

*Does Prayer Change Things?*

*The Crucial Questions Series*

By R. C. Sproul

*Who Is Jesus?*

*Can I Trust the Bible?*

*Can I Know God's Will?*

*Does Prayer Change Things?*

*How Should I Live in This World?*

# *Does Prayer Change Things?*

R. C. Sproul



*Reformation Trust*

PUBLISHING

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A DIVISION OF LIGONIER MINISTRIES · ORLANDO, FLORIDA

*Does Prayer Change Things?*

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## *Chapter One*



# THE PLACE OF PRAYER

What is the goal of the Christian life? It is godliness born of obedience to Christ. Obedience unlocks the riches of the Christian experience. Prayer prompts and nurtures obedience, putting the heart into the proper “frame of mind” to desire obedience.

Of course, knowledge is also important because without it we cannot know what God requires. However, knowledge and truth remain abstract unless we commune with God in prayer. The Holy Spirit teaches, inspires, and illumines

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God's Word to us. He mediates the Word of God and assists us in responding to the Father in prayer.

Simply put, prayer has a vital place in the life of the Christian. One might pray and not be a Christian, but one cannot be a Christian and not pray. Romans 8:15 tells us that the spiritual adoption that has made us sons of God causes us to cry out in verbal expressions: "Abba! Father!" Prayer is to the Christian what breath is to life, yet no duty of the Christian is so neglected.

Prayer, at least private prayer, is difficult to do out of a false motive. One can preach out of a false motive, as do the false prophets. One can be involved in Christian activities out of false motives. Many of the externals of religion can be done from false motives. However, it is highly unlikely that anyone would commune with God out of some improper motive.

We are invited, even commanded, to pray. Prayer is both a privilege and a duty, and any duty can become laborious. Prayer, like any means of growth for the Christian, requires work. In a sense, prayer is unnatural to us. Though we were created for fellowship and communion with God, the effects of the fall have left most of us lazy and indifferent toward something as important as prayer. Rebirth



quickness a new desire for communion with God, but sin resists the Spirit.

We can take comfort from the fact that God knows our hearts and hears our unspoken petitions as well as the words that emanate from our lips. Whenever we are unable to express the deep feelings and emotions of our souls or when we are completely unclear about what we ought to be praying, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. Romans 8:26–27 says: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” When we don’t know how to pray or what to pray for in a given situation, the Holy Spirit assists us. There is reason to believe from the text that if we pray incorrectly, the Holy Spirit corrects the errors in our prayers before He takes them before the Father, for verse 27 tells us that He “intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Prayer is the secret of holiness—if holiness, indeed, has anything secretive about it. If we examine the lives of the great saints of the church, we find that they were great

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people of prayer. John Wesley once remarked that he didn't think much of ministers who didn't spend at least four hours per day in prayer. Luther said that he prayed regularly for an hour every day except when he experienced a particularly busy day. Then he prayed for two hours.

The neglect of prayer is a major cause of stagnation in the Christian life. Consider the example of Peter in Luke 22:39–62. Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray, as was His custom, and told His disciples, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” The disciples fell asleep instead. The next thing Peter did was try to take on the Roman army with a sword; then he denied Christ. Peter did not pray, and as a result he fell into temptation. What is true of Peter is true of all of us: we fall in private before we ever fall in public.

Is there a right and wrong time for prayer? Isaiah 50:4 talks about the morning as the time when God gives the desire to pray on a daily basis. But other passages give times of prayer during all hours of the day. No part of the day is set apart as more sanctified than another. Jesus prayed in the morning, during the day, and sometimes all night long. There is evidence that He had a time set aside for prayer; however, considering the relationship Jesus had with the Father, we know that communion between them never stopped.

## The Place of Prayer

First Thessalonians 5:17 commands us to pray without ceasing. This means that we are to be in a continual state of communion with our Father.

Prayer, then, is central and crucial in the life of the Christian. Let us look further into this vital but neglected and misunderstood Christian discipline.



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## *Chapter One*



# THE MEANING OF GOD'S WILL

Lost in Wonderland, Alice came to a fork in the road. Icy panic stung her as she stood frozen by indecision. She lifted her eyes toward heaven, looking for guidance. Her eyes did not find God, only the Cheshire cat leering at her from his perch in the tree above.

“Which way should I go?” Alice blurted.

“That depends,” said the cat, fixing a sardonic smile on the confused girl.

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“On what?” Alice managed to reply.

“It depends on your destination. Where are you going?” the cat asked.

“I don’t know,” Alice stammered.

“Then,” said the cat, his grin spreading wider, “it doesn’t matter which way you go.”

The destination matters to the Christian. We are a pilgrim people. Though we do not wander in a wilderness in route to the Promised Land, we seek a better country, an eternal city whose builder and maker is God. Someday He will take us home to His kingdom.

So the ultimate destination is clear. We are certain that there is a glorious future for the people of God. However, what of tomorrow? We feel anxious about the immediate future, just as unbelievers do. The specifics of our personal futures are unknown to us. Like children we ask: “Will I be happy? Will I be rich? What will happen to me?” We must walk by faith rather than by sight.

As long as there have been people, there have been soothsayers and wizards exploiting our anxieties. If prostitution is the world’s oldest profession, surely fortune-telling is the second oldest. “Tell me of tomorrow” is the plea of the stock market speculator, the competitive businessman,

the sports forecaster, and the young couple in love. The student asks, “Will I graduate?” The manager muses, “Will I be promoted?” The person in the doctor’s waiting room clenches his hands and asks, “Is it cancer or indigestion?” People have examined lizard entrails, snakeskins, the bones of owls, the Ouija board, the daily horoscope, and the predictions of sports handicappers—all to gain a small margin of insurance against an unknown future.

The Christian feels the same curiosity, but frames the question differently. He asks: “What is the will of God for my life?” To search for the will of God can be an exercise in piety or impiety, an act of humble submission or outrageous arrogance—depending on what will of God we seek. To try to look behind the veil at what God has not been pleased to reveal is to tamper with holy things that are out of bounds. John Calvin said that when God “closes his holy mouth,” we should desist from inquiry (*Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen [reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House. 2003], 354).

On the other hand, God delights to hear the prayers of His people when they individually ask, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” The Christian pursues God, looking for His marching orders, seeking to know what course of action

is pleasing to Him. This search for the will of God is a holy quest—a pursuit that is to be undertaken with vigor by the godly person.

### *The Biblical Meaning of the Will of God*

We yearn for simple answers to difficult questions. We want clarity. We desire to cut through the entanglements to the heart of the question. Sometimes the answers are *simple* enough in themselves, but the process of finding them is laborious and confusing. Sometimes the answers are *simplistic*, giving us temporary relief from the pressures and the burdens of confusing questions.

However, there is a profound difference between the *simple* answer and the *simplistic* answer. The simple answer is correct; it accounts for all the data found in the complex problem. It is clear and can be easily grasped in its fullness. It abides, being able to stand the test of rigorous questioning. The simplistic answer is a counterfeit. On the surface it appears to be the genuine article, but under closer scrutiny it yields its bogus flaws. The simplistic answer may account for some of the data but not all of it. It remains fuzzy. Worst of all, it does not abide; it fails the test of deeper questioning. It does not satisfy in the long haul.

One of the most excruciating questions in theology is, “Why did Adam fall?” The simplistic answer, commonly heard, is that Adam fell by his own free will. Such an answer is satisfying until we probe the question more deeply. Suppose we ask: “How could a righteous creature made by a perfect Creator sin? How could Adam make an evil choice while possessing no prior inclination or disposition to evil? Was he simply deceived or coerced by Satan? If so, why would Adam then be blameworthy?” If he was merely deceived, then the fault is all Satan’s. If he was coerced, then it was not a free choice. If he sinned because he had a prior desire or inclination to sin, then we must ask: “What was the source of his evil desire? Did God put it there?” If so, then we cast a shadow on the integrity of the Creator.

Perhaps the simplest way to expose the weak character of the simplistic answer that Adam fell by his own free will is to ask our question another way: “Why did Adam exercise his own free will to sin?” It simply won’t do to answer, “Because he chose to.” This answer is a mere repetition of the question in a declarative form.

I would like to offer a simple answer to the difficult question of Adam’s fall, but I simply can’t. The only response I can give to the question is that I don’t know the answer.

Some readers will surely chasten me at this point by

saying to themselves: "I know the answer! Adam fell because it was the will of God."

I immediately ask: "In what sense was Adam's fall the will of God? Did God *force* Adam to fall and then punish him for doing what he had no power to avoid?" To ask such an impious question is to answer it. Certainly the fall must have been the "will of God" in some sense, but the crucial question remains, "In what sense?"

So here we are, pressed squarely against a biting question that involves the matter of the will of God. We want to know how the will of God worked in Adam's life; but more personally, we want to know how the will of God works in our own lives.

When questions are difficult and complex, it is a good rule to collect as much data about them as possible. The more clues the detective has to work with, the easier it usually is to solve the crime (note the word *usually*). Sometimes the detective suffers from too many clues, which only serve to compound the difficulty of the solution. The corporate executive faced with major decision-making responsibilities knows the importance of sufficient data- and record-keeping. His maxim may be: "If you have enough data, the decisions jump out at you." Again we must add the qualifier *usually*. Sometimes the data are so complex that they



jump out like screaming banshees, defying our ability to sort through them all.

