about Christ and these things. The verb used in verses 14 and 15 translated “talked” and “communed” is *homileo*, “from which we get ‘homiletics,’ is found only here and in Acts 20:11; 24:16. It comes from *holilos*, ‘crowd.’ So it first meant, ‘be in company with’ and then, ‘converse with.’”¹²⁵ Now that these men were away from the city where there were many enemies of the Savior, they could speak freely about the things of Christ. They were expositing and reasoning among themselves as to recent events and were probably particularly interested in the testimony they had heard only very recently about the angels and the empty tomb.

Their faith and understanding at this time was weak, but they at least were still focusing on Christ and attempting to come to some understanding of recent events. The subject of their conversation indicated their reverence for the Master and their godliness even though their ignorance and lack of faith in the resurrection was worthy of reproof. These men had no doubt heard from Jesus that His resurrection would take place and had even heard the report of the women and yet they were still bewildered.

From the subject of their conversation we should learn that speaking to each other about Christ and His work is the wise thing to do when we are sad and perplexed. As Solomon says, “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend” (Pr. 27:17). Spiritual conversation between Christians is an important means of sanctification. Paul said we should “exhort one another” (Heb. 10:25); speak “what is good for necessary edification” (Eph. 4:29); and “comfort one another” (1 Th. 5:11). Malachi’s words on this topic are noteworthy: “Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name. ‘They shall be Mine,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him’” (3:16-17). Let us stop wasting so much time talking to each other about frivolous matters and learn to talk more and more about the things of Christ. “Let us speak of Jesus, when we are sitting in our houses and we are walking by the way, whenever we can find a disciple to speak to (Deut. vi. 7).”¹²⁶ “Note, It well becomes the disciples of Christ, when they are together, to talk of his death and resurrection; thus they may improve one another’s knowledge, refresh one another’s memory, and stir up one another’s devout affections.”¹²⁷

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¹²⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:835.
As these men were talking, Jesus approached and joined Himself to them. Luke says that, "their eyes were restrained; so that they did not know Him" (24:16). Mark’s account says that He appeared to them in another form (16:12). Our Lord kept these disciples from recognizing Him; so to them He was only a friendly stranger. The Savior purposely did not allow these disciples to recognize Him so that He could question them and reason with them out of the Scriptures and first bring them to a biblical faith and understanding through the Word. It is informative that Christ, even though personally present, expected these disciples to find Him first in their Bibles.

Once Jesus had joined Himself to these men on their journey, His ministering to them began. As we study Luke’s account there are four things that we need to consider: (1) the Savior’s questions to these men; (2) the disciples’ deficient answer; (3) the Lord’s rebuke for their unbelief and the remedy for it; and (4) Christ’s fellowship with these disciples and His revealing Himself to them.

The Savior’s Questions

After our Lord caught up to the two disciples He questioned them. “He said to them, ‘What kind of conversation is this that you have with one another as you walk and are sad’ (24:17)? Christ’s question implies that it was asked after He had followed them for some time, close enough to listen to their conversation; or, that after He came up alongside of them they continued their discussion in His presence. This question was kind and compassionate, for clearly these men were looking depressed or glum. “The adjective skythropos (only here and Matt. 6:16) means ‘looking sad’ (NASB) or with ‘faces downcast’ (NIV).”128 “[W]hat melancholy story are you telling to one another, which causes such sadness of countenance, and dejection of mind?”129

The response to our Lord’s question is one of incredulity because these men are astonished that this Stranger does not know about these recent events. “Cleopas answered and said to Him, ‘Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?’” (24:18). This counter question assumed that only a complete stranger or visitor from outside the area could have remained in the dark about the events which were the talk of the town. Cleopas’ response tells us that all the events concerning Jesus were well known among the people. The redemptive work of Christ was a very public affair. “The whole verse is an important evidence of the publicity and notoriety of our Lord Jesus Christ’s crucifixion.”130

At this point Jesus still pretends ignorance and asks a question to draw out of them more particular information. “He said to them, ‘What things?’” (24:19). There are a number of things that we need to note regarding our Lord’s questions.

First, they reveal the Savior’s compassion for His people. “Our Lord Jesus takes notice of the sorrow and sadness of his disciples, and is afflicted in their afflictions.”131 Christ notes that the root cause of their sadness is their lack of understanding and faith and sets about to help them in the most effective manner possible. Although these disciples were having difficulties in comprehending recent events and had not yet embraced the resurrection; nevertheless, they loved the Savior and had true faith within them. They were not obstinate and ungodly men, but were

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true disciples who had a holy desire to understand the truth and please God. Consequently, the resurrected Redeemer stretches out His hand to them so that the feeble faith within them would grow and embrace the gospel in all its fullness and detail. We can rest assured that what God has begun in us, He will bring to completion. “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

In modern evangelical churches which embrace Arminianism or semi-Pelagianism, people are taught that they, of their own free, unencumbered will, must find Christ. But, in this passage, Jesus seeks out His own, finds them and then ministers to them. The resurrected Lord is not passively waiting for sinners to come to Him; but, is actively seeking out His own sheep. He does exactly what is necessary to remove their unbelief and perfect their faith in Him. The Mediator is very active and involved in bringing His people, the elect, to a full faith in His person and work. What a blessed Savior!

When we see our brothers in Christ experiencing sorrow or sadness we should imitate our Lord and go to them with counsel and comfort from the Scriptures. The church should be as an oasis of comfort and peace from this wicked, dark, uncaring world. “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4).

Second, these questions show us the Redeemer’s perfect wisdom in helping troubled Christians. Jesus could have revealed Himself at once, but He instead hid Himself and asked probing questions to examine where these disciples were theologically, spiritually and emotionally. In order to help people in distress, we must gently ask probing questions and then listen carefully to what is troubling them. Christ began by asking a general question and then follow it up with something more specific. To simply offer people advice without carefully examining where they are at is like working on a car without first finding out what is wrong with it. “He did not at once begin by saying, ‘I know why you are sad.’ No; he waited for them to speak, and in his patience drew forth from them the items and particulars of their trouble. You that deal with mourners, learn hence the way of wisdom. Do not talk too much yourselves. Let the swelling heart relieve itself…. It is good to let sorrow have a tongue where sympathy hath an ear. Allow those who are seeking the Lord to tell you their difficulties: do not discourse much with them till they have done so. You will be the better able to deal with them, and they will be the better prepared to receive your words of cheer.”

Our Lord asked these questions not simply so that He could identify the disciples’ problems, but also so that the disciples themselves would better benefit from His rebuke and teaching. Often Christians have problems and are depressed without knowing exactly why. Jesus draws out an answer so that their foolishness in not believing in the resurrection is brought into plain sight. We must remember that Christ as God already knows the disciples’ deficiencies in exhaustive detail. But these disciples need to know clearly where they are at, so that the Savior can show them where they ought to be.

The Disciples’ Deficient Answer

The disciples answer Jesus assuming that He had a complete lack of knowledge of recent events. Their answer has two primary elements. They first give a brief history of the important events; then, they explain why they are disappointed and sullen. “So they said to Him, ‘The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him’” (Lk. 24:19-20).

In this brief history of events they identify who Jesus is and what occurred to Him. The expression “Jesus of Nazareth” separates Him from the many other Jewish men of that time who had the name Jesus (i.e. Joshua). “There was, for example, ‘Jesus Barabbas’ (according to a Matt. 27:16 reading), ‘Jesus the son of Sirach,’ etc. In certain ethnic communities today not a few boys are called Jesus.”

The expression, “a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” indicates that this Nazarene was a messenger sent from God (see Dt. 18:15, 18; Lk. 7:16; Jn. 4:19, 44; 9:17; Ac. 3:22; 7:37). He was not an ordinary, average prophet, but was mighty before God and all the people. Jesus was attested as a genuine prophet by the amazing public signs that He did before God and the nation (see Ac. 2:22; Jn. 12:17). Although these disciples have not described our Lord as the Messiah—the Son of God, nevertheless they exhibit an unbroken faith that He was genuine. They clearly did not accept the Sanhedrinists’ propaganda that He was a deceiver. In their statement, they show honor and respect to the Savior.

This great prophet, however, suffered a terrible end to His career: “and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him” (Lk. 24:20). These disciples place the responsibility for Jesus’ death squarely upon the Jewish leaders. They even speak as if the Sanhedrinists themselves crucified Christ because ultimately they held the chief responsibility. These Jewish disciples were not speaking in an anti-Semitic way as many modern Jews suppose. They are simply relating an historical fact. “The disciples were not afraid to declare that in respect to Jesus, an irreconcilable difference of opinion existed between them and the chiefs of the people.”

As Cleopas continues, the deficiencies of their faith were revealed. “But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened” (Lk. 24:21). The disciples expressed disappointment that things relating to Jesus did not turn out as they had expected. When Cleopas says “we,” he may be speaking for all the followers of Christ. These two disciples’ attitude at this time was representative of virtually all the disciples. The verb used “we were hoping” (the imperfect) indicates that they had been hoping or trusting for quite some time. They believed that the Nazarene was going to redeem Israel. The word “redeem” has the basic meaning of “deliverance through the payment of a ransom.” In Christian theology, it refers to the payment of the debt of the guilt of our sins by the bloody, sacrificial death of Christ. Given the lack of understanding of these two disciples and the apostles at this time, it is unlikely their theology was this detailed or advanced. Given what we know of the disciples’ expectations of the coming of the Savior’s kingdom in the gospels, it is likely that Cleopas and his companion believed that our Lord in some manner was going to deliver Israel from the oppression of Rome and the corruption of its leaders. The nation’s deep spiritual and political problems would be forever resolved. “They

expected, indeed, the promised Deliverance at His hand; but certainly not by His death.”

Obviously, if they understood the full implications and meaning of Christ’s death they would not have been disappointed and sad.

In addition to their not understanding that Jesus’ death on the cross had accomplished the redemption in Israel, they then revealed their doubts regarding our Lord’s resurrection. “Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened. Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early astonished us. When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see” (Lk. 24:21-24).

These disciples knew about our Lord’s predictions regarding the third day; had heard the women’s report made earlier that morning; and, were even aware of Peter and John’s examination of the empty tomb. Indeed, verses 22-23 “give a short summary of 24:1-12. The summary includes the empty tomb (24:3), the angelic appearance (24:4), and the message that Jesus was alive (24:5; cf. Acts 3:15).” Their statement, “but Him they did not see” (24:24), indicates that the women’s testimony, the grave clothes and the empty tomb were not enough to convince Cleopas and his companion of the resurrection.

It appears that these two disciples believed that if Christ had truly risen, then He would make Himself public and immediately vindicate Himself by exhibiting His person in outward pomp and glory. But, thus far everything had been quite secret, except the report of the women; and, the gospels repeatedly tell us that the women’s report was not believed (e.g., see Mk. 16:11; Lk. 24:11).

While these men do not yet believe in the resurrection, they have not completely ruled it out either. They are perplexed and sad and are not sure what to make of all these events. It appears that these men were hesitating between faith and fear and thus were thinking about recent events in order to nourish their faith and drive away their doubts. The problem was that their presuppositions regarding the immediate earthly glory of the Messianic kingdom were keeping them from embracing the women’s testimony and accepting the reality of the resurrection. These poor, weak, doubting disciples needed the Savior to help them and that is precisely what He does.

The Lord’s Rebuke and Remedy

After having drawn out what was on the hearts of these disciples, our Lord does two things for the benefit of these erring believers. First, He rebukes them. Then, He explains why they are wrong.

Although unrecognized, Christ speaks to these men with authority. “Then He said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter His glory?’” (Lk. 24:26). First, let us note the following things regarding our Lord’s rebuke.

(1) Note that this was a strong rebuke. These men are called “foolish” for failing to believe that the Messiah had to suffer and be crucified before He could enter into His glory. Jesus said that unbelief is foolishness because God has so clearly spoken regarding these

redemptive events in Scripture. The Bible teaches that the Messiah would be despised by the people and rejected by men (Ps. 22:6; Is. 53:3); oppressed and afflicted (Is. 53:7); convicted and taken from prison (Is. 53:8). His hands and His feet would be pierced (Ps. 22:16). He would be surrounded by Gentiles and His wicked enemies as He suffered (Ps. 22:16). Finally, He would be killed and buried in a rich man’s grave (Is. 53:8-9). If these disciples had studied the many Messianic prophecies, they would have understood what had been happening in recent days and spared themselves a lot of grief, perplexities and doubt. “Unbelief, which we so often excuse, and for which we almost claim pity, is not treated by our Lord as a trifle. It is for this that he calls them foolish; it is about this that he chides the slowness of their hearts. Do not let us readily excuse ourselves for mistrust of God. If we ever doubt our gracious Lord, let us feel ourselves to be verily guilty.”

(2) This rebuke included the slowness of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. The disciples had accepted many things in the prophets regarding the Messiah. They, like their contemporaries, were very fond of the passages which spoke of the Messiah’s victory and glory. But, they did not believe everything regarding the Christ that was in the prophets. They did not embrace the Old Testament concept of the suffering Servant. When it came to the Messianic prophecies regarding Jesus’ humiliation and death there was a dullness, blindness and reluctance to believe them. The Savior rebukes all those who do not immediately embrace all that the Bible teaches. He does not accept any excuses for a lack of trust in all of the Scriptures. It is likely that these men had been wrongly instructed regarding some of these things from their youth. For the Mediator, that is no excuse. A heart or mind that is slow to embrace any truth of Scripture is worthy of a sharp rebuke from the lips of Jesus.

In our day, professing Christians treat the Scriptures like a theological smorgasbord, picking doctrines they like while ignoring or disregarding the rest. The Mediator says that such behavior is totally unacceptable. Because these disciples had not embraced everything the Bible said, they were confused, downcast and had a defective faith. They were living inconsistently with their own profession. They professed faith in the prophets, but they did not trust everything that the prophets said. Virtually all professing Christians will say, “I believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God.” But many act as though they really do not believe their own profession. When it comes to many biblical teachings, they simply do not want to know what the Bible says or do not care what it says. They have more of a seeming faith than a real faith. The test of whether a person’s faith is counterfeit or merely weak and defective is if, when clearly presented with the truth, they repent or reject it. The two disciples in our story repented when confronted

137 Charles H. Spurgeon, “Folly of Unbelief,” 33:482. Calvin’s comments on this passage are excellent: “This reproof appears to be too harsh and severe for a weak man such as this was; but whoever attends to all the circumstances will have no difficulty in perceiving that our Lord had good reason for rebuking so sharply those on whom he had long bestowed labour to little purpose, and almost without any fruit. For it ought to be observed, that what is here said was not confined to these two persons, but, as a reproof of a common fault, was intended to be conveyed by their lips to the rest of their companions. So frequently had Christ forewarned them of his death—so frequently had he even discoursed about a new and spiritual life, and confirmed his doctrine by the inspired statements of the prophets—that he would seem to have spoken to the deaf, or rather to blocks and stones; for they are struck with such horror at his death, that they know not to what hand to turn. This hesitation, therefore, he justly attributes to folly, and assigns as the reason of it their carelessness in not having been more ready to believe. Nor does he only reprove them, while they had the best Teacher, they were dull and slow to learn, but because they had not attended to the instructions of the Prophets; as if he had said, that their insensibility admitted of no excuse, because it was owing to themselves alone, since the doctrine of the Prophets was abundantly clear, and had been fully expounded to them (Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, 3:358).
with the truth, but tragically many professing Christians will obstinately and repeatedly continue to reject it. Such people have no reason to believe that they are truly saved before God. Remember, these disciples were slow to believe everything, but they did eventually believe it. It is one thing to be slow to trust, which is bad and worthy of rebuke; and, quite another never to believe, which is fatal and damnable. The latter group never had true faith in their hearts to begin with.

(3) Note that our Lord focuses His attention upon the Scriptures. Although He could have rebuked them for failing to believe the women’s testimony of the empty tomb and angelic announcement, He rather focuses on the prophets. For Jesus, the testimony of Scripture is more important than even eyewitness testimony. This view is supported in 2 Peter 1:19-21: “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (KJV). Peter says that the written word of God is more sure than even being an eyewitness of a miraculous event. Nisbet writes, “He calls it a more sure Word, comparing it with the voice from Heaven, but because it is a greater matter to have foreseen and foretold things to come, than to have seen and related the greatest things present. And because a transient voice is more easily mistaken or forgotten than a standing authentic record, therefore the written word is a more sure ground for sinners’ faith to rest than a voice from heaven could be.”

The implications of this profound truth are very important. Believers who, in their apologetic methodology, pretend the Bible doesn’t exist in reaching out to unbelievers are setting aside their most potent weapon against unbelief. We must strive to have the great respect and trust in the Bible as the Word of God that Jesus had. We must always remember that although atheists, secular humanists and so-called progressive thinkers are fond of referring to Bible-believing Christians as fools and idiots, Christ Himself taught exactly the opposite. People who are slow to believe everything that the Scriptures teach are foolish. Our Lord’s statement ought to make us bold even in situations where we are ridiculed.

Second, after the rebuke our Lord immediately sets forth the remedy for the disciples’ doubts, perplexity and sadness. “‘Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?’ And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Lk. 24:26-27). There are a number of noteworthy things in this passage.

(1) The primary reason for the rebuke is stated; which is the divine necessity of the Savior’s suffering on the cross. This teaching is stated in the form of a question that demands an affirmative answer. It implies that the disciples should have known the answer to this question. Although it was necessary for Christ to suffer to fulfill the decree of God, to fulfill the many prophecies and to satisfy God’s justice, Jesus will focus on the cross as the fulfillment of Scripture. “[T]he imperfect edei expresses the necessity that is involved in prophecy, a necessity that reaches back to the very first prophecy that was uttered about the Messiah and continues through the centuries until now…. No divine prophecy can possibly fail.” These disciples should have learned from their Bibles that our Lord had to suffer and die in order to be the Savior. Christ tells them that, in God’s plan, humiliation and suffering must precede the glory of the resurrection, ascension and the kingdom of grace. The Redeemer is telling these men that

138 Alexander Nisbet, 1 and 2 Peter (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1658] 1982), 239.
their sorrow and perplexity is totally unwarranted because His death was the focal point of Scripture and the most important act in redemption. If He did not die, there would be no kingdom, no glory and no paradise restored.

(2) Luke says that Jesus carefully answered His own question by expounding the Scriptures. The expression “Moses and all the prophets” is likely synonymous with “all the Scriptures” in the same verse. Christ was the seed of woman who would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). His sacrificial death was the antitype of all the Old Testament sacrifices. Jesus was the prophet to come who was greater than Moses (see Dt. 18:15-19). He was the fulfillment of the Davidic kingship and the antitype of all the judges and deliverers of Israel. Our Lord was the true Lamb, the true high priest, the true temple, the true scapegoat, the true seed who would bless all nations. He was Isaiah’s suffering servant whose death would redeem Israel (Is. 53:5, 8). He was Daniel’s Messiah the Prince who would be cut off for the people (9:26) and bring an end to the Old Covenant sacrifices (9:27). “He was Jeremiah’s ‘Branch of Righteousness, executing justice and righteousness in the land.’ He was Ezekiel’s ‘Plant of renown,’ giving shade and giving fragrance. He was Daniel’s stone cut without hands, smiting the image, becoming a mountain and filling the whole earth.”¹⁴⁰ “Let it be a settled principle in our minds, in reading the Bible, that Christ is the central sum of the whole book. So long as we keep Him in view, we shall never greatly err, in our search for spiritual knowledge. Once losing sight of Christ, we shall find the whole Bible dark and full of difficulty. The key of Bible knowledge is Jesus Christ.”¹⁴¹

(3) By way of application, note that our Lord is essentially giving these disciples a lesson in biblical interpretation or hermeneutics. The central reason that these disciples and the apostles did not understand the crucifixion was not a lack of knowledge of what the Bible said, but rather a failure to interpret the Scripture correctly. In order to understand the central teaching of the Old Testament, one must have a particular hermeneutical approach. With the death and resurrection of the Lord Himself already accomplished, Jesus can survey the Old Testament and expound certain texts so these disciples can now truly understand the teaching of the Old Testament.

From this, we should learn that the Old Testament cannot be fully understood without the help of the New Testament. “The mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known into men, was revealed unto the apostles and prophets of the New Testament (Eph. iii.5), and that revelation sheds a flood of light upon numerous portions of the Hebrew Scriptures. On the other hand, it is equally true that a scientific interpretation of the New Testament is impossible without a thorough knowledge of the older Scriptures… The Old Testament also abounds in the testimony of Christ (Luke xxiv. 27, 44; John v. 39; Acts x. 43), the illustration and fulfillment of which can only be seen in the light of Christian revelation.”¹⁴² Our approach to the Old Testament must be the approach of Christ. The false exegesis of the Jewish rabbis, which is mired in human traditions and perversions, cannot lead a person to see the beauty of the Savior or to embrace Him by faith.

Christ’s Fellowship with These Disciples

As Jesus and these disciples drew near their village our Lord indicated that He was going to continue. “But they constrained Him, saying, ‘Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.’ And He went in to stay with them. Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight” (Lk. 24:29-31).

After traveling with Christ and listening to Him teach for quite some time, these travelers do not want to let this Stranger go. Although the time of day and Middle Eastern hospitality played a role in their insistence on offering food and overnight hospitality (cf. Gen. 19:2-3; Jg. 19:19; “In the ancient world, hospitality to strangers ranked high as a religious virtue.”143), no doubt it was the Stranger’s presence and teaching that was their main motivation. This is evident from verse 32: “Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?”

When they sat down to eat with this stranger, something very strange and unusual occurred. The Stranger did not act as the guest, but as the host, the head of the household. He prayed over the meal and distributed to the two disciples who reclined with Him. These two men had been our Lord’s pupils on the way to Emmaus and now they assumed the position of disciples to the Master.

Commentators who see in this the celebration of the Lord’s supper are mistaken and are reading too much into the passage. There are no words of consecration, no wine is mentioned. There are no words of explanation and the Savior disappeared during the meal. The supper began but it never ended. In fact, it appears that our Lord disappeared before the unleavened bread was even consumed. We need to be careful not to interpret all passages which refer to eating as signifying the Lord’s supper. Sacramentalists in their desire to exalt the holy supper have been too eager to find the sacraments where they do not belong.

What is significant about this passage is the time in which the Mediator revealed Himself to these disciples. After the fellowship of the meal begins Jesus miraculously opened their eyes and immediately they knew it was Christ. “The verb ‘were opened’ is a divine passive much like ‘were kept from recognizing him’ in 24:16…”144 It is a mistake to attempt to explain this recognition in some sort of natural manner such as they recognized His voice or saw the scars on His hands when He broke the bread. They recognized Him only when He caused them to know Him.

From the order and the way the resurrected Savior caused these events to unfold there are certain things that can be applied from this passage. (1) It is clear that Jesus wanted His disciples to come to faith in His death and resurrection not solely by sight, but first through faith and understanding in God’s holy Word. He opened His Word to them and expounded it before He made Himself known to them. Blessed are those who believe without first having to see (Jn. 20:29). This point is especially relevant today when our Lord’s post-resurrection appearances have ceased and we are dependent upon the completed canon of Scripture alone.

(2) The Redeemer first brings us to Himself through the gospel before He fellowships with us as part of His family. No one can have a saving relationship to Christ who does not first embrace the teaching of the Word of God concerning the Messiah. Those who are ignorant of God’s Word and do not embrace the Mediator will remain outside the heavenly Jerusalem. “But

there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” (Rev. 21:27).

(3) Jesus has the power to open the eyes of the mind so that people will see Him as He truly is. The Mediator who sits in glory at the right hand of God sends His Holy Spirit into the hearts of His people to give them spiritual insight and enlightenment. If our Lord did not open our hearts by His power and give us faith and understanding, none of us would embrace the gospel. Salvation from start to finish is a work of Christ. He did not save us because we saw and believed of our own power. On the contrary, He enabled us to see in the new birth and drew us to Himself by His own sovereign power. Salvation is of the LORD (Jon. 2:9).

Chapter 8: Christ’s First Appearance to the Apostles

Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen (Mk. 16:14).

And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, “Peace be unto you.” But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And he said unto them, “Why are ye troubled? And why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.” And when he had thus spoken, he shewed them his hands and his feet. And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, “Have ye here any meat?” And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. And he took it, and did eat before them (Lk. 24:36-43).

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, “Peace be unto you.” And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the LORD. Then said Jesus to them again, “Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, “Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.” But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, “We have seen the LORD.” But he said unto them, “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe” (Jn. 20:19-25).

The Savior’s first appearance to the apostles as a body receives a lot of attention from both Luke and John. Mark deals with this important appearance in one verse. John, writing after Luke, adds a lot of information not discussed in Luke’s account. This visit from our Lord came at the end of a number of gracious manifestations. This appearance serves as a climax to all the other resurrection day visitations in, not only the number and importance of the people present, but also the very bold and deliberate manner in which Jesus presented Himself to this group. In this visitation, He not only carefully exhibited His scars to the disciples, but also set forth the first commission to the apostles and the church.
Our story begins with the disciples assembled in an unnamed place as they sat down to eat (Mk. 16:14). John is very specific as to the time that this event occurred. “[H]e begins by saying, ‘Now when it was evening of that day.’ That already marks the day as the first day, in light of the context (20:1). But he is not satisfied with this. So he continues, ‘that day, the first of the week.’”¹⁴⁵ Luke’s account places this event immediately after the two men from Emmaus returned to Jerusalem to tell the eleven apostles and the gathered disciples of their encounter with the resurrected Savior (24:33-36). If we take into account the fact that Cleopas and his companion invited Jesus into their home when it was “toward evening” (i.e. about 6:00 pm), and the time to travel the distance from Emmaus to Jerusalem (7.1 miles), the appearance to the disciples and apostles probably occurred sometime after 8:00 pm. This “proves that John is using Roman time, not Jewish, for here evening follows day instead of preceding it.”¹⁴⁶ It is significant that John emphasized that the disciples gathered on the first day of the week, yet also records that it was evening, for if the apostolic church had maintained a sunset-to-sunset Sabbath, then John would not have regarded it as the first day, but rather the second. Then there would be no reason at all for John to emphasize that particular day, for while the New Testament often emphasizes and singles out the first day (Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:2; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1, 19, 26; Ac. 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10), the second day holds no significance at all. Luke also uses the Roman method of counting days in Acts 20:7, where Paul continued his message until midnight.

The cause of this assembly was not simply to eat but also to discuss the very shocking news that had been received throughout the day. By this time there had been four separate reports that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive. There was the empty tomb, grave clothes and the angels witnessed by the women (Mt. 28:5-8; Mk. 16:2-8; Lk. 24:1-8). This report was confirmed by Peter and John (Jn. 20:2-10). There was the appearance to Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:11-18) and then to the other women (Mt. 28:9-10). There was the news that Jesus had risen and appeared to Simon (Lk. 24:34). Finally, not long before our Lord’s appearance, the eleven heard the amazing story of Christ revealing Himself to Cleopas and his companion (Lk. 24:35). This assembly contained ten of the eleven apostles (Jn. 20:24) and a number of unnamed disciples (Lk. 24:33).

The state of the group was primarily one of fear, perplexity, unbelief and also hope. John says, “The doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews” (20:19). The word “doors” (plural) indicates either two doors together or an outer door and an inner door. The statement that they were shut conveys the thought that they were shut and locked. The disciples knew how Jesus had been treated and were expecting similar treatment. Further, the empty tomb and the false story now spreading that the disciples stole the body would cause the disciples to expect some sort of retaliation by the Sanhedrin. The disciples thought it best to remain hidden behind locked doors at this time.

The fact, however, that the disciples are now found together, as a group, is commendable. It demonstrates that although their faith was weak and deficient it had not been extinguished. These disciples still had hope, for they remained together as a body and had not scattered to the wind. They came together for mutual encouragement in a time of great fear and perplexity. They, no doubt, were carefully discussing every bit of news that they had heard of the resurrection. Perhaps those who were now convinced such as John and Peter were attempting to convince the others. “In this manner we ought to struggle against the weakness of our flesh, and not to indulge fear, which tempts us to apostasy. Christ also blesses their zeal, when he appears to them while

they are assembled; and Thomas is justly deprived of the favour bestowed on all his brethren, because, like a wandering soldier, he had withdrawn from the standard of union." There is strength in numbers and God has commanded His people not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together with other believers (Heb. 10:25).

As we examine this first appearance to the apostles we will consider three main areas: (1) manifestation; (2) instruction; and (3) commission.

**Manifestation**

As we consider the manifestation, there are three things that are noteworthy. First, our Lord’s appearance was instantaneous and miraculous. Luke says that, as the disciples were speaking to one another, Jesus Himself stood in the midst (24:36). The disciples are reclining on couches eating their supper; then, in an instant, with no warning Jesus appears. After noting that the doors were shut, John says that Christ “came and stood in the midst” (20:19). The mention of the locked doors is meant to convey to us that the Savior did not enter the room in a normal manner. At the end of the encounter with the two disciples from Emmaus, our Lord “vanished out of sight” (Lk. 24:31). Here the Redeemer appears, as it were, out of nowhere and is standing in the midst of all the disciples. All argumentation which attempts to explain this appearance in a natural manner is not in harmony with the clear teaching of the passage. The sudden appearance is certainly one reason the disciples thought they were seeing a spirit (Lk. 24:37).

The manner of this appearance tells us that although the resurrected Mediator has a true human physical body that is finite and limited to only one location at a time, nevertheless Christ has the power to vanish (Lk. 24:31) and instantaneously transport His physical body wherever He desires (Mk. 16:14; Lk. 24:36; Jn. 20:19; Ac. 9:4; Rev. 1:11, 13-17). The doctrine of papists and Lutherans that the body of Jesus was infinite and not confined to any one place is unscriptural and is a denial of the biblical teaching that the human and divine natures of Christ exist in one person, but are never mixed, intermingled or changed by this union. This is true of Jesus in both His humiliation and exaltation. If the human nature partook of the Son of God’s divine attributes, then the Mediator’s true humanity would cease to exist. Furthermore, John’s words “came Jesus and stood” are meant to be taken literally. “He not only suddenly stood in their midst, but he actually came and stood! Had his human nature been omnipresent, he would not have to come…”

Jesus appears to His disciples in this miraculous manner to get their attention, to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection and to show His glorified condition. When Jesus walked the earth in His state of humiliation, His divinity was for the most part kept hidden. But, now that His exaltation has begun His divinity is freely exhibited when and where He pleases.

Second, the Savior’s sudden, miraculous appearance caused great fear in the disciples. “But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit” (Lk. 24:37). The fact that Jesus appeared with locked doors, without making any noise in such an unexpected manner startled the apostles and scared them. This incident reminds us of when the disciples saw the Savior walking on the water and “cried out for fear” thinking they had seen a ghost (Mt. 14:26). “It is striking to remark, both here and elsewhere in Scripture, how invariably the appearance of any supernatural being, or any inhabitant of another world appears to strike terror into the heart of man. It seems an instinct of human nature to be afraid on such occasions, and it

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is strong indirect proof of man’s utter inability to meet God in peace without a mediator. If man is afraid of spirits and ghosts, what would man feel if he saw God Himself?”

Interestingly, when the disciples cried out in Matthew 14:26, thinking Jesus was a ghost, they used the word *phantasma*, which refers to an apparition or phantasm. But here they use the word *pneuma*, which signifies a spirit. They believed they were seeing a spirit not clothed with a real body. The use of this word may shed light on how the disciples did not believe in the resurrection in spite of all the eyewitness testimony. They may have believed that since the general resurrection of the dead had not occurred and the kingdom as they believed in it had not yet come, that therefore, Christ had not really risen from the dead. Thus, they may have interpreted the reports of appearances as reports not of a physical bodily resurrection, but rather as people who saw the spirit of the Savior. This would explain our Lord’s reaction when He insists they examine and handle His body and even watch Him eat broiled fish. “Behold My hands and feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have” (Lk. 24:39).

Third, note the wonderful manner in which Jesus greeted His disciples. He said to them, “Peace be with you” (Lk. 24:36; Jn. 20:19). Although “Peace to you” is the normal everyday Hebrew greeting (e.g., 1 Sam. 25:6), virtually all commentators recognize that in this context the expression means much more than “Hello, I hope everything is well with you.” With Christ the common greeting, “Shalom to you!” is filled with rich salvific content because He has achieved true peace between God and man by His suffering on the cross. His “Shalom!” on the great day of His resurrection and victory is the complement of “It is finished” on the cross, for the peace of reconciliation and life from God is imparted throughout New Covenant history by the resurrected, glorified Redeemer. His sacrificial death is the only foundation of true peace between God and man. “[I]n the New Testament the thought of God’s giving peace to men is always connected with what Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection. Thus, in the book of Romans, Paul writes of peace as one of the results of our justification: ‘Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 5:1).”

This greeting which was soon repeated (Jn. 20:21) was especially precious to the disciples in light of recent events. Had not all the apostles abandoned Jesus at Gethsemane? Did not Peter recently deny the Savior publicly with curses? Had not the disciples refused to believe the prophets and the words of Christ regarding the necessity of the Lord’s death and resurrection? In light of all these serious failures would not the disciples be expecting anger, blame, fault finding, chastisement and a severe rebuke? But, the first words from the lips of the Savior are: “Peace be unto you.” There would be a mild rebuke, but this tender admonition was preceded by a reminder of God’s grace and mercy found only in Christ. We see the great compassion of our Redeemer in the fact that His first word to His errant disciples was designed to soothe and calm their troubled minds.

The gospel of our Lord is the only way that true peace can exist on earth. If men are to have peace with each other they must first have peace with God through the precious blood of Christ’s atonement. That is why the heavenly hosts’ praised God at the birth of the Messiah saying, “On earth peace, goodwill toward men” (Lk. 2:14). Jesus first establishes peace between God and sinful men by paying the penalty for men’s sin. Then He changes His people’s hearts, causing them to repent and lay down the weapons of their warfare against God. Men are justified

and sanctified because of Christ’s work. Men are saved and changed from the inside out so that they are holy and at peace with each other. Any religion like Islam which makes converts by the sword, which turns the world into a perpetual battlefield, which exalts in the torture, murder and death of innocent civilians, is not from heaven but from the pit of hell. Similarly, Romanism which burned innocent Christian men, women and children at the stake for not embracing its idolatry and heresy carries within its own signs of apostasy. Bible-believing Christianity is the only true religion and worldview that spreads genuine lasting peace in hearts and cultures. If you want peace with God and peace in your life, then believe in Jesus. He made peace by the blood of His cross and He gives that peace to those who embrace Him by faith.

Instruction

After our Lord appeared to the disciples and greeted them He began to teach them. This instruction involved a number of things. First, the Savior questioned the disciples: “And He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts?’” (Lk. 24:38). This question shows that Jesus knows what the disciples are thinking. The purpose of these questions is to calm the disciples’ fear and get them to focus on the deficiencies of their faith. This inquiry presupposes that the disciples’ fear and trepidation is unjustified and demonstrates a lack of belief on their part. On the one hand, the questions are meant to soothe, yet they also are the beginning of a rebuke. The disciples’ “doubts” have been understood as (1) the fact of the resurrection, i.e. whether Jesus had actually risen from the dead; (2) the identity of the ‘ghost,’ i.e. whether the person they were encountering was actually Jesus; and (3) the corporeal nature of Jesus, i.e. whether the Jesus they were encountering was a ghost or possessed a real body.151 The answer that Christ gives in Luke 24:39 indicates that all these doubts were involved, for our Lord not only proves the reality of His physical body but also identifies Himself (“It is I Myself”). “The disciples here are just as foolish [and] slow of heart to believe’ (v. 25) as ever the Emmaus disciples were.”152

Note that a poor understanding of theology and a lack of faith in Christ gives rise to troubled thoughts and fears within us. If the apostles had paid attention to what Jesus had taught them and had understood the prophets on the suffering servant, they would have spared themselves grief and anxiety. From this we should learn to study the Scriptures to apprehend a deeper knowledge of Christ to prevent false opinions and to strengthen our faith in His person and work. Remember, a poor understanding of the Scriptures is often coupled in God’s Word with a faulty, deficient faith. It is when people are not focused on Jesus and the Word of God that they have thoughts that are untrue; hinder their joy and service to the Master; and, make them unfit for their Christian duties.

Furthermore, we should not let our presuppositions or human reasoning cloud the clear teaching of Scripture. Calvin writes, “By saying that thoughts arise, he means that knowledge of the truth is choked in them in such a manner that seeing they do not see, (Matth. xiii.14;) for they do not restrain their wicked imaginations, but, on the contrary, by giving them free scope, they permit them to gain the superiority. And certainly we find it to be true, that as, when the sky has been clear in the morning, clouds afterwards arise to darken the clear light of the sun; so when we allow our reasonings to arise with excessive freedom in opposition to the word of God, what

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formerly appeared clear to us is withdrawn from our eyes.”

The disciples were not basing their thoughts squarely upon the Scriptures and the teaching of Christ; but, rather were speculating as to what they thought may be the case. Human presuppositions, imaginations, creativity and speculations have no place in Christian theology. “Give me understanding according to Your word” (Ps. 119:169). “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding” (Pr. 3:5).

Second, Jesus reprimanded the disciples for their unbelief. “He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mk. 16:14). When our Lord met with the two on their way to Emmaus He upbraided them for refusing to believe the prophets. Here the Savior reproves them for failing to believe the eyewitness testimony of those who had seen Him. The disciples’ problem is identified as “hardness of heart.” This is one word in Greek (sklerokardian). It denotes not a mere “callousness or insensibility of the affections [i.e. the emotions], but torpor and inaction of the whole heart in its widest sense, including intellect as well as feeling.” This rebuke was necessary to rouse them from their spiritual depression, irrationality, and faithless negativity into which they had been plunged by the crucifixion. It was one thing for these disciples not to believe the testimony of a heathen and quite another to reject multiple, independent eyewitness accounts from dedicated believers. Only a hardness of heart could explain it. It was dishonoring to the Redeemer to disbelieve His own words passed on to them through His chosen messengers. It shows obstinacy rooted in blindness. “Note, the evidences of the truth of the gospel are so full, that those who receive it not, may justly be upbraided with their unbelief; and it is owing not to any weakness or deficiency in the proofs, but to the hardness of their heart, its senselessness and stupidity.”

This passage proves that God will hold responsible all men throughout history who reject the testimony of gospel preachers.

Third, Christ sets forth the proof of His bodily resurrection. “‘Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet” (Lk. 24:39-40). John notes that Jesus also showed them the scar on His side (20:20). This is an amazing section of Scripture for here we see “that no fact of history is better attested than the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The common mass of facts accepted by all men as historical [is] not one-tenth as certainly assured to us as this fact is.”

The manner in which the Savior proves the resurrection is as follows.

(1) The Lord first asked the disciples to carefully examine Him with their eyes. The disciples were able to look at Jesus from only a few feet away. They could see that He had a real physical body and was not a disembodied spirit. Christ made sure the disciples saw the scars of crucifixion. There were visible nail prints in the Redeemer’s hands and feet where the large spikes had been pounded in. There was the mark of a large gash in the Mediator’s side where His side was pierced by the Roman spear. This scar was so large and deep that, on the next Lord’s day, doubting Thomas could thrust his hand into it. That such grievous wounds were already healed astonished the apostles. “Their sight of the Lord was not a hasty glimpse, but a steady

155 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:571.
inspection, for John in his first epistle writes, ‘Which we have seen and looked upon.’ This implies a lengthened looking, and such the Lord Jesus invited his friends to take.”