I emphasize the point of data, complexity, and simplicity because the biblical meaning of the will of God is a very complicated matter. To approach it simplistically is to invite disaster. At times, wrestling with the complexities of the biblical concept of the will of God can give us an Excedrin headache. Yet ours is a holy quest, a pursuit that is worth a few headaches along the way. But we must guard against proceeding in a simplistic way, lest we change the holy quest into an unholy presumption.

We note at the outset that the Bible speaks of the “will of God” in more than one way. This is the key problem that complicates our quest and serves as a warning against simplistic solutions. In the New Testament, there are two Greek words that can be and have been translated by the English word *will*. It would seem that all we need is to identify precisely the meanings of the two words and check out the Greek text every time we see the word *will*, and our problems will be solved. Alas, it doesn't work that way. The plot thickens when we discover that each of the two Greek words has several nuances of meaning. Simply checking the Greek text for word usage is not enough to solve our difficulty.

However, finding the meanings of the Greek words is a

helpful starting place. Let's examine the two words briefly to see whether they shed any light on our quest. The words are *boule* and *thelema*.

The term *boule* has its roots in an ancient verb that means a "rational and conscious desire," as opposed to *thelema*, meaning "an impulsive or unconscious desire." The ancient subtle distinction was between rational desire and impulsive desire. As the Greek language developed, however, this distinction was softened, and eventually the words became used at times as synonyms, with authors switching from one to the other for purposes of stylistic change.

In the New Testament, *boule* usually refers to a plan based on careful deliberation; it is used most often with respect to the counsel of God. *Boule* frequently indicates God's providential plan, which is predetermined and inflexible. Luke is fond of using it this way, as we read in the book of Acts: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan [*boule*] and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23).

Here the resolute decree of God is in view, which no human action can set aside. God's plan is impregnable; His "will" is unalterable.

The word *thelema* is rich in its diversity of meanings. It refers to what is agreeable, what is desired, what is intended,

what is chosen, or what is commanded. Here we have the notions of consent, desire, purpose, resolution, and command. The force of the various meanings is determined by the context in which *thelema* appears.

### *The Decretive Will of God*

Theologians describe as the “decretive will of God” that will by which God decrees things to come to pass according to His supreme sovereignty. This is also sometimes called “God’s sovereign efficacious will”; by it, God brings to pass whatsoever He wills. When God sovereignly decrees something in this sense, nothing can prevent it from coming to pass.

When God commanded the light to shine, the darkness had no power to resist the command. The “lights” came on. God did not persuade the light to shine. He did not negotiate with elemental powers to form a universe. He did not achieve a plan of redemption by trial and error; the cross was not a cosmic accident exploited by the Deity. These things were decreed absolutely. Their effects were efficacious (producing the desired result) because their causes were sovereignly decreed.

A serious danger faces those who restrict the meaning of

the will of God to the sovereign will. We hear the Muslim cry, “It is the will of Allah.” We slip at times into a deterministic view of life that says, “*Que será, sera,*” or “What will be, will be.” In so doing, we embrace a sub-Christian form of fatalism, as if God willed everything that happened in such a way as to eliminate human choices.

Classical theologians insist on the reality of man’s will in acting, choosing, and responding. God works His plan through *means*, via the real choices of willing and acting creatures. There are secondary as well as primary causes. To deny this is to embrace a kind of determinism that eliminates human freedom and dignity.

Yet there is a God who is sovereign, whose will is greater than ours. His will restricts my will. My will cannot restrict His will. When He decrees something sovereignly, it will come to pass—whether I like it or not, whether I choose it or not. He is sovereign. I am subordinate.

### *The Preceptive Will of God*

When the Bible speaks of the will of God, it does not always mean the decretive will of God. The decretive will of God cannot be broken or disobeyed. It will come to pass. On the other hand, there is a will that can be broken: “the

preceptive will of God.” It can be disobeyed. Indeed, it is broken and disobeyed every day by each one of us.

The preceptive will of God is found in His law. The precepts, statutes, and commandments that He delivers to His people make up the preceptive will. They express and reveal to us what is right and proper for us to do. The preceptive will is God’s rule of righteousness for our lives. By this rule we are governed.

It is the will of God that we not sin. It is the will of God that we have no other gods before Him; that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves; that we refrain from stealing, coveting, and committing adultery. Yet the world is filled with idolatry, hatred, thievery, covetousness, and adultery. The will of God is violated whenever His law is broken.

One of the great tragedies of contemporary Christendom is the preoccupation of so many Christians with the secret decretive will of God to the exclusion and neglect of the preceptive will. We want to peek behind the veil, to catch a glimpse of our personal future. We seem more concerned with our horoscope than with our obedience, more concerned with what the stars in their courses are doing than with what we are doing.

With respect to God’s sovereign will, we assume we are passive. With respect to His preceptive will, we know that

we are active and therefore responsible and accountable. It is easier to engage in ungodly prying into the secret counsel of God than to apply ourselves to the practice of godliness. We can flee to the safety of the sovereign will and try to pass off our sin to God, laying the burden and responsibility of it on His unchanging will. Such characterizes the spirit of antichrist, the spirit of lawlessness or antinomianism, that despises God's law and ignores His precepts.

Protestants are particularly vulnerable to this distortion. We seek refuge in our precious doctrine of justification by faith alone, forgetting that the very doctrine is to be a catalyst for the pursuit of righteousness and obedience to the preceptive will of God.

### *Biblical Righteousness*

Habakkuk's famous statement, "the just shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4, KJV), is found three times in the New Testament. It has become a slogan of evangelical Protestantism, whose emphasis has been on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This slogan, containing a hint of the essence of the Christian life, has its focal point in the biblical concept of righteousness.

One of Jesus' most disturbing comments was the state-

ment, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). It is easy for us to assume that Jesus meant that our righteousness must be of a higher sort than that characterized by men who were hypocrites. The image that we have of scribes and Pharisees from the New Testament period is that of unscrupulous, ruthless practitioners of religious deceit. We must bear in mind, however, that the Pharisees as a group were men historically committed to a very lofty level of righteous living. Yet Jesus tells us that our righteousness must exceed theirs. What did He mean?

When we consider the biblical notion of righteousness, we are dealing with a matter that touches virtually every plane of theology. In the first place, there is the righteousness of God, by which all standards of rightness and wrongness are to be measured. God’s character is the ultimate foundation and model of righteousness. In the Old Testament, righteousness becomes defined in terms of obedience to the commandments delivered by God, who Himself is altogether righteous. Those commands include not only precepts of human behavior with respect to our fellow human beings, but also matters of a liturgical and ceremonial nature.

In Old Testament Israel and among the New Testament

Pharisees, liturgical righteousness was substituted for authentic righteousness. That is to say, men became satisfied with obeying the rituals of the religious community rather than fulfilling the broader implications of the law. For example, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for tithing their mint and cumin while omitting the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy. Jesus indicated that the Pharisees were correct in giving their tithes, but were incorrect in assuming that the liturgical exercises had completed the requirements of the law. Here, liturgical righteousness had become a substitute for true and full obedience.

Within the evangelical world, *righteousness* is a rare word indeed. We speak of morality, spirituality, and piety. Seldom, however, do we speak of righteousness. Yet the goal of our redemption is not piety or spirituality but righteousness. Spirituality in the New Testament sense is a means to the end of righteousness. Being spiritual means that we are exercising the spiritual graces given by God to mold us after the image of His Son. The disciplines of prayer, Bible study, church fellowship, witnessing, and the like are not ends in themselves, but are designed to assist us in living righteously. We are stunted in our growth if we assume that the end of the Christian life is spirituality.

Spiritual concerns are but the beginning of our walk



with God. We must beware of the subtle danger of thinking that spirituality completes the requirements of Christ. To fall into such a trap—the trap of the Pharisees—is to substitute liturgical or ritualistic practices for authentic righteousness. By all means we are to pray and to study the Bible, and to bear witness in evangelism. However, we must never, at any point in our lives, rest from our pursuit of righteousness.

In justification we become righteous in the sight of God by means of the cloak of Christ's righteousness. However, as soon as we are justified, our lives must give evidence of the personal righteousness that flows out of our justification. It is interesting to me that the whole biblical concept of righteousness is contained in one Greek word, *dikaïos*. That same Greek word is used to refer, in the first instance, to the righteousness of God; in the second instance, to what we call justification; and in the third instance, to the righteousness of life. Thus, from beginning to end—from the nature of God to the destiny of man—our human duty remains the same—a call to righteousness.

True righteousness must never be confused with self-righteousness. Since our righteousness proceeds from our justification, which is based on the righteousness of Christ alone, we must never be deluded into thinking that our

works of righteousness have any merit of their own. Yet as Protestants, zealously maintaining our doctrine of justification by faith alone, we must be ever mindful that the justification that is by faith alone is never *by a faith that is alone*. True faith manifests itself in righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees and the scribes, for it is concerned with the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy.

We are called to bear witness to the righteousness of God in every area of life—from our prayer closets to our courtrooms, from our pews to our marketplaces. The top priority of Jesus is that we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. All other things will be added to that.

### *An Allergy to Restraint*

“Everybody do your own thing.” This cliché from the sixties characterizes the spirit of our age. Increasingly freedom is being equated with the inalienable right to do whatever you please. It carries with it a built-in allergy to laws that restrain, whether they be the laws of God or the laws of men.

This pervasive anti-law, or antinomian, attitude is reminiscent of the biblical epoch that provoked God’s judgment because “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6). The secular world reflects this attitude in the

statement, “Government can’t legislate morality.” Morality is seen as a private matter, outside the domain of the state and even of the church.

A shift has occurred in word meaning so subtle that many have missed it. The original intent of the concept, “You cannot legislate morality,” was to convey the idea that passing a law prohibiting a particular kind of activity would not necessarily eliminate such activity. The point of the phrase was that laws do not *ipso facto* produce obedience to those laws. In fact, on some occasions, the legal prohibition of certain practices has incited only greater violation of established law. The prohibition of alcoholic beverages is an example.

The contemporary interpretation of legislating morality differs from the original intent. Instead of saying that government *cannot* legislate morality, it says government *may not* legislate morality. That means government should stay out of moral issues such as the regulation of abortion, deviant sexual practices, marriage and divorce, and so on, since morality is a matter of conscience in the private sector. For government to legislate in these areas is often viewed as an invasion of privacy by the state, representing a denial of basic freedoms for the individual.

If we take this kind of thinking to its logical conclusion, we leave the government with little to do. If government

may not legislate morality, its activity will be restricted to determining the colors of the state flag, the state flower, and perhaps the state bird. (However, even questions of flowers and birds may be deemed “moral,” as they touch on ecological issues, which are ultimately moral in character.) The vast majority of matters that concern legislation are, in fact, of a decidedly moral character. The regulation of murder, theft, and civil rights is a moral matter. How a person operates his automobile on the highway is a moral issue since it touches on the well-being of fellow travelers.

Questions relating to the legalization of marijuana often focus on the fact that a majority of certain age groups are violating the law. The argument goes like this: Since disobedience is so widespread, doesn't this indicate that the law is bad? Such a conclusion is a blatant non sequitur. Whether or not marijuana should be decriminalized should not be determined by levels of civil disobedience.

The point is that a vast number of Americans reflect an antinomian spirit regarding marijuana. Such disobedience is hardly motivated by noble aspirations to a higher ethic suppressed by a tyrannical government. Here the law is broken as a matter of convenience and physical appetite.

Within the church, the same spirit of antinomianism has prevailed too often. Pope Benedict XVI faces the

embarrassing legacy of his predecessors as he tries to explain to the world why a majority of his American adherents tell the pollsters they practice artificial means of birth control when a papal encyclical explicitly forbids such methods. One must ask how people can confess their belief in an “infallible” leader of their church and at the same time obstinately refuse to submit to that leader.

Within the Protestant churches, individuals frequently become irate when called to moral accountability. They often declare that the church has no right to intrude into their private lives. They say this in spite of the fact that in their membership vows, they publicly committed themselves to submit to the moral oversight of the church.

Antinomianism should be more rare in the evangelical Christian community than anywhere else. Sadly, the facts do not fit the theory. So blasé is the typical “evangelical” toward the law of God that the prophecies of doom that Rome thundered at Martin Luther are beginning to come true. Some “evangelicals” are indeed using justification by faith alone as a license to sin; these can be deemed properly only as pseudo-evangelicals. Anyone who has the most rudimentary understanding of justification by faith knows that authentic faith always manifests itself in a zeal for obedience. No earnest Christian can ever have a cavalier

attitude toward the law of God. Though obedience to such laws does not bring justification, the justified person will surely endeavor to obey them.

To be sure, there are times when the commandments of men are on a collision course with the laws of God. In those instances, Christians not only *may* disobey men, but *must* disobey men. I am not talking here of isolated moral issues but of attitudes. Christians must be particularly careful in this era of antinomianism not to get caught up in the spirit of the age. We are not free to do what is right in our own eyes. We are called to do what is right in His eyes.

Freedom should not be confused with autonomy. As long as evil exists in the world, the moral restraint of law is necessary. It is an act of grace by which God institutes government, which exists to restrain the evildoer. It exists to protect the innocent and the righteous. The righteous are called to support it as much as they possibly can without compromising their obedience to God.

### *God's Will of Disposition*

While we understand that the decretive will and the preceptive will of God are part of His overall will, other aspects of the mystery of His sovereignty remain. One such aspect is

“the will of disposition.” It is tied up with the ability of man to disobey God’s preceptive will.

This aspect of the will of God refers to what is pleasing and agreeable to God. It expresses something of the attitude of God to His creatures. Some things are “well pleasing in his sight,” while other things are said to grieve Him. He may allow (but not via moral permission) wicked things to transpire, but He is by no means pleased by them.

To illustrate how these differing aspects of the will of God come into play in biblical interpretation, let us examine the verse that says the Lord is “not willing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9, KJV). Which of the above-mentioned meanings of *will* fits this text? How is the meaning of the text changed by the application of the nuances?

Try first the decretive will. The verse would then mean, “God is not willing in a sovereign decretive sense that any should perish.” The implication would then be that nobody perishes. This verse would be a proof text for universalism, with its view that hell is utterly vacant of people.

The second option is that God is not willing in a preceptive way that any should perish. This would mean that God does not *allow* people to perish in the sense that He grants His moral permission. This obviously does not fit the context of the passage.

The third option makes sense. God is not willing in the sense that He is not inwardly disposed to, or delighted by, people's perishing. Elsewhere, Scripture teaches that God takes no delight in the death of the wicked. He may decree what He does not enjoy; that is, He may distribute justice to wicked offenders. He is pleased when justice is maintained and righteousness is honored, even though He takes no personal pleasure in the application of such punishment.

A human analogy may be seen in our law courts. A judge, in the interest of justice, may sentence a criminal to prison and at the same time inwardly grieve for the guilty man. His disposition may be *for* the man but against the crime.

However, God is not merely a human judge, working under the constraints of the criminal justice system. God is sovereign—He can do what He pleases. If He is not pleased or willing that any should perish, why then does He not exercise His decretive will accordingly? How can there be a hiatus between God's decretive will and His will of disposition?

All things being equal, God does desire that no one should perish. But all things are not equal. Sin is real. Sin violates God's holiness and righteousness. God also is not willing that sin should go unpunished. He desires as well that His holiness should be vindicated. It is dangerous to



speak of a conflict of interests or of a clash of desires within God. Yet, in a certain sense, we must. He wills the obedience of His creatures. He wills the well-being of His creatures. There is a symmetry of relationship ultimately between obedience and well-being. The obedient child will never perish. Those who obey God's preceptive will enjoy the benefits of His will of disposition. When the preceptive will is violated, things are no longer equal. Now God requires punishment while not particularly enjoying the application of it.

Yet does this not beg the ultimate question? Where does the decretive will fit in? Could not God originally have decreed that no one ever would be *able* to sin, thus ensuring an eternal harmony among all elements of His will: decretive, preceptive, and dispositional?

Often the answer to this question is superficial. Appeals are made to the free will of man, as if by magic man's free will could explain the dilemma. We are told that the only way God could have created a universe guaranteed to be free from sin would have been to make creatures without free will. It is then argued that these creatures would have been nothing more than puppets and would have lacked humanity, being devoid of the power or ability to sin. If that is the case, then what does it suggest about the state of our existence in heaven? We are promised that when our

### *Can I Know God's Will?*

redemption is complete, sin will be no more. We will still have an ability to choose, but our disposition will be so inclined toward righteousness that we will, in fact, never choose evil. If this will be possible in heaven after redemption, why could it not have been possible *before* the fall?

The Bible gives no clear answer to this thorny question. We are told that God created people who, for better or for worse, have the ability to sin. We also know from Scripture that there is no shadow of turning in the character of God, and that all of His works are clothed in righteousness. That He chose to create man the way He did is mysterious, but we must assume, given the knowledge we have, that God's plan was good. Any conflict that arises between His commandments to us, His desire that we should obey Him, and our failure to comply does not destroy His sovereignty.

### *God's Secret and Revealed Will*

We have already distinguished among the three types of the will of God: His decretive will, His preceptive will, and His will of disposition. Another distinction must be established between what is called God's *secret*, or hidden, will and His *revealed* will. This secret will of God is subsumed under the decretive will because, for the most part,

it remains undisclosed to us. There is a limit to the revelation God has made of Himself. We know certain things about God's decretive will that He has been pleased to set forth for our information in Holy Scripture. But because we are finite creatures, we do not comprehend the total dimension of divine knowledge or the divine plan. As the Scriptures teach, the secret things belong to the Lord, but that which He has revealed belongs to us and to our children forever (Deut. 29:29).

Protestant theologians have made use of the distinction between the hidden God (*Deus obsconditus*) and the revealed God (*Deus revelatus*). This distinction is valuable and indeed necessary when we realize that not all that can be known of God has been revealed to us. There is a sense in which God remains hidden from us, insofar as He has not been pleased to reveal all there is to know about Him. However, this distinction is fraught with peril since some have found within it a conflict between two kinds of gods. A god who reveals his character to be one thing, but who is secretly contrary to that revealed character, would be a supreme hypocrite.

If we say that God has no secret will and proposes to do only what He commands and nothing more, then we would perceive God as one whose desires and plans are constantly

thwarted by the harassment of human beings. Such a god would be impotent, and no god at all.

If we distinguish between the secret aspect of God and the revealed aspect of God, we must hold these as parts of the whole, not as contradictions. That is to say, what God has revealed about Himself is trustworthy. Our knowledge is partial, but it is true as far as it goes. What belongs to the secret counsel of God does not contradict the character of God that has been revealed to us.

The distinction of God's revealed will and hidden will raises a practical problem: the question of whether or not it is possible for a Christian to act in harmony with God's decretive (hidden) will and at the same time work against His preceptive will.