The Savior presents His scars as badges of honor. They are the marks of His great victory over Satan, sin and death. Thus, He will wear them for eternity as a perpetual witness to the price He paid to win our redemption. When John was transported to the great throne room of heaven he described the enthroned Mediator as a “Lamb that had been slain” (Rev. 5:6). On that great day when Christ returns and we behold Him we will see these same scars. The Prince of peace will wear them like a man wears his medals won in battle. These scars will forever remain precious to us because they exhibit the atoning death that gave us life. “Christ, even in his exaltation, looks upon his sufferings for his people as his crown and glory.”

(2) Then Jesus asked the disciples to come closer and touch and handle His body. Sometimes when a person sees something extraordinary or remarkable he says to himself, “I can’t believe my eyes,” or “I must be dreaming.” Therefore, our Lord adds to their sight the evidence of the sense of touching. The Savior gives a reason for this invitation; that spirits are not solid. They do not have flesh (muscles) and bones. The disciples could touch and squeeze the Mediator’s arms. They could feel the bones in His fingers and in His wrists. They could easily distinguish between flesh and spirit. Thus, they could not deny that their crucified Lord stood before them in the same (albeit glorified) body in which He was buried. “[T]he Crucified is the risen Lord in the fullest sense of the term, and the risen Lord is the Crucified, the flesh and blood Redeemer, whose real death and real resurrection accomplished salvation for the whole person and the whole world.”

(3) Even though our Lord has already given the disciples indisputable evidence of His resurrection, He adds one more proof. He eats a piece of broiled fish and some honey in their presence (Lk. 24:41-43). Obviously, a disembodied human soul or spirit cannot eat solid food. This so impressed Peter that he mentioned it in the first sermon to the Gentiles. “Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to eyewitnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead” (Ac. 10:40-41).

This last proof of our Lord’s literal, bodily resurrection was given as a consequence of the disciples’ first reaction when they examined the Savior. After Jesus showed them His hands, feet, and side Luke says, “They still did not believe for joy and marveled.” The expression “did not believe for joy” is difficult. It means that when the disciples first saw the Savior they were so full of excitement and joy that they could not believe what they were experiencing was real. In recent days, the disciples had experienced such sorrow, fear and hopelessness that this new glorious information seemed impossible. They thought that Jesus was dead and that in this life they would never see Him again. But then, out of nowhere, all of a sudden, the Savior is standing in their midst only a few feet away. “One moment they would say to themselves, ‘This must be Jesus. How wonderful.’ The next moment they would say, ‘It is just too good to be true.’”

“This cannot be real.” Matthew Poole writes, “If they had not now believed they doubtless would

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157 Ibid.
159 George R. Beasley-Murray, John (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1999), 379.
not have rejoiced, but their faith was the cause of their joy; yet the excess of their joy was the hindrance of their faith; so dangerous are the excessive motions of our affections.”¹⁶² Our emotions must always be closely directed by the Scriptures because they are fickle and unsure guides of the intellect. The disciples’ joy had a good beginning, but soon ran amok in the storm of emotion. Faith can only gain the victory if, in our joy, we focus on God’s Word and not our own reasoning. Jesus ate of the food to graciously strengthen the weakness of His followers.

The Savior’s use of the senses of hearing, seeing and touching to prove His resurrection and the nature of it, teaches us by way of application that God never requires us to believe anything that is obviously contradicted by our senses. For example, the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which teaches that the bread and wine of communion actually and literally become the physical flesh and blood of Christ, is obviously false and contradicted by simple observation. Anyone can see that the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine. The color, texture, taste and even the molecules remain the same. To believe such nonsense flatly contradicts Scripture and common sense. (One could say the same thing about consubstantiation, which claims that Jesus’ true physical presence is “in, with and under” the elements). Further, the idea propagated by dispensationalists that people who are born again, saved and sanctified can live in habitual sin and unrighteousness and be true Christians defies common sense and the Scriptures. Jesus said we can know them by their fruit (Mt. 7:16ff.). If we observe someone living in continued carelessness and immorality, we must not regard him or her as a real believer.

The word of God requires us to believe in things that are above finite human reason; that our puny minds cannot fully comprehend; but God never requires us to believe in things that are contrary to reason. There are no contradictions in Scripture or Christian theology. John informs us that the disciples’ disbelief was short lived. He writes, “Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (20:21). The evidence that Jesus set before the disciples was effective. The disciples no longer doubted because the evidence was overwhelming and could not be denied. All the grief that the disciples had been experiencing for the past three days was turned into joy. “The promise of Jesus made to them in the Upper Room, that he would ‘come’ to them (14:18) and turn their grief into joy (16:20-22) was now fulfilled. Joy is a fundamental blessing of the kingdom of God (e.g., Isa. 25:6-9; 54:1-5; 61:1-3).”¹⁶³ “Note, A sight of Christ will gladden the heart of a disciple at any time; the more we see of Christ, the more we shall rejoice in him; and our joy will never be perfect till we come where we shall see him as he is.”¹⁶⁴

**Commission**

Once all the disciples are fully convinced of the resurrection by our Lord’s instructions and the exhibition of His person, Christ turns His attention to the commissioning of His disciples. “So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (Jn. 20:21-23).

It is interesting that all the gospels contain a commissioning of the apostles by the risen Lord (Mt. 28:16-20; Mk. 16:15-18; Lk. 24:46-49; Jn. 20:21-23). The Savior’s orders are not

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¹⁶⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1218.
given until the resurrection is first proven because the apostles are special eyewitnesses of the resurrection. When the apostles chose a replacement for Judas Iscariot, a prerequisite was being an eyewitness of the risen Christ. “Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Ac. 1:21-22).

The commission begins with a repetition of the greeting, “Peace to You,” which (as noted) goes beyond the simple Hebrew salutation. The peace that comes as a result of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ is emphasized not only because the disciples need this peace to go out into a world that will hate and persecute them; but, also because “as his witness and messengers they are to dispense this very gift of peace in a peaceless world.” This is one reason that Paul begins every one of his epistles with the salutation, “Grace and peace [or grace, mercy and peace] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Th. 1:1; 2 Th. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4). Paul refers to the message of Christ’s salvation as “the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15) and says Jesus “came to preach peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:17-18).

This commission contains three main elements. Our Lord first links the commissioning of the apostles to the sending of the Son by the Father. “As the Father sent Me, I also send you” (Jn. 20:21). In the gospel of John the sending of the Son into the world by the Father is emphasized (Jn. 3:16-17; 4:34; 5:24, 30, 36, 37, 38, 43; 6:29, 38, 39, 40, 44, 57; 7:16, 18, 28, 29, 33: 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 11:42; 12:44, 45, 49; 13:16, 20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 18, 21, 23; 20:21). Our Lord wanted the people to know that He came as the representative of the Father, with the Father’s authority, to do the will of the Father. Now that Jesus has successfully completed the Father’s will by achieving redemption for the elect, it is time for the disciples to go out and represent the glorified Savior. “The commissioning authority is the same; the message is the same (nevertheless, there is this difference: Jesus through his atonement makes the message possible; the apostles simply proclaim it!); and the men to whom it is proclaimed are the same. Hence, ‘just as…so.’” Christ had explicitly discussed the apostles’ future ministry in these terms in John 13:20 and had contemplated this commission in His high priestly prayer to the Father (Jn. 17:18, 20).

The commissioning of the disciples is a consequence of God’s plan in eternity to send Christ to save His people. Now that Jesus has achieved salvation and has risen victorious, He sets apart the apostles as ambassadors to establish his kingdom throughout the world. “Let it therefore be held by us as an ascertained truth, that the Apostles were now, for the first time, appointed to be ordinary ministers of the gospel.” The verb “has sent” (apostalke) which is in the perfect tense indicates “a sending in the past that continues to hold good in the present.” The verb used to describe the sending of the apostles (pempo) is present tense and indicates a continuous act. The redemptive work of Christ has been accomplished, but also has a lasting, continuing, permanent effect on history and the world.

As the Savior enters the state of His exaltation, His mission of applying His perfect, achieved redemption continues. It will be powerful and effective because the priest-King is alive,

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167 John Calvin, Commentary on the Gospel According to John, 3:266.
168 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 379.
active and victorious. He will rule by the power of the Holy Spirit and the sword that proceeds out of His mouth, the Word of God. Therefore, right from the start of the New Covenant church, Jesus makes it very clear that the apostles are not acting on their own authority or starting something new, but are carrying on Christ’s work. “[B]y virtue of the authority given him as a Mediator, he gives authority to them, as his ministers, to act for him, and in his name, with the children of men; so that those who received them, or rejected them, received or rejected him, and him that sent him, ch. xiii.20.”

This sending by the Lord raises the question: who does this sending apply to? Does it apply to the church in general (men, women and children), or is it directed to the apostleship and perhaps beyond them to ordained teachers throughout history? Although there were others in the room beside the ten (Lk. 24:33), there are good reasons for restricting this commission to the apostles. (1) This was an official setting apart and sending that has the characteristics of ordination to a church office. (2) The sending out is a sending out to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, teach the saints, set up new churches, do signs and wonders to authenticate the gospel message and new revelation, and administer church discipline. These tasks are restricted by Scripture to an ordained office. Preaching the gospel, and teaching in the public assemblies are explicitly restricted in the Bible to certain church officers. “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11-12). Note: Paul restricts church offices and their function to only some in the church; not all are so gifted. (3) There were probably women in the room and Paul says that women are forbidden to teach or have authority over men. “Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says” (1 Cor. 14:34; cf. 1 Tim. 2:11-14). (4) In the history of the apostolic church in Acts the only people sent out to preach the gospel and set up new churches were ordained men set apart for such a task: the apostles and their close associates the evangelists (Ac. 1:14; 3:12; 4:19, 20, 31; 5:12, 18-21, 25, 29, 42; 6:4, 7, 8; 8:5, 13, 25, 35, 39; 10:34ff.; 11:19; 13:2-5, 16, 42-43; 14:1-3; 15:12, 22, 36, 40-41; 16:4, 10, 17, 40; 17:1-3; 10-13, 17-22; etc.). (5) The sending involves carrying out judicial, ministerial tasks (Jn. 20:23) that are restricted in other portions of Scripture to church officers (cf. Mt. 16:19: 18:18; 28:19-20, etc). (6) If we compare passages that correspond to John 20:21, such as John 13:20 and 17:18-20, we see that previously in John’s gospel this kind of language is directed to the apostles alone. Therefore, exegetically, it is very unlikely that John, out of accord with his previous statements, wants us to understand this commission as given to everyone indiscriminately in the whole room or to all believers without exception. Hendriksen writes,

That Jesus has the ten (and in a sense also the absent apostle, Thomas; hence, the eleven) in mind follows also from the very similar or parallel passage in 17:18, 20. Note: “Just as thou didst send me into the world, so have I also sent them into the world…Neither concerning these only do I make request, but concerning those also who believe in me through their word.” One might paraphrase this: “Just as thou didst send me into the world, so have I also sent these eleven men into the world…Neither concerning these eleven men only do I make request, but concerning those also who believe in me through their word.”

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Many expositors, in their desire to apply this charge to the church in general, fail to consider the context of this passage and thus downplay the crucial role that the apostles played in redemptive history. The apostles were the immediate messengers of Christ. They were the sent out witnesses for Jesus of His teachings, miracles, suffering, death and resurrection. They were unique, by virtue of their special commission and gift of inspiration. Consequently, in their office they were infallible as teachers, and absolute and infallibly just as rulers. Paul says that the apostles and New Covenant prophets’ work formed the foundation of the New Testament church: “having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). “No man, therefore, could be an apostle unless, -- 1. He was immediately appointed by Christ; 2. Unless he had seen him after his resurrection, and had received the knowledge of the gospel by immediate revelation; 3. Unless he was rendered infallible by the gift of inspiration. These things constituted the office, and were essential to its authority. Those who without these gifts and qualifications claimed the office are called ‘false apostles.’”  

Although this sending out, in both the narrow and broader context of Scripture, applies primarily to the apostles, it does apply to the whole church in the sense that church officers are representatives of the church. Furthermore, while the Bible does not require every church member to go into all the world to preach the gospel, nevertheless all believers do have a responsibility to be witnesses for Christ by their behavior and their conversation. There are examples in Scripture of both men and women privately witnessing and teaching others about Jesus (e.g., the Samaritan woman, Jn. 4:28-30, 39; Priscilla and Aquilla, Ac. 18:26). There is also Paul’s commendation to the Thessalonian believers, “For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything” (1 Th. 1:8).

By way of application, note the importance of the lawful ordination and sending out of preachers of the gospel. In our day of many parachurch organizations and self-proclaimed prophets, leaders and preachers, Christ’s methodology must be followed. Hutcheson writes,

Ministers are of Christ’s sending and employing by his sovereign authority, as his courts and ministers do, ministerially in his name, send them out; they must not run unsent; they who want them, and would have them blessed to them, should seek them of him; they who are lawfully called are to act in his name and authority, which is to be acknowledged by people in their discharge of trust, and such messengers are to be looked on as a great and special gift bestowed on the church by her exalted Lord. All this is imported in this, “I send you,” now when he is risen from the dead, in his begun exaltation. (See Eph. iv. 8-11.)

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171 Charles Hodge, A Commentary on Ephesians (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1856] 1964), 159. The view that our Lord’s commission was directed only to the apostles “was the interpretation put upon Jn. 20:20-23 by the earliest Christian writers who allude to these verses. Justin (Tryph. 106) ignores the presence of any but apostles. Origen (de princip. 1.iii.2 and Comm. in Jn. 388) and Cyprian (de unit.4, Epist. lxiii.6) say explicitly that Accipe spiritum sanctum, etc, was addressed to the apostles. The Liturgy of St. Mark (which may be as early as the second century) is equally explicit. I do not know, indeed of any early writer who takes a different view” (J. H. Bernard, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John [Edinburgh: T&T Clark (1928) 1976], 2:677).

172 George Hutcheson, John, 421.
He Breathed on Them

After Jesus commissioned the apostles He then qualified and empowered them. “And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn. 20:22). This verse considered in the broad context of New Covenant redemptive history is difficult and has occasioned a number of different interpretations. As we study this section of Scripture we will first consider our Lord’s action and then examine this imperative.

This is the only verse in the New Testament where Jesus is said to breathe on someone. Regarding this action note the following.

First, the verb used (Greek, *enephusesen*), “He breathed” (which is only found here in the New Testament), is the same verb used in the Septuagint in Genesis 2:7 where God breathed life into Adam. Thus, the symbolism of Christ’s impartation of the Holy Spirit sets the beginning of New Covenant history in parallel with the first creation of man. The new creation is every bit as significant in God’s eyes as the first creation. In fact, Paul even says that Christ is Lord over both creation and the recreation. Both the material world and the church came into being through Him. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible…. All things were created through Him and for Him…. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col. 1:15, 16, 18). Because of His sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus breathes life into His body, the church. Because of the Savior’s resurrection, He brings the new creation into existence by His Spirit. Just as there was no life in man until God breathed into him the breath of life, there can be no birthing of the church until Christ breathed on the apostles. “Strictly speaking, one should not view this as the beginning of the new creation but rather as the beginning of the incorporation of man into that new creation which came into being in the Christ by his incarnation, death, and resurrection, and is actualized in man by the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17).”

Although given in the immediate context of our Lord’s actions, the allusion to Genesis 2:7 is not John’s central focus. Nevertheless, John is a master of using simple terms and phrases in a manner that is profound and deep, that sometimes points the mind beyond the simple, obvious meaning to related theological truths.

Second, the breath of Christ symbolizes what immediately follows—a particular gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God was not in our Lord’s human breath which was physical air. But the breath was a sign that it is the resurrected Redeemer who imparts the Holy Spirit to the apostles and the church. It is important to remember that wind in Scriptures is the prominent symbol of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:8; Ez. 37:9; Ac. 2:2). The outward symbol of Jesus breathing on the apostles would be completely inappropriate and even blasphemous if the Holy Spirit did not proceed from Christ. This fact teaches us two closely related truths.

(1) The theanthropic Mediator as an aspect of His glorification is the One who pours out the Holy Spirit on His church. Before the crucifixion John said, “The Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (7:39). The saving sovereignty of the Spirit was dependent upon the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The apostles and the church could not bring gospel blessings into the world until redemption was accomplished and then applied by the living-ruling Savior. Christ the “life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45) communicates the life that He

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achieved by His redemptive work to elect sinners throughout the world by His Spirit. Further, as a reward for His redemptive obedience Jesus is the exalted, all-powerful King and Head of the church who dispenses the gifts of the Spirit of God to the church. As Paul says, “He ascended…and He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers…” (Eph. 4:9, 11). David also spoke of this aspect of our Lord’s glorification. “Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captivity captive: Thou hast received gifts for men: yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord might dwell among them” (Ps. 68:18 KJV). Our Lord not only commissions the apostles, but also prepares them by the grace and gifts of the Spirit for their mission.

By way of application, note that no man is qualified to any office in the church, especially that of teaching and ruling who is not first enabled and gifted by the Holy Spirit. To properly interpret the Holy Scriptures and guide men into the truth of the gospel is a job far beyond fallen human capacity. Therefore, we should not be surprised that the glorified King sends His Spirit to men to enlighten their minds, guide their tongues and mold their hearts so they are able to faithfully discharge their duties. “[I]t is the glory of Christ alone to form those he appoints to be teachers of his church; for the reason why the fullness of the Spirit has been poured out upon him is, that he may bestow it upon each person according to a certain measure.”

(2) Jesus’ act of breathing upon the apostles (Jn. 20:21) and His pouring out the Holy Spirit upon the church (Ac. 2:17, *ekcheo*, “poured out”) on Pentecost teaches us something important about the trinity’s work in the economy of redemption. Although the Holy Spirit prepared and qualified Christ for His mediatorial work (Lk. 1:35; 3:32; Heb. 10:5-7; Jn. 3:24), the risen Savior sends the Holy Spirit to form, teach and guide the church. The sending of the Holy Spirit by the glorified Messiah is not arbitrary, nor simply for dramatic effect, but is an important aspect of the theanthropic Mediator’s reward and Kingly rule. “Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws and censures, by which he visibly governs them…” (Westminster Larger Catechism, A. 46).

**Receive the Holy Spirit**

After our Lord’s symbolic act of breathing on the disciples He said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 20:22). Because of Acts 2:1ff this command (“receive,” *labete* is an aorist active imperative) has been difficult for commentators and has resulted in a number of different interpretations. In order to carefully examine this statement and come to a sound interpretation of this verse, consider the following observations.

First, note what the passage does not mean. It cannot mean that at this point in time the disciples were to receive the Holy Spirit for the first time, for the Spirit’s presence and work on the heart is necessary for conversion. The apostles, obviously, were already believers and not pagans. Both the Old (see Ez. 11:19; 36:26; 44:9) and New Testament (see Jn. 1:13; 3:3, 5, 8; Col. 2:11; Tit. 3:5) teach that an immediate work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for the new birth and effectual calling (see Jn. 6:44, 65). Paul said, “Now we have received, not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). “[N]o one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1

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Cor. 12:3). Therefore, the apostles received the Spirit when they first were converted and believed. “Whether they realized it or not, the Holy Ghost was in their hearts already.”

This incident must not be confused with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. A number of modernist and neo-evangelical commentators take the position that John was not interested in a strict, accurate chronology and thus deliberately placed the sending of the Spirit on the day of resurrection. According to this view (at least with certain neo-evangelical scholars), Acts 2 contains the authentic account while John (aware of Acts) simply wanted to make the same theological point. But, because John wrote only one volume, not two, they contend he compressed events so that the giving of the Spirit could be placed in the resurrection narrative. Given the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, such a view is totally unacceptable. The Bible is inerrant not only when it speaks of theology or spiritual matters, but also when covering historical events.

Further, John’s own gospel anticipates the Pentecost event. In John 16, Jesus repeatedly makes it very clear that Holy Spirit will not come until after the ascension. He said, “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you” (Jn. 16:7). In this discourse Christ talks about going away to the Father and being absent from the apostles (see 16:5, 7, 16, 17, 19; cf. 17:5) before the Holy Spirit is sent. Therefore, one must not view John 20:22 as the beloved disciple’s version of Pentecost. Thus, the idea, originally developed by modernists, that John telescopes the resurrection, ascension and coming of the Holy Spirit to the day of resurrection is untenable. According to John himself, the Savior must be absent from the apostles with God in heaven before the comforter is sent. In this passage the Lord is still with the apostles.

(3) It is a mistake to view the breathing on the apostles and the words “receive the Spirit” as merely a promise or announcement of which the outpouring at Pentecost was the historic fulfillment. Our Lord did not say “you will receive” (future tense), but “receive” or “take.” “The aorist labete is decidedly punctiliar and denotes reception then and there and not a process of reception that is to go on and on.” The verb is the word used for “take” in all the accounts of the institution of the Lord’s supper (Mt. 26:26; Mk. 14:22; Lk. 22:17) where the reception of the elements was immediate. Consequently, the use of this verb “still more plainly implies that some gift was offered and bestowed then and there: it is wresting plain language to make ‘take ye’ a mere promise.” Therefore, there was a resurrection day gift of the Holy Spirit that is distinct from the Pentecostal gift of God’s Spirit.

Note also the evident differences between the resurrection day bestowal and Pentecost. As noted, the resurrection day gift is directed to the apostles. It is for their distinctive work. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the whole church. On the Lord’s day, Jesus bestows the gift in person and precedes it with the sign of His breath. On Pentecost, the Savior is in heaven or absent and the sound of a mighty rushing wind comes from heaven. On the day of resurrection there were no “divided tongues as of fire” (Ac. 2:3), speaking in tongues, bold public preaching or wide-scale conversions. Further, Pentecost is the direct fulfillment of Jesus’ promise in Jn. 16 as well as a number of Old Testament prophecies (e.g., Joel 2:30, 31; Zech. 12:10; Isa. 32:14-17; Ezek. 36:26; cf. Ac. 2:16); the resurrection day bestowal is not. “Wherefore it cannot be doubted that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was His first and real
coming into the Church.” Given these differences, it is best to view the resurrection day bestowal as not a promise, but as something separate, different and unique.

Second, given the considerations above and the immediate context, which is a commission and statement regarding the judicial responsibilities of teaching and church discipline, this impartation of the Holy Spirit should be viewed as a bestowal related to knowledge, understanding and authoritative teaching. Previously, the apostles had been severely deficient in their understanding of redemptive events. They did not even perceive the meaning or purpose of Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection. On this very same day, the day of resurrection, they were particularly blind in spiritual understanding regarding the many evidences and testimonies set before them. Therefore, after the effective demonstration of His bodily resurrection, Christ bestows on the apostles the Holy Spirit so that, as the primary witnesses, teachers and expositors in the church, they will have the necessary understanding and knowledge for their task.

The parallel account in Luke’s gospel points to this interpretation. Luke says that after our Lord gave a detailed explanation concerning Himself, “He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (24:45). Then, after their minds were enlightened, the disciples’ commission is again stated in explicit terms (24:47-48). “[L]ight in the understanding is the first thing required in order to make a man an able minister of the New Testament. Our Lord was commissioning His first ministers, and sending them out to carry on His work. He begins by giving them light and knowledge: ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost. I commission you this day, and confer on you the office of ministers. And this gift I confer on you is spiritual knowledge.’” Jesus communicates the peace of salvation and a special spiritual gift of understanding the Scriptures so that the apostles may be prepared for their common work.

This interpretation is supported by the great change we find in the apostles after this meeting. Although we are often taught that a radical change occurred only at Pentecost, we must not neglect the change in the apostles before Pentecost:

Read the closing chapter of each Gospel and the first of Acts, and the proofs of this are conclusive. Their irresolution, their unbelief, their misapprehensions, were all gone. When the cloud finally received the Saviour from their sight, instead of being dispersed in consternation “they worshipped him” and “returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (Luke 24:52)—this was “joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17): Moreover, they continued “with one accord in prayer and supplication” (Acts 1:14)—this was “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Peter has a clear understanding of Old Testament prophecy (Acts 1:20)—this was the Spirit guiding into the truth (John 16:13). And these things were before Pentecost.

Therefore, with reference to the apostles, there are at least three separate gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration; the special endowment qualifying these men for the apostolic office (Jn. 20:22); and, the baptism with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Ac. 2:1ff.). A number of commentators speak of the giving of the Spirit as an “earnest” of a greater gifting and empowerment to come at Pentecost. For example, Calvin writes,

The Spirit was given to the Apostles on this occasion in such a manner, that they were only sprinkled by his grace, but were not filled with full power…. And, indeed, he did appoint them

179 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:446.
to be heralds of his Gospel, so as to send them forth immediately to the work, but ordered them
to take repose, as we read elsewhere, *Remain ye in the city of Jerusalem till ye are endued with
power from on high*, (Luke xxxiv. 49). And if we take all things properly into consideration, we
shall conclude, not that he furnishes them with necessary gifts for present use, but that he
appoints them to be the organs of his Spirit for the future; and, therefore, this *breathing* ought to
be understood as referring chiefly to that magnificent act of sending the Spirit which he had so
often promised.\footnote{John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 3:268-269.}

Thus, the apostles received something more than they had before (special gifts of the Holy
Spirit), but they would receive even more spiritual blessings when Christ sits on His throne. The
day of resurrection then, is organically connected to Pentecost.

### Retaining and Remitting Sins

After commissioning the apostles and bestowing gifts for their task, our Lord turns His
attention to the great responsibility of their mission. The apostles’ job of preaching the gospel,
teaching doctrine and setting up churches has a distinct judicial aspect. Jesus said, “If you
forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”
(Jn. 20:23).

Christ is telling the apostles that their responsibility to preach the gospel and govern the
church is very serious business. If men do not believe in the gospel, the apostles have the
responsibility to tell such people that they are not saved; that they are still in their sins. But, if
people do believe in Christ and repent, the apostles are to tell such people that they are saved,
baptize them, and admit them into the visible church. This aspect of the apostles’ commission
applies to all office bearers throughout history. Church officers are responsible not only to
proclaim the gospel, but also (when appropriate), they are to inflict and/or remove ecclesiastical
censures. The apostles are not simply preachers, but also church planters and governors. With the
guidance of the Holy Spirit, they have the authority of announcing that a person is saved or that a
person is not a Christian *as long as what they say is in accordance with the teaching of God’s
holy Word*. In other words, their authority is ministerial and declarative and not intrinsic,
subjective, autonomous or arbitrary.

We emphasize the declarative nature of this responsibility in opposition to Roman
Catholic dogma that the apostles and their successors (cardinals, bishops and priests) have by
ordination an intrinsic and absolute power of retaining or remitting sins. Consequently, various
popes in the Middle Ages would threaten princes and kings with excommunication for political,
financial and arbitrary reasons. Also many godly men were excommunicated for rejecting the
heresies and idolatries of the papal church. That our Lord has in mind only a declarative and
ministerial sense to His words is proved by the following observations.

First, the tense of the verbs used indicates that church officers can only *declare* that
which God *has already done*. The passage literally reads, “Those whose sins you forgive [aorist;
i.e. punctiliar] have already been forgiven [perfect; i.e. already determined with a continuing
result]; those whose sins you do not forgive [aorist] have not been forgiven [perfect].” This
means that God doesn’t forgive or refuse to forgive based on a church officer’s prior decision.
But rather, ministers simply announce what is already the case according to God. And how do
men know if a person’s sins are forgiven or retained by God? The only way to know is by
searching the Holy Scriptures to see what God says. Church officers announce; they do not create or autonomously legislate. If a body of church elders arbitrarily disciplines a person that has not actually violated Scripture, that session is guilty of serious sin and God does not recognize, but repudiates their judicial decision.

Second, the Bible explicitly teaches that only God has the authority to forgive sins. When the scribes said, “Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mk. 2:7), they were right. “In the OT God alone can forgive sins, and later Judaism adhered scrupulously to this understanding.” Here, these learned Jews were correct in their interpretation of the Old Testament. Their great error was in not understanding the person of Christ; that He was indeed divine. No one but God can forgive sins and for a mere man to claim that he can is blasphemy. Therefore, Jesus answered by saying, “But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the paralytic, ‘I say to you arise, take up your bed, and go to your house’” (Mk. 2:10-11). The Savior proved that He was God when He healed the paralytic, for blasphemers cannot perform signs. The idea that a pope, bishop or priest can forgive sins is wicked and idolatrous.

In Acts 8:22 after Peter rebuked Simon the sorcerer for attempting to buy gifts of the Holy Spirit with money, Peter told Simon Magus to repent of his scandalous sin and pray to God for forgiveness. If Peter (whom Romanists erroneously call the first pope) had the power to forgive sins, then why did he tell Simon to confess his sins directly to God? Confession, or an acknowledgment of sins, is commanded throughout the Bible for forgiveness of sins. But, it is noteworthy that it is always a confession to God, never to a man. It is a striking fact that although Paul, Peter and John dealt frequently with men and women in sins, both in their teaching and in their practice they never permitted a sinner to confess to them.

Third, one can carefully read the entire New Testament without finding even one example of an apostle, evangelist, pastor or elder absolving or pardoning a person’s sins. They do frequently discuss having one’s sins removed or forgiven. However, they always relate it directly to the person and work of Christ. The message of forgiveness was “repent and...be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Ac. 2:38); “to Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Ac. 10:43); “let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins” (Ac. 13:28). “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Ac. 16:43). “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Therefore, a study of the whole New Testament reveals that the apostles themselves did not interpret Jesus’ words in John 20:23 in a Roman Catholic manner. “While Christ enjoins the Apostles to forgive sins, he does not convey to them what is peculiar to himself. It belongs to him to forgive sins. This honour, so far as it belongs peculiarly to himself, he does not surrender to the Apostles, but enjoins them, in his name to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, that through their agency he may reconcile men to God.”

183 James 5:16 which says, “Confess your faults to one another to one another, and pray for one another,” is a command to be done by all Christians for mutual edification. Obviously, if a professing Christian sins against a brother, he needs to acknowledge that sin and ask the offended brother for forgiveness. This passage, however, has absolutely nothing to do with confession to a priest or anyone else to receive forgiveness from God.
There is also nothing in Scripture about confessing one’s sins to a priest. This makes perfect sense for the Bible teaches that it is the privilege of every believer to confess his sins directly to God. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). Paul said, “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). The papal system places a human sinful mediator between God and Christ. Such a doctrine is not only exceedingly sinful, but highly injurious because people are taught to look to men instead of Christ for forgiveness. J. C. Ryle writes,

The experience of the Romish Church, in which the priests are practically regarded as having the power to absolve sinners, and shut heaven against persons not absolved, affords the strongest indirect evidence that our Lord’s words can only have been meant to bear a “declarative” sense. Anything worse or more mischievous, both to minister and people, than the results of the Romish system of penance and absolution, it is impossible to conceive. It is a system which has practically degraded the laity, puffed up and damaged the clergy, turned people away from Christ, and kept them in spiritual darkness and bondage.\(^{185}\)

Fourth, the parallel account in Luke’s gospel gives us details not found in John’s gospel that make it clear that Jesus is emphasizing the nature and importance of gospel preaching. After our Lord breathed on the apostles and opened their understanding so they could comprehend the Scriptures He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things” (Lk. 24:46-48). The statement about retaining or remitting sins is obviously connected to the preaching of the gospel, not the confessional. The church’s function is to proclaim the gospel to all men; teaching them that forgiveness is found only in Christ and that those who reject Jesus will die in their sins.

This theme is found throughout John’s gospel, only the terms (“remit,” “retain”) are different. In the beloved disciple’s gospel there is “much about ‘having life eternal’ and ‘not having life’ or ‘perishing’ from 3:15 onward, and no man has life without being rid of his sins. The same is true in 1:12, regarding the ‘power to become sons of God.’ Compare 5:24, and in particular 8:21 and 24, ‘dying in your sins,’ and 9:41, ‘your sin remains.’ In fact, the entire gospel is full of the fundamental truth of divine grace and forgiveness…. All is now concentrated and brought to a focus in two weighty statements by which Jesus bestows upon his disciples the great power [of gospel preaching] he has so far exercised himself.”\(^{186}\)

The main purpose of preaching the gospel is so that men would have their sins removed by Christ and be reconciled to God. Paul even refers to the work of the apostles as “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). If preachers are to be faithful to their calling they must accurately, firmly and repeatedly proclaim Christ’s gospel. Also, they must tell people plainly that those who reject the gospel are still in their sins. Their sins are retained. Their offenses and guilt remain and God’s just verdict of condemnation rests upon them. Those who preach the gospel ought to take their jobs very seriously and those who reject Christ ought to be terrified by

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185 J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:448-449. The Roman Catholic doctrine of auricular confession of sin to a priest instead of to God was a rather late human innovation instituted by Pope Innocent III at the Lateran Council in 1215. It is related to the Romanist sacerdotal concept of the priesthood which is rooted in a heretical concept of Christ’s atoning death as insufficient and unbiblical views of Mt. 16:19 and Jn. 20:23.
Jesus’ words. The gospel call invites all to embrace Christ by faith and be saved and it also proclaims damnation and destruction to those who despise the Savior’s glad tidings.

Fifth, the language of “retaining” or “remitting” describes the apostles as not only preachers, but also as ecclesiastical judges. Following the preaching of the gospel, comes admittance or exclusion from the church and the sacraments. “The authority of the messengers includes both the communication of salvation and the imposition of judgment. It is the judge’s authority to acquit and to pronounce guilty that is described by this pair of opposites and the synonymous phrases ‘bind and loose’ [Mt. 18:18] and ‘forgive and retain sins.’ As pairs of opposites are used in pairs of words mean that the messengers receive total authority.”\(^{187}\) In Matthew 18:18 the binding and loosing is connected with cases of unrepentant sin in the church. Sin is the transgression of the law. The context of John 20:23 places the remitting and retaining in connection with the acceptance or rejection of the gospel. In both Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23, the authority exercised by the ecclesiastic judges has solely to do with making judgments based on biblical law and New Testament applications of moral principles; or, whether a person has a credible profession of faith in Christ. The point is that in neither of these passages do we find Jesus taking His own intrinsic authority as God and transferring it to His apostles. They are called upon to make judgments according to the law and gospel. The Roman Catholic interpretation assumes with no scriptural evidence whatsoever that the apostles and their supposed successors are given intrinsic legislative authority which they are not.

The only time it would even appear that an apostle or prophet had some sort of special power or authority apart from the written word is when they were exercising special spiritual gifts such as writing or speaking by divine inspiration or exercising the gift of knowledge (e.g., the cases of Ananias, Sapphira and Simon Magus). These gifts, however, were unique and the judgment involved came by direct revelation, not private opinion. The apostles like the prophets before them were not acting like kings, but as ambassadors; that is by declaring to the people what God Himself has spoken. This aspect of the ministry of the apostles has ceased and was never intended by God to be handed down generation to generation in the churches. In this sense then, there is no such thing as apostolic succession. “Modern ministers are not successors of the Apostles, but of Timothy and Titus. The Apostles were particularly qualified, and gifted, and furnished for the very peculiar work they had to do, as the first founders of Churches. But, in the strictest and most accurate sense, their office was one which was not transmitted. With them it began, and with them it ended.”\(^{188}\)

Other Applications

There are a number of things that we should learn from this authority bestowed upon the apostles that extends to the church and her ministers.

First, we see that our Lord set up the visible church to be orderly and holy. There is a particular doctrine that is to be proclaimed and passed on to future generations, and there is church discipline to keep unbelieving, unrepentant, obstinate sinners out of the church. The visible church is to function under sound doctrine and strict discipline. “All the members of the church are subject to the order established by Christ in his house, and none ought to free

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themselves from his yoke; all are bound to submit to his doctrine in the mouths of his servants, and all also are under his rod of government.”

Churches that are unfaithful to this commission by perverting the Savior’s gospel (e.g., Arminianism, Romanism, Shepherdism, the Auburn Avenue heresy) and refusing to discipline people who are guilty of scandalous sin and heresy are not living in obedience to our Lord’s commission. They must not be supported by our membership or tithe.

Second, by showing us the nature of true authority this commission helps us identify and avoid arbitrary human ecclesiastical authority. Many professing Christians do not understand that the keys of the kingdom (see Mt. 16:19; 18:18) are purely ministerial and declarative. The authority of the pastoral office comes solely from understanding, exegeting, expositing and applying the Bible in preaching, teaching, writing, counseling and discipline. When the true meaning of Scripture is applied people are obligated to submit to the teaching or counsel not because the pastor said it, but because God has said it. The idea that church officers can make up or create new doctrines, rules or worship practices out of thin air and believers are obligated to submit to the new human traditions because the church elders say so is akin to Romanism and the great sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat. Church courts can only tell men that their sins are remitted, or that they are retained or bound in terms of God’s infallible Word. “No independent power is conferred upon the church, and to imagine so is to follow after the Pharisees, as the modern church has so often done.”

Therefore, we must view this commission as a great charter of Christian liberty. If a church session or presbytery wants to charge a church member with something, they must not only carefully follow biblical procedure (see Mt. 18:15-20; 1 Tim. 5:19), but also must first prove from Scripture that sin or heresy has been committed. Further, the decisions of ecclesiastical courts that are contrary to or not based on Scripture are not binding. The court’s responsibility is to condemn people who have first been condemned by God. Christians should not be afraid of ecclesiastical tyrants, but should rather expose them to the light of Scripture.

Third, this section of Scripture shows us the importance of submitting ourselves to biblical preaching and church admonition or discipline. When a pastor or church session tells a professing Christian that they are living in sin and need to repent and what is said is based on the Word of God, their words must be taken very seriously. Christ says that such words are fully backed up by God Himself, that biblical church censures are “bound in heaven” (Mt. 18:18). This subject is brought up because many church members think they can escape divine justice by denouncing the pastor or session and leaving the church; or by appealing to some technicality in the denomination’s book of church order. If you have done this or are contemplating it, do not be deceived. God is not mocked. You may fool a few people in the church and you may even succeed in damaging the pastor’s reputation, but you cannot fool God. He has already made His decision concerning your obstinacy and you will pay dearly for your rejection of God’s truth. Hutcheson writes, “This exercise of ministerial authority, however carnal hearts may condemn and slight it, either in doctrine or discipline, yet, being gone about according to the rules of the word, it is so effectual as it is ratified in heaven, and the penitent or obstinate sinner will find God’s mind towards them to be according as is declared in his name on earth…. And this may be a matter of terror to the obstinate, and of encouragement to the penitent.”

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Chapter 9: The Convincing of Thomas

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, “We have seen the LORD.” But he said unto them, “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.” And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, “Peace be unto you.” Then saith he to Thomas, “Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.” And Thomas answered and said unto him, “My LORD and my God.” Jesus saith unto him, “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (Jn. 20:24-29).

The story of unbelieving Thomas and our Lord’s second appearance to the apostles to convince him is peculiar to John’s gospel. This section of Scripture is not only a great blessing to believers by its teaching, but also serves as a strong proof of the honesty of the gospel writers and evidence for divine inspiration. If the apostles were dishonest hypocrites, they most certainly would not have so faithfully recorded all their own serious defects, doubts and sins.