We must admit that such a possibility exists—in a sense. For example, it was in God's decretive will and by His determinate counsel that Jesus Christ was condemned to die on the cross. The divine purpose, of course, was to secure the redemption of God's people. However, that purpose was hidden from the view of men who sat in judgment over Jesus. When Pontius Pilate delivered Jesus to be crucified, Pilate acted against the preceptive will of God but in harmony with the decretive will of God. Does this make nonsense of God's preceptive will? God forbid. What it

does is bear witness to the transcendent power of God to work His purposes sovereignly in spite of, and by means of, the evil acts of men.

Consider the story of Joseph, whose brothers, out of jealousy and greed, sold their innocent brother into slavery in Egypt. At their reunion years later, and upon the brothers' confession of sin, Joseph replied, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Here is the inscrutable majesty of God's providence. God made use of human evil in bringing to pass His purposes for Joseph and for the Jewish nation. Joseph's brothers were guilty of willful and malicious sin. By directly violating the preceptive will of God, they sinned against their brother and against God. Yet in their sin, God's secret counsel was brought to pass, and God brought redemption through it.

What if Joseph's brothers had been obedient? Joseph would not have been sold into slavery; he would not have been taken to Egypt; he would not have been sent to prison, from which he was called to interpret a dream. What if Joseph had not become prime minister? What would have become the historical reason for the brothers' settling in Egypt? There would have been no Jewish settlement in Egypt, no Moses, no exodus from Egypt, no law, no prophets, no Christ, no salvation.

Can we, therefore, conclude that the sins of Joseph's brothers were, in fact, virtues in disguise? Not at all. Their sin was sin, a clear violation of the preceptive will of God, for which they were held responsible and judged to be guilty. But God brought good out of evil. This reflects neither a contradiction in God's character nor a contradiction between His precepts and His decrees. Rather it calls attention to the transcendent power of His sovereignty.

Is it possible for us in this day and age to obey the preceptive will of God and yet be in conflict with the secret will of God? Of course this is possible. It may be the will of God, for example, that He use a foreign nation to chastise the United States for sinning against God. It may be in the plan of God to have the people of the United States brought under judgment through the aggressive invasion of Russia. In terms of God's inscrutable will, He could be, for purposes of judgment, "on the side of the Russians." Yet at the same time, it would remain the duty of the civil magistrate of the American nation to resist the transgression of our borders by a conquering nation.

We have a parallel in the history of Israel, where God used the Babylonians as a rod to chastise His people Israel. In that situation, it would have been perfectly proper for the civil magistrate of Israel to have resisted the wicked invasion

of the Babylonians. In so doing, the Israelites would have been, in effect, resisting the decreative will of God. The book of Habakkuk wrestles with the severe problem of God's use of the evil inclinations of men to bring judgment on His people. This is not to suggest that God favored the Babylonians. He made it clear that judgment would fall on them also, but He first made use of their evil inclinations in order to bring a corrective discipline to His own people.

### *Knowing the Will of God for Our Lives*

Pursuing knowledge of the will of God is not an abstract science designed to titillate the intellect or to convey the kind of knowledge that “puffs up” but fails to edify. An understanding of the will of God is desperately important for every Christian seeking to live a life that is pleasing to his or her Creator. It is a very practical thing for us to know what God wants for our lives. A Christian asks: “What are my marching orders? What should my role be in contributing to the establishment of the kingdom of God? What does God want me to do with my life?” It is inconceivable that a Christian could live for very long without coming face-to-face with these gripping questions.

Having been a Christian for some fifty years, with the

study of theology my main vocational pursuit, I find the practical question of the will of God pressing on my mind quite frequently. I doubt a fortnight passes that I am not seriously engaged by the question of whether I am doing what God wants me to do at this point in my life. The question haunts and beckons all of us. It demands resolution, and so we must ask ourselves, "How do we know the will of God for our lives?"

The practical question of how we know the will of God for our lives cannot be solved with any degree of accuracy unless we have some prior understanding of the will of God in general. Without the distinctions that we have made, our pursuit of the will of God can plunge us into hopeless confusion and consternation. When we seek the will of God, we must first ask ourselves which will we are seeking to discover.

If our quest is to penetrate the hidden aspects of His will, then we have embarked on a fool's errand. We are trying the impossible and chasing the untouchable. Such a quest is not only an act of foolishness, but also an act of presumption. There is a very real sense in which the secret will of the secret counsel of God is none of our business and is off limits to our speculative investigations.

Untold evils have been perpetrated on God's people by



unscrupulous theologians who have sought to correct or to supplant the clear and plain teaching of sacred Scripture by doctrines and theories based on speculation alone. The business of searching out the mind of God where God has remained silent is dangerous business indeed. Luther put it this way: "We must keep in view his word and leave alone his inscrutable will; for it is by his word and not by his inscrutable will that we must be guided."

Christians are permitted, in a sense, to attempt to discern the will of God by means of illumination by the Holy Spirit and by confirmation through circumstances that we are doing the right thing. However, as we will discover, the search for providential guidance must always be subordinate to our study of the revealed will of God. In our search, we must also come to terms with the dynamic tensions created by the concept of man's will *versus* predestination. Before our inquiry can lead us into such practical avenues as occupation and marriage, we must face the thorny issues involved in the free will/predestination issue. We have seen what the will of God entails. What about the will of man? How do the two relate? How free is man, after all?



# *How Should I Live in This World?*

R. C. Sproul



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## *Preface*

Almost every major discussion of ethics these days begins with an analysis of the chaotic situation of modern culture. Even secular writers and thinkers are calling for some sort of basic agreement on ethical behavior. Humanity's "margin of error," they say, is shrinking with each new day. Our survival is at stake.

These "prophets of doom" point out that man's destructive capability increased from 1945 to 1960 by the same ratio as it did from the primitive weapons of the Stone Age to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The thawing of the Cold War provided little comfort. Numerous nations have nuclear arms now or are close to having them. What, besides ethics, will keep them from using these weapons?

This stark reality is compounded by the profusion of social injustice in many areas, the rise of international terrorism, and the general decline of personal and social values.

Who is to say what's right and wrong? One technical volume, Thomas E. Hill's *Contemporary Ethical Theories*, lists more than eighty theories of ethics competing for acceptance in our modern world. It is not just a matter of "doing the right thing" but of figuring out what the right thing is. This proliferation of options generates confusion in our world and, for many, a sense of despair. Will we ever reach a cultural consensus that will stabilize the shifting sands of pluralism?

All this talk of "theories of ethics" may leave you cold. However, ethical decisions enter into every aspect of our lives. No field or career is immune from ethical judgments. In politics, in psychology, and in medicine, ethical decisions are made regularly. Legislative action, economic policy, academic curricula, psychiatric advice—all involve ethical considerations. Every vote cast in the ballot box marks an ethical decision.

On what basis should we make these decisions? That's where the "ethical theories" come in. The Christian may say, "I simply obey God's Word." However, what about those issues where the Bible has no specific "thou shalt"? Can we find ethical principles in Scripture, and in the very nature of God, that will guide us through this difficult terrain? How can we communicate these principles to others?

## Preface

How does God's Word stand up against the eighty-some other standards?

Let us start by looking deeper into the field of ethics to consider how society deals with such questions. Then we will see how God's Word fits in, and we will seek to apply biblical teaching to several modern dilemmas.



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## Chapter One



# ETHICS AND MORALS

In present word usage, the term *ethics* is often used interchangeably with the word *morality*. That the two have become virtual synonyms is a sign of the confusion that permeates the modern ethical scene. Historically, the two words had quite distinctive meanings. *Ethics* comes from the Greek *ethos*, which is derived from a root word meaning “stall,” a place for horses. It conveyed the sense of a dwelling place, a place of stability and permanence.

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On the other hand, *morality* comes from the word *mores*, which describes the behavioral patterns of a given society.

*Ethics* is a normative science, searching for the principal foundations that prescribe obligations or “oughtness.” It is concerned primarily with the imperative and with the philosophical premises on which imperatives are based. *Morality* is a descriptive science, concerned with “isness” and the indicative. Ethics define what people ought to do; morals describe what people actually do. The difference between them is between the normal and the descriptive.

ETHICS

1. normative
2. imperative
3. oughtness
4. absolute

MORALS

1. descriptive
2. indicative
3. isness
4. relative

When morality is identified with ethics, the descriptive becomes the normative and the imperative is swallowed by the status quo. This creates a kind of “statistical morality.” In this schema, the good is determined by the normal and the normal is determined by the statistical average. The “norm” is discovered by an analysis of the normal, or by counting

noses. Conformity to that norm then becomes the ethical obligation. It works like this:

*Step 1.* We compile an analysis of statistical behavior patterns, such as those integral to the groundbreaking Kinsey Reports in the twentieth century. If we discover that most people are participating in premarital sexual intercourse, then we declare such activity “normal.”

*Step 2.* We move quickly from the normal to a description of what is authentically “human.” Humanness is defined by what human beings do. Hence, if the normal human being engages in premarital sexual intercourse, we conclude that such activity is normal and therefore “good.”

*Step 3.* The third step is to declare patterns that deviate from the normal to be abnormal, inhuman, and inauthentic. In this schema, chastity becomes a form of deviant sexual behavior and the stigma is placed on the virgin rather than the nonvirgin.

Statistical morality operates according to the following syllogism:

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*Premise A*—the normal is determined by statistics;

*Premise B*—the normal is human and good;

*Conclusion*—the abnormal is inhuman and bad.

In this humanistic approach to ethics, the highest good is defined as that activity that is most authentically human. This method achieves great popularity when applied to some issues but breaks down when applied to others. For instance, if we do a statistical analysis of the experience of cheating among students or lying among the general public, we discover that a majority of students have at some time cheated and that everyone has at some time lied. If the canons of statistical morality apply, the only verdict we can render is that cheating is an authentically human good and that lying is a bona fide virtue.

Obviously there must be a relationship between our ethical theories and our moral behavior. In a real sense, our beliefs dictate our behavior. A theory underlies our every moral action. We may not be able to articulate that theory or even be immediately conscious of it, but nothing manifests our value systems more sharply than our actions.

The Christian ethic is based on an antithesis between what is and what ought to be. We view the world as fallen; an analysis of fallen human behavior describes what is

normal to the abnormal situation of human corruption. God calls us out of the indicative by His imperative. Ours is a call to nonconformity—to a transforming ethic that shatters the status quo.

### *A Serious Inconsistency*

Even within relativistic claims, a serious inconsistency emerges. The 1960s brought a moral revolution to our culture, spearheaded by the protests of the youth. Two slogans were repeated, broadcast side by side during this movement. The tension was captured by these twin slogans: “Tell it like it is” and “Do your own thing.”

The cry for personal freedom was encapsulated in the “inalienable right” to do one’s own thing. This was a demand for subjective freedom of self-expression. When the guns were turned on the older generation, however, a curious and glaring inconsistency was heard: “Tell it like it is.” This slogan implies an objective basis for truth and virtue. The adult generation was not “allowed” to do their own thing if doing their own thing deviated from objective norms of truth. The flower children demanded the right to have their ethical cake and eat it too.

I was once maneuvered into an unenviable counseling

situation by a distraught Christian mother, a modern-day Monica (mother of Augustine) anguishing over the wayward behavior of her nonbelieving and rebellious son. The lad had retreated from his mother's constant religious and moral directives by moving out of the family home and into his own apartment. He promptly decorated his apartment with black walls and strobe lights, then adorned the room with accoutrements designed for the liberal indulgence of hashish and other exotic drugs. His was a bacchanalian "pad" into which he promptly invited a willing coed to join him in luxurious cohabitation. All of this was to his mother's unmitigated horror. I agreed to talk with the young man only after explaining to the mother that such an encounter would probably engender further hostility. I would be viewed as the mother's "hired gun." The youth also agreed to the meeting, obviously only to escape further verbal harassment from his mother.

When the young man appeared at my office, he was overtly hostile and obviously wanted to get the meeting over with as quickly as possible. I began the interview bluntly by asking directly, "Who are you mad at?"

Without hesitation he growled, "My mother."

"Why?" I inquired.

"Because all she does is hassle me. She keeps trying to shove religion down my throat."



I went on to inquire what alternative value system he had embraced in place of his mother's ethical system. He replied, "I believe everyone ought to be free to do his own thing."

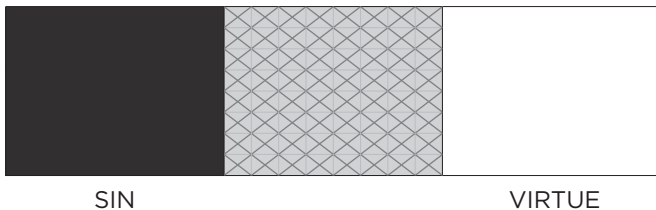
I then asked, "Does that include your mother?" He was startled by the question and not immediately aware of what I was driving at. I explained to him that if he embraced a Christian ethic, he could readily enlist me as an ally in his cause. His mother had been harsh, provoking her son to wrath and being insensitive to questions and feelings, issues that are indeed circumscribed by the biblical ethic. I explained that at several crucial points his mother had violated Christian ethics. However, I pointed out that on the boy's ethical terms he had no legitimate gripe. "Maybe your mother's 'thing' is to harass children by shoving religion down their throats," I said. "How can you possibly object to that?" It became clear that the boy wanted everybody (especially himself) to have the right to do his or her "own thing" except when the other person's "thing" impinged on *his* "thing."

It is commonplace to hear the lament that some Christians, notably conservatives, are so rigidly bound by moralistic guidelines that everything becomes for them a matter of "black and white" with no room for "gray" areas.

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Those who persist in fleeing from the gray, seeking refuge in the sharply defined areas of white and black, suffer from the epithets “brittle” or “dogmatic.” However, the Christian must seek for righteousness and never be satisfied with living in the smog of perpetual grayness. He wants to know where the right way is located, where the path of righteousness lies.

There is a right and there is a wrong. The difference between them is the concern of ethics. We seek a way to find the *right*, which is neither subjective nor arbitrary. We seek norms and principles that transcend prejudice or mere societal conventions. We seek an objective basis for our ethical standards. Ultimately we seek a knowledge of the character of God, whose holiness is to be reflected in our patterns of behavior. With God there is a definite and absolute black and white. The problem for us is to discover which things belong where. The following chart depicts our dilemma:



The black section represents sin or unrighteousness. The white section represents virtue or righteousness. What does the gray represent? The gray area may call attention to two different problems of Christian ethics. First, it may be used to refer to those activities the Bible describes as *adiaphorous*. *Adiaphorous* matters are those things that, in themselves, are ethically neutral. Such matters as eating food offered to idols are placed in this category. *Adiaphorous* matters are not sinful, but there are occasions when they might become sinful. Ping-Pong playing, for example, is not sinful. However, if a person becomes obsessed with Ping-Pong to the extent that it dominates his life, it becomes a sinful thing for that person.

The second problem represented by the gray area is more important for us to grasp. Here, the gray area represents *confusion*: it encompasses those matters where we are uncertain about what is right and wrong. The presence of gray calls attention to the fact that ethics is not a simple science but a complex one. Finding the black and the white areas is a noble concern. Jumping to them simplistically, however, is devastating to the Christian life. When we react to black/white approaches to ethics, we may be accurately assessing an annoying human tendency toward simplistic thinking. But we must guard against leaping to the conclusion that

there are no areas where black/white thinking is valid. Only within the context of atheism can we speak of there being no black and white. We desire competent and consistent theism, which demands a rigorous scrutiny of ethical principles in order to find our way out of the confusion of the gray.

### *The Ethical Continuum*

Our graph also may be used to illustrate the ethical continuum. In classical terms, sin is described as righteousness run amok. Evil is seen as the negation, privation, or distortion of the good. Man was created to labor in a garden. In modern jargon, the workplace is described as a jungle. What is the difference between a garden and a jungle? A jungle is merely a chaotic garden, a garden run wild.

Man was created with an aspiration for significance, which is a virtue. Man can pervert that drive into a lust for power, which is a vice. These represent the two poles on the continuum. At some point, we cross a line between virtue and vice. The closer we come to that line, the more difficult it is for us to perceive it clearly and the more our minds encounter the foggy gray area.

While teaching a course on ethics to clergymen working

on doctor of ministry degrees, I posed the following ethical dilemma: A husband and wife are interned in a concentration camp. They are housed in separate quarters with no communication between them. A guard approaches the wife and demands that she have sexual intercourse with him. The wife refuses. The guard then declares that unless the woman submits to his overtures, he will have her husband shot. The woman submits. When the camp is liberated and the husband learns of his wife's behavior, he sues her for divorce on the grounds of adultery.

I then posed this question to twenty conservative clergymen: "Would you grant the man a divorce on the grounds of adultery?" All twenty answered yes, pointing to the obvious fact that the wife did have sexual relations with the guard. They saw extenuating circumstances in the situation, but the situation did not change the fact of the wife's immoral behavior.

I then asked, "If a woman is forcibly raped, may the husband sue for divorce on the grounds of adultery?" All twenty responded no. The clergymen all recognized a clear distinction between adultery and rape. The difference is found at the point of coercion versus voluntary participation. I pointed out that the prison guard used coercion (forcing the wife's compliance lest the husband be killed)

and asked whether the woman's "adultery" was not actually rape.

By my mere raising of the question, half of the clergymen changed their verdict. After prolonged discussion, almost all of them did. The presence of the element of coercion threw the adultery issue into the gray area of confusion. Even those who did not completely change their minds strongly modified their decisions to account for the extenuating circumstances, which moved the woman's "crime" from the clear area of sin into the gray area of complexity. They all agreed that if it was sin, it was a lesser sin than adultery committed with "malice aforethought."

That a continuum exists between virtue and vice was the main thrust of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. He was teaching the principle of the complex of righteousness and the complex of sin. The Pharisees had embraced a simplistic understanding of the Ten Commandments. Their ethical judgments were superficial and therefore distorted. They failed to grasp the continuum motif.

I once read an article by a prominent psychiatrist who was critical of Jesus' ethical teaching. He expressed astonishment that the Western world had been so laudatory about Jesus as a "great teacher." He pointed to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) as exhibit A for the foolishness of Jesus'

ethical teaching. He asked why we extol the wisdom of a teacher who held that it is just as bad for a man to lust after a woman as it is to commit adultery with her. He questioned how a teacher could argue that it is just as bad to be angry at a man or to call him a fool as it is to murder him. He then belabored the difference between the destruction caused by lust as opposed to adultery and that caused by slander as opposed to murder.