Thomas, who is identified as “one of the twelve called Didymus” (Jn. 20:24), is mentioned very infrequently in the gospels. The synoptic gospels give us no information about him except his name. (Thomas [Hebrew] and Didymus [Greek] both mean “a twin.”) In John’s gospel, he is only mentioned twice and this information shows us that Thomas was brave, dedicated and somewhat pessimistic. The first incident occurred when Christ told the disciples of His intention of going to Jerusalem. At this time the disciples were well aware of the Jewish authorities’ desire to kill Jesus. Therefore, going to Jerusalem seemed exceedingly dangerous and perhaps even suicidal. It is in this context that the normally quiet Thomas said “unto his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him’” (Jn. 11:16). “Ahead Thomas could see nothing but disaster, but nevertheless he was for going on. Thomas was grimly determined to be faithful unto death.” The other incident shows Thomas to be dull of thought and bewildered by our Lord’s teaching. After Jesus spoke of going away to prepare a place for the disciples and even said, “And where I go you know and the way you know” (Jn 14:4) Thomas said, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” (Jn. 14:5). Based on these two examples, many commentators think that Thomas had a gloomy, pessimistic disposition. Such an assessment, however, may be a bit speculative given the sparse information we have regarding Thomas, called Didymus.

As we consider this section of Scripture, there are three main points that merit our attention: (1) Thomas’ request or challenge; (2) our Lord’s convincing of Thomas; and, (3) the Savior’s promised blessing.

Thomas’ Challenge

The story of the second appearance of Christ, where our Lord proves the resurrection to Thomas, is a direct result of Thomas’ absence from the first Lord’s day appearance and Thomas’ strong expression of unbelief. The absence of Thomas from the first Lord’s day assembly is not

explained. Therefore, we should not assume that Thomas was somehow blameworthy for missing the fellowship of the disciples. He may have had a legitimate excuse. We simply do not know. We do know, however, that by missing this assembly of saints, Thomas missed a great blessing and spent a whole week suffering needlessly over the Savior’s death. “By being absent he was kept in suspense and unbelief a whole week, while all around him were rejoicing in the thought of a risen Lord.”

From this incident we learn the importance of “not forsaking the assembly of ourselves together, as is the manner of some” (Heb. 10:25). If we miss public worship on the Christian Sabbath, we need to be sure that we have a legitimate reason. We must “never let our place be empty when the means of grace are going on, this is one way to be a growing and prosperous Christian. The very sermon we needlessly miss, may contain a precious word in season for our souls.”

After Thomas returned to the disciples, they attempted to convince him of the resurrection. “The other disciples therefore said to him, ‘We have seen the Lord’” (Jn. 20:25). The verb translated “said” (elegon) is an imperfect and is best translated “were saying.” This verb indicates that they kept speaking to Thomas in an attempt to convince him. The disciples were full of peace and joy and were already beginning to act as faithful witnesses. They took pity on Thomas who missed this glorious event and wanted him to have the peace and faith that they had. We must keep in mind that others were in the room besides the apostles. It is likely that Thomas received a barrage of excited, joyful testimonies of the risen Savior.

John sums up all the various accounts of these witnesses with the statement, “We have seen the Lord” (Jn. 20:25). They no doubt related to Thomas all that had recently happened. They told him how they had examined Jesus from only a few feet away; how Christ had the scars on His hands, feet and side. They relayed how they had been able to touch the Savior and see that He had a real physical—flesh and bones—human body. The disciples were attempting to heal the pain in Thomas’ heart that they had experienced. They wanted to encourage Thomas and build up his faith by communicating what they had seen. They used the very same language (in the plural) “that Mary Magdalene had used (20:18) when no one believed her.”

Thomas, however, would have none of it. He rejected their testimony and responded with a challenge, saying that he would only believe if certain conditions were met. “So he said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (Jn. 20:25). There are a number of things to note regarding this challenge.

First, Thomas’ challenge was very strong. He uses the emphatic double negative ou me which means he certainly will not believe without these conditions. Thomas was being exceedingly stubborn and uncooperative. He was obstinate. He was so convinced in his own mind that our Lord was still dead that nothing would satisfy him except a personal, physical, sensual experience. “The very form of this speech betokens the strength of his unbelief. For, as Bengel says, it is not, ‘If I see, I will believe,’ but ‘Unless I see, I will not believe;’ nor does he think he will see, though the rest had told him that they had.”

Because of the apostles’ hardness of heart and unbelief (Mk. 16:14), Jesus had permitted them both to see and handle His physical body. Thomas now demands the same proof almost as if he believes the other disciples are playing a very inappropriate joke upon him.

194 Ibid.
Second, Thomas’ demand was unreasonable. Thomas had heard the testimony of the women and Mary Magdalene. He also had heard the report from John and Peter regarding the empty tomb and the grave clothes. Now Thomas does not even accept the testimony of the ten apostles together, the two disciples from Emmaus and others who were present. “For him all this unanimous testimony of all these people, whose character for veracity he knew so well amounts to nothing. The fact that all of them, like himself had never dreamed of Jesus’ resurrection, had thought it impossible, and had then been convinced from this unbelief by overwhelming evidence, affects Thomas in an opposite way: he determines to set himself against all.”

“And his sin of unbelief is the more aggravated, inasmuch as this disciple was present at the raising of Lazarus from the dead by Christ, and had heard Christ himself say, that he should rise from the dead the third day.”

The absurdity of Thomas’ position is further demonstrated by the fact that Christ had chosen the apostles to be His special witnesses of His life, death and resurrection to the nations; yet Thomas, one of their own, was rejecting their eyewitness testimony. If Thomas could not believe the words of the apostles, how were the apostles supposed to convince others of the truth of the gospel who would never have the opportunity of empirical proof?

The unreasonable position of Thomas served at least three purposes in this narrative. First, God was showing all the apostles how irrational, absurd and sinful their unbelief had been. All the other disciples (except John) only a few hours earlier were no different than Thomas. Our Lord had to show them His hands, feet and side to convince them of the resurrection. Thomas is only expressing “an exaggerated expression of the attitude they manifested to the women who said that they had seen Jesus.” Therefore, it is unfair to single out Thomas. Christ providentially arranged this whole scene to remind all the apostles how unready all of them were to believe and to focus their minds on the importance of believing divine testimony without empirical proof. If everyone demanded empirical proof in the same manner as Thomas and the apostles, the gospel would not have spread through the nations.

The infallibility and self-authenticating nature of Scripture is very important for the propagation of the gospel. Christ has chosen to speak to all subsequent generations through the written divine Word alone. “The Bible is, as it were, a letter from Christ to his people, to his church. But Christ is God. He speaks to his Church so that his church might speak to mankind.” If the apostles do not accept the divine testimony as sufficient and make man the ultimate reference point for truth and meaning, then the demands of sinful, autonomous man will always set up absurd tests that the gospel can never meet. This is the result of man’s depravity and his desire to be his own god. While Thomas and the apostles were certainly unwilling to go that far in their demand for verification; nevertheless, in principle, it was the position of unbelief that they had unconsciously adopted.

Thus, what Thomas and the apostles had done was dishonoring to God’s holy Word and the testimony of Christ the living Word. Peter assures us that God’s written Word is “more sure” and more convincing than even being an eyewitness to miracles (e.g., Lk. 16:31; 2 Pet. 1:19; Jn. 20:29, 31). If a person is not satisfied by what the Word of God says, then according to Jesus no amount of empirical evidence will persuade them of the truth (“If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” [Lk. 16:31]). “The word

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of Christ carried such evidential warranting power within itself that He could say that whoever rejected His word would be judged on the final day by that very word itself (John 12:48). Therefore, we should be perfectly satisfied with the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ which is contained in His Word. Let us always remember that the unbeliever is always unreasonable because he demands proof upon proof when he has already rejected many satisfactory evidences.

Second, God was using the unbelief of Thomas to bring out another great proof of the resurrection for all succeeding generations. Divine providence overruled the dullness and foolishness of Thomas and the other disciples to multiply proofs for the gospel. The resurrection narratives place proofs one right after another so that no one can have a reasonable excuse to reject the great truths of the gospel.

Third, Thomas’ demand was presumptuous and disrespectful toward God. It was not proper for Thomas who had repeatedly heard the teaching of Jesus and had seen His amazing signs to make demands upon God. God requires His people to believe in His Word whether they are attended by signs or not. The fact that our Lord was kind and merciful to Thomas and satisfied his bold and astonishing demands does not mean that we should emulate Thomas’ arrogant, unbelieving behavior. We must remember that because Thomas was one of the twelve, Christ had to show Himself to him so that he could fulfill his role as an apostle, a special eyewitness of redemption.

When most people demand proof of the gospel in our day they are not truly seeking after God and His righteousness, but rather are making artificial excuses for their rejection of the truth. Such behavior is exceedingly dangerous. The Most High is not required to do your bidding. The Sovereign Lord does not perform on cue. It is stupid, arrogant and foolish to ask God to give you some special sign or proof when He has already done so in His infallible Word. If you want proof of the gospel; study God’s Word, and humbly ask the Lord to open your blind eyes to it. People who mock God and treat Him as some sort of circus animal are simply suppressing the truth so that they can continue a life of sin and debauchery.

**Jesus Convinces Thomas**

After Thomas’ challenge John picks up the story one week later when the apostles were meeting together in the same room. “And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, ‘Peace to you!’” (Jn. 20:26). The phrase “after eight days” according to the Jewish method of reckoning time (i.e. they count the first and the last days in the period.) places this scene on the following Sunday. John’s narrative gives the impression that this Lord’s day meeting is virtually identical with the previous Sunday except that now Thomas is present and can be corrected by the Savior. John even mentions that the doors were locked just as before. From this second Lord’s day meeting and appearance we can deduce that from the resurrection day onward the early believers recognized the first day of the week as the New Covenant Sabbath day. It is likely

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202 “Dr. Hammond has proved from Jospephus [Antiqu. 1.7.C.9], that the Jews used to express a week by eight days” (John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:128).
that the change of the day was communicated to the apostles by our Lord, but the instructions were not inscripturated.\footnote{The idea that Jesus must have personally instructed the apostles regarding the change of the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week is deduced by the following observations: (1) The change of the day after the resurrection is immediate and universal. It is hard to believe that this change could be so quick, based on the apostles’ theological analysis of the Sabbath from the Old Testament scriptures alone. (2) In the apostolic church there was never any disagreement or controversy regarding the change of the Sabbath day. This historical fact militates against the idea that the change was based on apostolic inferences alone. (3) The whole concept of divine warrant based on approved historical examples in Scriptures presupposes some sort of divine revelation behind the historical examples. This assertion is proven by two considerations: a) Throughout the Bible, God’s people are explicitly forbidden to add to what God had taught or commanded (Dt. 4:2; 12:32; Lev. 10:12; Jer. 7:24, 31; 1 Ki. 12:32-33; Num. 15:39-40; 1 Chr. 15:13-15; Mt. 15:3, 9; Col. 2:20-23; etc). Therefore, the change of the day was not something that the apostles made up or decided was a good idea. b) Paul says that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6) and that “whatever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). This truth means that church ordinances must be founded upon divine revelation not human opinion. If faith is directed to what man has determined in his heart apart from the Word of God, then God is dishonored and man is given the honor due to God alone. Paul calls such things “will worship” (Col. 2:23 KJV).}

The presence of Thomas at this assembly of the saints indicates that his disbelief in the resurrection did not cause him to abandon Christ or the Christian saints. His unbelief was bad, but it was not the kind of unbelief that belongs to apostates. Thomas still had faith in Christ and was part of the church. There is a great difference between those who deliberately nurture their unbelief and the temporary unbelief of Thomas. There is also a major difference between someone like Thomas who is sad and downcast about his unbelief and wants relief and the reprobate who loves unbelief and has no true regard of Jesus Christ and the cross. Such people cling to unbelief because it is the delusion that comforts their guilty heart as it swims in iniquity and lives in darkness. We must never confuse these two classes of men. “Let us be charitable with the honest doubter; God will take care of him, as He took care of Thomas. But we can have no sympathy with the dishonest doubter, who often makes his doubts the plea for carelessness and Godlessness.”\footnote{D. Macleod, \textit{Christian World Pulpit}, vol. xxi., p. 168, as quoted in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., \textit{The Sermon Outline Bible} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 8:304.}

Note also that, even though Thomas did not yet believe in the resurrection, the apostles and the saints allowed Him to stay within their company and fellowship. They showed love and forbearance with Thomas because: a) They had been guilty of the same sin and only repented because of Jesus’ personal appearance; b) They no doubt remembered our Lord’s statement in John 17 that none would be lost to apostasy except Judas; and, therefore, c) They knew that it was only a matter of time before Thomas repented of his unbelief in the resurrection. These unique redemptive historical circumstances are important because the New Testament epistles make it perfectly clear that a person who does not sincerely believe that Christ rose from the dead is not a Christian (see Rom. 10:9).

These details teach us that if a person is having doubts about a doctrine or struggling with sin, then he should not flee the visible church, but hold fast in it and seek help. A backslider will stay and repent; while an apostate will leave and join himself to other apostates and the world. As Hutcheson observes, “Whatever be the failings or unbelief of saints, yet it is commendable in them to be amending their other known faults and neglects; and there is still hope of their case, so long as they use the means whereby they may be cured of their unbelief, and do not, with their unbelief, quit the use of the means also.”\footnote{George Hutcheson, \textit{John}, 424.}
Further, it is noteworthy that our Lord waited one full week before relieving Thomas’ pain and unbelief. Although Scripture gives no specific reason why a whole week transpired before this appearance, it probably lies in the Savior’s sovereign desire to teach Thomas and the other apostles an important lesson. Christ wanted Thomas to fully experience the bitterness and pain caused by unbelief. Also, the other apostles had to experience the frustration of Thomas’ obstinacy. The passing of the full week would not only magnify the Redeemer’s mercy and compassion, but also teach the disciples to wait upon Christ and seek relief in Him alone.

After Jesus appears and greets the disciples, He immediately turns His attention to Thomas. 206 “Then He said to Thomas, ‘Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing’” (Jn. 20:27). There are a number of things to note regarding this statement.

First, note that Jesus very precisely and fully meets every single demand that Thomas had made. In fact, for “each demand of Thomas there is a command of Christ, though the order in which the commands are uttered is not exactly the same as that which the demands were made.”207 The very specific manner in which the Savior addressed Thomas would have startled Thomas, for it proved that even though the Redeemer had not been present when Thomas made his demands, the Lord knew exactly what Thomas had said. This not only demonstrated that Jesus had been alive the previous Lord’s day, but also exhibited Christ’s omniscience and divinity. 208 The Mediator had personally witnessed Thomas’ unbelief. Our Lord’s words must have pierced Thomas’ conscience and brought great sorrow to his soul. The reproduction of almost the very same words was designed to press home to Thomas the unreasonableness of his demands.

Regarding our Lord’s commands to Thomas, commentators are divided as to whether Thomas actually reached out and touched the scars of the crucifixion. The text does not actually say what Thomas did, but only what he said. Given the fact that Jesus ordered Thomas to touch the imprints on His hands and side, it is safe to assume that Thomas obeyed the Savior. He really had no other choice. Does this imply in any way that Thomas did not believe until he actually touched the Redeemer’s resurrected body? No. Our Lord’s amazing appearance and statement about the previous Lord’s day events was surely evidence enough. Christ’s specific demands were designed to show Thomas the unreasonable nature of his request; the Savior’s love toward him; and were directed to us also, so that nothing would be lacking regarding the proof and nature of His resurrection to all subsequent generations. Lenski notes,

They were made “witnesses” of his resurrection (Acts 2:32; 3:15) in the fullest possible sense of the word, “witnesses” whose testimony was to stand as being unassailable in all future ages. We may blame Thomas personally as much as we will. Jesus knew that Thomas would have many successors in all ages. Hence, if Thomas, “one of the Twelve,” had been left with

206 It is noteworthy that Jesus in this passage follows His own judicial procedure set forth in Matthew 18:15ff. Hutcheson observes, “Such as have publicly sinned to the offending of others should be publicly dealt with, to take with and amend their fault, that so their recovery may strengthen those whom their failings were ready to weaken; therefore doth Christ deal with and seek to reclaim Thomas, in presence of all the disciples, to whom he had professed his willful unbelief” (The Gospel of John, 424-425).
208 The One who died on Calvary’s cross was ‘God manifested in flesh,’ and being God, He not only sees every deed we perform, but also hears every word that we utter. O that we might be more conscious, hour by hour, that the eye of Divine holiness is ever upon us, that the ear of the omnipresent One is ever open to all that we say, that He still stands in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks! To realize this is to walk ‘in the fear of God’” (Arthur W. Pink, Exposition of the Gospel of John, 3:297).
any justification, however flimsy, even for any degree of doubt as regards the resurrection of
Jesus, the effect would have been bad for all time to come. By thus dealing as he does with
Thomas, meeting him on Thomas’ own ground, he is dealing with all doubt and disbelief in his
resurrection in all time to come, closing the mouth of every disbeliever in all future time.209

Therefore, we must be eternally grateful to our precious Savior for so firmly and clearly
overthrowing all reasons for disbelief for all ages.

Second, we should carefully note the amazing compassion, mercy and kindness that
Christ showed to his erring apostle. Thomas had made demands that he should never have made.
They were unreasonable, unbelieving and even irreverent. Thomas was in no position to make
demands of the risen, all-powerful divine-human Mediator. The arrogant manner in which
Thomas exhibited his unbelief was provoking and given the many proofs already set before him,
inexcusable. One would naturally expect at a minimum that Thomas would be severely rebuked
and chastised for such behavior. But our Savior does no such thing. He came and immediately
fixed His loving eyes upon Thomas and ministered to him. Jesus did not speak words of anger or
reproach but addressed him directly in order to promote his faith. “[I]t is impossible to imagine
anything more patient and compassionate than our Lord’s treatment of this weak disciple. He
does not reject him, or dismiss him, or excommunicate him…. He deals with him according to
his weakness, like a gentle nurse dealing with a froward child…. If nothing but the grossest,
coarsest, more material evidence could satisfy him, even that evidence was supplied. Surely this
was a love that passeth knowledge, and a patience that passeth understanding.”210

What Jesus did teaches us most vividly that the achieving and application of salvation are
great acts of condescension by our Savior. Christ does not give us what we deserve, but rather
gives us what we need, to see, believe and repent. Although Thomas had no right to ask to place
his finger in the print of the nails and his hand into the Redeemer’s side, the Lord commanded
him to do so to cure his unbelief. “Our Lord does not always act toward us according to his own
dignity, but according to our necessity.”211 This demonstrates that salvation is by grace. Grace is
unmerited favor from God. Because of His great love and compassion toward us, Jesus gives us
the exact opposite of what we really deserve. “He will not break the bruised reed, but as a good
shepherd, gathers that which was driven away, Ezek. xxxiv.16.”212

This incident teaches us that redemption is particular and, from beginning to end, is
applied by Christ. Jesus does not give up on His sheep. He does not abandon them when they
fall. But rather He seeks out His own and directly deals with their weakness and unbelief.
Although the Savior no longer makes personal appearances to His people, He still ministers to
them by His Spirit. This ought to greatly strengthen our faith in the Savior’s love toward us and
His high priestly work. Jesus is “the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:2); who “is able to
keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with
exceeding joy…” (Jude 24). Let us take comfort in the fact that the great Shepherd leads even the
stupid, slow, dull and doubting believers into safety.

By way of application this passage teaches us to have compassion and patience with
believers who are slow to grasp theological principles and feeble in their trust. Sanctification and
growth in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ takes time. It takes patience and compassion to

212 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1222.
deal with those who are slow and dull. This does not mean that the church is to tolerate heresy or scandalous sin, but that infirmities are to be dealt with gently, firmly and patiently. Churches that expect some type of perfection or demand an almost immediate, exhaustive knowledge of theology before communicant membership, are being unreasonable and are ignoring the progressive nature of sanctification. “Our Lord has many weak children in His family, many dull pupils in His school, many raw soldiers in His army, many lame sheep in His flock. Yet He bears with them all, and casts none away.”

Third, Christ commands Thomas to stop disbelieving and start believing. “Do not be unbelieving” (Jn. 20:27). This statement has two elements, the one negative and the other positive. Therefore, it contains both a rebuke and an exhortation. The passage literally means, “Stop being an unbeliever, but a believer.” Thomas, from now on, is to stop his unbelief and replace it with a belief in all the historical facts relating to Jesus’ accomplishment of redemption. “By placing the negative and positive together, ‘do not show thyself unbelieving but believing,’ the admonition is made emphatic.” This passage teaches us a number of important things.

(1) It proves that the saving faith involves a trust or belief in all of the Savior’s redemptive acts. When Jesus spoke these words to Thomas he was not completely faithless. But, he as yet had not embraced the fact that Christ had literally, bodily and physically risen from the dead. Our Lord demands a full embracing of the whole gospel. People who believe they are Christians who accept certain aspects of the gospel while disbelieving and rejecting others are living in gross self-deception. If Thomas had not repented and embraced the living Redeemer, he would have been removed from the visible church.

(2) This passage demonstrates that not believing in the gospel is a sin that must be forsaken and replaced with faith in Christ. The Savior’s imperative (“Be not faithless [me ginou apistos]. Present middle imperative of ginomai in prohibition…”215) applies not only to Thomas, but to all mankind. The Mediator and the whole Word of God emphatically rejects the modern pluralistic notion that all religions basically teach the same thing and that all the diverse spiritual paths lead directly to God. The resurrected Redeemer who has all authority in heaven and on earth commands each and every one of us to put off all unbelief and replace it with faith in the person and work of Christ. “This warning is given to us all: Be not faithless; for if we are faithless, we are Christless and graceless, hopeless and joyless; let us therefore say, Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.”

People need to understand that unbelief toward Christ and the true and living God is very evil in and of itself. It is the real root behind all other sins. It makes people unfit for their proper duties and renders the Word of God unprofitable. It leads man away from Jesus into all sorts of idols, sins and abominations. It is especially wicked when committed by people who have been brought up in the church and repeatedly exposed to the truth about Christ. We must recognize and treat unbelief as the true wretched evil that it is. It destroys souls, households, communities and even whole nations. Let us continually pray that God would strengthen and increase our faith and love toward Jesus Christ and His holy Word, for without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). “The exercise of the grace of faith is well-pleasing to Christ; it gives glory to him,

216 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1222.
and makes for the soul’s comfort; and a word from Christ, his power going along with it, will enable men to believe, as it did Thomas.”

Fourth, Jesus’ command to Thomas was efficacious. “And Thomas answered and said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (Jn. 20:28). The amazing answer of Thomas which is short, excited and full of devotion is exactly what we would expect from a person completely taken by surprise, immediately convicted of his sin and overwhelmed with faith and love for Christ. “It is the language of amazement, delight, repentance, faith and adoration, all combined in one sentence.” There are a number of noteworthy things about this answer.

(1) It is one of the clearest statements of the divinity of the Messiah set forth in the whole New Testament. Thomas confesses publicly that Jesus is “My God.” Socinians, Unitarians and various cults have attempted to deny the obvious meaning of Thomas’ words by asserting that Thomas was shocked, surprised and excited by what he saw, that he was merely shouting out “my God” as a man would when cursing or taking the Lord’s name in vain.

Such a view is completely absurd for the following reasons. This confession must be interpreted in the immediate context which is one where the Savior had just demonstrated His omniscience (Jn. 20:27). Also, Thomas was with the Redeemer throughout His ministry when He repeatedly taught His own divinity (e.g., see Jn. 5:17-26; 8:57-59; 10:28-39; Mk. 2:5-11; cf. Rev. 21:6-7). “To talk of an ‘exaggerated cry,’ is altogether out of the question, in relation to a Gospel which everywhere discloses a tendency to place the divinity of Christ in the clearest light.”

Further, the idea that Thomas, a pious Jew, would curse in front of Christ and all the disciples is untenable and ludicrous. Moreover, if Thomas did publicly, boldly and loudly take the name of the Lord God in vain in front of Jesus, one would expect an immediate rebuke from the Mediator. There was no rebuke, but rather a statement about believing. Our Lord was one who never ignored public scandalous sin. Besides, the heretics and cult mongers who make such foolish arguments fail to take into consideration that the expression “my God” as a violation of the third commandment, because of surprise, shock or anger, is a distinctly English expression and was not used by the ancient Jews in such a manner. In addition, the words that Thomas used to address Jesus are identical to words used to address Jehovah in the Old Testament. For example Psalm 35:23 reads, “Stir up thyself, and awake to my judgment, even unto my cause, my God and Lord, o Theos mou kai o kurios mou.” Those who reject the divinity of Christ cannot circumvent this passage. “It is an incontrovertible proof that Thomas looked on Christ as God, and addressed Him to His face as God, and that our Lord made no objection, and did not reprove him.”

This amazing confession teaches us that if we are to have true saving faith in Jesus we must own Him as not just Savior, but also as Lord and God. We must believe in the deity of Christ; that He is truly God of very God in His being and attributes in every possible way. He is not like God or God-like as the cults say. He is not a mere man that the church turned into God as the modernists so often teach. But He is really God, who came to earth and assumed a true human nature to live a sinless life and suffer and die for His people. “In faith there must be the consent of the will to gospel terms, as well as the assent of the understanding to gospel truths. We must accept of Christ to be that to us which the Father hath appointed him. My Lord refers to

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Adonai—my foundation and stay; my God to Elohim—my prince and judge. God having constituted him the umpire and referee, we must approve the choice, and entirely refer ourselves to him. This is the vital act of faith, He is mine (Cant. ii. 16).”

(2) Thomas’ use of the personal pronoun indicates that this confession was a very personal act of faith and repentance. Thomas was not simply stating an accurate abstract theological principle, but was also submitting himself to the resurrected King. “He who a little while ago was trying ‘to lord it over the Lord’ (laying down conditions for him to meet), has become submissive. No longer does Thomas wish to rule supreme. In Jesus he recognizes his sovereign, yes even his God! For a Jew that was a remarkable confession.”

“He confesses to the risen Jesus that he belongs to him as his willing subject; he adores him and henceforth will serve him as he deserves.” John has included this amazing confession so that the reader or listener to this account will, like Thomas, see Christ for whom He truly is and believe in Him and trust in Him as Lord and God. When we truly behold Jesus as He is presented in the Scriptures, we lay down the weapons of our warfare and bow the knee to Him. Thomas’ confession must be in our hearts and upon our lips.

(3) Thomas’ confession is the greatest confession recorded in the gospels. It serves as a confessional climax in John’s gospel. Thomas “rises by a single bound from the lowest degree of faith to the highest, and proclaims the divinity of Master in a more categorical expression than all those which had ever come forth from the lips of any of his fellow apostles. The last becomes in a moment the first, and the faith of the apostles attains at length, in the person of Thomas, to the whole height of the divine reality formulated in the first words of the Prologue.”

If you do not believe in Jesus, then you should ask God to open your blind eyes. Also, you must study carefully all the Scriptures relating to the suffering servant. (Especially study the four gospels; also, examine Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22.) Familiarize yourself with the life death and resurrection of Christ. Learn and study every detail of the Savior’s ministry and sacrificial death. As you do, continually pray for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. Further, go to a solid Bible-believing Reformed church and listen to the preaching of the gospel for “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Do not stop seeking the Lord Jesus Christ until Thomas’ confession becomes your own.

Jesus’ Last Beatitude

After Thomas’ wonderful confession our Lord comments upon his faith and the faith of those who believe without first having immediate empirical proof. “Jesus said to him, ‘Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’” (Jn. 20:29). This statement contains the last great blessing pronounced by Jesus in all the gospel accounts. It is appropriate that this blessing is connected with believing in the full gospel and comes only one week after all the central historical acts of redemption are completed. There are a number of things to note in the Savior’s statement.

First, Christ acknowledges Thomas’ faith in the resurrection” “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed” (Jn. 20:29). “The perfect pepisteukas, thou hast believed,

222 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1222.
224 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 386.
signifies: ‘Thou art henceforth in possession of faith.’”

The Mediator’s statement has the sense of: “Thomas now you have at last believed in My resurrection because you have observed Me directly with your own eyes.” This statement indicates that Thomas immediately believed even before he touched the Savior with his own hands. This sentence is not a rebuke, but a statement of fact. When taken with the following statement there is the obvious implied admonition that it would have been better or nobler if Thomas had believed a week before on the basis of the testimony of the ten apostles. Thomas’ faith had been greatly weakened by the crucifixion and death of Jesus and he had been exceedingly dull and slow to believe the resurrection. Yet, the moment he does embrace the gospel in all its fullness, our Lord owns him as a believer. Even though the Redeemer implies that believing without seeing is nobler; nevertheless, the Mediator graciously acknowledges Thomas’ faith. “Those who have long stood it out, if at last they yield, shall find him ready to forgive. No sooner did Thomas consent to Christ than Christ gives him the comfort of it, and lets him know that he believes.”

It is important that we understand that there is nothing wrong or defective regarding Thomas’ faith in the resurrection. Thomas had true, saving faith and will receive all the blessings of salvation that Jesus achieved through His death and resurrection. The implied admonition only regards how a person comes to faith in Christ. In the period when redemptive history is coming to pass and new revelation is coming forth, God used the direct observation of signs, wonders, miracles and redemptive events to bring forth faith in His people. There were the amazing miracles during Jesus’ ministry and those attending His death and resurrection, as well as the forty days of post-resurrection appearances. Signs and wonders would even continue during the ministry of the apostles when the first churches were planted and the New Testament canon was being completed. Therefore, sight does have a necessary place in redemptive history. In fact, we have noted before that it was absolutely necessary for the apostles to be eyewitnesses of the resurrected Savior (Ac. 1:21-22). The apostles were special eyewitnesses and infallible interpreters of Jesus’ person and work (Jn. 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:13-15; Heb. 2:3-4). But a new era is coming where faith cannot be founded on sight as Thomas and the other apostles had experienced.

Second, Jesus pronounces a blessing upon everyone who believes without seeing whether from the past, present or future. Although the beatitude is timeless, it is obviously directed to all of the readers of John’s gospel who would not have the opportunity to witness any of the post-resurrection appearances of Christ or even any of the miracles that were a part of the apostolic era. “[T]he effect of this beatitude is to apply the lesson of Thomas to all readers of the Gospel: Happy are they who, without having had Thomas’ experience share Thomas’ faith!”

This beatitude must not be misunderstood. It does not mean that believers have blind faith or a trust in Jesus Christ without any evidences whatsoever. But, rather, it is teaching that Christians are blessed, who have faith in the gospel without being eyewitnesses themselves or without immediate empirical proof. The evidences for the truth of the gospel are very strong and abundant. But they are all to be found in the sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Those who claim there are no evidences must ignore the perfection of the divine law, the dozens of perfectly fulfilled prophecies, the absolute, logical consistency of Scripture and the many proofs of the resurrection found in the gospels of which this incident with Thomas forms a climax. Therefore, God does not expect anyone to believe on insufficient evidence. But, it is the

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226 Ibid, 985.
227 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1222.
228 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 386.
kind of evidence that Jesus here has in mind. God has ordained that faith is to come not from direct sight, but rather from the self-authenticating Word of God. Calvin writes, “Faith cannot flow from a merely experimental knowledge of events, but must draw its origin in the word of God. Christ, therefore, blames Thomas for rendering less honour to the word of God than he ought to have done, and for having regarded faith—which springs from hearing, and ought to be wholly fixed on the word—as bound to the other senses.”

This point is established by the Bible’s own definition of faith. The author of Hebrews writes, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (11:1). Faith is the trustful confidence in the promises of God. For the men of old such as Abel, Noah and Abraham these promises came by direct revelation. For us, obviously, they are restricted to God’s inscripturated Word alone. “The faith of which our author is speaking is not blind faith, vacuous and unintelligent credulity, but faith that is in the highest sense enlightened and substantial, because the divine word to which it is the response is a word not only of power but also of light (Ps. 119:105). In the biblical purview faith and revelation belong together, and revelation inevitably involves, on the part of the recipient, the activity of the intellectual faculty: by faith we understand.”

Similarly, in Romans Paul says that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). A person cannot have faith and be saved if they do not hear the gospel preached. The gospel that is preached is derived solely from the Scriptures. All men are required to receive the gospel message and believe it as true because it is the Word of God. Without a direct, infallible, inscripturated word from Jehovah there could be no certain ground of faith. If the Bible was not “God breathed” or “inspired” (2 Tim. 3:16-17) and inerrant it could not be a sure foundation of our trust. Even Thomas, who believed only after he saw, did not believe in isolation from the Old Testament prophecies and the inspired promises of the resurrection by Christ. Thomas’ empirical observation brought to remembrance and confirmed the teachings of the gospel that before he had overlooked, misinterpreted and not perceived. Thomas did not have faith apart from the divine Word; but, he did have help from the immediate experience of his senses. When Thomas saw the resurrected Savior the Holy Spirit opened his eyes; gave him the proper understanding; connected his sensual experience to the Scriptures and teachings of the Lord and thus brought out of his enlightened heart his great confession: “My Lord and my God.” Thus, every believer ultimately walks by faith and not sight (2 Cor. 5:7).

By way of application Jesus is saying that everyone should be satisfied by a faith that is founded upon the Word of God alone. Now that the apostles and New Covenant prophets are all gone and the canon of Scripture is closed, we could even say that a person who demands an immediate sensual experience or empirical proof before they will believe in Jesus is demonstrating unbelief and obstinacy against the gospel. Because Scripture is self-authenticating and absolutely authoritative, preachers can call men to repent and believe without performing signs, experiments or producing many sources outside of Scripture that prove the truth of the gospel.

Further, even if several independent proofs of the gospels were presented to unbelievers and scoffers, they would not be accepted because the unbeliever always sifts the facts through his unbelieving, heathen presuppositions. The so-called “brute facts” that do not fit in with his sinful, human, autonomous thought are a priori (i.e. before the facts) ruled out of bounds. That is why Abraham told the rich man suffering in torment, “If they do not hear Moses and the

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prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rise from the dead” (Lk. 16:31). The Pharisees saw the resurrection of Lazarus and remained in unbelief. The Sanhedrinists heard the eyewitness testimony of the Roman guards who witnessed the resurrection, yet remained the enemies of Christ. The unregenerate heart that rejects the perfect, inerrant, inspired and miraculous Bible will not be overcome or changed by any degree of external and immediate evidences. Signs, miracles and even resurrections will not and cannot convince men who are dead in sins (Eph. 2:1), spiritually blind (Jn. 3:13; 1 Cor. 2:14), totally depraved (Mk. 7:20-23; Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9) and unable to do anything that pleases God (Rom. 8:6-8). The problem with unbelievers is not the amount of direct empirical evidences related to the gospel, but rather their darkened hearts: “For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (Jn. 3:19-20; cf. Rom. 1:21, 28).

The unbeliever professes to be amused by the absurdities of the gospel; to cringe at what he considers the unjustness of God’s law; to laugh at the doctrine of creation; to be shocked at the cruelty of the cross; to be incredulous at the unreasonableness of biblical inerrancy. We must look beyond the unbeliever’s objections to the gospel to the true ground of his hostility and enmity. It is because he is unwilling to bend the knee to Jesus Christ and acknowledge his sin and guilt before God, that he continually demands proofs that are unable to be supplied. It is because he relishes his sin and lusts and is unwilling to forsake them and follow Christ that he demands the impossible. The Scriptures are a sufficient witness for faith and the Scriptures are only able to convince and convict when accompanied by the irresistible power of the Holy Spirit. “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him…. No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (Jn. 6:44, 65).

Saving faith does not depend on the enticing words of man’s wisdom. It does not rest on clever philosophical proofs, or on the latest archeological and historical evidences, but on the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. Although the Bible describes faith as an activity of man, it also teaches that faith is a direct result of the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit uses the knowledge of the Word of God to convict a person of his sins, to convince a person of the truth of Scripture—in particular the gospel, and to place his trust in Christ as He is presented in the Scripture. The Holy Spirit produces saving faith and guarantees that a believer’s faith will never fail. Since faith is a gift of God, God receives all the glory in the salvation of men. God “even when we were dead in trespasses made us alive together with Christ…. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:5, 8).231

231 "Ephesians 2:8-9: To the Ephesians Paul writes, ‘By grace you have been saved thought faith—and this [toute] not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not of works, lest any man should boast.’ Even though ‘faith’ if a feminine noun in the Greek and ‘this’ is a neuter demonstrative pronoun, it is still entirely possible that Paul intended to teach that ‘faith,’ the nearest possible antecedent, is the antecedent of the pronoun ‘this,’ and accordingly that saving faith is the gift of God. It is permissible in Greek syntax for the neuter pronoun to refer antecedently to a feminine noun, particularly when it serves to render more prominent the matter previously referred to (see for example, ‘your salvation [soterias], and this [toute] from God”—Phil. 1:28; see also 1 Cor. 6:6, 8). The only other possible antecedents to the touto are (1) the earlier feminine datative noun ‘grace’ (chariti) which hardly needs to be defined as a ‘gift of God.’ (2) the nominal idea of ‘salvation’ (soteria) implied in the verbal idea ‘you have been ‘saved,’ which Paul has already implied is a gift by his use of charity, and like ‘grace’ (chariti) and ‘faith’ (pistos) is also feminine in Greek, or (3) the entire preceding notion of ‘salvation by grace through faith,’ which, of course, amounts to saying that faith, along with grace and salvation, is the gift of God. However the text is exegeted, when all of its features are taken into account, the conclusion is unavoidable that faith in Jesus Christ is a gift of God” (Robert L. Reymond, A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998], 732). Other
When John described the difference between people who were saved and remained in the church and those who departed because they did not have true saving faith he wrote, “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things...the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him” (1 Jn. 2:20, 21). “The Spirit demonstrates the truth to the mind, i.e. produces the conviction that it is the truth, and leads the soul to embrace it with assurance and delight.”

Third, the blessing that results from believing in Christ is the blessing of salvation in the fullest sense of that term. There were many people in the days of our Lord who beheld the Savior and even saw the miracles; but, who were not blessed by it in any way. The reason they did not receive blessing is because they did not behold Jesus with the eyes of faith. But throughout history many people have heard the gospel and have looked to the Redeemer with spiritual sight; with the eyes of faith. These people have never physically seen the Mediator; but yet, they see Him in a much more satisfying, lasting and real manner than the unbelievers who physically beheld Him two thousand years ago. “In this sense Paul says to the Galatians, (iii.1,) that Christ was crucified before their eyes; and, therefore, if we desire to see in Christ what may render us happy and blessed, let us learn to believe, when we do not see.” Peter says that such faith is more precious than gold which perishes and commends believers: “Jesus Christ, whom not having seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet. 1:7 - 8).

Do you have the faith that the Savior says is blessed? If you do, there are a number of soteriological blessings that flow from it.

(1) It is through faith in Christ that we receive life everlasting. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16). Those who have an abiding trust or confidence in Jesus will not receive the everlasting condemnation that their sin and guilt deserves but rather will have a never-ending life in the realm of bliss and glory with God. The man who has faith in the Savior is in possession of eternal life right now. “Saving faith is not some difficult and meritorious work by which man must perform so as to give him a claim upon God for the blessing of salvation. It is not on account of our faith that God saves us, but it is through the means of our faith.”

passages that teach or imply that faith is a gift from God are as follows: Phil. 1:6, 29; Ac. 11:18; 13:46-48; 16:14; Jn, 3:6-8; 1:13; Eph. 1:3-4; 2 Tim. 2:25; etc

233 John Calvin, Commentary on the Gospel According to John, 2:279.
234 “The expression, ‘believeth in Him,’ is deeply important. It describes that one act of man’s soul which is needful to give him an interest in Jesus Christ. It is not a mere belief of the head [i.e. not a mere intellectual assent or a historical knowledge] that there is such a Person as Jesus Christ, and that He is a Savior. It is a belief of the heart and will. When a person, feeling his desperate need by reason of sin, flees to Jesus Christ, and trusts in Him, leans on Him, and commits his soul entirely to Him as his Saviour and Redeemer, he is said, in the language of the text, to ‘believe on Him’” (J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 1:157). Illustrations have often been used to explain the instrumental and appropriating nature of faith; faith can be compared to an empty vessel which holds a great treasure or an empty ring which holds a priceless diamond. Faith is described as the hand of the soul. Faith is spoken of as an eye which looks away from itself toward Jesus Christ. Saving faith is always directed toward the Savior. Genuine faith always acknowledges that we have nothing to contribute to our salvation; that all our righteousness is as filthy rags; that apart from the Mediator we are hopeless, destitute, dead and damned.
235 Arthur W. Pink, Exposition of the Gospel of John, 1:133.
pardoned. It is being counted completely righteous, and made a citizen of heaven. It is not merely an escape from hell, but the reception of a title to heaven.”

(2) It is by faith in Jesus that we are adopted into God’s spiritual family and become children of God. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:12-13). Those who trust in the Savior receive the greatest of spiritual benefits; the right or authority through God’s grace to be the children of God. Believing in the “name” of Christ means to trust in His whole person. The Redeemer, as defined in Scripture, must be the direct object of your trust, reliance and devotion. Do you believe in Christ as He truly is? Do you trust Him as a Person? Do you rely on His sacrificial death to wash away all your sins?

(3) Faith in the Savior delivers us from the judgment of God. “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (Jn. 5:24). The man who trusts in the person and work of Christ has passed from a spiritual state of death to a state of spiritual life. The very moment he believes in Jesus, his guilt is completely removed and his state of condemnation is over. That person has absolutely nothing to fear when looking forward to the judgment of the last day. If you look to the Savior with the eyes of faith, you can rest assured that on the day of judgment the Lord will say directly to you: “Come you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt. 25:34).

(4) Everyone who believes in the Mediator will have his spiritual needs satisfied and be a foundation of blessings to others. “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (Jn. 7:37-38). Those who are burdened with sin and are spiritually thirsty need to come to Christ and drink. If you understand your guilt, sense the meaninglessness and vanity of your sinful life and thirst for deliverance, then trust in Jesus and you will find relief. You will not only find abundant spiritual satisfaction in Him, but also He will give you the Holy Spirit so that your life will be a fountain of blessing to others—your family, friends, acquaintances and co-workers. “The drinking of which Jesus spoke is possible only to him who comes in faith. When the believer comes to Christ and drinks he not only slakes his thirst but receives such an abundant supply that veritable rivers flow from him. This stresses the outgoing nature of the Spirit-filled life.”

(5) Faith in Jesus delivers a person from darkness into a life of light. “I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness” (Jn. 12:46). Apart from the Savior, people remain in the darkness of ignorance, sin and evil. But once Christ is embraced by faith, the guilt of sin is removed and the power of sin in the life is broken. The state of the unregenerate or natural man is spiritual and ethical darkness. But the Redeemer who is the very source of light came so that men could be delivered from the clutches of darkness. “The world is in darkness.—Christ is the only light.—Faith is the only way to have [an] interest in Christ.—He that believeth no longer abides in darkness, but has spiritual light.—He that does not

believe remains and continues in a state of darkness, the prelude to hell.” Thus, we see that faith in the Mediator not only brings the blessing of justification but also sanctification.

(6) Everyone who believes in Christ will receive His special high priestly mediation. “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word” (Jn. 17:20). Our Lord not only prays for the eleven apostles, but also for all genuine believers throughout history or what theologians refer to as the invisible church. “[T]he Lord makes it known that believers, and believers only, have an interest in His mediatorial intercessions…. The description here given of those who do have an interest in Christ’s intercession is their faith in Him. This is the fundamental mark of their identification. He mentions not their love, their obedience, their steadfastness (though these are necessary in their place), but their faith. Wherever our participation of the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection are spoken of, the one thing named is faith. Why? Because this is a grace which compels us to look outside ourselves to Him! Faith is the great essential, for faith is the mother of obedience and the other graces. But mark it is no vague and undefined faith: ‘which shall believe on me.’ To believe in Christ is to have confidence in and to rely upon Him; it is to trust Him, to rest upon Him.”

What a glorious blessing! Jesus prays for believers that their faith and love will not fail, that they can endure the trials and temptations of life without apostasy. Praise God; for we know that the prayers of our dear Savior are always efficacious (cf. Heb. 7:25; cf. Lk. 22:32).

The blessings that our Lord has promised to all those who believe in Him are wonderful and amazing. Do you believe in Christ even though you have never personally seen Him? If you have, then all these blessings and much more are yours.

Chapter 10: The Purpose of John’s Gospel

And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name (Jn. 20:30-31).

After the grand climax of Thomas’ confession John inserts a very important parenthetical comment which explains the reason the gospel was written. These verses, along with 21:24-25, serve as a conclusion to the whole gospel. These verses are significant because, if we know the book’s central purpose, we hold the key to understanding all the various parts of the gospel. As we examine the conclusion of John’s gospel we will consider three areas: (1) the purpose; (2) the content of faith; and (3) the result of believing.

The Purpose of the Book

John tells his readers that he is not writing a biography or a complete life of Christ, but rather is writing in a very selective manner. If the beloved disciple had been writing to satisfy his own or even our curiosity he would obviously have written a much more traditional biography of Jesus. We are not told anything about the Savior’s childhood or upbringing. There is nothing

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239 Ibid.
about what the Redeemer looked like: His eye color, height or color of hair. We are not even given the date on which our Lord was born. Obviously, thousands of interesting details and curious facts are omitted from John’s narrative.

John also did not let his own personal feelings influence the record that he so faithfully penned. He repeatedly omits many historical instances where his special place of honor as part of the inner circle was noted in the other gospels. “He and James and Peter were frequently selected by the Master to be with him when others were excluded, but of these occasions he says nothing. At the resurrection of the daughter of Jairus it is said of the disciples, as well as of the relatives and the multitude, that the Lord put them all out, and only suffered the three to be with him. This was a singular honor, but John does not say a word about the raising of the daughter of Jairus…. Even more striking is the fact that the Master when he took with him the eleven to the garden, left the major part of them at the gate, but he led the three further into the garden, and bade them wait at about a stone’s cast distance, where some of them heard his prayers, and observed the bloody sweat. John, who was one of them, says nothing about it. He leaves that out which would bring John into the front, in order that he may fill up the whole foreground of his canvas with the portrait of his Lord. Everything is submitted to the one grand end ‘that ye should believe that Jesus is the Christ.’”

The beloved disciple even notes that he did not record all the signs that Jesus did. The statement does not simply mean that John did not record all the miracles found in the other gospels, for that point is obvious. John wrote after the synoptic gospels were completed and circulated and often chose to focus on areas and details omitted by the other evangelists. Moreover, the miracles or signs of which John speaks should not be restricted to the forty day post-resurrection period. A number of commentators interpret John’s statement to mean that he only omitted many more proofs of the Savior’s resurrection. John testifies that the disciples were witnesses of many signs throughout our Lord’s ministry, but that he only recorded that which was sufficient to stimulate faith in the readers of the gospel. The term “signs” refers not only to the miracles, but also the teaching that the signs served to authenticate.

The gospel of John was not even written to set forth the ethical teachings of Jesus or reveal the Savior as the perfect example for mankind. Good works are important and are certainly given their proper place. However, they are secondary to the beloved disciple’s main purpose which is to set forth a selective history so that people would believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

The very common teaching among modernist scholars that Jesus was really only concerned to set forth a new ethic of love or be an example to mankind is explicitly contradicted by John. Because Christian liberals reject biblical inerrancy and the supernatural nature of biblical revelation, they teach that Christ was a religious genius, or an ethical teacher, or a social reformer. They mold the Savior into an idol of their own making: the kind, antinomian socialist who came to endorse the welfare state and sodomite rights. Modernist assertions, however, obliterate the simple, clear and striking Christology of the gospels—that Jesus was the Messiah who came to die on the cross and that He was truly God’s Son in a unique way. John states the purpose of his gospel in such explicit terms so that his readers in all subsequent generations would understand exactly who the Savior was and why He was and continues to be worthy of our trust.

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There are a number of things to note regarding John’s stated strategy, subject and purpose. First, it teaches us that signs or miracles serve a distinct purpose in the gospels. Their main purpose was not to serve mankind and alleviate pain and sickness, but to prove that Jesus was who He claimed to be. The signs authenticate the Messenger and His message. The reason that many signs were omitted from the gospels was not that they were unimportant or did not serve an important purpose when they occurred; but, that the Holy Spirit recorded only what was sufficient for the readers of the gospel to place their faith in Christ. Moreover, if everything that Jesus did was recorded and inscripturated, the Bible would be much too long and unmanageable for the masses. As John says, “even the world could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn. 21:25).

Second, understanding the purpose of John’s gospel helps us to understand the selection process of the material used (i.e. John writing under divine inspiration exalts Jesus in His messianic office and deity) and is very useful in interpreting the different parts of the book. With this in mind, note how John’s record repeatedly exalts Christ and points to the necessity to believe in Him.

(1) In the beginning of the gospel Jesus is immediately identified as God the Word who always existed with God the Father (1:1). He is “the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth” (1:14). After our Lord demonstrated His omniscience Nathanel testified, “You are the Son of God [deity]! You are the King of Israel [i.e. the Messiah]” (1:49).

(2) Chapter two contains the first sign (water is changed into wine) and the statement “and His disciples believed in Him” (2:11). It also contains the first prediction of the resurrection and the statement: “His disciples remembered that He had said this to them and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said” (2:22).

(3) Chapter three contains the interaction with Nicodemus and the statement that God sent Jesus into the world to save it (see 3:16-17). Men are bidden to believe in Christ in 3:16, 17, 36: “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life” (3:36).

(4) Chapter four contains our Lord’s witness to the Samaritan woman. After demonstrating His omniscience the Savior identified Himself as the Messiah (4:26) with the result that many “Samaritans…believed in Him because of the word of the woman…” (4:39).

(5) In chapter five Jesus publicly healed a crippled man (5:11); claimed equality with God the Father (5:17) and in a lengthy discourse proved His deity and Messianic kingship by an appeal to many witnesses: Himself (5:31), His own works or signs (5:36); John the Baptist (5:33); God the Father (5:37-38); and, Scripture (5:39). The discourse ends with a stinging rebuke toward those who refused to believe in Him (5:40-47).

(6) Chapter six contains the miracle of feeding the multitude (6:10-14) and walking on water (6:19). After declaring to the multitude that the Son of Man gives everlasting life Jesus said, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent” (6:29). In the bread of life discourse our Lord identified Himself as the bread from heaven (6:30, 32, 41, 50, 51, 58) and spoke repeatedly of coming to Him (6:44, 45), believing in Him (6:29, 47) or figuratively of eating His flesh (6:50, 51, 53, 54, 56, 57, 58) which means appropriating the Redeemer through faith.

(7) Chapter seven contains a prediction of the ascension (7:33-34) and the great discourse on living water. “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (7:37-38).

(8) In chapter eight Jesus is the light of the world (8:12). He once again speaks of His origin in heaven (8:14, 22, 23) of His proceeding forth from God (8:42) and His eternal existence
(8:58). He warns men that if they do not believe in Him they will die in their sins (8:24). He tells the Jews that if they keep His word (i.e. believe and obey) they will never see death (8:36, 46, 51).

(9) Chapter nine contains the healing of the man born blind and Jesus’ affirmation of His deity: “Do you believe in the Son of God?” (9:35). After believing in Christ, the healed man, who was blind, worshipped the Savior (9:38).

(10) Chapter ten contains the discourse about the Good Shepherd. Here Jesus said, He lays down His life for the sheep (10:11); “The works that I do...bear witness of Me” (10:25); and, “I and My Father are one” (10:30). Then, again, our Lord appealed to His works (i.e. the signs) “that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him” (10:38).

(11) In chapter eleven Lazarus is raised from the dead after he had been in the grave four days (11:44). Before this amazing sign Christ said to Martha, “Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?” (11:40). Many of the Jews who saw what Jesus did, believed in Him (11:45).

(12) Chapter twelve notes that when the Savior entered Jerusalem the people praised Him as “The King of Israel” (12:13). In this chapter our Lord predicted His death and resurrection (12:23-24) and once again pointed to His unity with the Father: “He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me” (12:44; cf. 45, 49, 50).

(13) In the upper room discourses and the high priestly prayer Christ said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Me” (14:6). “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (17:3). Although these chapters contain no miracles they do contain a number of explicit prophecies that were fulfilled perfectly and thus qualify as authenticating signs.

(14) After the resurrection, which is the ultimate sign, there were the appearances to Mary, all the disciples and then Thomas which led to his climactic confession: “My Lord and my God” (20:28).

The whole gospel centers on Jesus Christ in such a way as to prove beyond question that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. The whole gospel weaves together miracles, teaching and stories which are intended to lead men to believe not only that Jesus is the Savior who died for the sins of His people, but also the exalted King and God Himself, the second Person of the trinity.

Third, by way of application note that John’s purpose is essentially the purpose of the whole Bible. “John’s Gospel, and the other three Gospels, and the whole Bible, New Testament and Old, have this for their purpose, to produce in men’s hearts the faith in Jesus as the Christ and as the Son of God. Christ, the Son of God, is the centre of Scripture; and the book—whatever may be the historical facts about its origin, its authorship and the date of the several portions of which it is composed—the Book is a unity, because there is driven right through it, like a cord of gold, either in the way of history and grateful retrospect, the reference to the one ‘Name that is above every Name,’ the Name of the Christ the Son of God.”

The purpose of John’s gospel and the whole Bible is not simply to know something, but to believe something. Scripture requires of its readers and hearers a commitment to Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. If we treat the Bible as nothing more than interesting mythology, history or religious literature and do not find the Messiah—God’s only begotten Son—within its pages, then all of our reading has been in vain. If we do not study the whole Bible Christologically, then

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we can never truly understand its message. Moreover, if a theologian, or preacher, or book, or philosophy, or religion does not teach that Jesus of Nazareth was truly God who became man and died for His people; who was the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures, then that person or point of view is not of God but is from the devil. All Scripture has one central purpose which is to produce faith in Christ and cause men to bow the knee to Him. If you cannot, with Thomas, worship Jesus and say to Him, “My Lord and My God,” then God’s precious, inspired Word has not affected your heart of stone and you are still in your sins. Pray that God would give you a heart of flesh and cause you to believe in and worship the resurrected Mediator.

The Content of Faith

When John describes the object of faith he focuses on two things: that Jesus is the Christ or Messiah and that He is the Son of God (Jn. 20:31). Because a faith without the proper content or object is worthless, harmful and even deadly, it is important that we understand what John means by these terms. Therefore, we will carefully consider the biblical meaning of each expression.

The word Christ (Christos) which is the Greek word for Messiah means “the anointed one.” In order for a person to be a Christian, he must believe that Jesus was the long awaited Anointed One sent from God: “the One who as Mediator was set apart or ordained by the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit, to be his people’s chief Prophet (Deut. 18:15, 18; Isa. 50:4; Luke 24:19; Acts 3:22, 7:37); only High-priest (Ps. 110:4; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 6:20; 7:24; 9:24); and eternal King (Ps. 2:6; Zech. 9:9; Matt. 21:5; 28:18; Luke 1:33; John 10:28; Eph. 1:2-23; Rev. 11:15; 12:10, 11; 17:14; 19:6).”243 The term “anointed one” developed out of the Old Testament ritual where the high priest (Aaron and his descendants) were set apart to their special service by the pouring of the special holy anointing oil over the high priests’ head and body (cf. Ex. 30:30ff.). A similar rite of consecration by anointing with oil was also applied to many of Israel’s kings (e.g., Saul, David, Solomon, Joash, etc.). The phrase “the anointed of the Lord” (cf. 1 Sam. 12:3, 5) was even used as a synonym for the King. The anointing with oil represented a special gift of the Holy Spirit which enabled the high priest or king to carry out their designated functions.

The Old Testament concept of the Messiah as the exalted eschatological Prophet, Priest and King is rich and varied. The teaching of the Old Testament regarding a single eschatological deliverer begins in obscurity and comes into detail and into focus as divine revelation proceeds. Even as early as Genesis 3:15 God reveals that, through the seed of the woman, the head of the serpent would be crushed. In Genesis 49:10 Jacob prophesied, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people.” In Deuteronomy 18:5-19 we learn of the great Prophet to come who exceeds all other prophets. The New Testament applies this promise directly to Jesus (cf. Jn. 1:21, 45; 6:14; Ac. 3:22-23; 7:37).

It is from the time of King David that Messianic prophecy comes into sharp focus. In 2 Samuel 7:16 we learn for the first time that the Messiah would be a direct descendant of David. In Psalm 2 we learn that Messiah is God’s Son, who will rule all the nations with a rod of iron. The New Testament repeatedly cites the Psalms in connection with the purpose and ministry of

the Christ. The Psalms teach the Messiah’s divinity (Ps. 45:6; 110:1), his eternal sonship (Ps. 2:7), His incarnation (Ps. 8:5; 40:7-9), His mediatorial offices as Prophet (Ps. 40:9-10), Priest (Ps. 110:4), and King (Ps. 2:7-12; 22:28; 45:6; 72; 110:1). The Psalms tell us about the Messiah’s betrayal (Ps. 41:9); agony in the garden (Ps. 22:2); trial (Ps. 35:11); rejection (Ps. 22:14-18; 118:22), crucifixion (Ps. 22:69), burial and resurrection (Ps. 16:9-11), ascension (Ps. 24:7-10; 47:5; 68:18) and second coming and judgment (Ps. 50:3-4; 98:6-9).

The prophets call the Messiah the branch of the LORD (Isa. 4:2) who is born of a virgin yet is Emmanuel—God with us (Isa. 7:14). The Christ will come from Galilee and will bring the people great light (Isa. 9:1-2). He is the Son who is born, yet is one with God the Father (Isa. 9:5-6). His kingdom will last forever (Isa. 9:7). He will rule with perfect righteousness (Isa. 32:1-8) and will give a perfect spiritual satisfaction (Isa. 55:1-5). His coming is the coming of Jehovah Himself (Isa. 40:3-5). Jeremiah calls Him “the LORD our righteousness” (23:5-6; 33:16), who will “execute judgment and righteousness in the earth” (33:15). He establishes the new covenant (Jer. 31:31ff.), an everlasting covenant (Isa. 55:3). Upon His ascension He is given all power authority by God the Father over every nation and His authority will never come to an end (Dan. 7:13-14). He suffers and dies for His people (Isa. 53), “to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness” (Dan. 9:24).

Passages could be multiplied, but the point has been established that the biblical definition of the term “Messiah” contains a full-orbed concept of the person of the Christ as well as His mission. Therefore, to have faith in Jesus as the Messiah is essentially to believe the gospel. The content of our Christology must never be lower than that of Thomas’ confession, which at that time was under-girded by the whole Old Testament and Jesus’ own teachings. It is our duty to believe and embrace everything that the Bible says about Jesus as the Messiah.

The expression “Son of God” in the context of John 20:31 is used not merely as a synonym for the Messianic title but is also used in a Trinitarian sense. Jesus is God’s Son who existed in eternity before the world was with God the Father. The Jews believed that the Messiah would be God’s Son in an adoptionist sense. But the gospels and the whole New Testament make it clear that Christ is the Son not by adoption but by nature. “The combination of terms indicates the very highest view of the Person of Jesus, and it must be taken in conjunction with the fact that John had just recorded the confession of Thomas which hails Jesus as ‘My Lord and my God.’ There cannot be any doubt but that John conceived of Jesus as the very incarnation of God.”

Vos notes that our Lord’s divine Sonship was intimately related to the carrying out of the Savior’s Messianic office:

The Messiahship appears in the reception on Jesus’ part of the commission to reveal all things. But the sonship underlies this as the only basis on which it could happen, and on which it can be understood. And the sonship of this Messianic Person altogether transcends his historic appearance. It exists, as it were, in a timeless present, where He knows the Father and the Father knows Him. Just as little as “the Father” and “Lord of heaven and earth” are titles derived from the soteric situation, just as little is “the Son” a designation of Jesus ultimately derived from that. He is called “the Son” not simply because of his being the Messiah, but because his Messiahship is determined by an anterior sonship lying back of it.

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Faith in Jesus as the Son of God in the highest sense (as the only begotten Son of the Father who is eternally and indissolubly one with Him) is crucial for salvation because Christ had to be God to reveal Him. “As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father” (Jn. 10:15). “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak” (Jn. 12:48-50). “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Mt. 11:27). “All things are put into the Mediator’s hands; fit hands towards God and towards man; for he alone knows both to perfection. Jesus reveals the Father to the babes whom He has chosen. Only the Father can fill the Son with benediction, and only through the Son can that benediction flow to any one of the race of men. Know Christ, and you know the Father, and know that the Father himself loveth you.”

Belief in Christ as God’s Son in the Trinitarian sense is also necessary because the Savior had to be truly God of very God to render a sacrifice of infinite value to the Father. In order to save a vast multitude of every tribe, tongue and nation, the Messiah could not be a mere man but had to be both God and man in one person. Consequently the Savior’s atoning death was sufficient to save the whole world (Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 2:2). Further, the Mediator had to be God in order to intercede as a high priest and apply the fruits of His accomplished work to the millions of people throughout history who received Him by faith. This task not only involves omniscience, but also the sending of the Holy Spirit into the elect’s hearts (a task obviously beyond a mere mortal). Moreover, divinity is necessary for the Messiah’s role as an all-powerful King. A mere man could not rule by changing His people’s hearts and by overthrowing His enemies. If Jesus “had not been a divine person, endued with the power of God and entitled to the glory of God, he had not been qualified for, the undertaking—not fit either to do the Redeemer’s work or to wear the Redeemer’s crown.”

Trust in Jesus Christ as the Son of God is a crucial part of believing the gospel, for God the Son after His incarnation reveals the Father; propitiates God’s wrath against sin; mediates between man and God and applies all the benefits of redemption to the elect. This doctrine ought to greatly stimulate our trust in Christ’s ability to save His people. Since our precious Savior is God, we can trust Him and pray to Him to change our stubborn sinful hearts. Because the Mediator is God, we can rest assured that He will overcome all our enemies by His almighty power and wisdom. “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 Jn. 4:15). “Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (1 Jn. 5:5). “He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son” (1 Jn. 5:10). Rest upon Jesus as your Savior, your Messiah, your Lord and, yes, even your God. Bow to Him and give Him the worship that He deserves. “The faith which receives Christ as he is revealed as the Messiah, and as the Son of God, is the faith which hath eternal life, and the Scriptures are written that you may have this faith.”

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247 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1224.
248 Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Main Matter,” 27:660. “[I]Indeed, he who after having received those striking proofs, which are to be found in the Gospel, does not perceive Christ to be God, does not deserve to look even at the sun
The Result of Believing

John says that faith in Christ is the means of bringing men to life: “That believing you may have life in His name” (Jn. 20:31). The terms “life,” “eternal life,” or “life everlasting” are common in John’s gospel and epistles. The term “life” when used of salvation refers to spiritual life and all that it entails. It includes the importation of new spiritual life in the new birth (Jn. 3; 1 Cor. 12:13), when a person is translated from death to life (Eph. 2:1ff). A person who is regenerated is in immediate possession of the kingdom of God (Col. 1:3) and is already a citizen of heaven (Heb. 12:22). Faith in Christ brings an immediate title to life everlasting. The person who grasps the Redeemer by faith has all the blessings that He has obtained. “[W]e must not fail to observe that eternal life is not a future but a present possession of the believer…we must try and escape from the narrow and imperfect conception of eternity as a thing [wholly] future…. Eternal life may, nay must be obtained here, if it is to be obtained at all.”

The term “life” includes the declaration that a person has been pardoned and declared righteous on the basis of the merits of Jesus Christ. Faith appropriates the sacrificial death of the Savior where a believer’s sin, guilt and liability of punishment are forever removed. Our Lord endured the penalty for sin; paid the price in full; propitiated God’s wrath against sin and thus reconciled us to God. The Mediator removed the curse of the law (Gal. 3:23) or judicial and spiritual death by suffering the penalty in our place. The Redeemer also secured the title or right to eternal life by His perfect obedience to the moral law and the covenant of works (see Ac. 13:38; 26:18; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 5:1; Mt. 3:15; etc). By faith we appropriate Jesus’ victory over sin, Satan and death. Through faith we grasp the righteousness of Christ and are immediately declared just in God’s sight. When we believe in the Savior we are clothed with His perfect righteousness and thus must live in spiritual blessedness forever. Because He lives, we live also. “This is the central message of the Fourth Gospel, that belief in Jesus Christ is the path to life. See 3:15, 16, 36; 1 Jn. 5:13. ‘In Him was life’ is proclaimed in the Prologue (1:4), and the purpose of His coming was that men might have life; cf. 5:40; 6:53, 10:10.” Without Christ you are dead in the fullest, most terrifying meaning of that word, but if you trust in Jesus you will receive life or eternal salvation.

The word “life” includes the baptism with the Holy Spirit and a believer’s progressive sanctification. The Spirit of God works in the believer causing him to put off the old man and the habitual sin patterns of life and to replace them with godly living and service to Christ. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). “Christ came to give life and perisson ti—something more, something better, life with advantage; that in Christ we might not only live, but live comfortably, live plentifully, live and rejoice. Life in abundance is eternal life, life without death or fear of death, life and much more…” (e.g., a life without bondage to sin and slavery to savage lusts). Believers live with a

and the earth, for he is blind amidst the brightness of noonday” (John Calvin, Commentary on the Gospel According to John, 2:282).

249 John James Lias, An Exposition of the First Epistle of John (Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock, [1887] 1982), 393-394. Note the words of Jesus in John 5:24: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” The verb “has passed” (metabebeken), a perfect active indicative, is significant. It means that a person who believes in Jesus has passed from one state (that of spiritual death) into another (eternal life); and that person remains in that new state of spiritual life that continues into eternal blessedness (cf. Rom. 5:1-2).


251 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1031.
peace and satisfaction unknown and unknowable to unbelievers. Because of our faith in the Savior our life has meaning and fulfillment in service unto God. The unbeliever, however, walks in darkness and lives in total vanity, meaninglessness and despair.

The word “life” also includes our eschatological or future life. There is the blessing of having our souls go immediately to be with Christ at death (2 Cor. 5:1, 6, 8; 1 Th. 4:14). We can look forward to the resurrection of our bodies which will be glorified, perfect and immortal (Job 19:26; 1 Cor 15:43). Also, there is the everlasting kingdom of glorified life with Jesus in the eternal state. This is what many people think of when they think of the life of salvation. The New Testament contains some wonderful imagery of the heavenly scenes of paradise. Christ said, “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (Jn. 14:1-2). Paul wrote, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Th. 4:16-18). “And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away’” (Rev. 21:3-4). While the wicked enter their final doom, which is the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14) and the second death (Rev. 21:8), the righteous enter into life beholding the face of God and worshipping Christ the King. These saints will have eternal access to the river of the water of life and the tree of life (Rev. 22:1-2, 14).

This brief examination of the life that Christ gives to those who believe in Him raises some important questions. Are you in possession of this glorious never ending life; or, are you still in the realm of death and darkness? Have you placed your faith, trust and confidence in Jesus Christ and His redemption work for your salvation from sin, guilt and death? When you approach God through prayer, do you do so only through the divine-human Mediator and His sinless blood? When you worship, do you worship Jesus Christ as your Lord and God? When you do good works, do you do them to please Christ and show your gratitude for His sacrificial death in your place? John has written his gospel so that you will believe in Jesus as the Messiah—the Son of God and have eternal life. “[T]he one thing, the main thing, the only thing is that we do hold on to Jesus Christ, through thick and thin, through foul and fair, uphill and down dale, in the night and in the day, in life and in death, in time and in eternity; that we do steadfastly believe that Jesus of Nazareth who died upon the cross is the Messiah of God, yea, the Son of God, sent to cleanse away iniquity and bring in perfect righteousness. Whether we see him on his cross or on his throne, all our hope, all our trust must be fixed on him, and so we shall live when time shall be no more. Verily, I say into you, those which thus trust him shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of his hands, for he hath said, ‘I give unto my sheep eternal life.’”

Chapter 11: The Appearance to Seven Disciples by the Sea of Galilee

After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself. There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples. Simon Peter saith unto them, “I go a fishing.” They say unto him, “We also go with thee.” They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus. Then Jesus saith unto them, “Children, have ye any meat?” They answered him, “No.” And he said unto them, “Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find.” They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, “It is the Lord.” Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher’s coat unto him, (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea. And the other disciples came in a little ship; (for they were not far from land, but as it were two hundred cubits,) dragging the net with fishes. As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread. Jesus saith unto them, “Bring of the fish which ye have now caught.” Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken. Jesus saith unto them, “Come and dine.” And none of the disciples durst ask him, “Who art thou?” knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead. So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?” He saith unto him, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.” He saith unto him, “Feed my lambs.” He saith to him again the second time, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” He saith unto him, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.” He saith unto him, “Feed my sheep.” He saith unto him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, “Lovest thou me?” And he said unto him, “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.” Jesus saith unto him, “Feed my sheep. Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.” This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, “Follow me.” Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, “Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?” Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, “Lord, and what shall this man do?” Jesus saith unto him, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.” Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, “He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?” This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen (John 21:1-25).

The final appearance of Jesus to the apostles in the gospel of John is quite different from the previous appearances and contains much rich and interesting gospel history. The previous appearances were all on the Lord’s day or the first day of the week while this appearance occurred on a regular work day. The other appearances took place when the apostles were meeting behind closed doors with virtually all the disciples present. These first manifestations
occurred in Jerusalem where the disciples were in fear for their lives. But, in this narrative, the scene has shifted to Galilee (sometimes called the Sea of Tiberias or the Lake of Gennesaret) where the apostles are not afraid and can move about openly. At this appearance only seven apostles are present. This incident is only mentioned by John and is the only description of the apostles’ activities after leaving Jerusalem, while they were in Galilee waiting for the great commission and the ascension. The amazing events and interaction between Christ and these apostles on this occasion are designed to prepare the apostles for the great commission and their future ministry.

This chapter can be divided into five main sections. (1) There is the appearance of Jesus to the apostles who are fishing on Galilee. Our Lord’s instructions to the disciples lead to a miraculous catch of fish. (2) When the apostles come to shore the Savior serves them a prepared meal (21:1-14). (3) Then follows the conversation between Jesus and Peter where our Lord graciously and tenderly reinstates Peter (21:15-17). (4) Peter’s reinstatement is immediately followed by a prophecy of Peter’s martyrdom (21:18-19) and a somewhat vague comment about the beloved disciple’s future (21:20-23). This section provides John with the opportunity to correct a misconception in the churches at that time that John would never die (21:23). (5) The chapter ends with the final conclusion of the whole gospel. Because there are a wide variety of views among scholars regarding John 21, some preliminary comments need to be made before we examine the particulars of each section.

Preliminary Comments

The last chapter of John’s gospel has been the occasion of a number of different theories by scholars. The reason for disagreements and speculations arises from the fact that the last two verses of chapter 20 appear to be the conclusion of the gospel. Chapter 20, in its form, structure and purpose, serves as a perfect climax of the resurrection narratives. Further, chapter 21 reads as though it were an add-on or epilogue to the gospel. Therefore, in our day, the majority of New Testament scholars regard chapter 21 as an appendix, a postscript, an addendum or an epilogue to the gospel.

Of the scholars who believe that chapter 21 was an addition to an already completed work, some believe that the final chapter was not even written by John but was added many years later by an editor of the Johannine school. Others believe that John himself dictated the final chapter in his old age to eliminate a rumor that had spread in the churches that he would not die before the Lord returned (cf. Jn. 21:20-23). Still others believe that a leader in the church at Ephesus wrote the final chapter under divine inspiration with the apostle John’s permission (e.g., William Hendriksen). This view is based on the use of “we” in verse 24 and the lengthy description of John in 21:20.

Although from a stylistic standpoint there is nothing wrong with viewing chapter 21 as an epilogue (an epilogue simply refers to the concluding section of a book that serves to complete the plan of the work), any idea that the last chapter was added on later or was not written by John himself should be repudiated for the following reasons. First, of all the thousands of ancient and medieval texts of the fourth gospel there is not one in which the 21st chapter is omitted. If the gospel was written and released and then added to later, there is no doubt whatsoever but that some texts without chapter 21 would remain. Therefore, if the final chapter was a later addition it would mean that John wrote the gospel and then waited several years before releasing it. Such a scenario is exceedingly unlikely. Further, there “is not the slightest proof that any trustworthy
ancient writer ever regarded the last chapter of St. John’s Gospel, as less genuine and less inspired than the rest of the book.”253

Second, the view that John 20:30-31 was written as the conclusion of the whole gospel without any consideration for chapter 21 is pure speculation. It makes perfect sense to consider the beloved disciple’s statement in 20:30-31 as given to emphasize the need to believe in and confess Jesus in the same manner as Thomas, even though his history was not yet complete. It is unwise to guess regarding John’s intent or impose modern literary methods on a unique inspired history. There is nothing unnatural or out of harmony with the gospel in chapter 21 that merits the assertion that it was added long after the gospel was originally penned.

Third, the vocabulary, grammar and style of chapter 21 clearly points to an identity of authorship with the rest of the gospel. Although minor divergences exist, there are “remarkable agreements in style between cc. 1-20 and c. 21. The use of amen amen at v. 18; the evangelistic comment at v. 23, are among the more obvious. Such similarities might possibly be due to conscious imitation of the mannerisms of Jn. by the author of the Appendix, but there are others, more subtle, which can hardly be thus explained.”254

Fourth, the idea that chapter 21 is a later addition “is altogether unworthy of the apostolical character, and inconsistent with the tenor of this Gospel; and it altogether fails to give any reason why the Apostle did not strike out the conclusion in ch. xx. 30, 31, after the addition of the postscript had rendered it unsuitable.”255 If John or anyone else added chapter 21 onto an already completed gospel, then why did they not simply move 20:30-31 to the end of chapter twenty-one? The alleged awkwardness of chapter twenty-one, if anything, is evidence of its being written by John as part of the original gospel.

The Miraculous Draught of Fishes

John’s narrative begins some time after the second appearance to the apostles (Note the indefinite expression “after these things” in verse one). By this time the disciples, in obedience to Jesus’ command (Mk. 16:7; Mt. 18:7, 16) had made their way back to Galilee.

The sea of Tiberias (Jn. 6:1; 21:1) also called “the sea” (Mt. 8:24, 32; Mk. 2:13; Jn. 6:16, 17); the “lake of Gennesaret” (Lk. 5:1); the “sea of Chinnereth” (Nu. 34:11; Josh. 13:27) or “Chinnereth” (Josh. 19:35) and the “Sea of Galilee” (Mt. 4:18; 15:29; Mk. 1:16; 7:31) was next to the original home of at least eight of the apostles: Philip (Jn. 1:44), John (Mt. 4:21; Mk. 1:19), Andrew (Jn. 1:44; Mk. 1:16-18; Mt. 4:18-20); Peter (Lk. 5:3ff.; Jn. 1:44), James (Mk. 1:19; Mt. 4:21; Lk. 5:10), Matthew (Mk. 2:1, 14-15), Nathanel (Jn. 21:2) and James the son of Alphaeus (Mk. 2:14; 3:18-19; Mt. 10:3-4; James the son of Alphaeus was Matthew’s brother). This beautiful fresh water lake sustained a prosperous fishing business in the days of our Lord. The lake contained over twenty-two different species of fish with the most numerous being the Tilapia. “The best fishing was at the N end of the lake where the Jordan enters.”256 The north end

254 J. H. Bernard, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John, 2:687. Bernard continues by noting some of the subtle mannerisms of John: “apo in v. 8 is used exactly as at 11:18; omoios in v. 13 just as at 6:11; sun (v. 3) is rare in Jn., but it is found [in] 12:2, 18:1; mentoi (v. 4) is thoroughly Johannine (cf. 12:42); and so is os oun (v. 9; see on 4:40)” (Ibid.).
255 E. W. Hengstenberg, Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, 2:466.
of the lake was the old fishing area of Peter, Andrew, John and James who were partners and co-owners of a fishing business when called by Jesus (Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 5:1-11).

The lake’s geography is unique in that it lies 685 feet below sea level. “Looking down upon the Sea of Galilee from the height of Safed the lake looks harp shaped (the meaning of the Heb. term from which the word ‘chinnereth’ is derived) with a bulge to the NW, and is deep blue. It is truly a beautiful sight…. From the entrance of the Jordan at the N to the southern tip of the lake is...about thirteen miles.... The width of the N of the lake at its greatest distance...is usually understood to be seven and a half miles.... Opinions concerning the sea’s depth fluctuate from eighty ft. in the more shallow areas to the maximum of 160ft.”

There are a number of things that are noteworthy regarding this section of Scripture. First, only seven of the apostles are present. Two are not named. One of the two may have been Peter’s brother Andrew who was a fisherman with Peter before their calling. The other perhaps was Philip who was an inhabitant of Bethsaida on the lake. The account does not say why only seven went fishing. Not all of the eleven were fishermen and some may not have even known how to swim. The number seven in Scripture is often associated with perfection. John may have mentioned the number because this scene completed the beloved disciple’s resurrection narrative.

The manner in which the apostles are listed is particularly interesting. Peter is named first, which is not unusual. He is listed first in each of the four places where the New Testament lists the apostles (Mt. 10:2-4; Mk. 3:16-19; Lk. 6:14-16; Ac. 1:13). But Thomas who is listed either eighth (Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:14) or seventh (Mt. 10:3) in the synoptic gospels is now listed second, right after Peter. This not only links this chapter with the immediately preceding narrative, but also shows that Thomas, now thoroughly convinced, has taken great care to cling to the apostles. Also, Peter and Thomas had been the most bold and public deniers of the truth of all the disciples during the apostles’ time of failure. From this we learn that the Christian church “is made up of those who were doubers, deniers, and sinners of many varieties, but who have been brought to faith in Christ and have had their sins forgiven.”

The apostles were saved and chosen by Jesus not because they were intrinsically great or noble, but because of the Savior’s grace and mercy toward them.

We must never forget the humble working class origins of the apostles. These men were not men of riches, notability, great education or exceptional intelligence. Most worked hard with their hands to make a living. The fact that we find them toiling all night in order to have food to eat demonstrates that the church at this time was too small, scattered and obscure to support eleven men. The very humble beginnings of the church and the fact that the apostles were such ordinary men are excellent proof of the divine origin of Christianity. The same men who were up all night attempting to catch fish to eat and support themselves would soon turn the whole world upside down. These men would be used by God to establish churches throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. If it had not been for their calling by Christ and their enabling by the Holy Spirit, they would have all died in obscurity in a small corner of a tiny oppressed nation. But, in obedience to the Master, they became the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem, the holy bride, the church (Rev. 21:14). These unlearned, ignorant men would be so gifted by the Holy Spirit that, when they confronted the rank paganism of their day and the sophisticated ancient philosophies by preaching the cross, they did so boldly, without fear and with amazing success. “These were the men who at Ephesus, and Athens, and Rome, emptied the heathen temples of

their worshippers, and turned away multitudes to a new and better faith…. Nothing can account for the rise and progress of Christianity but the direct interposition of God.”