The answer to the psychiatrist should be clear. Jesus did not teach that lust was as bad as adultery or that anger was as bad as murder. (Unfortunately, many Christians have jumped to the same erroneous conclusion as the psychiatrist, obscuring the point of Jesus' ethical teaching.)

Jesus was correcting the simplistic view of the law held by the Pharisees. They had embraced an "everything but" philosophy of technical morality, assuming that if they avoided the most obvious dimension of the commandments, they fulfilled the law. Like the rich young ruler, they had a simplistic and external understanding of the Decalogue. Because they had never actually murdered anyone, they thought they had kept the law perfectly. Jesus spelled out the wider implications or the complex of the law. "You shall not kill" means more than refraining from homicide. It prohibits the entire complex that goes into murder. It also

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implies its opposite virtue: “You shall promote life.” In our continuum, we see the following range:

VICE -----	VIRTUE
Murder-Hatred-Slander-----	Saving Life
Destroying Life -----	Promoting Life

A similar continuum moves from the vice of adultery to the virtue of chastity. In between are lesser virtues and lesser sins, but virtues and sins nonetheless.

Jesus’ teaching revealed both the spirit and the letter of the law. For instance, slander doesn’t kill the body or leave the wife a widow and the children orphans. It does destroy a man’s good name, which robs him of a quality aspect of life. Slander murders the man “in spirit.” The Pharisees had become crass literalists, ignoring the spirit of the law and missing the wider concerns of the complex of the sin of murder.

*Degrees of Sin?*

To speak of an ethical continuum or a complex of righteousness and evil is to plunge us into the debate over degrees of sin and righteousness. The Bible teaches that if



we sin against one point of the law, we sin against the whole law. Does this not imply that sin is sin and that ultimately there are no degrees? Has not Protestantism repudiated the Roman Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins? These are the issues that come to the surface as soon as we begin to speak of degrees of sin.

Certainly the Bible teaches that if we sin against one point of the law we sin against the whole law (James 2:10), but we must not infer from this that there are no degrees of sin. Sinning against the law is sinning against the God of the law. When I violate one point of God's law, I bring myself into opposition to God Himself. This is not to say that sinning against one point of the law is the equivalent of sinning against five points of the law. In both cases, I violate the law and do violence to God, but the frequency of my violence is five times as great in the latter as in the former.

It is true that God commands perfect obedience to the whole law, so that by a single transgression I stand exposed to His judgment. The lightest sin exposes me to the wrath of God, for in the smallest peccadillo I am guilty of cosmic treason. In the least transgression, I set myself above the authority of God, doing insult to His majesty, His holiness, and His sovereign right to govern me. Sin is a revolutionary act in which the sinner seeks to depose God from His

throne. Sin is a presumption of supreme arrogance in that the creature vaunts his own wisdom above that of the Creator, challenges divine omnipotence with human impotence, and seeks to usurp the rightful authority of the cosmic Lord.

It is true that historical Protestantism has rejected the Roman Catholic schema of mortal and venial sins. The rejection, however, is not based on a rejection of degrees of sin. John Calvin, for example, argued that all sin is mortal in the sense that it rightly deserves death, but that no sin is mortal in the sense that it destroys justifying grace. Considerations other than the degrees of sin were in view in the Protestant rejection of the mortal and venial sin distinction. Historical Protestantism retained the distinction between ordinary sins and sins that are deemed gross and heinous.

The most obvious reason for the Protestant retention of degrees of sin is that the Bible abounds with such gradations. The Old Testament law had clear distinctions and penalties for different criminal acts. Some sins were punishable by death, others by corporal penalties, and still others by the levying of fines. In the Jewish criminal justice system, distinctions were made between types of murder that would correspond to modern-day distinctions such as first- and second-degree murder, and voluntary and involuntary manslaughter.

The New Testament lists certain sins that, if continued in impenitence, demand the forfeiture of Christian fellowship (1 Cor. 5). At the same time, the New Testament advocates a kind of love that covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). Warnings abound concerning a future judgment that will take into account both the number (quantity) and the severity (quality) of our sins. Jesus speaks of those who will receive many stripes and those who will receive few (Luke 12:44–48, KJV); of the comparatively greater judgment that will befall Chorazin and Bethsaida as opposed to Sodom (Matt. 11:20–24); and the greater and lesser degree of rewards that will be distributed to the saints. The apostle Paul warns the Romans against heaping up wrath against the day of God’s wrath (Rom. 2:5). These and a host of other passages indicate that God’s judgment will be perfectly just, measuring the number, the severity, and the extenuating circumstances that attend all of our sins.



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By R. C. Sproul

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# WHO IS JESUS?

R. C. SPROUL

RT

Reformation Trust

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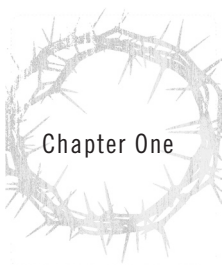


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# WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?

There are vast numbers of portraits of Jesus in the art galleries of this world. These images are often so conflicting that they offer little help in achieving an accurate picture of what Christ looked like during the period of His incarnation. This multiplicity of images parallels the widespread confusion about Jesus' identity that exists in the world today.

We need Christ—the *real* Christ. A Christ born of empty speculation or created to squeeze into the philosopher's pattern

simply won't do. A recycled Christ, a Christ of compromise, can redeem no one. A Christ watered down, stripped of power, debased of glory, reduced to a symbol, or made impotent by scholarly surgery is not Christ but Antichrist.

The prefix *anti* can mean “against” or “instead of.” In language, there is a difference, but in life, it is a distinction without a difference, because to supplant the real Jesus with a substitute is to work against Christ. To change or distort the real Christ is to oppose Him with a false Christ.

No person in history has provoked as much study, criticism, prejudice, or devotion as Jesus of Nazareth. The titanic influence of this man makes Him a chief target of the arrows of criticism and a prime object of revision according to the interpreter's prejudice. Thus, the portrait of the historical Jesus has been altered to suit the fancies of those seeking to line Him up on their side, to make of Him an ally in a host of militant causes, many of which are mutually exclusive. In the theologian's laboratory, Jesus is treated like a chameleon; He is forced to adapt to the backdrop painted by the theologian.

Rigorous academic attempts have been made to get behind the New Testament portrait of Jesus, to discover the “real” historical Jesus. These attempts to penetrate the wall of history, to peek behind the veil of the so-called primitive

apostolic witness, have taught us much about the prejudice of the scholars but have added little or nothing to our understanding of the real Jesus. What the scholars discovered behind the veil was a Jesus created in their own images according to their own prejudices. The nineteenth-century liberals found a “liberal” Jesus; the existentialists found an existential hero; and the Marxists discovered a political revolutionary. Idealists found an idealistic Jesus and pragmatists discovered a pragmatic Christ. To search behind or beyond the New Testament is to go on a snipe hunt equipped with the flashlights of pride and prejudice.

Then there is the scissors-and-paste Jesus. He is fashioned by those who seek within the Bible a core or kernel of tradition about Christ that is authentic. The things they see as unnecessary extras, the accretions of myth and legend, are excised by the scissors to expose the real Jesus. It seems so scientific, but it is all done with mirrors. The magician’s art leaves us with the portrait of Rudolf Bultmann or John A. T. Robinson, and again the real Jesus is obscured. By preserving a modicum of New Testament data, we think we have avoided subjectivity. However, the result is the same—a Jesus shaped by the bias of the scholar wielding the scissors and getting his hands sticky from the paste.

The story is told of the vagrant who knocked at the

farmer's door and politely inquired about employment as a handyman. The farmer cautiously put the man to work on a trial basis to measure his skill. The first task was to split logs for firewood, which the stranger finished in record time. The next task was to plow the fields, which he did in just a few hours. The farmer was pleasantly astonished; it seemed he had stumbled on a modern-day Hercules. The third task was less laborious. Taking the hired man to the barn, the farmer pointed to a large pile of potatoes and instructed him to sort them into two piles: those that were of prime quality were to be put in one receptacle and those of inferior grade in another. The farmer was curious when his miracle-working laborer failed to report in as rapidly as he had with the other tasks. After several hours, the farmer went to the barn to investigate. No perceptible change was evident in the pile of potatoes. One receptacle contained three potatoes and the other had only two. "What's wrong?" demanded the farmer. "Why are you moving so slowly?" A look of defeat was written on the hired man's face as he threw up his hands and replied, "It's the decisions in life that are difficult."

The scissors-and-paste method suffers from the problem of determining in advance what is authentic and what is myth in the biblical portrait of Jesus. What Bultmann discards into the basket of husks, another scholar puts into

the basket of kernels. What Bultmann calls prime, another discards as inferior.

### Evidence Is Compelling

The problem is simple. It lies not with the “shoddy” reporting of the New Testament authors or the “sloppy” documents of history we call the Gospels. It was Emil Brunner, the Swiss theologian, who blew the whistle on nineteenth-century liberalism. Brunner’s verdict was as simple as it was inflammatory. The problem, he said, is unbelief.

Brunner was not speaking about unbelief based on insufficient evidence. To withhold belief because the evidence doesn’t support the claims is an honorable and wise response. Likewise, to believe against poor evidence is credulity, the mark of the fool, and brings no honor to God.

However, the evidence about Jesus is compelling, so withholding belief in Him is to commit an immoral act. Unbelief is judged by Jesus not as an intellectual error but as a hostile act of prejudice against God Himself. This sort of unbelief is destructive to the church and to the people of God.