Second, Peter said to the others that he was going fishing and they volunteered to go along. This act of fishing by these disciples has been unjustly criticized by many commentators. This fishing expedition has been labeled “an act of self will” (The New Scofield Reference Bible; Arthur W. Pink), an act of “uncertainty” (Leon Morris) and “serving in the energy of the flesh” (Arthur W. Pink). A much better explanation is that the apostles who could return to lawful employment while they waited for instructions from Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit, did so. Peter probably still owned a fishing boat and decided to go fishing. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the disciples were abandoning their mission or were being disobedient to their Master. They needed to sustain themselves while they waited for events to unfold. “The great business of going out as our Lord’s messengers, to preach the Gospel, was not to begin until his ascension, and in the interval it was better to follow an honest calling than to be idle.”

Even the great apostle Paul worked as a tentmaker to help support himself on his missionary journeys (cf. Ac. 18:3).

The seven went fishing at night which was the best time for a good catch (see. Lk. 5:5). These men toiled all night without catching a single fish. Fishing is a very uncertain enterprise with results that can be very poor or excellent. This night, however, was an exceptional failure. The apostles, who were soon to be fishers of men, this particular night “caught nothing.” This failure is very important, for Jesus makes His appearance in order to turn their complete failure into an amazing success. “God permitted them to toil to no purpose during the whole night, in order to prove the truth of the miracle; for if they had caught any thing, what followed immediately afterwards would not have so clearly manifested the power of Christ, but when, after having toiled ineffectually during the whole night, they were suddenly favoured with a large take of fishes, they have good reason for acknowledging the goodness of the Lord.”

Third, the narrative of the miraculous draught of fishes is designed to show the apostles that their kingdom work of fishing for men must soon be resumed with vigor and that they are completely dependent upon Christ for success in their ministries.

After the disciples fished all night with no success, Jesus stood on the shore, yet was not recognized by the disciples (21:4). This non-recognition was likely due to the early morning light, the distance of the boat from the shore (in verse 8 we are told that the boat was about two hundred cubits off shore which is around one hundred yards); and, the simple fact that the apostles were not expecting the Savior to appear at such a time. (The two previous visitations were on the Christian Sabbath). We must also keep in mind that with His glorified body the Redeemer looked the same, yet not exactly the same.

Given the distance to the boat, Jesus with a loud voice asked the disciples a friendly question to put them at ease: “Children, do you have any food?” (Jn. 21:5). The word translated “meat” (KJV) or “food” (NKJV) (Greek, prosphagion) can refer to anything to eat, but is sometimes used for any food which is eaten with bread. In this context, the Savior is politely asking the disciples if they have caught any fish. Interestingly, our Lord often began conversations with courteous questions. With the woman at the well, He began witnessing to her

260 Ibid, 3:484.
262 The Greek word originally was used for a relish to be served with bread. See Archibald Thomas Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 5:319.
by saying, “Give Me a drink” (Jn. 4:7). With Mary Magdalene He asked, “Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking” (Jn. 20:15)? The word translated, “children” (Greek, paidia) is a friendly colloquial expression like, “young fellows.” If Jesus had used the more intimate term, “little children” (Greek, teknia), which He used in John 13:33, He would have at once given away His identity and the great lesson He was about to set forth would have been lost.

After the disciples tell Jesus (who they believe is a friendly stranger) that they have no food. Our Lord says to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some” (Jn. 21:6). The Savior’s command was obviously based on His omniscience (that is, He knew exactly where the fish were) and His omnipotence (as God our Lord controlled the exact path of each fish causing them to enter the apostles’ net). It is interesting that the disciples immediately obeyed the voice of this stranger. It may have been the certainty of the stranger’s voice or the simple fact that all evening nothing had worked, so the disciples may have thought they had nothing to lose by making one more attempt on the right side. In any case, the casting of the net was an amazing success. The net of fish was so heavy the disciple did not even attempt to haul the catch up into the boat, but rather dragged it to shore.

The miraculous catch of fish caused John to recognize that the stranger was in fact Jesus. “Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’” (Jn. 21:7). Often in the gospels it is John who first understands while Peter is often the first to act. The beloved disciple was the first to believe in the resurrection while Peter was the first to enter and inspect the tomb. Peter is so surprised and excited that he put on his fisher’s coat and plunged into the sea. Since it is unlikely that Peter would put on additional clothes before attempting to swim, the boat was probably in an area shallow enough for Peter to wade to shore. Peter once again shows his nature as a man of action. While his actions may appear a bit hasty to some, we can only admire Peter for his love and zeal toward Jesus. The other disciples followed in the little boat with the net full of fish.

There are a number of things to note regarding this miraculous catch of fish.

(1) This incident would have immediately brought to the mind of these men the calling of some of these same disciples to become fishers of men that is recorded in the synoptic gospels (Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 5:1-11). The account in Luke 5, which is more detailed and fuller than the other gospels, reveals some fascinating similarities between these two events. In Luke 5:4 Jesus tells the disciples (Peter, Andrew, John and James) to let down the nets in deeper water. Peter responds to this request by saying, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the nets” (Lk. 5:5). Peter’s comment reveals that, like the narrative in John 21:3, the disciples’ long efforts had been a complete failure. After the disciples obey our Lord’s instruction, they catch such a large amount of fish that the net begins to break (Lk. 5:6) and a second boat is needed to hold the fish (Lk. 5:7). The boats are so full of fish they begin to sink. In the John 21 narrative, it seems that the disciples remembered what happened at their original call and thus do not even attempt to pull the net of fish into the boat. By carefully pulling the net to shore, it is not torn (Jn. 21:11). The similarity of these events and their occurrence at crucial points of redemption history (one almost at the very beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the other right before the great commission) is not by accident.

The disciples would naturally connect this present “sign” to the one before and thus would associate it with their charge to be fishers of men. Our Lord said, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17). “Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men” (Lk. 5:10). It would also recall the parable of the dragnet: “the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind” (Mt. 13:47). Now that the
Savior has risen from the dead and has been given all power and authority by God, they will have a renewed summons to the work of catching men, but now the work will shift from the tiny nation of Israel to the whole world. The two miracles were substantially the same. Yet, there were differences that pointed to the new situation with the exalted Lord. In the first instance, Jesus was in the boat with the disciples. When our Lord walked the earth in His state of humiliation the disciples could rely on His immediate presence. In the second, Christ stood away from the apostles on shore. The disciples needed to learn that, although in His estate of exaltation the Redeemer would be in heaven, His help would still be with them. They could still rely on the Savior and look to Him to provide their needs.

With all this in mind, we see that chapter 21 is the perfect epilogue to the gospel of John and prelude to the great commission recorded in the synoptic gospels. “Suitably was it the last miracle which they witnessed at the hands of their Master, for it supplied a symbol which would continually animate them to and in their service for Him.”

(2) This incident was designed to show the apostles their complete dependence upon the resurrected living Redeemer for success when preaching the gospel. The apostles had shown great patience and perseverance in their attempt to catch fish. They had labored very hard and exerted themselves all night to the sunrise with absolutely nothing to show for it. Yet, with only a few words from the Master, their net was full. Their needs were met and the catch was a miraculous success. As the disciples had been taught to depend on Jesus during His earthly ministry, they must now learn to trust in His power, guidance and blessing when He is seated in heaven at the right hand of God the Father.

This passage contains an important lesson for every Christian that for both salvation and fruit in evangelism Christ is sovereign. In other words, “A man can receive nothing unless it is given to him from heaven” (Jn. 3:27). Success in evangelism is not due to our own powers of persuasion, use of logic or even perseverance in preaching to a group of people. It is a gift of God that comes forth entirely from His hand. All success is due to Christ and not our own strength or wisdom. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). The great secret of being a holy and productive Christian is to look to Christ for everything and live in terms of our union with Him. A stem severed from the Savior does not bear fruit but withers and dies. Self-effort in evangelism without the accompanying regenerating power of the Holy Spirit may produce hypocrites, but it cannot produce true converts. John points out that the net that Jesus filled contained large useful fish, 153 in all. It did not contain trash, weeds or useless fish. Paul recognized this teaching when he said, “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase” (1 Cor. 3:5-7).

The biblical doctrine that success in gospel preaching comes from Christ, not ourselves, is very important, for it teaches us to pray and faithfully present the gospel without resorting to humanistic gimmicks and entertainment. Many modern evangelical churches and even a number of professing Reformed churches have adopted a philosophy of evangelism and church growth diametrically opposed to our text. The general idea of modern church growth is to catch men by making the church and the gospel more like the world, or more appealing to the flesh. Such men implicitly teach that since doctrine and the gospel are offensive to the natural man, then doctrine and an explicit presentation of the gospel must recede into the background and be replaced by

exciting music, upbeat songs, drama presentations and very non-doctrinal, man-centered sermons. By way of analogy modern churchmen have looked at empty nets not as a reason for prayer and a closer dependence upon Christ, but as an excuse to make new nets. The gospel of Christ crucified and justification by faith alone has been turned into, “If you want a happy, prosperous life let Jesus come into your heart.”

These new nets of human autonomy, will worship and a humanistic gospel do indeed fill quite rapidly; but unlike the nets that the Savior filled with good fish, they are largely filled with useless fish. Today churches often grow to amazing sizes, but they are being filled mostly with unregenerate professors of religion. A gospel that is tailored to satisfy the world will produce a church like the world. The leadership and the people in the pews are not focused on Christ as He is revealed in the Scriptures, but upon the sociological matrix, the excitement, the entertainment, the programs and worldly gimmicks. Tragically, the fact that the new humanistic nets are full, is seen by the people involved as evidence of God’s blessing. But the simple reality is that nets are easy to fill with trash.

Once we understand that success in gospel preaching comes from Jesus alone, we can persevere in our labors for Christ without distress, even if the net catches few fish or if the catch is delayed. If we are faithful in our preaching or witnessing and are praying for success, then we must be content with the amount of fish the Lord brings us. Sometimes God tries preachers so that they would more highly value His blessings. There have been times in history when good preaching yielded little fruit. There have been geographical locations where conversions were very rare. God is sovereign over all of this and there is no point in being distressed about it. The man who interprets such things as a reason to withdraw his hand from gospel labors or, even worse, a reason to water down the gospel message, does not understand the sovereign power of Christ. Our text must also be seen as an exhortation to steadfastness, courage and perseverance in times when faithful preaching appears unproductive for the Savior will bless His gospel and attend it with saving power in His own good time.

Breakfast with Jesus

Our Lord not only gave the disciples a miraculous catch of large fish, but also had breakfast waiting on shore prepared and ready to eat. “Then as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.’ Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. Jesus said to them, ‘come and eat breakfast.’ Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, ‘Who are You?’—knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead” (Jn. 21:9-14).

The theme of Christ providing for His apostles continues with the wonderful events on shore. The disciples were up all night fishing. They no doubt were both weary and hungry from a long night’s toil. They were obviously excited to see Jesus and were happy about their large catch of fish. (John notes both the size of the fish and their number, 153). This amount of fish would not only keep the disciples well fed, but would also provide some needed income to travel back to Jerusalem for the coming feast of Pentecost. As we examine this feast with the Savior, once again it is important to note that this narrative shows the Redeemer preparing the apostles for their commission. There are a number of significant things to note about this meal.
First, the breakfast that our Lord prepared was (like the catch of fish) miraculous. One moment the Savior is standing on the shore speaking to the disciples, then, quite mysteriously, Jesus has a meal ready to eat on hot coals. The burning fire, the fish and the bread were supernaturally obtained; they were created by Christ for this occasion. As the preincarnate Son provided manna in the wilderness for the tribes of Israel before their conquest of the land of Palestine, the Redeemer here provides for his apostles before they go out into the world to preach the gospel. This supernatural meal of bread and fish would have reminded the apostles of the feeding of the five thousand near Bethsaida where five loaves and two fishes were multiplied for the crowd (Lk. 9:10-17; Mk. 6:38-44; Mt. 14:16-21; Jn. 6:1-13). This event would reinforce the disciples’ faith during their coming labors, hardships and persecutions. The Mediator could and did provide for their needs by His almighty power.

Note that Jesus did not say, “Go and dine”; but, “Come and dine.” He teaches us to come to Him to meet all of our needs. He asks us to come to Him for all of the provisions of our faith. He bids us to come and hear His holy Word which will nourish our faith. He wants us to pray to God through Him so that our holiness and faithfulness will grow. He invites us to feast upon all of His ordinances so that we would grow in grace. The Good Shepherd loves to feed and care for His sheep. When times are good and when things are bad Christ wants us to feed upon Him and His work by faith. “It is encouraging to Christ’s ministers, whom he hath made fishers of men, that they may depend upon him who employs them to provide for them; and if they should miss of encouragement in this world, should be reduced as Paul to hunger and thirst, and fastings often, let them content themselves with what they have here; they have better things in reserve, and shall eat and drink with Christ at his table in his kingdom, Luke xxii.30.”

Moreover, it is noteworthy that our Lord asked the apostles to bring some of the fish to the meal. The Savior desired that His tired, hungry disciples would eat and have their fill. The Savior fed the apostles through both mediate and immediate means. Regeneration is an immediate work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart that in conjunction with the Word begets faith. Yet, once the gift of faith is ours, we must diligently make use of the means of grace to stimulate our faith and contribute to our sanctification.

The bringing of the fish to Christ may also be symbolic of the bringing of souls to the Savior through the preaching of the gospel. In bidding the disciples to bring the fish to Him, “He intimated they would have fellowship together, not only in labouring, but also in enjoying the fruits of it! It reminds us of His words in 4:36: ‘He that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.’”

Second, the Mediator served the apostles. Jesus not only provided the food for the feast, but He also acted as the host and servant. “Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish” (Jn. 21:13). This was a great condescension on the part of the resurrected Savior. By this act Christ was demonstrating that in His estate of exaltation His fellowship and service toward the apostles would not cease but continue. The disciples’ success was dependent upon our Lord’s continuing as a prophet, priest and king. Our Lord provided food and ate with the apostles to prove “that he was true man still, and so doth teach us, that our exalted High Priest continueth [as] our kinsman, and bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, still; and that he was going in our nature to take possession for us in heaven.” The ascended King who sits at the right hand of God by His continuous work of the Holy Spirit enables us to

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264 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1228.
266 George Hutcheson, The Gospel of John, 432.
comprehend and digest the heavenly food of His Word. Without this continuous care from Christ we would not be built up in the faith and we would not persevere.

Jesus as the Lord of salvation dispenses His mercies. He does not forget His own or keep them at a distance, but personally ministers to them. “[H]e provides plentifully for his people; gives them to eat of the hidden manna, and tree of life, and leads to fountains of living waters; encourages them to eat and drink freely, what is of his own preparing, and at his own expense provided for them.”267 As the King and Head of the church, the Mediator gives every man his portion (i.e. his gifts and measure of faith). As the judge, He also dispenses all heavenly rewards. To all those persecuted for the faith, our Lord said “great is your reward in heaven” (Mt. 5:12). If we abide in Christ and serve Him and do not turn back, then we are promised the most amazing heavenly reward. “Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them” (Lk. 12:37). The Savior promised the apostles this kind of marvelous reward: “But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Lk. 22:28-30).

Christ feeds His apostles before He asks Peter and, by implication the rest of the disciples, to feed His sheep. In serving the apostles our Lord was setting an example of Christian leadership. Once again we see here a prelude to the great commission and the task of discipling the nations.

Third, John notes that “none of the disciples dared ask Him, ‘Who are You?’” (Jn. 21:12). The disciples recognized Jesus yet were amazed by His appearance. They were probably thinking, “Is it really Jesus?” They knew it was real but they had that, “it must be a dream,” kind of feeling. Out of reverence to the Master, they kept their thoughts to themselves. They had a deep reverence for Christ’s majesty and no doubt were somewhat shocked to be in His presence. They marveled that He who had died and had been raised in glory would come among them and act as a servant. There also was probably an element of humiliation in their silence. “Peter looked with tears in his eyes at that fire of coals, remembering how he had stood and warmed himself when he denied his Master. Thomas stood there, wondering that he should have dared to ask such proofs of a fact most clear. All of them felt that they could shrink into nothing in his divine presence, since they had behaved so ill.”268 Yet this humility was combined with great joy for their dear Savior was in their presence and was eating a fellowship meal with them. When our Lord returns and we are in His physical presence for the first time, we will bow in silence in awe and reverence for His majesty.

Fourth, the beloved disciple ends this section with an important parenthetical statement. “This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead” (Jn. 21:14). John emphasizes that this was the third occasion where Jesus manifested Himself to the disciples as a group. Therefore, in accordance with the biblical principle regarding lawful, convincing evidence in a court the resurrection is firmly established; “so by these three principal appearances of Christ to his disciples, his resurrection from the dead was confirmed.”269 Even in the midst of this rich teaching regarding the importance of depending upon the Savior, the evangelist still relates this appearance of the Redeemer as proof of the resurrection. John wants his audience to never separate the gospel and Christian ethics from the

concrete historical events of redemption. Those who seek to separate them (modernists, Barthians, neo-evangelicals) undercut the gospel and biblical morality. Even as the beloved disciple shows our Lord preparing the disciples for their specific apostolic work he stops to focus on his major theme of bringing about faith in Jesus as the Messiah—the Son of God.

Chapter 12: The Restoration of Peter

So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?” He saith unto him, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.” He saith unto him, “Feed my lambs.” He saith to him again the second time, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” He saith unto him, “Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.” He saith unto him, “Feed my sheep.” He saith unto him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, “Lovest thou me?” And he said unto him, “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.” Jesus saith unto him, “Feed my sheep” (Jn. 21:15-17).

After the miraculous catch of fish and breakfast with the risen Lord, John turns his attention to the remarkable interaction between Jesus and Peter. In the previous fourteen verses the disciples are dealt with as a group, but now they are left out of the narrative while the Savior questions and restores Peter. In order to properly understand this passage, we must view it against the background of Peter’s boasting at the Lord’s supper. After Christ told the disciples that they would flee for their lives when He was arrested, tried and killed, Peter boasted that he would never stumble (Mt. 26:33; Mk. 1:29) even if everyone else did, that even if he had to go to prison and die for Jesus he was willing to do so (Lk. 22:33; Mk. 1:29). Nevertheless, Peter denied the Lord three times after he made these claims. Peter’s actions had placed him under a cloud with the other disciples and had certainly affected Peter’s confidence and communion with the Savior. Therefore, a public restoration of Peter was necessary so he could resume his role as a prominent leader in the church.

The timing of this incident is noteworthy because we are told that Jesus had already appeared to Peter privately in Luke 24:34 and 1 Corinthians 15:5 and, therefore, our Lord waited to confront Peter until after the fact of the resurrection was firmly established to all the disciples. Further, Jesus confronts Peter only after providing for his needs and serving him breakfast. Peter has already been assured that he belongs to the disciples and has been accepted and blessed by Christ. Therefore, “now he is ready, and only now, for that so necessary dealing with his conscience, when his heart is fully assured.”

The Savior’s Question

Our Lord’s approach to the restoration of Peter is unusual and marvelous. Only One who is omniscient could take such a penetrating approach. The Savior does not directly confront Peter with his sin, but rather asks a piercing question. “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these (21:15)?” There are a number of things to note regarding this question.

First, the Redeemer addressed Peter not as “Peter” or even “Simon Peter” but as “Simon son of Jonas.” This form of address was deliberate and was designed to bring three important historical occasions together in Peter’s mind.

(1) The first thing that this address would bring to mind was Peter’s original call to be an apostle by Christ. After our Lord called Andrew, he brought his brother Simon to Jesus. When Jesus called Peter He said to him, “You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas’ (which is translated, a stone)” (Jn. 1:42). In the Bible a change of name marks a change of life and position. Our Lord changed Simon’s name to Cephas (Aramaic) or Petros (Greek) both of which refer to a large stone, boulder or chunk of rock to indicate the change that Christ would work upon Peter’s heart and life. Peter, who was impulsive, unstable, undependable and temperamental, would be transformed into firm, solid stone as a leader in the Church of Christ. By calling Peter Simon, the Savior was reminding Peter of his former life and character. He was instructing Peter of the need to put off the old life and remain steadfast in the new. This would be crucial as Peter would now resume his position as one of the chief apostles in the church.

(2) The next incident that the name Simon would call to mind was Peter’s great confession of Jesus. This is the only other time Peter was called Simon except for Luke 22:31. After Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, our Lord said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 16:17). Then immediately the Savior added this profound comment. “And I also say to you that you are Peter [rock], and on this rock [rocky cliff] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Mt. 16:18). The designation, Simon son of Jonah, was a reminder of what Peter was by nature, simply a human son of a human father. He was a man who, of himself apart from his relationship to Christ, could not have contributed anything worthwhile to the kingdom of God. But by his great confession (which was a result of God’s grace), Simon had become a worthy bearer of the name Peter. This new name had been called into question by the public denial of his confession during the trial. Our Lord wants Peter to see that, as a leader in the church, his confession of Christ must never waiver again.

(3) The final event that Peter would think of was the Savior’s warning to Peter in Luke 22:31-32: “And the Lord said, ‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.’” Jesus used the name Simon in this passage to remind Peter of the instability of his old nature. Peter now stood reminded that Christ had warned him when he was bragging of his greatness, that he was on the precipice, about to make a grievous fall. This also reminded Peter that it was only the Redeemer’s intercession that preserved him from complete apostasy. Now that Peter had returned, as our Lord prophesied, it was time to “strengthen your brethren” (i.e. “Feed My sheep”).

It is noteworthy that Jesus did not pray that Peter would not fall, but that his faith would not fail. The Savior allowed Peter to fall so that he would learn and be sanctified by the experience. Christ even prophesied the specifics of Peter’s fall and return so that the spiritual lessons that Peter needed to learn from this experience would not be missed. Peter’s pride and carelessness exposed him to severe temptation and led to his fall. But his fall was used by God to complete Peter’s training as an apostle. It ultimately was beneficial because it revealed to Peter the condition of his heart. It showed him the danger and foolishness of his self-confidence and was used of God to subdue his arrogant attitude. Like Peter, sometimes we need to learn our own weakness, pride and stupidity by personal experience before we can become strong and useful
for the kingdom of God. To be an effective apostle, Peter needed to learn to stop trusting in himself and instead focus on Christ and His word.

Second, the question is a searching question about Peter’s love for Christ: “Do you love Me more than these?” There are a number of things to note regarding this inquiry about love.

(1) Although this question does not specifically define love, the context of it tells us what love toward Jesus is not. Peter had done two things that had placed him in the position to receive this question. The first thing he did was to completely ignore the Savior’s words or warning. He was so full of pride and self-confidence that he did not listen to or obey the Shepherd’s voice. The second thing Peter did was to publicly deny Christ. He had refused to confess his loyalty to the Master in order to save his own skin.

Therefore, if these activities call into question our love of the Redeemer, then obviously, love toward our Savior involves believing in and confessing Christ before men and obeying our Lord’s commandments. Public confession is important in determining love and allegiance toward Jesus because people who refuse to confess the Savior publicly, do so either because they have more regard and loyalty to the friendship, honor and company of friends than the Redeemer and/or they regard their own safety, personal peace and affluence over Christ. Confessing Jesus in the days of our Lord meant, first being put out of the synagogue (Jn. 9:22), then eventually it meant arrest and persecution unto death (e.g., see Ac. 7:58; 8:1-3). People at that time often had to make a decision between love and allegiance to the Mediator or being hated by their own families, friends and relatives. That is why Jesus said, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Lk. 14:26).

Therefore, love to Christ means first and foremost that He takes the first place in our hearts and lives. We are to have no other gods beside Him (Ex. 20:3; Dt. 5:7). We are to love Him with all of our heart, soul and strength (Dt. 6:5). When it comes to Jesus there is no such thing as a faith and love that is not expressed with the lips and the life. “Confession of Christ is as necessary as faith in Him, but necessary for a different purpose. Faith is necessary to obtain the gift of righteousness. Confession is necessary to prove that this gift is received. If a man does not confess Christ at the hazard of life, character, property, liberty, and everything dear to him, he has not the faith of Christ.”

Love to Christ is also demonstrated by a willingness to heed His voice and obey His commandments. Our Lord said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him” (Jn. 14:21; cf. 15). The true test of a professing Christian’s love to Jesus is not emotions, tears, knowledge or mere talk, but rather obedience to His revealed will. Many people know what the Bible has to say, but very few are interested in obeying it. Virtually everyone is willing to make a strong profession of the love and allegiance to Christ, but this profession does not affect the way in which they conduct their lives at all. If we are to love the Savior as we ought, we must study His doctrines and precepts and conform ourselves to the Lordship of Christ. We must always be on guard because of the sin within us, so that we do not return to our carnal ways and love something of this world more than Christ. “Love for Jesus will lead to keeping the commands of Jesus: What are they? The interchange of ‘my commands’ with ‘my word’ and ‘my words’ in vv. 21, 23, 24 suggests that they include the full range of revelation from the Father, not simply ethical instructions (cf. 8:31-32; 12:47-49; 17:6); the lover of Jesus

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will live in the light of their guidance and their power…” 272 “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 Jn. 5:3-4). “Do not love the world, or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 Jn. 2:15-16).

As we focus on love toward Christ, we do not deny for a moment the emotional element involved in this love. After all, when Peter saw the Lord he was so happy he leaped in the water to go to Jesus. Further, the three-fold repetition of the Savior’s question to him grieved Peter’s heart. However, the Bible does not focus on love as an emotion, but rather centers on love as action; as fulfilling the law and confessing Christ. The reason for this emphasis is probably rooted in the fact that while we have little or no control over how we feel about someone or something, we can control our actions. Our behavior is a fruit of faith and love and thus the Bible gauges our love by our actions. Further, the best way to increase our love toward the Redeemer as an emotion is to obey His voice, by using the means of grace and diligently studying and following the Word of God. The Bible directs itself primarily to the intellect and we are responsible to rule over our emotions by submitting them to the Word of God. Remember, our Lord questioned Peter about his love because his behavior had given occasion for doubts to arise concerning his love.

From this incident we must learn to judge our love toward the Savior by our actions. If we are willing to disobey the Mediator’s explicit teaching to satisfy our own desires and perceived needs, then we must call into question the sincerity of our love. When a professing Christian is confronted about a scandalous sin and his response is an obstinate refusal to obey the truth, then he is demonstrating that he really does not love Jesus, regardless of his words on this matter. The Redeemer bids all of us to examine the love toward Christ in our hearts. Do you have a real love for Jesus? Are you strongly devoted to the Mediator? Is your love to the Lord demonstrated by your words and actions?

Although we must judge our love by our actions, we must also judge our actions by our hearts. This point may seem contradictory, but it is not. The point here is that there are many people who go to church faithfully and do many outwardly good deeds, but who do not do so from a sincere love of Christ. Our Lord talked about the scribes and Pharisees who loved to do good works to be seen by men (Mt. 6:1, 5, 16). There was no true heart love for God in their actions, but only self-interest. So while we must gauge our love by our actions, we must also be careful to examine our hearts in the light of God’s word to make sure we are not deceiving ourselves.

This truth is very relevant in our day, for there are hundreds of thousands of people who go to church every week who do not love Christ. There are multitudes that are deeply attached to forms, ceremonies, rituals, excitement, singing, music, public speaking, the eucharist and various church growth gimmicks who do not love Jesus. There are even many who make a very orthodox profession of faith, yet who have no love toward the Savior in their hearts. “We may know much, and do much, and profess much, and talk much, and work much, and give much, and go through much, and make much show in our religion, and yet be dead before God, from want of love, and at last go down to the pit. Do we love Christ? That is the great question.” 273 “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ

272 George R. Beasely-Murray, John, 256.
is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified” (2 Cor. 13:5). Are you a Christian in name only, or is your faith self-manifesting by works that flow from love to Christ? The fact that we are commanded to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith, proves that the church may contain reprobates. As Jesus questioned Peter, we sometimes need to question ourselves. This involves a biblical examination of our confession, our behavior and our hearts.

Third, the question goes to the very root of Peter’s sin which was pride. The first time Jesus asked Peter this question He said, “Do you love Me more than these?” The expression “more than these” is ambiguous and can be interpreted in three different ways. Some believe that our Lord was asking if Peter loved the Savior more than his fishing boats, nets and old manner of making a living. This view is somewhat predicated on the idea that Peter and the disciples had decided to give up on the ministry and go back to fishing. Another view is that the Redeemer was asking Peter if he loved Christ more than he loved the other disciples. The interpretation that makes the most sense (and is held by the vast majority of commentators) is that our Lord is asking Peter if he loved the Redeemer more than the other disciples loved Him. Thus, Jesus was calling Peter’s mind back to the time after the Lord’s supper when Peter boasted, “Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” (Mt. 26:33). Peter’s boast is emphatic in the Greek (ego, “I myself”).

This penetrating question would have the effect of saying, “Do you remember that day, Peter, when you were so confident? Do you recall how you boasted that you were more faithful and dependable than the other disciples? After all that has happened, Peter, what now do you have to say? Is your love and dedication to Me really superior to the other apostles? The whole purpose of this phrase was to teach Peter humility. If Peter was to be a rock, teaching the church, then he needed to learn humility and self-control.

We see in this question the great wisdom of Christ. His purpose in asking Peter this question about love was not only to fully restore Peter to his previous position as a chief among the apostles in front of the other disciples, but also to teach Peter not to make the same mistake again. Once Peter was cured of his over-confidence he would be more watchful, prayerful and careful. We also must not forget that the other six disciples would greatly benefit from this conversation. Although they had not shown the same pride and over-confidence as Peter; nevertheless, we are told that after the holy supper, they all promised that they would not deny Jesus (Mt. 26:35; Mk. 14:31). And, although they did not fall to the degree that Peter did by denying Jesus three times, they were guilty of abandoning the Savior at His greatest time of need. The great leaders of the church needed to learn humility and watchfulness, for they were to be the great examples and teachers of the flock. The true qualifications for leaders or shepherds in the church is not great talk of courage, zeal and a readiness to die for Jesus, but rather humility, steadfastness, and a patient endurance in providing food and care for the Savior’s sheep.

Fourth, our Lord asked virtually the same question three times but with small variations to emphasize and teach different things. One of the most obvious differences is Jesus’ use of a different word for love the third time he asked Peter this question. The first two times he asked the question the verb agapao is used. This verb is used of the highest form of love in Scripture. This is the word, used in John 3:16, which describes God’s love of the elect. Agapao is the love of reason, intelligence, purpose as well as affection. Some scholars regard agapao as the most superior form of love. The last question contains the verb phileo, which is used more for affinity, friendship and affection. “Both words represent a high aspect of love. Since they are used of both God (3:16; 5:20) and men (14:27; 16:27) in this Gospel, they seem to be [almost]
interchangeable with no great difference in meaning.”

But, in this context we should see a

difference.

Essentially what is happening here is this: Christ asks Peter if he loves Him with the highest form of love possible, a love greater than the other disciples as he had boasted earlier. Peter, now thoroughly humbled by his three-fold denial of Christ, answers by saying, “Yes, Lord, You know I love You with a phileo kind of love.” In other words, My affection and
dedication toward You is still here, Lord, but I no longer claim to have the highest, superior form
of love.” “Even now, with bowed head, he himself realizes that his love has been anything but
the high love of the true understanding of his Lord and of the sincere purpose of living up to that
understanding. So often he has misunderstood, so often Jesus had to correct his wrong impulses.
No; he dared not claim real agape. So he answers, philo se, ‘I have affection for thee.”

This answer, which is steeped in humility, shows a real repentance on the part of Peter. The root cause
of his fall, sinful pride, has been replaced with Christian humility.

The second time Jesus asks Peter about his love, He uses the same word for love (agapao) but drops the comparison with the other disciples. “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me with the highest, superior form of love?” Peter responds with the same answer “Yes, Lord, You know that I have a friendship-affection kind of love (phileo) for You.”

The third time our Lord asks the question Jesus now condescends to Peter’s evaluation of
himself by dropping the use of agapao and using the verb phileo. “Simon, son of Jonah, do you have affection for Me? Are you still my friend?” This time Peter is grieved by the three-fold repetition; he also changes his answer and makes it a bit stronger. In the previous two answers Peter appealed to our Lord’s perfect knowledge of his heart. But now he speaks of the Savior’s divine omniscience relating to all things. “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love you” (Jn. 21:17).

This is one of the most touching scenes in the whole Bible. We see Jesus deal with His errant apostle in a very firm yet gentle manner; a manner designed to do him the most good. We also see Peter humble himself, for he was truly repentant and very sorry for what he had done. Note that his sorrow was not rooted in the consequences that the sin had brought upon his life; but, he was sorry for his ill treatment of his Master. Peter, no doubt, had a holy hatred of his sin because he had dishonored his Redeemer, ignored His word of warning and had called into question his love of Jesus. “The very ‘grief’ which Peter felt at being thrice asked about his love, was intended to do him good. It was meant to remind him that if he was grieved to be asked thrice, ‘Lovest thou Me?’ how much more must his Master have been grieved when he thrice denied Him!”

Peter’s response tells us something important about how to view our relationship with
and service to God. The apostle assumed a position of humility before the Mediator. Even if Peter had not blatantly sinned by denying Christ, his previous position of pride was unbiblical
and dangerous. “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and
the perverse mouth I hate” (Pr. 8:13). “When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the
humble is wisdom” (Pr. 11:2). “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall”
(Pr. 16:18). The arrogant mind of a man leads him into a fall. And, for a believer, a fall brings
him into a deep and rugged valley of humiliation. Therefore, humility keeps one safe from
stumbling. It is a great, persevering virtue. Peter should have already learned this doctrine from

274 Merrill C. Tenney, John, 9:201.
the lips of the Master who said, “So likewise you, when you have done all these things you are commanded say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’” (Lk. 17:10). If this is the proper attitude of someone who has done his duty, what position of humility must we take who have not done half or even a hundredth part of the things commanded us?

Peter also placed his faith in Christ’s omniscience. The apostle could not even come close to articulating his feelings and devotion toward Jesus. His recent past had been so disconcerting that, on this area, his thoughts were like the troubled sea. Therefore, he rested upon the Savior’s divine knowledge. He knew that the Redeemer divined what was in the deep recesses of his heart. Indeed, the Mediator knew his heart better than he did himself. “That Christ knew all things comforted this disciple, as it should us. Peter realized that the Lord knew the depths as well as the surface of things, and therefore, that He saw what was in his poor servant’s heart, though his lips had so transgressed. Thus did he once more own the absolute Deity of the Saviour.”

Feed My Sheep

That Jesus receives what Peter says as evidence of genuine love and true repentance is clear from His declaration to Peter: “Feed My lambs.” This command (like the question about love) is repeated three times for emphasis. There are a number of significant things about this declaration.

First, note that love to Christ by our Lord’s under-shepherds is connected to feeding the sheep. A man who does not first have a strong love toward his Savior cannot faithfully discharge his ministerial duties. “Love to Christ’s person is one of the most important graces that can adorn a Christian, and specially a minister.” If a minister loves Jesus, then he will not water down the gospel or neglect discipline for the sake of popularity or money. If an elder loves the Redeemer he will be happy to show that love by visiting widows and orphans. This passage teaches us that all the things we do and all good works must be motivated by and rooted in our love of the Master. If we keep this perspective, obedience and good works become a pleasure rather than something that we must force ourselves to do.

This connection also tells us something about Jesus’ great love for His people. Christ asks His under-shepherds to show their love to Him by caring for His flock. The salvation and care of our Lord’s sheep is the first thing on His mind. He essentially says, “Show Me your love by loving My sheep.” “All believers ought to draw from it no ordinary consolation, when they are taught that they are so dear and so precious in the sight of the Son of God, that he substitutes them, as it were, in his own room. But the same doctrine ought greatly to alarm false teachers, who corrupt and overturn the government of the Church; for Christ, who declares that he is insulted by them, will inflict on them dreadful punishment.”

This passage also teaches us that our love to Christ can be gauged by how we treat others, especially the brethren. John writes, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death…. By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for His brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from

him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in
tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn. 3:14, 16-18).

Second, our Lord uses slightly different terms to describe the flock that needs to be fed. When Christ responds to Peter the first time, He uses the word *arnia* (*arnos*) which indicates lambs or young sheep. The next two times the Savior uses the word *probata* (*probaton*) which refers to sheep. The use of these different words is probably not meant to refer to different age groups (e.g., children and adults) in the church, but rather to different levels of Christian maturity. The church consists of new believers (babes in Christ) and mature Christians. The care of the flock involves teaching and direction for both the novice and the theologian. All kinds of believers must be considered. ““Now having profited by your experiences (because of your sincere sorrow), consider the members of my Church to be your lambs, and feed them; your sheep, and shepherd them; yes, your dear sheep, and in feeding them love them! Do not neglect the work among the flock, Simon. That is your real assignment! Go back to it!””

The man who pastors the flock must not direct his preaching and teaching only to those who are young, ignorant, tender and weak, but also to those who have grown to a good degree of strength and maturity. The tendency in our day is to dumb everything down for new believers and children at the expense of mature adult believers. While preaching must not be overly intellectual like a seminary lecture, it must contain enough solid food to benefit the strong sheep in the flock. Moreover, covenant heads are given the responsibility by God to make sure that those under their care understand the sermons preached on the Lord’s day.

Third, the words used for taking care of the sheep are also different. In verses fifteen and seventeen Jesus uses the word *boske* which means “feed.” The shepherd is to provide food and pasture for the sheep. In verse sixteen a different word is used: *poimain* (from *poimen*) which means to shepherd. This word includes the giving of food but also refers to all the other things being a shepherd involves: governing, leading, protecting, directing and so forth. “The shepherd was known for his feeding and protecting the flock (Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:2); for seeking out the lost sheep (Ezek. 34:12) and for rescuing those who were attacked (Amos 3:12)…. In keeping with this concept one finds in the OT many passages which speak of the leaders of God’s people as shepherds under God. In Numbers 27:17 and 1 Kings 22:17, the plight of Israel without leaders is likened to sheep without a shepherd. Later, the prophets, priests and kings who failed God and God’s people were condemned as shepherds who deserted or misled the flock (Jer. 2:8; 10:21; 23:1 ff.; Ezek. 34:21 ff., etc).”

Both of these words are obviously used metaphorically to describe Peter’s spiritual work as an apostle and elder (1 Pet. 5:1) in the church. The sheep, which are professing Christians or members of the visible church, need spiritual food and protection. The apostles and their successors throughout history (gospel ministers) are responsible to teach (feed) and govern (lead and protect) God’s people (the sheep). It is noteworthy that in the New Testament the terms “shepherd” and “overseer” or “bishop” are often connected. For example, when Paul gave his final charge to the Ephesian elders he said, “Therefore take heed to yourself and to all the flock [poimnion] among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [episkopous] to shepherd [poimainein] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Ac. 20:28). The apostles serve under their Master who is the chief “Shepherd and Overseer” (1 Pet. 2:25) of the church. The sheep belong to Christ and must be cared for in the manner that He has commanded

in His Word. “The shepherd imagery blends the ideas of authority and leadership with self-sacrifice, tenderness, wisdom, hard work, loving care, and constant watchfulness.”282 The shepherd must learn the needs of the sheep and must be willing to go to great lengths to protect the sheep from harm. This involves governing the church in accordance with God’s Word and teaching the church so that members will grow in grace and spiritual maturity. The Scriptures have a number of things to say about the care of Christ’s flock.

(1) The first and foremost method of feeding the sheep is through preaching and teaching the Word of God. Thus, Paul designates those who teach in the church as pastor-teachers in Ephesians 4:11. The pastor-teacher has a responsibility to equip the saints for the work of ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12). This is why Paul says an elder must be able to teach in 1 Tim. 3:2. Paul trained Timothy to teach faithful men in his congregation so that they in turn would “be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Thus Paul commanded Timothy saying, “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). (The word, “preach” [kerusso], means “to proclaim aloud, publicly.”283) When Paul uses the word in the context of teaching the saints, it refers to the sermon in public worship. Preaching in the biblical sense always refers to teaching out of the Bible. It involves not setting forth our own opinions, philosophies or ethics but expounding God’s Word (Mk. 4:34; Lk. 24:27; Ac. 2:14-40; 17:3; 18:36; 28:23). The Scripture is directly applied to each congregation through correction (i.e. reproving sins), rebuke (i.e. speech desired to cause a person to change direction or prevent undesirable behavior from occurring) and exhortation (i.e. pressing truths home to the conscience with an appeal to respond). Paul indicates that this must be done with all “longsuffering” (i.e. with patience and persistence) and teaching (i.e. careful biblical argumentation is to be used to support admonition, rebuke and discipline). Paul uses strong language when describing the ministry of the Word because God’s flock is made up of saved sinners who have a tendency (because of the flesh [the sin remaining in our human nature]) to wander off course. Preaching the Word feeds, edifies and builds up the flock and protects the sheep from self inflicted harm (sin, backsliding) and wolves (false doctrine, heresy and false teachers). In order to preach effectively and protect the sheep from harm, a pastor must have a solid knowledge of Scripture and theology, “holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9). The weapons a pastor uses to protect the sheep are not carnal but spiritual.

In caring for the sheep it is important that they receive a balanced diet. That is why Paul made a special reference to the fact that he had preached “the whole counsel of God” (Ac. 20:27). Teaching that only focuses on certain doctrines (e.g., prophecy or eschatology) while neglecting others (e.g., justification and sanctification) can produce malnourished sheep that are easy prey for false teachers. Further, it is extremely important that preaching be thoroughly rooted in Scripture and nothing else. Paul told Timothy to order certain men in his church to teach “no other doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3) than that received from the apostles. In many evangelical churches today sermons are full of pop-psychology and self-help pragmatism that has nothing to do with Scripture and does not sanctify God’s people (see Col. 2:8, 20-23). God’s sheep need expository, applicatory preaching of the whole counsel of God, full of sound doctrine (1 Tim.

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282 According to Scripture, then, ‘heralding’ or ‘preaching’ is generally the divinely authorized proclamation of the message of God to men. It is the exercise of ambassadorship” (William Hendriksen, Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957], 309).

283 Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 149.
1:10), without human philosophies and commandments. The position of the New Testament on preaching presupposes that the Bible is the inerrant, authoritative Word of God that is sufficient to meet all of our needs (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Although preaching is the primary method of feeding the flock, there are other ways that God’s Word is communicated to others such as personal counseling and family visitation. These things enable communication to occur in a more personal manner so that private problems or concerns can be addressed.

(2) The shepherds are to lead by example. “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-3). The elders are not to lead by brute force or by forcefully gaining mastery over others (katakriéo), but rather are to serve and set a godly example. It is for this reason that elders must not be involved in polygamy and must rule their households well, having their children in submission with all reverence (1 Tim. 3:4). The Roman Catholic concept of a church hierarchy which rules the church like political princes is antithetical to Scripture.

(3) Shepherds also care for the sheep by correction and discipline. Discipline is designed to do two things. One is to restore sheep who have wandered astray. The other is to protect the flock from the leavening effect of unrepentant sin or heresy in the church. The procedure for retrieving a fallen brother is set forth by our Lord in Matthew 18.

Church discipline is one of the most neglected duties of church leaders in our day. The root of this lack of discipline is the church’s adoption of a humanistic concept of love. Generally, people today have a negative view of discipline as unkind and uncompassionate. The reality is that a lack of church discipline is unloving and cruel. No one would consider allowing a lamb to stumble into a ditch or fall off a cliff to be compassionate. But that is essentially what overseers are doing when they refuse to deal with public scandalous sin or heresy in the church. Discipline must be done according to Scripture in as gentle a manner as possible; yet, it must be done. “For the right discharge of the duty of discipline the elder requires the spirit both of faithfulness and of tenderness. These are fully illustrated in our Lord’s dealing with offenders, which we should often study. How faithful was he, and yet how tender! Oh, that we could deal with erring brethren in the spirit of Jesus Christ!”

Peter loved Christ and was now prepared to feed His sheep. In fact, as we shall see, Peter was also willing to die for His Savior. May God increase our love of Jesus so that we would be dedicated servants of our Lord and even be willing to die for Him if necessary.

Chapter 13: A Prophecy of the Martyrdom of Peter and the Destiny of John

“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, ‘When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.’” This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, “Follow me.” Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, “Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?” Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, “Lord, and what shall this man do?” Jesus saith unto him, “If I will that he

tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.” Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, “He shall not die; but, if I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?” (Jn. 21:18-23).

After Peter is restored and re-commissioned, our Lord speaks a direct prophecy unto him regarding the kind of death that he is going to die. This prediction is connected to the preceding statement by the Aramaic double amen translated as “verily, verily;” “truly, truly;” “most assuredly;” or, “most solemnly.” This expression (which occurs in the Old Testament in Num. 5:22; Neh. 8:6; Ps. 41:13; 72:19; 89:52) “often introduces a statement which expresses a conclusion to what has preceded.”

The restoration of Peter is accompanied with a great promise that the apostle will indeed be faithful unto death. As we study this prophecy there are a number of things to consider.

(1) This prophecy is designed to show Peter that, through a life of humble service toward Christ, the highest honor that Peter had bragged about will indeed be afforded to him. When Peter was arrogant and careless he had said, “Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death” (Lk. 22:33). We know that Peter had not listened to the Savior’s warning, or heeded the imperatives at Gethsemane, but had boldly and carelessly exposed himself to temptation and a fall. Peter had missed a great opportunity to confess Jesus at the crucial hour of temptation. Now that Peter had repented and declared his love of Christ, the Savior assures him that by His own persevering power, by His own grace and love toward Peter, he will be given another opportunity to confess the Redeemer under severe testing. But this time the apostle will prevail and glorify God by his confession unto martyrdom. What once was a boast of the overconfident flesh will become a reality by the Spirit. Peter’s repentance was sincere and Peter will demonstrate his love toward Jesus through life all the way to a painful death as a criminal against Rome. What a heart-touching, beautiful promise! While most people would dread knowing the manner of their death, Peter is shown that he indeed will be a faithful shepherd and faithful in his love toward the Master. This would greatly strengthen Peter’s faith and it would reassure him of the Mediator’s infinite love toward him. “Peter is to know the kind of death he is to die and, knowing this in advance, he will not only go forward joyfully to meet it but will also while his life lasts devote himself most zealously to the flock entrusted to him. Paul was also told in advance ‘how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake,’ Acts 9:16.”

This passage should greatly strengthen our faith, assurance and steadfastness, for it demonstrates that Jesus knows the future history of all believers. He knows how they will live and how they will die. Peter had just told the Savior that He knew all things, that he knew that Peter loved Him. Thus, our Lord tells Peter by this prophecy, “Yes, I do know that you love Me. Here My dear disciple, is a glimpse of that love. Your past lack of obedience will be replaced by a fervent obedience. Your past failure to confess will be replaced by a full and glorious confession.”

This truth ought to be a great comfort to all believers. The resurrected Redeemer who rules as King and serves as our High Priest and protector, both knows and arranges our future. He even says to us “that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). There is nothing arbitrary about our lives. We are not left to the whim of “lady luck” or chance. Ultimately, there are no real accidents in our

lives. Everything occurs under the watching, loving eyes of Jesus and is arranged by His all powerful hands.

This reality must ever be before our eyes for when bad things occur to us and the storms of life seem like they are going to overwhelm us, we can rest upon this great truth. If we keep this truth in our minds we will not fret, murmur and complain over our troubles or over the troubles of those close to us. “In such days we should lean back on the thought, ‘Christ knows this, and knew it when He called me to be His disciple.’” Instead of worrying or complaining we should think and say, “This also is from the Lord: He foresaw it, and would have prevented it, if it had not been for my good.” Paul says that “we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Christians can look forward to the future because our life has meaning and purpose in Christ. We may plan our way, but He directs our steps.

(2) This prophecy gives specific details about the time and manner of Peter’s death. Our Lord tells Peter that when he was younger he girded his long outer garment himself and had the freedom to walk or go wherever he desired. However, when he is old he will stretch out his hands and be girded or bound by another man and forced to go where he does not want to go. There are a number of things to note regarding this statement.

First, this statement implies that Peter was middle-aged in A. D. 30 when these words were spoken. Jesus contrasts a younger Peter with Peter when he has become old. Since Peter was executed during Nero’s reign sometime around A. D. 64, Peter at this time was perhaps older than the other apostles, but was not yet old.

Second, virtually all commentators see in the stretching out of the hands and the binding by another the manner of Peter’s death. In fact, given what is known of Roman executions at this time, we almost certainly have here a prophecy that Peter would be crucified. The general procedure for crucifixion involved first a stretching forth of the hands and arms on the crossbeam of execution. Then, a Roman soldier would take rope and bind or fasten the arms to this beam. Then, the prisoner was required to carry the crossbeam to the site of execution. “This understanding of the stretching out of the hands makes it quite plain that Jesus predicts to Peter that he will die for him as an old man on the stake of shame. Then is clear also why the mention of being guided by another comes after the spreading out of the hands. Not ‘others,’ but ‘one other will gird him and guide him to a place to which Peter does not want to go.’ This ‘other’ is he among those who carry out the death sentence.”

Although some commentators see the stretching out of the hands as only a measure to allow a rope to be tied around the waist so the prisoner could be led to the site without escape, the expression “stretching out of the hands” was used by classical writers to describe execution by crucifixion.

This certainly is how Christian writers from the second century onward have interpreted this passage. Peter’s martyrdom is described by a number of church fathers. Eusebius writes, “‘But Peter seems to have preached in Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia and Cappadocia and Asia, to the Jews of the Dispersion, and at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head downward, for so he himself had asked to suffer’ (The Ecclesiastical History III, i).” Tertullian’s description is consistent with Eusebius: “‘At Rome Nero was the first who stained

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288 Ibid.
289 Bornhauser, as quoted in George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 409.
290 See Ibid, 408.
with blood this rising faith. Then is Peter girt by another when he is made fast to the cross’ (Antidote for the Scorpion’s Sting XV). Cf. also Origin, Against Celsius II, xlv).”

Third, by way of application, the manner of Peter’s death teaches us a few things. The idea, rather common among liberal theologians and some premillenialists, that the apostles were expecting the second bodily coming during their own lifetime is thoroughly refuted by the text before us. Peter is told in no uncertain terms that he is going to grow old and that he is going to be executed before the second coming of the Lord. There is nothing in our Lord’s statement about looking forward to an immediate victory of an earthly kingdom and the following ease this would entail. Peter and many other disciples would have to look forward to suffering, beating, torture and a violent death. The apostolic church was in for a fierce struggle. The leavening of the earth with the gospel would be accompanied by tribulation and was going to take some time. Although it may be true that Peter and the other disciples in the beginning were expecting the Redeemer to usher in the kingdom immediately after the resurrection, they did not receive this idea from Christ. Jesus taught his disciples to live as though He would return at any moment (Mt. 24:44, 46, 50, 51; 25:13), but He taught that His physical return would be delayed for a long time (Mt. 25:19).

This passage teaches us that the world has a strong hatred of the truth of Scripture and is willing to attempt to extirpate that truth by persecuting and even killing God’s messengers. The hatred of the Jews toward Paul expressed by the statement, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live” (Ac. 22:22), is the thinking of all those who hate Christ and His people whether pagan Romans, Mohammedans, communists, fascists or modern secular humanists. The witness-bearer may be killed but the light of the gospel continues to shine. The blood of the martyrs was greatly used of God to further His cause in pagan Rome as well as Queen Mary’s England. Dying for Jesus is a great privilege, both biblically and historically. Hamilton writes, “We wonder how weak humanity survived such tragedies; and as we think of all whom the headsman’s axe left widows, and all whom inquisitorical terrors hunted from their homes, and try to estimate that long agony by which a martyr Church has maintained its testimony, we begin to appreciate the awful privilege assigned to Peter and to the myriads who, like him, have trod in the Master’s bleeding track since that morning when, stretching forth His own pierced hands, Jesus said to the apostle, ‘Follow Me.’”

(3) In verse 19 John inserts a parenthetical remark to make sure his audience does not misunderstand the Savior’s prediction. “This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God.” “The expression ‘what death’ means ‘what kind of death,’ and is generally considered to indicate that the preceding verse describes death by crucifixion.”

What is interesting and significant about this verse is that it teaches that believers may glorify God by the manner in which they die. This is an important teaching of Scripture that we must exalt and magnify God by both the way we live and the way we die. Paul’s earnest expectation and hope was that “Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death” (Phil. 1:20). Peter even emphasized this teaching when he wrote to churches which were going to be persecuted: “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests

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292 Ibid.
294 J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3:520.
upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evil doer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” (1 Pet. 4:12-16). As Christ glorified God through His suffering and death (see Jn. 12:27-28; 13:31-32; 17:1), believers ought to imitate their Savior by being willing to suffer and die for the sake of the gospel.

John’s parenthetical comment teaches us that we must learn to face the way in which we die more seriously. In American culture death is something not to be thought about. Even many Christians look at death as simply the end of any usefulness for the kingdom. But God has used the suffering and death of believers many times to exalt His name and further the cause of the gospel. When the heathen in the Roman Empire saw the patient, peaceful, joyful manner in which Christians suffered and died they often wanted to know about the religion that produced such amazing people. Schaff writes, “…this bloody baptism of the church resulted in the birth of a Christian world…. The long and bloody war of heathen Rome against the church, which is built upon a rock, utterly failed. It began in Rome under Nero, it ended near Rome at Milvian Bridge, under Constantine. Aiming to exterminate, it purified. It called forth the virtues of Christian heroism, and resulted in the consolidation and triumph of the new religion. The philosophy of persecution is best expressed by the terse word of Tertullian, who lived in the midst of them, but did not see the end: ‘The blood of the Christians is the seed of the Church.’”

What was true of the Roman Empire was also true of England under the terror of the papist Bloody Mary. “It is probable that the patient deaths of our martyred Reformers had more effect on the minds of Englishmen, than all the sermons they preached, and all the books they wrote. One thing, at all events, is certain,—the blood of the English martyrs was the seed of the Church.”

There are a number of things that we should do if we want to glorify God by our death. First, we must live as though we could die at any moment and stand before God. A professing Christian who dies as a backslider, hypocrite or apostate obviously does not glorify God in death.

That is why people who glorify God by how they live also glorify God by how they die. We do not know the point in time when we will leave behind this world. Many people die suddenly by a heart attack, stroke, aneurysm or car accident. Therefore, it is crucial that we always live in a state of readiness to meet Christ. If you want to glorify God in death, then be watching, praying, serving and obeying now—in the present. The believer must always live in holiness and readiness with an eye on the judgment seat of Christ. Are you prepared to die at this very moment? Are you harboring secret sins that would dishonor the gospel? Have you been leading a life that adorns the gospel and glorifies Christ? If not, then right now is the time to repent and replace your complacency, disobedience and secret sins with obedience and godliness. “The Christian who is found like a sentinel at his post, like a servant with his loins girded and his lamp burning, with a heart packed up and ready to go, the man to whom sudden death, by the common consent of all who knew him, is sudden glory,—this is the man who brings glory to God.”

One of the great errors found among modern American evangelicals is the teaching that the Christian life is one of only financial prosperity, happiness and good times. The biblical teaching that a commitment to Christ and godly living will lead to persecution has been either forgotten or has purposely been ignored. Pastors, elders and mature Christians have a moral

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obligation to tell new believers that the Christian life does involve trials. Although Christians are not being persecuted in America as they were at Rome; nevertheless, our civil government, culture, schools and media are becoming more and more hostile to consistent Bible-believing Christianity. Further, believers need to be taught the joy and glory of sharing Jesus’ suffering and bearing His reproach. The modern prosperity gospel has no room for bringing glory to God through suffering in the Savior’s name. The Bible, however, teaches that it is a great privilege. “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt. 5:11-12).

Second, we must behave in a Christian manner on our deathbed. Death for the heathen is a very terrifying, agonizing experience. As they stand on the abyss of eternity they do not have the comfort of Christ and consolation of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, their deaths are often accompanied by severe grief, depression, terror and even anger. The famous composer Ludwig von Beethoven is said to have died shaking his fist and cursing God. The believer, however, can glorify God by suffering patiently, without complaint and without fear, depression or anger. The dying Christian can be a great witness to others by enduring suffering and death in a way that demonstrates faith in the all-sufficient death of Christ and exhibits trust in the victory of Jesus’ resurrection. The dying Christian can pray and sing with David, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” (Ps. 23:4).

It should be the great concern of every believer to die in such a way that glorifies God. Matthew Henry notes that our chief end is this: “to die to the Lord, at the word of the Lord. We die patiently, submitting to the will of God,—die cheerfully, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God,—and die usefully, witnessing to the truth and goodness of religion and encouraging others, we glorify God in dying.” George Hutcheson notes that a martyr’s death is a great testimony to the truth of the gospel: “The sufferings of saints do contribute to set out the glory of God; the glory of the truth of the word when they are ready to seal it with their blood, and to stand to the defense thereof unto death; the glory of the truth and riches of his promises and of eternal life held out therein when they hazard on the enmity and opposition of all, and on death itself, in the faith and hope thereof, and do look on eternal life as sufficient to compensate all their losses; and the glory of his excellency and all-sufficiency, when they count all things but vanity and loss that they may please him, and so they proclaim their faith to be richly made up in him; therefore saith he, that by his ‘death he should glorify God.’”

(4) Jesus follows up His prophecy by saying to Peter, “Follow Me” (21:19). This statement in its immediate context first refers to a literal, physical, immediate following. In verse 20 we observe Peter and John walking behind or following Christ. Therefore, Peter minimally understood these words as an order to go along with the Redeemer as He walked along the shore. In the broader context these words clearly have a more profound meaning which is, “take up your cross, deny yourself and follow Me as Lord and Savior your entire life—even unto death.” “Here was the final word of grace to the fallen and now recovered disciple. Now that Peter had discovered his weakness, now that he had judged the root from which his failure had proceeded now that he had been fully restored in heart, conscience and commission, the Lord says, ‘Follow me.’” When Peter had attempted to follow the Savior while full of pride and carelessness after Gethsemane, he failed miserably. But now, after learning his lesson, he was ready to follow the

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298 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:1233.
Master wherever he would lead him. "‘Expect to be treated as I have been, and to tread the same bloody path that I have trodden before thee; for the disciple is not greater than his Lord.’”

From the moment that we are converted to the moment we die we must be followers of Christ. This will involve a turning from sin daily, a dying unto self, humility and a great love toward the Savior. Following Jesus means having faith in His person and work and repentance from what we were before our conversion. The person who follows the Savior must first renounce and then forsake all of his known sins against God. John Stott says that in following the Redeemer the forsaking of sin…”can in no circumstances be bypassed. Repentance and faith belong together. [True faith always leads to genuine repentance.] Moreover, repentance is a definite turn from every thought, word, deed and habit which is known to be wrong. It is not sufficient to feel pangs of remorse or to make some kind of apology to God. Fundamentally, repentance is a matter neither of emotion nor of speech. It is an inward change of mind and attitude towards sin which leads to a change of behavior. There can be no compromise here. There may be sins in our lives which we do not think we ever could renounce; but we must be willing to let them go as we cry to God for deliverance from them.”

Throughout our whole lives we must continually believe in Christ’s person and doctrines, follow His example and obey His commands. Jesus must be our God and supreme Lord over our lives throughout our whole lives. This is how we must live if we are going to profess Christ; take the name Christian upon us and assert that we are the Son of God’s followers. Jesus must be more important to us than our own desires and specific sins. That is, even those sins which before our conversion were very precious to us. The idea common today that following the Lord only involves a verbal commitment and a brief prayer without a renunciation of specific sins and habits is a doctrine of demons. The “carnal Christian” heresy which says that a person can own Jesus as Savior but not as Lord is the legacy of antinomian dispensationalism. It explicitly contradicts our Lord’s statement that “except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:3, 5). It contradicts Peter, who said the disciples “believed on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Ac. 11:17) and Paul, who said “that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:11). Have you truly repented of every known sin in your life? Are you harboring secret sins like little idols in your heart? Are you willing to put to death the deeds of the flesh daily and follow Christ? If you are unwilling, then you are not following Jesus. And if you are not following the Savior, then you are not a Christian. Although we are not saved by repentance because only Christ’s sacrificial death and sinless life saves us; nevertheless, the person who is saved by Christ will repent as a fruit of regeneration and faith. If you have not repented, then do so right now, before it’s too late. Our mindset should be that of Paul: “For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:20; cf. 7:23).

Interestingly, the words “follow Me” would not only bring to Peter’s mind his original call by Jesus on the very same shoreline (Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17; Lk. 5:10), but would also once again focus his mind on the Redeemer’s prediction after the holy supper. “Simon Peter said to Him, ‘Lord where are You going?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward’” (Jn. 13:36). With his restoration complete, Peter is again to follow Christ. This teaches us that if we fall, then repent and are restored, we also must put the past behind us and continue to serve the Savior. When Satan says, “Look at what you’ve done. You are not worthy to follow Jesus,” we must look at our Lord’s words to Peter. When the Redeemer forgives, He also restores. The command, “follow Me,” is a present imperative which

301 Matthew Henry, *Commentary of the Whole Bible*, 5:1234.
302 John Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1959), 112.
means, “keep on following Me.” Let us be consistent and continuous in our looking to Christ and following Him.

We must also remember that the Savior who calls us to follow Him even to death if necessary is the One who has already suffered, died and risen again. The resurrected Redeemer is our leader. “Now this single consideration greatly soothes all the bitterness that is in death, when the Son of God presents himself before our eyes with his blessed resurrection, which is our triumph over death.” Other religions follow leaders (e.g., Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed, the Rabbis, etc) who have been consumed by death. But our leader is alive, active, omniscient and omnipotent. We have such a great privilege to follow the one living, true God who has assumed a human nature to meet our needs.

What about John?

Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, “Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?” Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, “Lord, and what shall this man do?” Jesus saith unto him, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.” Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, “He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?” (Jn. 21:23).

After Jesus told Peter to follow Him, he began to walk away from the group of disciples gathered around Him. Peter, perhaps not understanding the metaphorical meaning of this command, immediately begins walking by the side of Christ. After a short while, Peter hears footsteps and therefore turns to see who is following them. Seeing “the disciple whom Jesus loved” Peter begins to wonder what will happen to John, his best friend and close companion. Therefore, he said to Jesus, “Lord what about him?” This inquiry has the sense of “what about John, is he also going to die a martyr’s death?” Regarding this question, it is likely that it grew out of Peter’s curiosity regarding John’s end and his love and concern for him. There is no need to see something fleshly or unethical regarding this question. Interestingly, besides the Lord’s statement about Peter’s end, the only other statement about other apostles’ futures had already been made about John and James his brother. “Jesus said to them, ‘You [James and John] will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized’” (Mk. 10:39). Therefore Peter knew that John would suffer persecution.

Our Lord answers Peter with an admonition. “Jesus said to him, ‘If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me’” (21:22). There are a number of noteworthy things regarding this answer.

First, the statement “If I will” can only be interpreted as teaching that Jesus is Lord and God who has absolute authority, power and control over all events. “Christ died and rose again that He might become the Lord and Master both of the dead and of the living (Rom. 13:9). He speaks here in full consciousness of this sovereignty.”

“Very obviously, our Lord’s words presuppose predestination. It is He who ordains the lives of all men, and He has decreed the lives and deaths of His disciples. His statement is emphatic: ‘If I will.’ All depends on His sovereign will. Neither Peter nor any other disciple disputes this.” In revealing His decree to Peter, Jesus

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did something very unusual. Peter had not asked for this information, but our Lord gave him this information for his own benefit. However, Peter did not have any business asking Christ to reveal the secret decreetive will of God regarding John. Our requests to God must not be made to satisfy curiosity; but, rather, for the sake of personal holiness. “Peter must not be so deeply interested in God’s secret counsel (regarding John) that he fails to pay attention to God’s revealed will!”

The teaching that God has sovereign control over all events is taught throughout Scripture (Ps. 22:28, 29; 47:9; 103:17-19; Pr. 16:33; Dan. 4:34, 35; Ac. 14:16; Rom. 9:11; 11:5; Eph. 1:4; 2 Th. 2:13; 1 Tim. 6:15). But tragically, however, this doctrine is despised, perverted and ignored by most modern churches. Since the nineteenth century more and more professing Christians have replaced the absolute sovereignty of God with the lordship of so-called autonomous man. Behind this teaching is the semi-pelagian idea that God voluntarily restricted His own sovereign power so that men could have a genuine free will. The problem with this doctrine is that God’s attributes are unchangeable (immutability) and therefore such an idea is impossible. Also, if salvation is ultimately dependent on an act of man’s “autonomous” free will, then salvation is partly of God and partly of man. This teaching turns faith from an instrument of salvation that is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8), into a partial ground or foundation of salvation. Thus, most evangelicals are teaching salvation by works, but are completely unaware of it.

Second, the expression “till I come” is a reference to the second coming of Christ. We know that this was the meaning, for the disciples interpreted these words to mean that John would still be alive when Jesus returned. As we shall see in a moment they failed to take into consideration the word “if” (ean). Our Lord was not stating a future historical fact about John, but was merely making a hypothetical statement in order to admonish Peter.

A number of commentators (e.g., Gill, Lightfoot, Alford, Ellicott, etc) believe that Jesus was not referring to His second bodily coming but rather to a spiritual coming in judgment upon Jerusalem. The problem with this view is that: a) a coming in judgment upon Jerusalem would not be something to look forward to for John who was living in Asia Minor; b) the word “coming” is almost always used of the bodily coming; and, c) although Christians would be greatly excited about a rumor of a literal bodily coming, few Gentile believers in Asia would care much about the destruction of Jerusalem.

Third, Jesus’ statement “What is that to you?” has the meaning of “that is not your concern” or “that is none of your business.” This statement is followed by a repetition of the injunction, “You follow Me!” Thus, this admonition has a negative and positive element. The negative element is essentially: “Do not concern yourself about things that are beyond your control,” or “Don’t focus so much on the future of John.” The positive aspect is: “Attend to your own holiness and duty. Focus upon your duties as a Christian and Apostle.” The great lesson here is “that whatever we may think about the condition of other people, we should think first about our own.”

Jesus is not saying that we should not concern ourselves about others or take no interest in other believers around us. But, that we must first make sure that our own house is in order, otherwise we will be in no position to minister to others.

Remember, Peter was asking information about events that were to take place after his death. These were things about which he had absolutely no role whatsoever to play. Therefore, his question was purely one of curiosity. Taking time to satisfy his own curiosity would profit no

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one. Further, Peter knew that Christ would take special care of His sheep and His beloved disciple. John would be just fine.

Fourth, by way of application this passage teaches that: a) It is a waste of time to attempt to discover the secret things of God. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Dt. 29:29). b) We cannot help others spiritually if we do not first focus on our own knowledge, obedience and holiness. A dull tool that is not attended to may end up doing more harm than good. When brand new believers are immediately pressed into all sorts of activities and good works, they often do more damage than good. The great intellectual, the apostle Paul, spent three full years in study and training before he went into the mission field. c) There are a number of professing Christians that are so busy with activities and caring for others that they neglect their own spiritual needs. Matthew Henry writes, “He seems more concerned for another than for himself. So apt are we to be busy in other men’s matters, but negligent in the concerns of our own souls—quick-sighted abroad, but dim-sighted at home—judging others, and prognosticating what they will do, when we have enough to do to prove our own work, and understand our own way.”

A Parenthetical Comment

After this interaction John inserts a parenthetical comment in order to stop a misunderstanding regarding our Lord’s statement to Peter that was circulating among the churches in Asia Minor. “Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple would not die. Yet, Jesus did not say to him that he would not die; but, ‘If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?’” (Jn. 21:23). This passage is noteworthy for the following reasons.

First, this statement is very interesting for it shows that the first generation of churches somehow came to believe that John would remain alive until the second coming of Christ and, as a result, John would never see death. In accordance with Paul’s teaching in 1 Thess. 4:16-17, (“For the Lord Himself will descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord,”) these early Christians thought John and those believers who were alive with him would be raptured and go directly to be with Jesus.

Second, note that John does not question their belief in a personal, bodily, coming of Christ. That belief was correct and apostolic. The problem only was in their belief that John would remain and never die. The Redeemer did not say, “I will that he remain…,” but, “If I will that he remain….” The Savior was only making a hypothetical statement about the future “in order to etch indelibly on Peter’s mind that the future of the Beloved Disciple was not his concern but that of the risen Lord, and of him alone.”

Third, by way of application, this passage shows us three important realities. One is that our Lord’s statements are often misunderstood by professing Christians. All believers have a responsibility to carefully study the Bible for themselves using biblical methods of hermeneutics to make sure what they have been taught or what they have read is actually taught in the Scriptures. Errors spread when people simply accept what they have heard without any critical thought or willingness to further study the Bible in order to make sure that what was taught is

308 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:1235.
309 George R. Beasley-Murray, John, 412.
sound. Luke commended such behavior: “These [the Bereans] were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word in all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Ac.17:11). Believers should listen and verify. This completely wrong interpretation spread throughout the whole church because one simple word (“if”) was omitted.

When one studies church history, one is astonished at how easily false doctrines were spread throughout various churches. In our own day the Auburn Avenue heresy spread rapidly through two conservative denominations because people were unwilling to question their pastor’s teaching and covenant heads did not bother checking to see if the new doctrines were actually taught in Scripture.

This passage also shows us the unreliability of the oral transmission of teachings made in history and the necessity of written, divinely-inspired Scripture. Our Lord’s statement obviously was told to other disciples, friends and relatives soon after this event. Yet, by the time John wrote his gospel, around thirty-five years later, the statement had already taken on a new meaning never intended by Jesus. It took John himself writing by divine inspiration to dispel this inaccurate rendering of history. Now if a simple statement given directly to seven of the apostles could not be maintained in its purity for even one generation, then what does this incident tell us about the Roman Catholic dogma regarding the supposed storehouse of unwritten tradition held by that church? This passage completely obliterates Romanist teaching on the authority of a supposed unwritten tradition. Obviously, the only thing reliable that we can depend on is the inspired writings found only in the Bible (the 66 books that form the canon of Scripture).

Finally, this passage demonstrates how easy human traditions enter the church and spread throughout its ranks. We must never accept an interpretation of Scripture or doctrine simply because it has ancient roots. As we noted earlier, every doctrine must be proven from Scripture alone before it is accepted by the Church. “Nothing is more unsatisfactory, nothing more destitute of solid foundation, than that huge mass of matter which the Roman Catholic Church has heaped together, and professes to respect, called ‘Catholic tradition.’ The moment a Christian departs from God’s Word written, and allows ‘Catholic tradition’ any authority, he plunges into a jungle of uncertainty, and will be happy if he does not make shipwreck of his faith altogether.”

To build on human tradition is to build on shifting sand. Roman Catholic tradition has been nothing but a fountain of idolatry, heresy, immorality and blasphemy. The Word of God written is our only sure foundation.

Chapter 14: The Commission on the Mountain in Galilee

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted. And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Mt. 28:16-20).

And he said unto them, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover” (Mk. 16:15-18).

After describing the resurrection of Christ, Matthew omits a number of our Lord’s appearances and ends his gospel with what has become known as “the great commission.” This name is appropriate given the fact that, of all the orders that the Savior gave to His disciples during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension, this commissioning is the most complete and comprehensive. In this pericope Christ will make the claim of universal authority. He will give a charge to the eleven that extends throughout the whole world and He makes a promise of His presence to give encouragement that the task will indeed be completed. In Mark’s account, the charge without the claim or the promise is given with different words but with a similar meaning: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (16:15). The exact time of this appearance is not known. A comparison of all the gospel narratives places this event at least a week after the resurrection. It occurred after the two appearances in Jerusalem and the appearance on the shore of Galilee. Many people think it occurred almost immediately before the ascension. However, the ascension occurred not in Galilee, but on the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem (Lk. 24:50-53; Ac. 1:9-12).

The importance of this commission can be ascertained not merely from the content of Jesus’ message which is majestic and amazing; but also from the fact that, unlike our Lord’s many surprise appearances, this meeting was by appointment. Matthew writes, “Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee to the mountain which Jesus had appointed them” (Mt. 28:16). This appointment, at a minimum, refers to a) the Savior’s prophecy in Matthew 26:32, “But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee;” b) to the announcement by the angel on the morning of the resurrection (Mt. 28:7); and, c) the words of Jesus Himself later that day to the women, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee and there they will see Me” (Mt. 28:10). It is very likely that on one of our Lord’s post-resurrection appearances He gave very specific instructions as to when and where their meeting would take place. We know that Christ was specific because the definite article is used: “the mountain” (i.e. the one definitely appointed or assigned).

Many scholars believe that this meeting in Galilee is the same meeting mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:6: “He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.” Although Matthew only mentions the eleven (28:16) because the great commission was directed primarily to them, it is likely that this was the large meeting mentioned by Paul because: a) We know from Luke 24:9-10 that other disciples, including many women, were in the room when Jesus told the apostles to go to Galilee in order to see Him. This word would have quickly spread among all the disciples. b) If our Lord wanted to communicate the great commission only to the eleven apostles in private, there would be no need for the seclusion and safety of a distant mountain in Galilee. But if Christ wanted this commission to be spoken in front of as many disciples as possible a secluded hill in Galilee would be perfect. It would be far from our Lord’s enemies in Jerusalem and it would be near the cities where most of the Redeemer’s disciples lived. (The northern side of the Sea of Galilee contained the areas where Jesus spent most of His time preaching and healing the sick). Further, it appears that there were not a lot of followers of Christ in the vicinity of Jerusalem, for on the day of Pentecost there were only 120 disciples gathered in the upper room (see Ac. 1:15). c)
Moreover, given the advance notice of this meeting (Mt. 26:32; 28:7, 10) and the importance of the message, it makes sense that our Lord used this public meeting as an opportunity to appear to all the believers then alive to make them witnesses of both His resurrection and the commissioning of the apostles. d) After the triumph of the resurrection and the new radical change of the church’s mission from the nation of Israel to all the nations, a public announcement was in order. Although the great commission forms a dynamic conclusion to the whole gospel of Matthew, in a sense it is a new beginning for the church. e) In verse 17 we are told that “some doubted.” Although the disciples were slow to accept the amazing fact of our Lord’s resurrection and even “disbelieved for joy” (Lk. 24:41) at the Savior’s first appearance to the eleven; at this point in time after three appearances to the apostles as a group, it is not likely that the eleven were still having doubts. But if others were present who had never seen the resurrected Savior, the words “some doubted” make perfect sense. Some of the people who had been told to come to this important meeting who had never seen the resurrected Redeemer were probably thinking, “Is this really Jesus? Could He be someone else?” There were those who at first could not believe their eyes. They, however, would be soon convinced.  

The place of this announcement, “the mountain,” conveys the biblical thought of a special place to meet with God and receive divine revelation (e.g., Ex.19:3; Mt. 5:1). The people of Israel waited at the foot of Mt. Sinai while Moses received the holy law, their marching orders for the promised land. Jesus, who was the Prophet greater than Moses, gives orders for the spiritual conquest of the whole world. Some commentators believe this mountain was Tabor, the place of transfiguration. This mountain, however, is not identified. “It has been well remarked that the very gathering on a mountain already marks an important event; for on a mountain Jesus preached his great sermon (chapters 5 to 7), on a mountain he chose the Twelve, on a mountain he showed himself in the glory of the transfiguration. On mountain heights heaven and earth, as it were, meet, and here the glorified Savior spoke of his power in heaven and on earth. With the vast sky above him and the great panorama of the earth beneath him, Jesus stands in his exaltation and his glory—a striking vision, indeed.”

As Jesus approached this group they fell to the ground and worshipped Him. This is not the mere respect paid to an earthly king, but the acknowledgement given to the Redeemer as the God-man. They fell on their knees in adoration to give Jesus the honor He deserved not only because He was and is God in the fullest sense of that term, but also because by His suffering, death and resurrection He had conquered sin and death. “Note, All that see the Lord Jesus with an eye of faith are obliged to worship him.” “As faith is clear and vigorous, so does it see Christ to be God, and brings the soul down before him to worship.” The Jews, who were taught from birth that worshipping a creature was the greatest of sins, are here prostrating themselves in worship.

311 Some scholars insist that the fact that the eleven are specified indicates that only the eleven were present. R. T. France writes, “Such a specific identification surely renders very unlikely the contention of Stonehouse…that a large group were present, a contention suggested partly by the term ‘brethren’ in v. 10, and partly by the desire not to identify the ‘doubters’ of v. 17 with some of the eleven. On the basis of this supposition it has been further suggested that this is the appearance ‘to more than five hundred at one time’ (1 Cor. 15:6). But, if this is so, Matthew was either misinformed or has gone out of his way to disguise the size of the group involved” (Matthew, 412). The problem with Frances’ argument is that: a) Mark 16:14 says that Jesus appeared to the eleven as they sat down to eat without mentioning anyone else, while Luke’s account makes it clear that other disciples were with them (Lk. 24:33-43). Therefore, not mentioning others does not prove others were not present. b) As noted above, it is hard to believe that some of the eleven still doubted after Jesus had already appeared to them at least 3 times.

313 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:445.
314 David Dickson, Matthew, 413.
themselves in worship before the Son of God. This is an excellent proof text for the deity of Jesus.

The exception “but some doubted” (hoi de edistasan) as noted, does not refer to the eleven, but to others present among the five hundred disciples. The verb used, edistasan, comes from dis which means two, and thus divided in mind. The verb does not refer to unbelief [apistein] or even perplexity [aporein] but rather hesitation, indecision and perhaps uncertainty. The only other time this word is used in the New Testament is Matthew 14:31 where Peter walks on the water and becomes afraid. Then Jesus says, “O you of little faith [oligopiste], why do you doubt [edistasas]?” The people present on the mountain who doubted had faith, but they were so surprised and shocked to see the risen Savior, that there was hesitation in accepting what was before their eyes. There was a period of double-mindedness and indecision as they absorbed the amazing scene before them.