How could such blatant unbelief not only attack the Christian church but in several instances capture whole seminaries and even entire denominations? Why don’t

people who reject the New Testament portrait of Jesus simply abandon Christianity altogether and leave the church to less-educated mortals who need a fanciful Jesus as a religious crutch?

The nineteenth century brought an intellectual and moral crisis to the church—the rise of liberal theology that flatly rejected the supernatural core of the New Testament. This crisis eventually pressed hard on very practical matters. If the leaders of a church or the faculty of a seminary wake up one morning and discover they no longer believe what the Bible teaches or the church confesses, what are their options?

The most obvious option (and the first expected of honorable men) is that they would declare their unbelief and politely leave the church. If they control the power structures of the church, however, they have practical questions to consider. By vocation and training, their jobs are tied to the church. The church represents a multibillion-dollar financial investment, an established cultural institution with millions of active constituent members and a proven effective vehicle for social reform. These factors make declaring unbelief to the world and closing the doors to the churches less attractive. The course of least resistance is to *redefine* Christianity.

Redefining Christianity is no easy task. Christianity has been given definition by two weighty factors: (1) the existence

of a body of literature that includes primary sources about the founder and teacher of the Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth; (2) the existence of two millennia of church tradition, which includes points of disagreement about particular issues of debate among denominations, but which reveals a remarkable unity of confession about the essentials of Christianity. To redefine Christianity requires one to neutralize the authority of the Bible and relativize the authority of the creeds. The struggle of the church for the past 150 years has been precisely at these two points. It is not by accident that the eye of the storm of controversy within the seminaries and the church in our day has focused on issues concerning the Bible and the creeds. Why? Not simply because of words on paper, but because of Christ. One must banish the Christ of the Bible and the Christ of the creeds in order to redefine Christianity.

The church is called “the body of Christ.” Some refer to it as “the continuing incarnation.” Surely the church exists to embody and carry out the mission of Christ. For this reason, the church is inconceivable without Christ. Yet the church is not Christ. It is founded by Christ, formed by Christ, commissioned by Christ, and endowed by Christ. It is ruled by Christ, sanctified by Christ, and protected by Christ. But it is not Christ. The church can preach salvation and nurture the saved, but it cannot save. The church can



preach, exhort, rebuke, and admonish against sin, it can proclaim the forgiveness of sin and it can give theological definition to sin, but the church cannot atone for sin.

Cyprian declared, “He cannot have God for his Father who does not have the church for his Mother.” We need the church as urgently as a starving baby needs his mother’s milk. We cannot grow or be nourished without the church. Possessing Christ and despising the church is an intolerable contradiction. We cannot have Christ without embracing the church. However, it is possible to have the church without truly embracing Christ. Augustine described the church as a *corpus permixtum*, a “mixed body” of tares and wheat, of unbelievers and believers existing side by side. This means unbelief can gain entrance into the church. But it never can gain entrance into Christ.

The Christ we believe, the Christ we trust, must be true if we are to be redeemed. A false Christ or a substitute Christ cannot redeem. If it is thought unlikely that the biblical Christ can redeem, it is even less likely that the speculative Christ of human invention can redeem. Apart from the Bible, we know nothing of consequence concerning the real Jesus. Ultimately our faith stands or falls with the biblical Jesus. Lay aside theories of biblical inspiration if you must, doing so at your own peril, but even apart from inspiration

the New Testament represents the *primary sources*—the earliest documents of those who knew Him, the record of those who studied under Him and were eyewitnesses to His ministry. They are the most objective historical sources we have.

### Men Who Wrote with an Agenda

Some demur at this point, calling attention to the obvious fact that the New Testament portrait of Jesus comes to us from the pens of biased men who had an agenda. The Gospels are not history, they say, but redemptive history, with the accent on efforts to persuade men to follow Jesus. Well, certainly the writers had an agenda, but it was not a *hidden* agenda. The apostle John says forthrightly: “These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

The fact that the biblical writers were believers and were zealous to persuade others counts for their veracity. Had they been unbelievers while exhorting others to believe, they would have been guilty of duplicity. Of course, men can be mistaken about what they proclaim, but the fact that they believed their own message, even unto death, should enhance rather than weaken their credibility.

Theirs was indeed a record of redemptive history. It was *redemptive* because they were not writing from the standpoint of neutral, disinterested historians. It was *history* because they insisted that their testimony was true.

At this point, a practical question emerges from the streetwise and the hard-nosed skeptic, who seeks to discredit the biblical Christ by exposing the apostolic Christ as a fantasy. They argue that if the closest associates of Jesus were biased (in that they were believers), laborious scholarship to discover the “real” Jesus makes little sense. If all we know about Jesus is learned through the witness of the apostles—if they are the “screen” through which we must gaze to see Him—our efforts seem pointless.

The answer is that the historical Jesus did not live in a vacuum; He is known at least in part by the way He transformed those around Him.

I want to know the Jesus who radicalized Matthew, who transformed Peter, who turned Saul of Tarsus upside down on the Damascus Road. If these firsthand witnesses can't get me to the “real” Jesus, who can? If not through friends and loved ones, how can anyone be known?

If the apostles can't lead me to Jesus, my only options are to scale the fortress of heaven by sheer mystical subjectivism, embracing the oldest of all heresies, Gnosticism, or to

pitch my tent with the camp of skeptics who dismiss Jesus from the realm of significant truth altogether. Give me the biblical Christ or give me nothing. Do it quickly, please, as the options give me nothing save the frustration of fruitless laborious research.

Jesus said: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?” (Mark 8:36–37). Jesus put an enormous price tag on the human soul. For that, I am grateful. I like to think my soul has worth, and I would hate to squander it on an empty Christ, a Christ of subjective speculation. However, this is what we are doing when we embrace anything less than a real Christ. We are playing with human souls—the very souls Christ poured out His life to redeem.

### Gaining a True Picture of Jesus

There are different methods we could use to arrive at our picture of Jesus. We could examine the classical creeds of the church, gaining valuable insight about the collective wisdom of the ages. We could restrict our study to contemporary theology in an attempt to study Jesus in light of our own culture. Or we could try our luck at our own creativity and produce yet another speculative view.

My choice is to look at Jesus as He is presented to us in the New Testament. Even if one rejects the revelatory character of the Bible or its divine inspiration, he must face one unassailable fact: virtually all we know about Jesus is recorded in the Scriptures. The New Testament writers are the primary sources of our knowledge of Jesus. If these sources are ignored or rejected, we are left with speculation and speculation alone.

We echo the cry of Erasmus, “*Ad fontes!*” (“To the sources!”), as we focus attention on the New Testament. No matter what advantages we may have from two thousand years of theological reflection, those years remove us from the virginal response of the contemporaries of Jesus who knew Him, who walked with Him, who observed Him in action, and who interpreted Him from the perspective of the Old Testament Scriptures. The biblical writers themselves are the primary sources, and it is their portrait of Jesus that must take priority in any serious study of this person. Outside of the New Testament writers, there are no more than three paragraphs of literature written in the first century about the person and work of Jesus.

When we go back to the biblical sources, we recognize that any attempt to understand Jesus must take into account the dangers imposed by our own minds. Though the New

Testament is not a product of the twenty-first century, those of us who read it today are. Each of us has had some exposure to the idea of Jesus since we were children, if from no other source than from the simple displays that we saw in Christmas crèches during the holiday season. Though we may not have an exhaustive knowledge of the biblical Jesus, we are not ignorant of Him either. Every literate American has some information about Jesus and some opinion about Him. Our opinions may or may not be in harmony with the biblical portrait, yet we bring those assumptions to the text and sometimes create an attitude of prejudice that makes it difficult for us to hear what Jesus' contemporaries were saying.

We also must be aware that Jesus is no mere figure of historical interest whom we can study dispassionately. We are aware of the claims that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world. We realize that we must make a decision about Him for or against. We are also aware that many believe such a decision determines one's eternal destiny. We sense that so much is at stake in our understanding of Jesus that we must approach the question not with indifference but with the understanding of who Jesus is. It is a question of ultimate significance to each one of us. Whether or not Jesus brings to my life an absolute claim is something I cannot intelligently ignore.

The New Testament writers give us an eyewitness account

of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke begins his Gospel with the following words:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4)

Peter adds the following statement:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. (2 Peter 1:16)

The biblical records claim to be firsthand accounts given to us by men who were self-consciously and openly committed to following Jesus. Let us look briefly at the testimony of those who knew Him, loved Him, and gave their lives for Him.





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## Foreword

The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy was a California-based organization from 1977 to 1987. Its purpose was the defense and application of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element for the authority of the church. It was created to counter the drift from this important doctrinal foundation by significant segments of evangelicalism and the outright denial of it by other church movements.

In October 1978, the council held a summit meeting in Chicago. At that time, it issued a statement on biblical inerrancy that included a Preamble, a Short Statement, Nineteen Articles of Affirmation and Denial, and a more ample Exposition. Materials submitted at the meeting had been prepared by Drs. Edmund P. Clowney, James I.

Packer, and R. C. Sproul. These were discussed in a number of ways by groups of delegates from the Advisory Board and in various partial and plenary sessions at the summit. Furthermore, written comments were solicited and received in considerable numbers. A Draft Committee composed of Drs. Clowney, Packer, Sproul, Norman L. Geisler, Harold W. Hoehner, Donald E. Hoke, Roger R. Nicole, and Earl D. Radmacher labored very hard around the clock to prepare a statement that might receive the approval of a great majority of the participants. Very special attention was devoted to the Nineteen Articles of Affirmation and Denial. (The Preamble and the Short Statement were also subjected to editorial revisions. The Exposition was left largely as received.) After considerable discussion, the Draft Committee's submission received a very substantial endorsement by the participants: 240 (out of a total of 268) affixed their signatures to the Nineteen Articles.