Our Lord then stepped forward, close to this assembled group, to speak. The teaching recorded by Matthew consists of three major parts: (1) the Savior’s statement regarding His universal authority (v. 18); (2) the commission which is founded upon this authority (v. 19f.); and, (3) a glorious promise regarding Christ’s presence with the church till the end of the age (20b).

Christ’s Universal Authority

Before assigning the great task of discipling the nations to the apostles and their successors, Jesus first speaks of the foundation upon which such work lies. “And Jesus came and spoke to them saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth’” (Mt. 28:18). There are a number of things to note regarding this authority.

(1) The giving of this authority is emphasized in the original language. The verb is in the emphatic position: “Given to Me was all authority.” The verb, which is passive, assumes that God the Father bestowed this authority. Our Lord then “did not assume it, or usurp it, but it was given him, he was legally entitled to it, and invested in it, by a grant from Him who is the Fountain of all being; and consequently of all power. God set him King (Ps. ii.6), inaugurated and enthroned him, Luke i.32.”

This glorification and giving of authority was anticipated by Jesus right before His passion when He prayed His high priestly prayer. “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him…. I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (Jn. 17:1, 2, 4, 5).

This passage teaches us that the incarnation was a period of self-imposed weakness and humiliation; once our Lord’s suffering and death for sin was accomplished, He would be restored to the glory that He had as God the Son before the incarnation. His human nature, which had never ever been in such a state, would receive glory by virtue of the fact that the two natures were one person and because redemption was the accomplishment of the God-man, the theanthropic Mediator.

316 See Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, 885.
317 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:445.
The giving of this authority by the Father to the Son is prominent in the Psalms and Prophets. David spoke of the Messiah: “The LORD said to my Lord, ‘sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool’ … The Lord is at Your right hand, He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill the places with dead bodies” (Ps. 100:1, 5-6). “Give the king Your judgments, O God, and Your righteousness to the King’s Son. He will judge Your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice…. Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations will serve Him” (Ps. 72:1, 11). “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has appointed You” (Ps. 45:6-7; cf. 22:28-29). “I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, You are My Son, today I have begotten You, Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession” (Ps. 2:7-8; cf. 9-12). In Daniel 7, the resurrected Redeemer comes up to heaven and is given an eternal kingdom by “the Ancient of Days” (vs. 9-14). “Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples; nations; and languages should serve Him” (Dan. 7:14; cf. Isa. 42:1, 4).

The New Testament also teaches that God gave the resurrected Savior this universal authority. On the day of Pentecost Peter said, “This Jesus God has raised up…let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac. 2:32, 36). Paul said, “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:8-9). The apostle taught that God “raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but the age to come” (Eph. 1:20-21; cf. Col. 3:1). The author of Hebrews said that God “appointed [Christ] heir of all things (1:2). When Jesus had “purged our sins, [He] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3). Christ “has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than” even the holy angels in heaven (Heb. 1:4). “Jesus, who has made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death [was] crowned with glory and honor” (Heb. 2:9). John wrote that only the Lamb that had been slain was worthy to take the scroll out of the right hand of God and open its seals (Rev. 5:1-13).

Scripture teaches that the triune God entered into an agreement before the foundation of the world regarding how a people would be saved from sin. God the Father sent the Son into the world to save those He had chosen. The Son came into the world, assumed a human nature and carried out the Father’s will by living a sinless life and dying a sacrificial death for the elect. The Holy Spirit applies the Savior’s accomplished redemption to the elect. In saving God’s people, Scripture presents the Father as the originator of the plan, the Son carries out that will and then the Holy Spirit applies it. In carrying out God’s plan, the Redeemer had to first suffer and experience humiliation before He could be exalted as ruler, as the universal King.

(2) Jesus was given all authority when He rose from the dead. The verb (edothe, an ingressive aorist) “has been given” indicates that, at a single point of time in the past, Christ received “all authority.” The Scriptures identify that time as either the resurrection (“Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead” [Rom. 1:4]), or the ascension (“I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like the Son of Man was coming, and He came up with the Ancient of Days, and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an
everlasting dominion which will not pass away” [Dan. 7:13-14 NASB]). Since the ascension had not yet occurred, our Lord was obviously speaking of His resurrection. The Bible views the resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Christ organically, as different aspects of the Savior’s exaltation. Therefore, one should see no conflict between these passages. The resurrection of Christ is the great turning point of our Lord’s ministry and of all human history.

When we speak of Jesus receiving authority at a point in time in history it is important to recognize that He received this authority as the God-man or theanthropic Mediator. As God the Son, our Lord was equal in power and authority with God the Father. Therefore, metaphysically, the Savior could not receive any more power or authority than what He already possessed. However, in the incarnation, the Son of God voluntarily restricted the exhibition of His power and assumed a human nature. (The power and authority was always there. He simply restricted the public use of His power during His ministry.) Although Jesus in His human nature had a great deal of authority due to his union with the divine nature and His anointing beyond measure by the Holy Spirit, yet the judicial foundation of salvation had not yet been achieved. The Mediator had not yet shed His blood for the sins of His people (the elect). The God-man had to live in a state of humiliation in order to obey the law of God and fulfill the covenant of works on behalf of His people. He also had to take upon Himself the guilt, penalty and curse of those He came to save. It was only after salvation had been completed, merited, or accomplished that Jesus, the God-man, could receive all authority. This authority was the judicial result of salvation achieved. Christ was given all authority because He deserved it. It was His by right. As the Mediator, our Lord secured a judicial recreation. “In the Great Commission the claim of Christ to have received from God ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’ formalizes judicially what was true metaphysically: God’s rulership over all.” Calvin writes, “For no ordinary authority would have been enough, but sovereign and truly divine government ought to be possessed by him who commands them to promise eternal life in his name, to reduce the whole world under his sway, and to publish a doctrine which subdues all pride, and lays prostrate the whole of the human race.”

318 During our Lord’s ministry, in His state of humiliation, He exercised great authority. Everyone immediately noticed that He taught as one who possessed real authority and not like the scribes (Mt. 7:29). He set forth teachings and imperatives based on His own authority saying repeatedly “But [or for] I say to you” (Mt. 5:20, 22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). He demonstrated throughout the nation that He had power over all kinds of diseases (Mt. 4:23; 9:35; etc) and over demons (Mt. 4:24; 8:32; 12:22; 17:18). He even cured lepers (Mt. 8:2, 3; 11:5) and raised the dead (Lk. 8:4; 8:54-55; Jn. 11:1, 43; 12:1). “He gave the Twelve authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of disease and sickness (x.1); He gave similar authority to the Seventy (Lk. x.9, 17). He produced evidence to show that He had authority on earth to forgive sins (ix.6). He said that the Father had given Him authority to execute judgment; authority over all flesh to bestow eternal life; authority to lay down His own life and to take it again (Jn. v.27, xvii.2.x.18)” (Alfred Plummer, An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew, 428-429). In the days that He walked the earth, even the winds and rain obeyed His voice (Lk. 8:25). Yet, even with all this amazing authority, our Lord had not yet conquered sin, Satan and death. The price for sin had not yet been paid. The vast earth was still under the sway of the wicked one. Further, when Jesus ministered to Israel, He had to conceal His power and glory. Those He healed were often given orders not to make public what had occurred (Mt. 8:4; 9:30). When arrested, He refused to call on the help of the angelic armies (Mt. 26:53). When He died, only a few sepulchers were opened (Mt. 27:52). But with salvation accomplished and Satan, sin and death already [definitively] defeated His authority is no longer restricted in any way. He is given the victor’s crown, which is an unrestricted, universal sovereignty.


(3) Jesus received this authority as a reward for His redemptive obedience. Our Lord had to complete His redemptive mission before He could receive His great reward. The Savior was conscious of this fact during His ministry. He said, “Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?” (Lk. 2:49). “Behold I have come…to do Your will, O God” (Heb. 10:7). He said to His disciples, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work” (Jn. 4:34). His reward was merited by His perfect obedience unto death. Paul says, “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:8-9). The word translated “highly exalted” literally means “super exalted.” Our Lord has gone from the very depths of the suffering of hell and alienation on the cross, to very throne of God. After voluntarily suffering a shameful and accursed death at Golgotha as a common criminal, Jesus was exalted to the fullest extent by His resurrection victory over death, ascension to Heaven and enthronement or investiture with all authority, majesty and glory. He was given the name Lord, which is above every name held by creatures in heaven and on earth. “We ought to put this passage alongside of Eph. i. 15-23 where the Apostle asserts that God displayed in the person of Jesus His mightiest power, when He raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His own right hand, far above all principality and power, might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but in that which is to come. Indeed all through the New Testament the Father’s agency in the exaltation of His Son is distinctly accentuated; and we are constantly reminded of the contrast between the action of men, who with wicked hands slew Him, and the action of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

“The Father’s act of exaltation is his reply to the Son’s self-humiliation, and as such is to be understood as a response of vindication and approval.” The author of Hebrews focuses on the fact that the Savior’s enthronement took place after he offered Himself on the cross as a propitiatory sacrifice unto God. He notes that “when He had Himself purged our sins, [He] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3). “The description of the Son as being now seated signifies the completion of the work of purification, conveying the notion of rest after the fulfillment of a mission. But more than that, his position ‘at the right hand’ of God…indicates that his is the place of highest honor, that he is not merely on a seat but on a throne, and that he is not just ‘sitting’ but ruling…. This is the seal of the divine acceptance of his work of purification, for he now is received back to the height from which he descended for our redemption.”

The sinless, obedient life of the Son of God and the shedding of His precious blood is the reason why Jesus was glorified. His redemptive work is the foundation of His mediatorial kingship. His victory on the cross is the platform for His kingdom of grace. His purification of sins is the reason He pours out His Spirit from heaven upon the church (Lk. 24:29; Jn. 16:7; Ac. 1:8; 2; Eph. 4:8). His victory on Golgotha and the resurrection is the reason why God now commands all men everywhere to repent and believe in His Son (Ac. 17:30-31). The Redeemer by His redemptive work has already won the war. He has already received the victor’s crown. The great commission is simply the application, throughout history, on earth of what our Lord has definitively accomplished. “Having endured the Cross, He was fully entitled to enter ‘the joy

321 F. B. Meyer, Devotional Commentary on Philippians (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979), 92.
322 Peter T. O’Brien, Commentary on Philippians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 47.
323 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 47.
set before Him.’ Having poured out His soul unto death, it was meet that the Father should ‘divide him a portion with the great’ (Isa. 53:12).

It is interesting that in the temptation narrative, near the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, Satan offered our Lord all the kingdoms of the world and their glory if only He would worship the devil (Mt. 4:8-9). Christ emphatically rejected this satanic shortcut to power and glory. By being obedient to God, He received not only all authority on earth but also in heaven.

4 The authority that Jesus received is comprehensive in nature and scope. The Greek word used is not 
\textit{dunamis}, which refers only to power or might, but \textit{exousia} which means authority. Our Lord already had all the power needed to control or conquer whatever He desired; but, He did not yet have the authority to exercise that power as the Mediator. He did not yet have the authority for a spiritual or redemptive conquest of the whole earth until He first shed His blood and conquered Satan, sin and death. Once His redemptive work was complete, He could then exercise full authority over everything, everywhere. He has all authority over everything created whether physical or spiritual. Having died on the cross and been raised to life, Jesus now has the active power and full ability to rule a kingdom of grace by the power of His Spirit. He now has the authority as the theanthropic Mediator to subdue all of His enemies and the enemies of His people—the church. The will of the God-man shall be accomplished and His commands must be obeyed. The scope of Christ’s authority is indicated by the phrase “in heaven and on earth.” Jesus has been given universal cosmic dominion not only over the physical universe and everything in it, but also over everything spiritual: the spirits of those who have died and all the heavenly hosts (angels and demons). “Jesus Christ...has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him” (1 Pet. 3:21-22). He is the “head of every man” (1 Cor. 11:3) and the “head of all principality and power” (Col. 3:10).

Before the resurrection, Jesus, as the divine-human mediator, did not have all authority. Yes, it is true that before the resurrection when Jesus walked the earth the wind and sea obeyed His every word, demons submitted to His commands, He healed every manner of disease and He even raised the dead. But, it was only after Jesus finished His redemptive work and rose from the dead victorious that He had the right and foundation to enter the heavenly sanctuary and boldly make intercession for His people. Christ’s victory over death secured victory for the elect. Jesus emerged from the tomb with the keys of death and hell. “I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (Rev. 1:17-18). Jesus, by His death, crushed the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). He bound the strong man and is actively plundering his goods (Mt. 12:28-29). The author of Hebrews taught that through Christ’s death “He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14).

When Jesus instructed His disciples regarding His coming crucifixion He said, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to Myself” (Jn. 12:31-32). In Revelation 20 Satan is bound so that he will no longer deceive the nations (Rev. 20:2-3). (This binding occurred at Christ’s first coming at the resurrection and not, as many suppose, at the second coming.) Christ’s death and victorious resurrection enabled Him to spiritually conquer all nations. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). As God, Jesus had the power to create worlds; but to conquer a world in darkness and iniquity, to ransom a people guilty of breaking God’s law, Jesus had to pay the supreme price. He had to die an

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atoning death. Once this was accomplished, Jesus rose from the dead with the judicial authority to recapture the whole earth. The elect of every nation will be saved. Only after the resurrection did Jesus Christ receive dominion over the whole earth which Adam had forfeited by his sin.

(5) Jesus Christ’s authority is the basis or foundation of the commands He gives to the apostles in verses 19 and 20. Before the resurrection Jesus told the disciples, “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 10:5-6). After the resurrection the apostles are ordered to “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Mt. 28:19). The word therefore indicates that those who go and make disciples of all nations do so, on the basis of the mediatorial authority given to the Messiah. Those who go are to promote obedience to that authority. Because Jesus obeyed the Father and achieved salvation for the whole world (i.e. people of every tongue, tribe and nation). He received all authority from the Father. Because Christ has been given a comprehensive, universal authority, the apostles are commanded to go and make disciples of all the nations. Jesus, after having won the war, is given all authority. He then delegates that authority to the church. The church is to command all nations to kiss the Son, to submit to the King of kings and Lord of lords. “For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet” (1 Cor 15:25).

The fact that the church’s marching orders for a spiritual world conquest are based upon Christ having all authority in heaven and on earth should give the Church great encouragement and optimism. Is there anyone or anything that has more power or authority than Jesus Christ? Christians should march off to battle knowing that Christ has secured the victory, and that His omnipotence cannot be thwarted. The pessimism and defeatism taught in so many churches today is totally unscriptural. Although there are periods in history when Christians suffered persecutions and setbacks, rest assured that the white horse Rider will conquer all His opposition. The “therefore” indicates “that what otherwise would be absolutely impossible now becomes gloriously possible, yea, an assured reality.”

Discipling the Nations

After asserting His universal authority as the resurrected King, Jesus then turns His attention to the apostles’ and church’s primary job throughout the rest of human history. Christ said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen” (Mt. 28:19-20).

The main verb of the great commission is matheteuo which does not mean teach (didasko) but “make disciples” (only here; Mt. 13:52; 27:57; Ac. 14:21). The translation “teach” is unfortunate and misleading. The verb comes from the noun “disciple” (mathetes). Jesus tells the apostles how disciples are to be made by the three participles that are dependent on the main verb. These participles receive their imperative force from the main verb and thus are translated: “go,” “baptize,’ and “teach.” Thus, the great commission is not simply a call to evangelize or preach the gospel. These things are certainly included. But, it also includes the sacrament of baptism and teaching the whole counsel of God which implies church planting and church membership. It presupposes an authority structure and what is derogatively referred to as the

institutional church. The Savior expected the New Covenant church to be aggressive and militant in the proclamation of the gospel, the planting of churches and the teaching of new converts. That is precisely what the apostles, evangelists and pastor-teachers did in that first generation of the church. In only one generation, churches were established throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace…. Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their word to the ends of the world” (Rom. 10:15; 18; cf. 1:8; Ac. 17:6; Col. 1:5, 6, 23).

The making of disciples was something that rabbis did in the first century. They would gather around themselves pupils who would be followers of their wisdom, knowledge and ethics. The apostles and their successors were unique and different than the rabbis and the various Greek philosophers; they were to make disciples for Jesus, not for themselves. A disciple of our Lord is someone who trusts in the person and work of Christ; who has bowed the knee to the Savior as Lord; who has submitted to trinitarian baptism and has been incorporated into the visible church; and, who spends the rest of his life studying, listening and applying the Word of God to every area of life. The truth must be learned, confessed and practiced. Only those who continually abide in the Redeemer’s Word are truly His disciples (Jn. 8:31).

The use of “make disciples” means that the great commission goes far beyond mere evangelism. Telling people about their sin and guilt and their need of Jesus as Savior and Lord is only the first step or beginning of discipling. The church of Christ cannot rest until people confess the Savior, repent of their sins, get baptized, join the local church, submit to godly elders, attend the means of grace and progressively grow in holiness unto the Lord. This command completely refutes two common errors in our day. One is that Jesus is merely a fire escape from hell or a ticket to the rapture; and, therefore, taking up the cross and following Christ everyday is unnecessary. On the contrary, discipleship is a life-long commitment of one’s life, of our whole body and soul. Another error is that people can confess the Savior and be true Christians yet not join themselves to a local Bible-believing church. This is refuted by the fact that the sacraments and teaching, which are crucial aspects of discipleship, have been delegated to ordained teaching servants or pastors. Therefore, disciples must submit themselves to church officers who in turn feed the flock. The author of Hebrews said, “Obey those who rule over you and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account” (Heb. 13:17). Obviously, believers are only to submit to ministers of the gospel when they teach what Christ has commanded. When the pastor of a particular church teaches things contrary to God’s Word (e.g., “Christian liberalism,” pop psychology, secular humanism, macro-evolution, feminism, antinomianism, Arminianism, the continuance of the sign gifts [the Irvingites], dispensationalism, etc), one must leave that church in order to be a faithful disciple. Are you submitting every area of your life to the resurrected King? Remember, no sphere of your life is excluded from His authority. “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas. 1:22).

Note that our Lord said “make disciples of all the nations.” He did not say make disciples from among the nations; neither did He order the apostles to simply disciple individuals. The use of the word nation is significant and brings into view a much wider goal than simply setting up a few churches in each nation. The word for nation (ethnos) means a multitude of individuals of the same ethnic group, language, culture or country. The ancient, biblical and modern uses of the word nation are essentially the same: large groups of people that are distinct from other groups in various ways such as language, customs, heritage, history, culture, geographical location, boundaries, etc. Paul said, “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all
the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (Ac. 17:26). John wrote, “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, people, and tongues, standing before the throne and the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands (Rev. 7:9).

There are a number of things that are noteworthy about the use of the phrase “all nations.” First, the confining of the visible church and the spiritual kingdom to one tiny nation (Israel), which was characteristic of the Mosaic administration, has been abolished in the New Covenant era. Before the resurrection the Redeemer only ministered to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt. 15:24). The apostles during that period were also restricted to the same field. They were ordered not to go into the way of the Gentile or to any of the Samaritan cities (Mt.10:5). The resurrected Mediator, however, not only removes all such restrictions, but also expands the disciples’ sphere of labor to include every nation, tribe, and tongue upon the whole earth. Such a command would have been very radical and hard to accept by first century Jews. But this is precisely what our Lord had been training His apostles to do. They were to be fishers of men in the most comprehensive sense of that phrase. “The salt of the earth (v. 13) is sent forth to save mankind from corruption; the light of the world (v. 14) is sent forth to illuminate every branch of the human race. They have no longer to preach the Messiah of the Jewish people, but the Savior of the world.”

From this point on, race, ethnicity, circumcision, background, language and so forth account for nothing. “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Ac. 17:30-31).

After Jesus died on the cross He broke down the middle wall of separation, abolished the ceremonial law and thus made the Gentiles, who were regarded as strangers, to be fellow citizens with the saints (see Eph. 2:14-19). Therefore, the gospel is preached to those who were afar off (the Gentiles) and those who were near (the Jews) (cf. Eph. 2:17). The Mediator has reconciled men of all nations to God through His sacrificial blood. God has made it very clear that Jews are no longer to consider Gentiles as unclean (Ac. 10:13-16, 28). By way of application, the great commission explicitly condemns all forms of racism. The gospel is to go to all men without exception.

Second, our Lord’s choice of the word “nations” rather than “individuals” or “men” is significant because it tells us that the goal of the great commission is not just that a few individuals here and there are to be discipled, but rather that eventually whole nations are to be brought under the subjection of Jesus Christ. The church’s task is not completed until institutions, cultures and civil governments submit to the King of kings. This task is to be accomplished by spiritual and not physical means. Individuals and families are to be evangelized and brought into the church to learn all that Christ has commanded. All believers in turn are to apply the word of God to every area of life. As salt penetrates and preserves meat, God’s word will change every aspect of society. The eventual result will be a Christian society. The idea that the Bible is a book to be used only for private, family and church devotional use; that the earth, cultures and civil governments are somehow outside the realm of Christ’s comprehensive authority is a reduction of Christianity. It is totally unscriptural.

In order to properly understand the comprehensive nature of the great commission one needs to consider the relationship of the great commission to the “cultural” or “dominion mandate” given to Adam. When God created Adam and Eve in the garden, He commanded them

to have dominion over the whole earth (cf. Gen. 1:26-30). God’s intended purpose for man before the fall was to develop a world-wide godly culture, a culture that honored and glorified God. All of man’s activities and pursuits were to be done for God and in God’s way. All the accumulated labors of mankind over time: music, art, science, medicine, architecture, economics, infrastructures and so on would be done obediently and would reflect man’s love of God and mankind. If Adam had obeyed the covenant of works and his descendants had fulfilled the dominion mandate the result would have been a world-wide, obedient, God-loving civilization. This was God’s original preceptive will for mankind. But man’s sin—the eating of the forbidden fruit—necessitated the need for a Savior. God in His kindness and mercy instituted the covenant of grace. God’s original plan for a godly civilization was not set aside. However, because of sin this plan could only be accomplished through Jesus Christ, the second Adam. Christ’s resurrection is the new beginning, the foundation of the regeneration of the world. The total victory that Jesus accomplished on the cross is to be progressively brought to bear on all nations. “His ‘all authority’ over ‘all the nations’ demands we preach His crown rights over all men and all their institutions, cultures, societies, and nations. The saving of multitudes of individuals must eventually lead to cultural Christianization under Christ’s rule and to His glory by His providence, in conformity with God’s creational purpose. This world order was designed to have man set over it, to the glory of God. This is why at the very beginning of human history unfallen man was a cultural creature.”

Go!

After Jesus told the apostles that He had received all authority, He then ordered them to go and make disciples of all nations. Before the resurrection of Christ, people were welcomed who professed Jehovah and came to Israel, God’s elect nation. But now the mediatorial King’s ambassadors are to go to men everywhere. This universalism was anticipated by our Lord: “Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you [the apostate nation of Israel] and given to a nation [the multinational church] bearing the fruits of it” (Mt. 21:43). “When Jesus said, ‘Go, make disciples of all nations,’ he announced in the simplest and least ostentatious way the most sublime enterprise that ever human beings have been called upon to accomplish.”

There are a number of things that this command involves.

First, it involves a specific timetable. Before the apostles were to go, they had to wait for the glorified, ascended Christ to bestow power on the church by pouring the Holy Spirit upon it. “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you” (Jn. 16:7). “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Ac. 1:8). “[T]arry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Lk. 24:29). The Holy Spirit will give them power in order to accomplish their extraordinary work which included the gift of tongues, miracles, preaching and teaching with power and the receiving of divine revelation. The apostles were not only witnesses, but were infallible witnesses of sacred history. “They were to be witnesses of all that they had seen and heard from the beginning of their intercourse with

327 Kenneth Gentry, Jr., The Greatness of the Great commission, 42.
328 John A. Broadus, Commentary on Matthew, 592.

Therefore, the apostles did not begin their special ministries or “go” immediately, but waited in Jerusalem, without making any attempts to preach the gospel between the ascension and Pentecost. In obedience to our Lord’s commands they were waiting for something new and extraordinary. They were waiting for the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church. Under the Old Covenant the Holy Spirit was very active. Yet, in comparison to the outpouring at Pentecost, the Spirit’s activity could be characterized as mild showers under the old administration. But with the incarnation and the salvific victory of the Messiah accomplished, the Redeemer in His own Person could pour out the full stream of the Holy Spirit upon His body—the church. After the ascension, Jesus received the Holy Spirit from His Father; only then did the Redeemer empower His church. “The essential fact of Pentecost consisted in this, that on that day the Holy Spirit entered for the first time into the organic body of the Church, and individuals came to drink, not each by himself, but all together in organic union.”

The key to the success of the great commission is the power of the Holy Spirit. “Not by might nor by [physical] power, but by My Spirit says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). The conversion of Jewish proselytes from several different nations on three different continents on the day of Pentecost was a sign of the eventual victory of the gospel over all nations. The disciples did not go until they were empowered to do so.

Second, note that the apostles were to go under a specific plan. The great commission was to begin in Jerusalem, then was to go to “all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Ac. 1:8). Paul repeatedly noted that the gospel was to go to the Jews first before going to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:16; cf. Ac. 3:26). It is noteworthy that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the great commission began in Jerusalem and not in Galilee where the command was given. The reason for this was the fact that between the resurrection of Christ and the destruction of Israel there was a period where, in a sense, two covenantal administrations overlapped. The Jews who were brought up under the Mosaic administration were given one generation to repent and embrace the Redeemer. Therefore, the first preaching of the gospel began in the capital of the Jewish nation. The capital was the center of the covenant nation politically and religiously. God chose to demand repentance on the part of the religious and political leaders at the very beginning of the New Covenant era.

There are two important principles that modern churches can learn from this procedure. (1) Gospel preaching should be attended to locally before missionaries are sent off to the far reaches of the earth. If our own nation is allowed to decay spiritually and becomes militantly hostile to the Christian faith, then churches will lose their ability to go to the periphery of civilization. (2) In seeking to disciple whole nations, churches should first focus their attention on the centers of political and religious power and influence. If one wants to render a dangerous snake harmless, then one must strike the head first, not the tail. In a spiritual conquest of a nation, the heart must take first priority. Medieval missionaries often understood this principle and therefore would make great efforts at preaching to the royal court.

Third, the great commission is directed to specific people in the church. It is first given primarily to the apostles who were specifically appointed to set forth authoritative doctrine and lay the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). Indeed, Matthew, Mark and Acts all teach that the great commission is given to the eleven apostles. “Then the eleven disciples went away into

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Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them” (Mt. 28:16). “Afterward He appeared to the eleven… And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature’” (Mk. 16:14-15). “The former account I made…of all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day in which He had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen” (Ac. 1:1-2; cf. 1:18). The apostles were the first to preach the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles and had a special role to play in the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. They set up the first churches and presided over the first church council or general assembly. Jesus even spoke of the apostle Paul as “a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (Ac. 9:15). The apostles were Christ’s personal representatives to an unbelieving world.

The great commission also certainly extended to the unique office of evangelist, who were special assistants to the apostles, had peculiar sign gifts and in some cases (e.g., John Mark, Luke) even wrote books of the Bible. The book of Acts which describes the church living in obedience to the great commission focuses on the apostles and various evangelists (e.g., Stephen, Philip, Silas, Timothy, Barnabas and John Mark). The evangelists of the first generation of believers are not the same as modern missionary preachers in that they performed miracles to authenticate the new gospel message. Today, ministers who are missionaries depend on a completed canon of Scripture and do not perform the sign gifts, which have ceased (1 Cor. 13:8-12).

Throughout history this commission applies to ministers of the gospel who are the successors of the apostles in teaching, administering the sacraments, disciplining the flock and other public ordinances. This point is logically inferred from the fact that: the great commission is to last until the end of the age long after the apostles are deceased; the great size of the earth which at that time had unexplored continents; and, the nature of the task (preaching, administering the sacraments and discipline) which, according to other sections of Scripture, is restricted to ordained officers.

Although it is common among modern interpreters to use the great commission as a proof text for the task of personal evangelism, that is really not the intent of the passage for a number of reasons. The Bible teaches that those who preach the gospel must be officially or formally sent out by the church (i.e. ordained and sent out by a presbytery or church court). Paul said, “How then shall they call on Him in who they have not believed? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how then shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things’” (Rom. 10:14-15). The apostle assumes that those who preach the gospel must be commissioned by God and officially appointed to such a task. Obviously, believers do not need a special commission to witness to their neighbors. But, ministers of the gospel do need to have their calling and gifts recognized by the church before they go out to preach.

In the gospels the apostles were sent out directly by Christ. After the ascension evangelists and pastor-teachers were sent out by the church. “Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen…and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia…” (Ac. 13:1-4). The Holy Spirit chose two ordained teaching elders to become missionaries; the church laid hands on them and sent them out. Obviously, not every Christian is ordained and sent out to preach the gospel.
Every example of gospel *preaching* in the book of Acts is by ordained men. The book of Acts is God’s record of how the great commission was carried out. Therefore, it is predominately a book of action. Apostolic history clearly explains how the apostles and early church understood the Savior’s orders to go. There is the example of the preaching and miracle working of the apostles Peter and Paul. As apostles these men were called, trained, set apart and sent out directly by Christ (cf., Ac. 9:5-6, 15; 1 Cor. 9:1, 17-18; 15:8-9; Gal. 1:12, 15-18). Interestingly, all the examples given in Acts of gospel preaching from people who were not apostles involved ordained men who were evangelists. The first example is that of Stephen (Ac. 6:8-7:53) who was first ordained as a deacon (Ac. 6:6). Stephen was a great miracle worker. He “did great wonders and signs among the people” (Ac. 6:8). This fact sets Stephen apart from most other believers. The gift of teaching and miracle working was restricted by God to only some believers (cf., 1 Co. 12:29). The next example one encounters is Philip (Ac. 8) who was first ordained as a deacon and then became an evangelist. Lenski writes, “We must combine Philip’s preaching with his power to work miracles. These gifts of God made him what has been called an evangelist, a missionary preacher. He was thus more than the ordinary Christians who spread the gospel only as a part of their general Christian calling; yet he and his work remained under the authority of the apostles and of the mother congregation in Jerusalem (v. 14) so that he acted with their approval and as their agent.”

There also is the example of Silas (also called Silvanus) who accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey (cf. Ac. 15:40 ff.). Silas is identified as an elder (Ac. 15:22); an apostle or missionary (1 Th. 2:6) and a prophet (Ac. 15:32). He was actively engaged in an official teaching and preaching ministry (cf., Ac. 15:32; 1 Th. 2:2; 2 Cor. 1:19). Another “fellow worker” (Rom. 16:21) with Paul was Timothy. Timothy was a teacher (2 Tim. 2:2, 15), preacher (2 Tim. 4:2) and minister of the church (1 Tim. 4:6). He was an ordained teacher who was committed with a special trust (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14). Another example is Barnabas. Barnabas was a prophet and teacher (Ac. 13:1) who was commissioned by the church for missionary work and sent out (Ac. 13:2-4). Therefore, he is referred to as an apostle or missionary (Ac. 14:14). Barnabas’ cousin John Mark (cf., Col. 4:10) was also an evangelist. He served with Paul on his first missionary journey; with Barnabas in Cyprus; and also wrote the gospel of Mark.

If one examines the evangelists mentioned in the New Testament it appears that they were chosen from among men who were already ordained either as deacons or elders. Although there was an overlapping of function in the teaching offices (e.g., Paul refers to Timothy as an evangelist and an overseer [2 Tim. 4:5]; Peter the apostle refers to himself as a “fellow elder” [1 Pet. 5:1], etc.), Paul lists evangelist as a distinct office in Ephesians 4:11-12, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” An evangelist is someone who was sent out primarily to preach the gospel in new areas and would then (in conjunction with the apostles and other established churches) work to organize new congregations in those specific areas. Once the new congregations had the oversight of a pastor and elders (cf. Tit. 1:5), the evangelist would move on to other new territories. The evangelist was an ordained servant because his task involved far more than witnessing. It concerned teaching the whole counsel of God or all that Christ had commanded. They were involved in “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry” (Eph. 4:12).

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Fourth, fulfilling the great commission involves the administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s supper). The Bible teaches that only lawfully ordained ministers of the Word are to administer the sacraments. Ministers are shepherds appointed to feed the flock of God (Jer. 3:15; Eph. 4:11; Ac. 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). Part of this feeding involves the administration of the Lord’s supper, which is a means of grace. This truth is supported by Ephesians 4:11-13 which names the offices given for the teaching and perfecting of the saints. “Is not the administration of the sacraments a perfecting of the saints, of the work of the ministry, of the edifying of the body of Christ?” Only some are appointed to such a task. Furthermore, only ministers of the Word are referred to as “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1), “and there is nothing which more properly belongeth to the ecclesiastical stewards than the dispensation of the sacraments.” Gillespie writes, “We have clear and convincing examples in the New Testament, that the sacraments were administered by public ministers, called and appointed thereunto, as baptism by John (John i. 33, ‘He hath sent me to baptize’), and frequently by the apostles, in the story of Acts. The Lord’s supper, administered by Christ himself (whose example in these things imitable we are bidden [to] follow, who also himself commanded *toute poiete*; *this do*); and by the Apostle Paul, Acts xx. 7, 11. So ‘the breaking of bread’ is joined with ‘the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship,’ Acts ii. 4…. So that a lawful minister may in faith administer, and the receivers receive from him in faith, the sacraments, having Scripture warrants for so doing; but there is neither any commission from Christ to such as are no church officers to administer the sacraments; nor can there any clear example be found in the New Testament, of administering either the one sacrament or the other by any person who can be proved not to have been a minister lawfully ordained. Therefore such persons cannot in faith administer, nor others in faith receive from them, either baptism or the Lord’s supper.”

The obvious implication of this teaching is that the church must encourage men to enter the ministry, train them properly and then send them out as church planters and missionaries.

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333 Ibid.
334 Ibid, 2:38. Those who argue that the great commission is directed to every Christian without exception do so with two basic arguments. The first is that the great commission was likely given with five hundred believers present (1 Cor. 15:6) and not simply the eleven. Regarding this argument, the fact that the five hundred may have been present does not necessarily imply that every Christian is expected to baptize, teach and administer discipline. As noted, other clear sections of Scripture limit such activities to ministers of the gospel or pastor-teachers. The five hundred who were present were there as witnesses and accompanied the apostles because church officers are representatives of the whole church. The members of churches are the ones who vote and choose their church leaders (i.e. those who go) and support them with their tithes, prayers and encouragement. Therefore, the ordained officers who go are ambassadors of Christ and are representatives of the whole church. They are not self-appointed or autonomous at all.

The second argument is based on Acts 8:1, 4. “At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles…. Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” It is argued that the word translated preach (*evaggelizomenoi*) in verse 4 does not refer to public proclamation or preaching but to personal evangelism. Regarding this argument, one should note that personal evangelism does not conflict with or contradict the interpretation of the great commission set forth above. Laymen can and should witness to their neighbors (e.g., Jn. 4:28, 29, 39; Ac. 18:26). Indeed, all Christians have a duty to be salt and light to the surrounding culture (Mt. 5:13-16). However, such personal witnessing is not the same as pubic preaching by an ordained minister of the gospel. God does not expect or require a Christian housewife to preach to a crowd in the public square. Further, the only example of evangelistic activity set forth by Luke in the immediate context is that of Philip an ordained evangelist who preached authoritatively. Luke uses the word *kerruso* to describe Philip’s activity, which means a heralding or *public proclamation* of the gospel.
The key to spreading the kingdom of God on earth is not simply to witness to our neighbors as important as that is, but is to start new churches in new areas at home and abroad. This takes a great amount of time, effort and money; but, it must be done. The great commission does not treat the church as a mass of separate individuals, but rather as an organism that works together for certain goals. The propagation of the gospel involves taking people who are alienated from God, who are serving their own lusts and place them in the body of Christ, where they are under the direct authority of the Savior’s under-shepherds.

The great commission teaches us something important about the church. When churches prosper with regard to size and finances, one of their first priorities should be to use the extra funds to train men and send them out to start new churches. Churches need to be aggressive and militant in the expansion of Christianity. The biblical application of the great commission is totally contrary to the common practice in America of churches attempting to become megachurches or little empires of their own. Their focus is not really outward on the spread of the gospel and the planting of new churches, but rather is on building huge facilities and programs that attract people to church for entertainment and sociological purposes. Pastors in such churches are more interested in personal fame than they are in fulfilling the great commission.

To be faithful to the great commission in our own day, churches must return to the missionary zeal of their forefathers. Ministers of the gospel must be sent out into every part of the world. Jesus must be publicly proclaimed as a light to the Gentiles, for He alone brings salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa. 49:6). To do so is to fulfill many great prophecies. “For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 1:11). “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee. For the kingdom is the LORD's: and he is the governor among the nations” (Ps. 22:27-28). “All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name” (Ps. 86:9). “He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth. They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him” (Ps. 72:8-11).

Baptize

Those who have gone are also to baptize. They are to baptize with water in the name of the triune God. Here baptism is placed before teaching because under normal circumstances the vast majority of teaching occurs after baptism. Other portions of Scripture make it clear, in the case of adults (i.e. those who are old enough to be the objects of preaching and reasoning from the Scriptures) that a certain amount of instruction is necessary before a person can be baptized. People must first believe in Jesus Christ (Ac. 16:31), receive the Word of God (Ac. 2:41) and repent of their old beliefs and lifestyle (Ac. 2:38, 41). If they do not, they are not to be baptized. The knowledge needed by a person to be converted to Christ is not great. However, once a person professes the Redeemer and is baptized, the whole Bible is to be learned and applied to life. The pattern of the gospel preached and received, followed by baptism and then comprehensive education in the Word of God is emphasized in the book of Acts: “Then those who gladly received his word [i.e. Peter’s sermon regarding Christ] were baptized; and that day
about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine [or teaching] and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and prayers” (Ac. 2:41-42).

There are many reasons why baptism is necessary and important for discipleship. First, baptism signifies a person’s regeneration by the Holy Spirit. It is by this sovereign act of God that hearts are subdued. Jesus, by His Spirit, takes away the heart of stone that is dead and unresponsive to the truth and replaces it with new spiritual life and love. By this, the unwilling are made willing and are drawn to the pierced feet of the Savior. Christ’s conquest of the earth begins in the hearts of men. This is what separates Jesus’ kingdom and rule from all other kingdoms. Apart from this sovereign work of grace, not one person would believe in the Mediator and repent of their sins.

Second, baptism signifies a believer’s union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Baptism points to the fact that all the saving graces flow from Jesus’ atoning death. When we submit to trinitarian Christian baptism, we are acknowledging the perfection and all-sufficiency of the Savior’s expiatory, propitiatory, redemptive and reconciling sacrifice for sin. Baptism, properly understood, is a sign that we are not saved by own works, but solely by Christ. Thus, baptism signifies a believer’s complete cleansing from all sin—past, present and future. The Mediator’s blood is efficacious; it cannot fail. Thus, baptism (biblically defined) is a great act of faith.

Third, in baptism the new believer publicly acknowledges his submission to Jesus’ ownership and authority. The sincere believer who comes to be baptized has repented of his old religion, philosophy, worldview and behavior. He understands that he was bought at a price; that, therefore, he must glorify God in his mind and his actions (see 1 Cor. 6:20). He has laid down the weapons of his warfare and has submitted to the rule of the King of kings and Lord of lords. He “is proclaiming that he has broken with the world and has been brought into union with the Triune God, to whom he intends to devote his life.” Matthew Henry writes, “Baptism is a sacrament, that is, it is an oath; super sacramentum dicere, is to say upon oath. It is an oath of abjuration, by which we renounce the world and the flesh, as rivals with God for the throne in our hearts; and an oath of allegiance, by which we resign and give up ourselves to God, to be his, our own selves, our whole selves, body, soul and spirit, to be governed by his will, and made happy in his favour; we become his men, so the form of homage in our law runs.” By baptism we are dedicated persons unto the Mediator even unto death. Although baptism has absolutely nothing to do with our salvation before God, a person who is saved will gladly submit to baptism.

Fourth, baptism under normal circumstances is required for membership in the visible church. Discipleship must occur in the body that Jesus Himself has established for that very purpose. Those who believed the apostle’s preaching were baptized and continued under the apostle’s teaching, fellowship, the sacrament of the Lord’s supper and prayer (Ac. 2:41-42). They were added to the church (Ac. 2:41, 47) and numbered with the saints (Ac. 4:4; 6:1, 7). Discipleship must never be divorced from the church government, officers, laws and censures that Christ has instituted for His body. Therefore, it is crucial for every believer to join himself to a Bible-believing church that teaches and practices the whole counsel of God. In our day that would be the strict Reformed or Presbyterian denominations that have not backslidden and departed from the great attainments of the Protestant Reformation.

336 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:447.
The common anti-institutional, anti-church membership spirit of many modern professing Christians in our day is not in accordance with Scripture; but, rather, is the spirit of the world disguised as piety or spirituality. It is an implicit rejection of the Savior’s authority. Although personal Bible reading, study, self-discipline and prayer are necessary for sanctification, they are only a part of a Christian’s life or duty. God is also zealous for public worship, the sacraments, godly oversight, counsel, discipline and Christian fellowship. “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account” (Heb. 13:17).

Fifth, baptism is in (or into) the name of the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism signifies that union with Christ brings believers into a vital relationship with the three persons of the Godhead. When a person believes and is justified, he is adopted into God’s family. God is Father (Abba). Believers are co-heirs with Christ. The Holy Spirit dwells in believers and enables them to more and more put off sinful behavior and to put on righteousness. The church is Christ’s body, His own bride. Dickson writes, “There are three Persons in the Godhead distinct from one another in order of subsistence and operation, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost…. These three are one GOD, undivided in essence and operation, equal and one in authority and power; their name and their exercise of authority is one; for it is said, Baptizing them, not in the names but in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”337

The fact that discipleship begins with baptism teaches us that the church is God’s primary institution for discipleship and spiritual growth. Christ gave the power of public teaching, baptizing, administering the Lord’s supper, governing and disciplining unto lawfully called and ordained church officers. If people are to be baptized, preached unto, taught and disciplined they must become a member of a local church. Parachurch ministries do not have the authority to publicly preach, baptize, administer the Lord’s supper or administer church discipline. Do parachurch organizations do many good things for people in society? Yes, they often do. However, they are not founded upon Scripture, but upon pragmatism. Historically, parachurch groups have weakened the church. Often short term gains are followed by long term problems (e.g., false ecumenicity, heresies, innovations in worship, a lack of respect for the church and church officers, evangelistic gimmicks, pop-psychology, etc.). If the church is not being faithful to her calling, then the solution is repentance and revival; not the setting up of parallel rival institutions. The responsibility to disciple the nations rests with the church and no one else.

Teach

The third thing necessary to disciple the nations is to teach them to observe all things that Christ has commanded. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is described as riding on a white horse, going forth to conquer the earth (19:11-14). How does Christ subdue the nations? Does He employ physical means such as bullets, bombs and missiles? No. “Out of His mouth goes a sharp two-edged sword, that with it He should strike the nations” (19:15). Jesus subdues the nations through the power of His Spirit and through the preaching and teaching of His Word. The sharp sword is the Word of God—the Bible (cf., Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16). We disciple the nations “by teaching them the truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures, and seeking the power of the Holy Spirit to make our teaching effective in those we try to instruct in divine things.”338

337 David Dickson, Matthew, 415-416.
Everything that can be known (this side of heaven) regarding God, Christ, the law, salvation, the church, our estate and so on is revealed in the Bible. “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” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The “all” of Jesus’ teaching includes not just everything that He taught in His public ministry, but also the whole Word of God—the Bible. Jesus taught the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament. He taught a historical, literal view of the first chapters of Genesis (e.g., Mt. 19:4-6). Christ accepted the worldwide flood account that occurred in Noah’s day (cf. Mt. 24:37-39). He also taught the abiding validity of the Old Testament moral law (Mt. 5:17-20). Our Lord told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would come and guide them into all the truth thereby guaranteeing the divine inspiration of the New Testament (Jn. 16:13).

When the church fails to teach all that Christ has commanded, the result is disaster for the church and society. The mainline Protestant denominations abandoned the word of God during the 1920s and 1930s. The effect was apostate, wicked denominations and a culture in decline. The void left by the demise of most of Protestantism has been filled by atheism, secular humanism, the occult, new age mysticism, rank hedonism and so on. With the abandonment of the Bible has come an increasing abandonment of the rule of law. Statism has followed in the wake of modernistic theology.

Fundamentalist and evangelical churches which have adopted dispensationalist doctrines have also failed to teach everything that Christ has commanded. They teach that most of the Old Testament is irrelevant to the Christian and that God has not provided blueprints for the Christian reconstruction of society. By failing to teach “the whole counsel of God,” fundamentalists unwittingly handed over our culture, institutions, courts (and so forth) to the secular humanistic modernists and atheists. By teaching a reductionist version of the great commission, evangelicals have increasingly drifted toward Christian existentialism. The goal is not the Christianization of whole nations, but the building of experiential ghettos. “Get saved and come to church each week and have a wonderful experience.” The modern evangelical church does not lead in the areas of science and culture but rather follows. Churches are often patterned after Hollywood with crass entertainment, jokes and pop-psychology. The salvation of individuals is emphasized but the false gospel of Arminianism is preached (i.e. man has veto power and sovereignty over God). Once a person makes “a decision” for Christ, he is told not to waste his time changing society but to wait for the imminent rapture. The modern evangelical church is impotent. It has lost its saltiness.

Jesus did not teach or endorse a retreatist, pietistic form of Christianity. Christ taught a dynamic, militant, nation-changing, culture transforming doctrine. The church is to go into every nation and preach the gospel. Churches are to be established with church governors and a “whole counsel of God” preaching ministry. As more and more people in society are saved, baptized and taught, who then apply the word of God to their personal lives, family lives, business activities, civil governments, education, economics and so on, society will become transformed. The church is to keep going, baptizing and teaching until every earthly institution and every nation has submitted to Jesus Christ. A nation is not totally discipled until it explicitly acknowledges the kingship and authority of Christ. The goal of the great commission is that each nation would explicitly acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in their constitutions, legislature and courts and that each nation would covenant with Christ.
The great commission not only condemns churches which fail to preach the “whole counsel of God” or “all that Christ has commanded,” but also implicitly rebukes all believers who add to what Christ has commanded. Churches that encourage their members to celebrate extra-biblical holy days (e.g., Christmas, Easter); or, instruct members to follow a church calendar; or tell believers to sing uninspired hymns in public worship are teaching things not commanded by Christ. Likewise, denominations which forbid the consumption of alcoholic beverages in moderation or forbid the eating of meat on certain days are adding man-made regulations to the law of Christ. The apostle Paul has warned us to avoid such legalistic nonsense. He says that man-made regulations do not contribute to our sanctification. “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but, are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:20-23). The great commission restricts the church’s task to teaching all that Christ has commanded—no more and no less. Thus, we are free from the doctrines and commandments of men.

Christ’s Encouragement

After Jesus commanded the apostles to disciple the nations He then gave them encouragement with this promise, “Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). The word lo when used in the New Testament is usually an imitation of the Hebrew style of address that has the meaning of “behold” or “see.” Jesus’ statement could be paraphrased as: “pay attention to this, I even I am with you.” Lenski writes, “The exclamation ‘lo’ is to rivet our fullest attention on the great promise with which Jesus closes. [Ego] is decidedly emphatic, ‘I myself.’” Christ’s promise of His continual presence is given emphasis and therefore should not be treated as a mere afterthought on the part of our Savior.

When Israel was about to engage on their God-given mission of conquest over the pagan nations within the promised land, Joshua spoke of God’s special presence: “Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh.1:9). Israel went forth to conquer the seven heathen nations with the sword. The apostles, their associates and their successors throughout history go forth to conquer by the Word and Spirit. Both are dependent upon God’s special presence for courage, success and ultimate victory. Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase” (1 Cor. 3:8). Jesus told the apostles that His leaving the earth (at the ascension) was to their advantage (Jn. 16:7-8; Ac. 1:8). Christ’s spiritual presence (the baptism of the Holy Spirit) was more important to the task of the great commission than even His bodily presence. After Christ ascended and was seated at the right hand of Power, He poured out the Holy Spirit upon the church. This baptism empowered and emboldened the apostles and evangelists in the task of discipling the nations. The same men who fled and cowered in fear at the arrest and prosecution of Jesus are seen after Pentecost preaching with amazing boldness, courage and fervency, even under extremely dangerous circumstances. Should we not also go forth with courage and

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boldness? We should always keep in mind that the resurrected, all-powerful Lord of glory is our ever present companion and ally. Jesus who has “eyes like a flame of fire” (Rev. 1:14) is walking in the midst of the lampstands (Rev. 2:1): “so the Lord patrols the ground, is ever on the spot when He is needed; His [spiritual] presence is not localized, but co-extensive with the Church.” Gentry writes, “Believers are adequately empowered for the task of world evangelism and the Christian culture transforming labor that follows evangelism’s trail. The Christian has the abiding presence of the resurrected Lord of glory through the spiritual operation of the indwelling Holy Spirit, Whom Christ says grants ‘power from on high’ (Luke 24:49). The Christian should not read the newspapers and fear the encroachment of the various branches of secular humanism in history, for secular humanism in all of its manifestations is but an idol for destruction.”

Jesus said, “I am with you always” or literally in Greek, “I am with you all the days.” Jesus is leaving not a single day without certainty of His help. Christ is not just with His people every moment of every day but also to the end of “the age.” The Lord of glory will be with the church to the end of the world. Jesus remains with the church until the task that He has commanded is completed. This proves that the great commission applies to the church until the second coming of Christ. Our Lord’s promise is not only the ultimate encouragement, but is also our guarantee of victory. Christians should never be pessimistic regarding the success of the gospel in the world.

If anyone had a reason to be pessimistic, would it have not been the first disciples? They were persecuted, stoned, tortured, imprisoned, slain by the sword, beheaded, fed to the lions, crucified, roasted alive, beaten with rods and hated by all men. A number of fathers and mothers had to watch as their children were slain knowing their demise would follow. Yet, the early church remained active, bold, and militant by preaching Christ crucified and establishing churches throughout the empire. They did not build tennis and basketball courts, retreat, and then wait for the rapture. Rather, they conquered the Roman empire with the sword of the Spirit. “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Christians are not to look to the New York Times or CNN for hope and encouragement, but to Christ alone. Believers who preach pessimistic defeatism for the church simply are showing a lack of faith in Christ’s emphatic promise. They are really no different than the spies who told Moses, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we…. The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours it inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature” (Nu. 13:31-32). Are we able to spiritually conquer the whole world? No, not in and of ourselves (Lu. 5:4-11; Jn. 15:5); but, Christ who is all powerful and who has all authority in heaven and earth is able. Jesus is at the head of His army. The church rides on white horses behind the King (Rev. 19:14).

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Chapter 15: The Ascension of Christ

So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God (Mk. 16:19).

And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen (Lk. 24:50-53).

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, “Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.” Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey (Ac. 1:9-12).

After a number of post-resurrection appearances where Jesus thoroughly establishes the reality of His bodily resurrection and instructs the apostles regarding their mission, our Lord is now ready to return to heaven. Therefore, He leads the apostles out of Jerusalem to a section on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives which belonged to Bethany (Lk. 24:50; Ac. 1:12). “It is noteworthy that both the agony and the ascension took place on the Mount of Olives; the places are located some distance apart but are still on the same ridge. Our humiliations and exaltations often lie close together. Jesus and the disciples had often walked over this piece of road during these past days—think of how they were walking it now!”\(^{342}\)

In this familiar place on a Sunday, forty days\(^ {343}\) after the resurrection (Ac. 1:3) in broad daylight, the eleven apostles will personally witness Christ’s physical-bodily ascent into heaven. Although they did not personally witness the resurrection but only the risen Lord after the event, the ascension occurs right before their eyes. This amazing event is the logical and spiritual outcome of the resurrection. “T]he resurrection and ascension of Jesus represent one continuous movement and together constitute his exaltation.”\(^{344}\)

Interestingly, as important as the ascension is, it is only briefly mentioned by Mark and receives only seven verses by Luke (three in the gospel and four in Acts). This shows us that the great focus of the gospels and gospel preaching was on the resurrection and that the ascension is both assumed and proved by the resurrection. Further, Matthew, Luke and John all anticipate this glorious event. Luke and Matthew both refer to Jesus being seated at God’s right hand at the trial before the Sanhedrin (Mt. 26:64; Lk. 22:69). In John’s gospel the resurrected Lord warns Mary not to touch Him because He has not yet ascended (20:17a) and then says, “I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God” (20:17b).

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\(^{343}\) “The number forty has an illustrious history: the flood lasted forty days (Gen. 7:17); Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days (Exod. 24:18; 34:28); Israel wandered for forty years (Exod. 16:35), as Elijah did for forty days (1 Kgs. 19:8); Ezra's dictation to restore the destroyed Scriptures took forty days (Ezra 14:23, 36, 42-45); Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness (Luke 4:2)” (John Nolland, Luke 18:35-24:53, 1225).

As we examine the ascension narratives there are a number of important areas to consider. Note the gracious manner in which Jesus departed from His apostles. He did so with a blessing. “And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them” (Lk. 24:50). The raising of the hands to give a blessing is deeply rooted in Old Testament practice. After Aaron the high priest made an offering for the sins of the people he “lifted his hand toward the people, blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and peace offerings” (Lev. 9:22). After this great benediction (see Num. 6:24-27) Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting (Lev. 9:23). All this typified Christ who after His perfect sacrifice for sins, blessed the apostles and then ascended into heaven to be hidden from human sight while making intercession for His people. He went into heaven to keep applying the blessings of salvation that He had earned on the cross. In the Old Covenant administration, public blessings upon God’s people were only the prerogative of prophets, priests or kings. “He blessed as one having authority, commanded the blessing he had purchased; he blessed them as Jacob blessed his sons. The apostles were now as representatives of the twelve tribes, so that in blessing them he blessed all his spiritual Israel, and put his Father’s name upon them. He blessed them as Jacob blessed his sons, and Moses the tribes, at parting, to show that, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.”

This blessing assured the apostles that our Lord was smiling upon them because they were forgiven of their sins and clothed with the righteousness of Christ. It also strengthened their faith in the Savior’s continued blessing upon their gospel labors. The very essence of the gospel is that Jesus came into the world to bless sinners by removing the curse of the law and God’s wrath against sin. To those who embrace the gospel, the Mediator is not a condemning judge, but a loving friend, faithful high priest and intercessor. Because of the Mediator’s great work, believers do not live in continual fear and dread of God’s fiery indignation against rebellion; but, rather, look to God as a loving Father who has adopted them into His family. The Redeemer’s ministry to the apostles was one of continual blessings. Now that the Lord was departing these blessings would continue to flow through Christ’s Spirit.

The Roman Catholic tradition of going to Mary as an intercessor because she is supposedly more merciful, approachable and loving than Jesus is completely refuted by this and many other passages of Scripture. There is no one who is more loving, compassionate, merciful, gracious, patient and tender than our Lord Jesus Christ. To compare the love of Mary and the saints to the love of the Savior is to compare a speck of dust to the whole universe and more. “To talk of the virgin Mary as being more compassionate than Christ is proof of miserable ignorance. To flee to the saints for comfort, when we may flee to Christ, is an act of mingled stupidity and blasphemy, and a robbery of Christ’s crown. Gracious was our Lord Jesus while He lived among His weak disciples,—gracious in the very season of His agony on the cross,—gracious when He rose again and gathered His sheep around Him,—gracious in the manner of His departure from this world. It was a departure in the very act of blessing!” At God’s right hand the Savior continues to bless. We have every reason not only to trust in the redemptive acts of Jesus, but also His person. His compassion toward sinners is beyond our finite human comprehension.

Interestingly, passages which speak of Jesus’ ascension speak of it as a great blessing to believers in two different ways. First, the Savior by His glorious victory has subdued all His and our enemies. The psalmist writes, “You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive” (Ps. 68:18). “Brethren, we were captives once—captives to tyrants, who wrought us woe, and

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345 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 5:846.
would soon have wrought us death. We were captives to sin, captives to Satan, and therefore captives under spiritual death. We were captives under divers lusts and imaginations of our own hearts: captives to error, captives to deceit. But the Lord Jesus Christ has led captivity captive. There is our comfort.\footnote{Charles H. Spurgeon, “Our Lord’s Triumphant Ascension,” 36:245.} Do not forget that, apart from Christ and His glorious victory, all of us would still be under the power of death, the dominion of the devil, the guilt of sin and slavery to its power. Our lives were thoroughly characterized by bondage. But all these things have been vanquished by the Mediator. He crushed the head of the serpent, removed the sting of death and took away the dominion of sin. His ascension into heaven into the throne room of God before multitudes of adoring angels and the souls of departed saints was the victory ride of the conqueror—the King over all. As Paul says, “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15).

In our day when secular humanists, atheists, sodomites, feminists, papists and Mohammedans all seem to have the ascendancy and most churches act more interested in entertainment and gimmicks than the truth, we must keep the eye of our faith focused on Christ’s great victory. Do not lose heart and be dismayed at the great rise of infidelity before us, for Jesus has already achieved the victory. By His bloody death, resurrection and ascension to the very throne of God He has secured the victory of the gospel, the victory of the faith once delivered to the saints and the victory of His church. “And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22).

Remember, the Savior departed in the midst of a blessing. He did not withdraw in anger or indifference, but in a deep love for His church. He departed from His beloved disciples only because it was for their own good and ours. He departed to rule for our benefit. He departed to bestow gifts and blessings upon us. He departed to send His Spirit into the church to conquer our hearts of stone and give us hearts of love toward Him. What a magnificent blessing! Is there any greater blessing than being a temple of the Holy Spirit, having God as our Father and Jesus as our beloved Savior and friend? He blessed and parted and thus guaranteed that His blessing would become a wonderful reality for every one of us.

Second, the ascended Savior bestows gifts upon His people. Paul says, “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore, He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men’” (Eph. 4:7-8). The enthroned divine-human Mediator is sovereign in the distribution of His gifts. He poured the Spirit into His church and is personally responsible for our regeneration and baptism in the Holy Spirit. He also distributes all the various gifts to each and every believer. The Bible speaks of the Redeemer as ascending like a conqueror who is rich in spoils and given all power and authority by His victory. The original Hebrew says that the Messiah has “received gifts for men” (Ps. 68:18) while Paul’s Greek says “our Lord gave gifts to men” (Eph. 4:8). While the Psalm emphasizes the Savior’s reward for His redemptive obedience, Paul, speaking by the Spirit, emphasizes that Christ received his authority and gifts in order to give them to His church. Our Lord gave His own life for us and now He applies that salvation to us. He gave Himself in His passion and He continues to give as the ascended Priest-King. The salvific merit achieved by His redemptive work was not for Himself, but rather for us. With it He continues to bless the elect throughout history. The Messiah is enriched by His triumphant work on Golgotha, and now the resurrected living Redeemer distributes the reward of His humiliation. “By his obedience and sufferings he conquered the prince of this world, he redeemed his people, and obtained the right to bestow upon them all needed good. He is exalted to give the Holy Ghost, and all his gifts and graces, to
grant repentance and remission of sins.”

“He receives the gift, but he only acts as the conduit-pipe, through which the grace of God flows to us. It pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell; and of his fullness have all we received.”

This blessing of Christ, which is founded upon His redemptive work and bestowed throughout history from God’s right hand, completely unites our Lord’s atoning death with the application of that sacrifice by Jesus toward His own people. This teaching completely obliterates all Arminian concepts of the Savior’s sacrifice, which they argue is accomplished for all but only applied to some. What Christ earned by His sinless life and bloody death was not for Himself but for His sheep, for those given to Him by the Father (Jn. 10:29; 19:6ff). Therefore, to argue that Christ died for all men without exception, but only sovereignly bestows the gift of regeneration, Spirit baptism and repentance to some, is to limit Jesus’ authority and replace it with the authority of sovereign, autonomous man. The Savior conquers by the Holy Spirit because He has the power and authority to change hearts and make the unwilling—willing.

“When Christ ascended he was not returning to heaven with empty hands. On the contrary, as a result of accomplished mediatorial work he returned in triumph to heaven, in the full possession of salvation for his people. These people were, so to speak, in his triumphant procession. They were captives in his train, chained as it were, to his chariot…. He received these captives in order to give them to the kingdom, for kingdom work.”

Note the nature of Jesus’ ascension. In Luke it says, “…that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven” (24:51). Acts says, “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and in a cloud received Him out of their sight” (1:9). There are a number of things that merit our attention regarding these verses.

First, the ascension is a parting of the Mediator from His disciples. “The ascension differs radically from Jesus vanishing from the sight of the disciples at Emmaus (31) and similar happenings. There is an air of finality about it. It is the decisive close of one chapter and the beginning of another. It is the consummation of Christ’s earthly work; the indication to his followers that his mission is accomplished, his work among them comes to a decisive end. They can expect to see him in the old way no more.”

During the forty days Jesus would appear and then disappear. There were many such appearances. Our Lord’s physical appearances would now cease. Aside from a few rare visions where Christ makes His spiritual presence known, or communicates through a vision, there are no more physical appearances of the Redeemer after the ascension. The rather common assertion by Charismatic leaders that Jesus appeared in person and spoke with them are either gross delusions or outright lies.

Second, the passive construction of the verb eperthe, “He was taken up,” indicates that God the Father took Jesus back into heaven. In his gospel Luke uses the verb anephereto “was carried” which is also passive. In Acts 1:2, 11 and 1 Timothy 3:6 the verb anelemphe is used to indicate that our Lord was “received up” by the Father. God the Father sent His only begotten Son into the world (Jn. 3:16) and then took Him back into heaven and received Him when His mission was accomplished. Both the planning and carrying out of redemption is an act of the triune God.

352 In Ac. 9:3 Saul sees a light from heaven and hears a voice. In 2 Cor. 12:2-4 Paul speaks about being caught up to the third heaven. In Revelation, John has visions of the glorified Christ (1:12-17).
Third, both Luke and especially Acts emphasize the literal, physical nature of the ascension. In the gospel Jesus ascends in the midst of blessing the disciples. In Acts the focus is on the apostles as witnesses of this event. Our Lord was taken up “while they watched” (1:9), or literally “as they were looking.” “The present participle accents the fact that they were looking directly at Jesus.”

They “looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up” (1:10). Their whole attention was on the glorified Savior. Their eyes were focused on Him “with so much care and earnestness of mind that they could not be deceived. It is probable that he did not fly swiftly up, but moved upwards gently, for the further satisfaction of his disciples.”

It is important that we do not spiritualize or allegorize this great event. The true, real humanity of Jesus with which He achieved our redemption is visibly, literally taken into heaven. The incarnation was genuine. The resurrection was real. The coming into the world to save sinners involved taking upon Himself a true human nature and this incarnation has permanent consequences. The glorified human nature of Christ with its real flesh, bones, blood and soul is exalted and seated with God forever. And this same Jesus will return physically to judge the world.

The account in Acts says “He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight” (Ac. 1:9). This means that the disciples could see Jesus ascend until He entered a cloud. This detail helps us understand the ascension. The Savior, in His real glorified physical body, literally ascended in the sky before His disciples. Heaven, however, or what Paul calls the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:2 (the first heaven is the atmosphere where clouds float about; the second heaven is outside the atmosphere and contains the stars) is not really a part of this universe, but is a completely different realm, a spiritual realm where God and the angels have their abode. Therefore, it is likely that when Jesus entered the cloud, He was immediately transported to the throne room of God. With the ascension it was important to convey the fact that Christ was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah’s ascent to God (Dan. 7:13; Ps. 68:18); and, that the Redeemer went into the very presence of God for us.

The sight of Jesus entering a cloud would remind the apostles of the many times in Scripture where a cloud is associated with God’s special presence. There was a thick cloud that settled over the tabernacle (Ex. 19:16; 40:34; 2 Chron. 5:13-14; 6:1) and the dark thundercloud that came to rest on Sinai (Ex. 19:16). There was also the bright cloud of Shekinah glory that overshadowed the Savior at His transfiguration (Mt. 17:5; Lk. 9:34). The cloud reminded the apostles that Christ was entering back into God’s special presence. In fact, He would sit as King on Jehovah’s holy throne. “Jesus as the ascended Lord is enveloped by the shekinah cloud, the visible manifestation of God’s presence, glory, and approval.”

The cloud made our Lord’s transit from earth to heaven more distinctly visible and was an important theological statement about Christ. In these circumstances it is understandable that the disciples began worshipping the Savior as they watched this glorious sight.

The literal, physical nature of the ascension is important because the ascension teaches us about the nature of the second coming of Christ. “And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven’” (Ac. 1:10-11).

The two men dressed in white are angels of God sent to make an important announcement. These are perhaps the same two angels who appeared in white dazzling raiment who announced our Lord’s resurrection (Mt. 28:2-7; Lk. 24:4-7; Mk. 16:5-7; Jn. 20:12-13). The angels connect the glory of the ascension with the glory of the second coming. The same Christ who literally ascended will also literally descend at the second advent to judge the whole world. The second coming is connected to the resurrection and ascension because it is part of the Mediator’s vindication and reward for His redemptive obedience.

The angels tell the apostles that Jesus “will so come in like manner” as they saw Him go into heaven. The expression “in like manner” (hon tropon) “never indicates mere certainty or vague resemblance; but whenever it occurs in the New Testament, denotes identity of mode or manner” (cf. Mt. 23:37; Lk. 13:34; Ac. 7:28; 2 Tim. 3:8). Therefore, since the Savior departed in a real physical body; He shall return in a real physical body. He ascended visibly, He shall return or descend visibly. He went up into heaven. He shall return from heaven. When He returns, we will meet Christ in the clouds up in the air and return with Him (1 Th. 4:17).

Those who reject the literal bodily, physical nature of the ascension (such as full preterists, pantelists and modernists) can only do so by twisting the clear meaning of Scripture. The ascension, however, is placed alongside the Savior’s passion, resurrection and second coming as a fundamental doctrine of the gospel. To reject its literal nature is to become a heretic. “A day will come when Jesus shall return from heaven, in like manner as He went. He will not always abide within the holy of holies. He will come forth, like the Jewish high priest, to bless the people, to gather His saints together, and to restore all things. (Lev. ix. 23, Acts iii 21). For that day let us wait, and long, and pray. Christ dying on the cross for sinners,—Christ living in heaven to intercede,—Christ coming again in glory, are three great objects which ought to stand out prominently before the eyes of every true Christian.”

The ascension also teaches us that Jesus, according to His human nature, lives in heaven and rules as King in this age. The Redeemer has gone into heaven as our forerunner, as the captain of our salvation (Heb. 2:10). By His redemptive obedience, He achieved salvation for us and thus goes before us to prepare our heavenly home (Jn. 14:2-3). When our Lord ascended His

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357 Pantelism or full preterism is the idea that the second coming of Christ and everything associated with that coming in Scripture (the resurrection of the dead; the rapture; the universal judgment; and, the beginning of the final state) already took place in A. D. 70 when Jesus came in judgment upon Jerusalem. This position which is dangerous and heretical is refuted by the following considerations. (1) Our Lord explicitly taught that at the final judgment God will cast the damned, both body and soul into hell (read Mt. 10:28; Jn. 5:28-29; Rev. 20:13). This obviously did not occur in A. D. 70. (2) Jesus taught that non-Jewish pagans who had been dead for thousands of years would be involved in the day of judgment (see Mt. 10:15; 11:23-24, 42). Christ taught that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon, the people of ancient Nineveh and the queen who lived in Solomon’s day will all be judged together on the same day. This certainly did not occur in A. D. 70. (3) The final judgment will be universal (i.e. it will involve all men who ever lived including people alive now) and will be very public (Mt. 6:3-4; 6:6; 10:26; 12:36; 25:34, 41; Rom. 2:16). This contradicts the full preterist idea of a secret judgment. (4) Pantelism totally contradicts Rev. 20 which teaches that the final judgment is coterminous with Satan’s final defeat, judgment and casting into the lake of fire. Further, the symbolism of 1,000 years which indicates a very long period of time obviously could not be used to describe the forty year period between the Savior’s resurrection and A. D. 70. (5) The Bible teaches a real resurrection of people’s dead bodies. The fact that graveyards are full of dead people proves that the second coming has not occurred yet. 6) Acts 1:9-11 proves that the second coming involves a literal, bodily, physical coming and not a spiritual or metaphorical coming in judgment which is described in Matthew 24. Full preterism is a rejection of the clear teaching of Scripture and every church creed which discusses the second coming for the past 2000 years whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

triumph over the world became ours. Therefore, God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

Consequently, as Christians, we must have a particular mindset. After Paul discusses the destruction of the wicked “who set their mind on earthly things,” he writes, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior” (Phil. 3:20). Since our King is in heaven, we are not to be preoccupied with the things of this world as though this world and its present system is all there is. “Paul tells the Philippians that they belong to a heavenly commonwealth, that is, their state and constitutive government is in heaven, and as citizens they are to reflect its life.”

Christ’s present kingship in heaven is to determine our present existence as believers. This heavenly commonwealth with Jesus as supreme ruler is a present reality. We are heavenly citizens right now. This reality does mean that we should treat life as a great escape from this realm, but that everything in this life must be lived in terms of our allegiance to the heavenly King.

It is true that the earth belongs to Christ. And a time is coming in history when the angels will proclaim, “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ” (Rev. 11:15). But, in the meantime, this world lies in wickedness and no subject of Jesus can live in holiness without focusing on our union with the Savior in heaven; or without the blessed hope that our Lord will change our vile bodies and make them like His glorious body.

Further, the fact that our citizenship is with the Mediator in heaven teaches us that our allegiance to the Redeemer must always take the first place over our own nation and earthly citizenship. The vast majority of professing Christians have bought into the idea formulated primarily during the so-called enlightenment that the state must remain secular and neutral respecting all religions; that all religions must be treated exactly the same under the law; that no Christian church membership or creedal considerations whatsoever should be required to hold office, serve on juries, vote in elections or serve as judges. In other words, Christ’s universal sovereignty—His “all authority in heaven and on earth”—does not apply to civil governments, nation states, courts or the other centers of power in society. The idea behind the acceptance of this enlightenment rationalism is that the only way to avoid religious conflict in a nation or among nations is to leave religion in the church building or prayer closet, but make all the political and judicial institutions in society secular. Essentially, Christians in America have agreed to give secular humanism a monopoly on civil government and even the various educational systems. Most churches and professing Christians in the United States have explicitly repudiated the lordship of Christ as defined by Scripture and have instead adopted a surrender or at best an attempted political ceasefire with the secular humanists. In the process, the United States Constitution has been elevated above the word of God on political, judicial and educational areas of life.

The consequences of this abandonment of the lordship of Christ over the constitution and the state were not immediately apparent in that: a) the Christian worldview and ethic dominated the United States in its early days; and b) most states in the first generation of America had their own Christian and trinitarian requirement to hold office. Therefore, Christians were content with a position of supposed neutrality.

But the fact that Jesus Christ was not explicitly acknowledged as Lord over the nation and its laws in the original constitution has borne poison fruit. The secular humanistic worldview is now so hostile to Christian faith and ethics that no political cease fires are possible. Science is completely dominated by Darwinism. Ethics now are purely arbitrary, situational and

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positivistic. Many things that were unthinkable only a few generations ago are now legal and even popular: abortion on demand, homosexual rights and even sodomite civil unions, legalization of adultery and sodomy, no-fault divorce, infanticide, killing the handicapped, experimentation on fetuses, etc. A small handful of Christians have begun to understand that compromise with secular humanists is impossible; that cease fires are a thing of the past; that if things continue Christians will be persecuted by the state. But, tragically, the vast majority of evangelicals who are attempting to be a salt and light against such ethical rot and darkness still believe the solution is a return to a more strict interpretation of the constitution. The result is that reforms are attempted without a direct appeal to the authority of Christ and the Bible and all attempts at ethical reform are based on “old-fashioned family values” or a vague notion of “natural law.” Tragically, most believers are attempting to win this battle without Christ; with both hands tied behind their backs. Is it any wonder that professing Christians keep losing ground in the so-called “culture wars”?!

The only way that Christians are going to make long-term progress in the goal of a Christian America or a nation discipled for Christ is to do the following. First, the Lordship of Jesus as defined by Scripture must be explicitly acknowledged by professing Christians. This means an abandonment of the idea of neutrality in politics, judicial matters, education, and so on. There is no neutrality. The sooner believers realize this and stop attempting to make peace with secular humanists, the better. The various politically active groups on the secular left (homosexuals, feminists, abortionists, socialists, evolutionists) have understood for decades that strict Bible believing, consistent Christians are their greatest enemies. Professing Christians must set aside their worship of the American constitution. Constitutional democracy as practiced in modern America simply means that our laws will reflect not God’s infallible Word, but rather our degenerate culture. Man, not God, has become the source of law.

Second, believers must not rest until we have a Christian amendment to the constitution. In other words, there must be a change from right wing enlightenment thinking to an explicit acknowledgment of Christ as Lord over our nation. Given the present state of our nation, this obviously is a long term goal. Older Reformed theologians referred to this as the establishment principle. Our nation must in it constitution and laws recognize and establish biblical, Protestant, trinitarian, Reformed Christianity over this whole nation. This will indeed take a good deal of time. But, without long-term biblical goals, nothing will be accomplished except short term cease fires and compromises. We are not speaking of revolution, violence or coercion, but rather a slow, steady social transformation as professing Christians learn to apply the Word of God beyond the church to every area of life. If western civilization is to be rescued from the darkness of secular humanism and Darwinism, then churches must repent of their severe restriction of Christ’s authority and nations must become the Mediator’s bondservants. Churches must not rest until the U. S. constitution is restructured so that Christ is recognized as Lord and His law word is the final standard of all court appeals, not the whim of a few secular humanists on the Supreme Court.

Christians and churches today stand at the crossroads. They need to decide if they are going to keep supporting the secular humanism that rules our nation or attempt to make our nation explicitly Christian. The words of Elijah are appropriate for our current situation: “And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, ‘How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him’” (1 Ki. 18:21). The people in America have been so well trained in pluralism, modern democracy and the idea that the crown rights of King Jesus only apply to the heart, or prayer closet or spiritual realm, that they automatically side with
the humanists against the Bible in this debate. They speak of rule according to the Bible and Jesus Christ as dangerous, as a great loss of freedom; as a return to the dark ages; as a loss of liberty of conscience. But, there is no neutrality and rule under secular humanism will make the Middle Ages look like a picnic. Just consider the ten million killed in concentration camps under Hitler; or, the over thirty million murdered by Stalin; or, the forty plus million murdered by abortion.

Concerns about Christ’s Lordship over the state must of course always follow our own personal dedication to Jesus as Lord and our focus on personal obedience. As Paul says in Colossians 3:1-3, “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Paul wants us to focus our hearts on our union with Christ and focus on heaven so that we take our minds off the evil things and lusts of this world. As we live and function in this world, our thinking regarding our position in Christ in heaven must direct our concerns during this present evil age. “We must make heaven our scope and aim, seek the favour of God above, keep our communion with the upper world by faith, and hope, and holy love, and make it our constant care and business to secure our title to and qualifications for the heavenly bliss.”

Our union with the Savior in His death, resurrection and ascension must change our whole manner of thinking and living. Although we live in a fallen world and must struggle with the flesh and the temptations of this world we must never forget that we are already part of the redeemed order. “May we take up our celestial burgess-rights, exercise our privileges and avocations as heavenly citizens, and live as though we are alive from the dead, who are raised up together and made partakers of his resurrection life.”

Finally, the apostles’ reaction to the ascension was one of worship, joy, and obedience. “And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen” (Lk. 24:52-53). There are a number of reasons why the disciples reacted the way they did.

First, the apostles were full of joy because they were relieved of all the doubts and fears by this amazing display of our Lord’s glory. They now fully understood the meaning and purpose of the Mediator’s humiliation. They now could see that the cross, the suffering, the sacrificial death led to exaltation beyond what they ever had imagined. They had been seeking an earthly king, but now they worshipped a King over kings who would sit on God’s throne in heaven. They were expecting an earthly Jewish kingdom and they could now see a universal, cosmic kingdom. Previously, they had seen Jesus as a Master, Prophet and Messiah and now they could see Him as the King of glory and Judge of the world. Their joy could not be contained, so they bowed before the Savior as the object of religious worship. Once again, the apostles acknowledge the fact that Jesus is God and must be worshipped, served and obeyed as God. “This is the first formal act of adoration [in Luke] which we ever read of the disciples paying to our Lord. Their knowledge of His Messiahship and divinity was now clear and distinct.”

It is noteworthy that at His birth the Redeemer was honored by the angels and shepherds (Lk. 2:8-20), while at His departure He is worshipped by the chief shepherds of the church. From beginning to the end, the gospels portray Christ as God of very God whom we must adore.

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This narrative teaches us that the more we learn about Christ and trust Him, the greater our joy in life will be. A lack of knowledge and faith is the reason that many believers are lacking joy and have so little peace. The key to joy in the heart and peace in the life is to get to know Jesus Christ. When the Redeemer is truly known and trusted, a person’s life will be characterized by joy. We rejoice in the Mediator’s redemptive accomplishments. We praise God for His wonderful victory that, by grace, is our victory also. “Though still in the midst of their enemies, they rejoiced; though deprived of the personal presence of their Lord, they rejoiced; though they knew that in the world they would have much tribulation, they rejoiced. And why? Because they believed the promises. They knew that Jesus was gone to the Father to make intercession for them, and that He would return again to make them blessed.”

When people turn the Christian faith into a habitual attitude of gloom and a sad, serious countenance, where joy and happiness are seen as a lack of piety and Christian maturity, they reveal a perverted understanding of sanctification. Sin leads to sorrow and depression; but, faith and obedience lead to joy. We, of course, do not rejoice in ourselves and pat ourselves on the back, but rejoice in the amazing person and work of Jesus Christ.

Second, the disciples were full of joy because they understood that His physical absence was only temporary and that His victorious ascension guaranteed the blessing of being reunited with their Savior. This was certainly part of John’s thinking for in almost the last verse of the Bible he says, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 20:20). When the Redeemer comes again in the same manner as He departed (Ac. 1:12), He will say to every Christian, “Come you blessed of My Father” (Mt. 25:34). “Enter into the joy of your lord” (Mt. 25:21).

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