It was indicated that the Draft Committee would meet within the year to review and, if necessary, revise the statement. That meeting took place in the fall of 1979, with Drs. Geisler, Hoehner, Nicole, and Radmacher in attendance. It was the consensus of those present that we should not undertake to modify a statement that so many people had signed, both at the summit meeting and afterward. But



in order to ward off misunderstandings and to provide an exposition of the position advocated by the ICBI, it was thought desirable to provide a commentary on each of the articles. A draft commentary was prepared by Dr. Sproul and was submitted to the members of the Draft Committee. A number of editorial changes were made, and the final result is what is contained in this booklet.

Dr. Sproul is well qualified to write such a commentary. He had prepared the first draft of the Nineteen Articles, and although they underwent considerable change in the editing process, Dr. Sproul was closely involved in all discussions conducted by the Draft Committee. The present text makes clear exactly what the Council affirmed and denied. Obviously, those who signed the articles do not necessarily concur in every interpretation advocated by the commentary. Not even the members of the Draft Committee are bound by this, and perhaps not even Dr. Sproul, since his text underwent certain editorial revisions. However, this commentary represents an effort at making clear the precise position of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy as a whole.

In the editing process, we strove to take account of the comments that were forwarded to us. In some cases, we could not concur with those who made comments,

and therefore the changes solicited could not be made. In other cases, matters were brought to our notice that in our judgment deserved consideration. We trust that the commentary removes ambiguities and deals effectively with possible misunderstandings.

There is a remarkable unity of views among the members of the Council and the Board, and this should be reflected not only in the articles in their original form but also in the present publication. It was not the aim of those who gathered at Chicago to break relations with those who do not share our convictions concerning the doctrine of Scripture. Rather, the aim was and continues to be to bear witness to what we are convinced is the biblical doctrine on the great subject of the inspiration of Scripture. In making this confession and presenting this commentary, we hope to dispel misunderstandings with which the doctrine of inerrancy has so frequently been burdened and to present with winsomeness and clarity this great tenet in witness to which we are gladly uniting.

—*Roger R. Nicole*

## Preface

In the 1970s, Harold Lindsell published a book titled *The Battle for the Bible*. In that little book, Lindsell addressed what had become a huge matter of controversy—the truthfulness and reliability of the Scriptures. In the face of myriad arguments against the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of the Bible, Lindsell took a stand and declared that the Bible remains trustworthy.

It was this same desire to stand against the persistent questioning of the Bible's integrity that brought together more than 250 evangelical leaders in Chicago, Illinois, in October 1978. That summit meeting, convened by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, sought to draw a line in the sand, affirming the historic Protestant position on the Scriptures. The result was the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

The issue is crucial. It is via the Scriptures that the church historically has claimed to understand matters of faith and life, from God's creation of all things from nothing to the significance of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ to the ultimate consummation of all things toward which history is moving. If the Bible is unreliable in what it teaches about these things, the church is left to speculate and has nothing of value to speak to the world.

In the thirty-plus years since the summit meeting, the battle for the Bible has not abated. It is more crucial than ever that believers understand what the Bible is and why they can trust it wholeheartedly.

This booklet is a brief commentary on the affirmations and denials of the Chicago Statement. While it may seem technical at times, I trust it makes a solid case that the Bible is inerrant in its whole extent.

Ultimately, we believe the Bible to be inerrant because it comes from God Himself. It is unthinkable to contemplate that God might be capable of error. Therefore, His Word cannot possibly contain errors. This is our faith—we can trust the Bible because we can trust God.

—*R. C. Sproul*

# THE CHICAGO STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL INERRANCY

The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian church in this and every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly and faithfully obeying God's written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master. Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.

The following statement affirms this inerrancy of Scripture afresh, making clear our understanding of it and warning against its denial. We are persuaded that to deny it is to set aside the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit and to refuse that submission to the claims of God's own Word that marks true Christian faith. We see it as our timely duty to make this

affirmation in the face of current lapses from the truth of inerrancy among our fellow Christians and misunderstanding of this doctrine in the world at large.

This statement consists of three parts: a Summary Statement, Articles of Affirmation and Denial, and an accompanying Exposition. It has been prepared in the course of a three-day consultation in Chicago. Those who have signed the Summary Statement and the Articles wish to affirm their own conviction as to the inerrancy of Scripture and to encourage and challenge one another and all Christians to growing appreciation and understanding of this doctrine. We acknowledge the limitations of a document prepared in a brief, intensive conference and do not propose that this statement be given creedal weight. Yet we rejoice in the deepening of our own convictions through our discussions together, and we pray that the statement we have signed may be used to the glory of our God toward a new reformation of the church in its faith, life, and mission.

We offer this statement in a spirit, not of contention, but of humility and love, which we purpose by God's grace to maintain in any future dialogue arising out of what we have said. We gladly acknowledge that many who deny the inerrancy of Scripture do not display the consequences of this denial in the rest of their belief and behavior, and we are conscious that we who confess this doctrine often deny it in life by failing to bring our thoughts and deeds, our traditions and habits, into true subjection to the divine Word.

We invite response to this statement from any who see reason to amend its affirmations about Scripture by the light of Scripture itself, under whose infallible authority we stand as we speak. We claim no personal infallibility for the witness we bear, and for any help that enables us to strengthen this testimony to God's Word we shall be grateful.

### A SHORT STATEMENT

1. God, who is Himself truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.
2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.
3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.
4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and

about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.

5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the church.

## ARTICLES OF AFFIRMATION AND DENIAL

### *Article I*

**We affirm** that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God. **We deny** that the Scriptures receive their authority from the church, tradition, or any other human source.

### *Article II*

**We affirm** that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the church is subordinate to that of Scripture. **We deny** that church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.

### *Article III*

**We affirm** that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God. **We deny** that the Bible is merely a witness to revelation, or only becomes revelation in encounter, or depends on the responses of men for its validity.



*Article IV*

**We affirm** that God who made mankind in His image has used language as a means of revelation. **We deny** that human language is so limited by our creatureliness that it is rendered inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation. We further deny that the corruption of human culture and language through sin has thwarted God's work of inspiration.

*Article V*

**We affirm** that God's revelation within the Holy Scriptures was progressive. **We deny** that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings.

*Article VI*

**We affirm** that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration. **We deny** that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole.

*Article VII*

**We affirm** that inspiration was the work in which God by His Spirit, through human writers, gave us His Word. The origin of Scripture is divine. The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us. **We deny** that inspiration can be reduced to human insight, or to heightened states of consciousness of any kind.

*Article VIII*

**We affirm** that God in His work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared. **We deny** that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.

*Article IX*

**We affirm** that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the biblical authors were moved to speak and write. **We deny** that the finitude or fallenness of these writers, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God's Word.

*Article X*

**We affirm** that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original. **We deny** that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.

*Article XI*

**We affirm** that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in

all the matters it addresses. **We deny** that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant in its assertions. Infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, but not separated.

*Article XII*

**We affirm** that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. **We deny** that biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.

*Article XIII*

**We affirm** the propriety of using inerrancy as a theological term with reference to the complete truthfulness of Scripture. **We deny** that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

*Article XIV*

**We affirm** the unity and internal consistency of Scripture.

**We deny** that alleged errors and discrepancies that have not yet been resolved vitiate the truth claims of the Bible.

*Article XV*

**We affirm** that the doctrine of inerrancy is grounded in the teaching of the Bible about inspiration. **We deny** that Jesus' teaching about Scripture may be dismissed by appeals to accommodation or to any natural limitation of His humanity.

*Article XVI*

**We affirm** that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the church's faith throughout its history. **We deny** that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism.

*Article XVII*

**We affirm** that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the Scriptures, assuring believers of the truthfulness of God's written Word. **We deny** that this witness of the Holy Spirit operates in isolation from or against Scripture.

*Article XVIII*

**We affirm** that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. **We deny** the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship.

*Article XIX*

**We affirm** that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. We further affirm that such confession should lead to increasing conformity to the image of Christ. **We deny** that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the church.

EXPOSITION

Our understanding of the doctrine of inerrancy must be set in the context of the broader teachings of Scripture concerning itself. This exposition gives an account of the outline of doctrine from which our summary statement and articles are drawn.

*Creation, Revelation, and Inspiration*

The triune God, who formed all things by His creative utterances and governs all things by His word of decree, made mankind in His own image for a life of communion with Himself, on the model of the eternal fellowship of loving communication within the Godhead. As God's image-bearer, man was to hear God's Word addressed to him and to respond in the joy of adoring obedience. Over and above God's self-disclosure in the created order and the sequence of events within it, human beings from Adam on have received verbal messages from Him, either directly, as stated in Scripture, or indirectly in the form of part or all of Scripture itself.

When Adam fell, the Creator did not abandon mankind to final judgment but promised salvation and began to reveal Himself as Redeemer in a sequence of historical events centering on Abraham's family and culminating in the life, death, resurrection, present heavenly ministry, and promised return of Jesus Christ. Within this frame God has from time to time spoken specific words of judgment and mercy, promise and command, to sinful human beings, so drawing them into a covenant relation of mutual commitment between Him and them in which He blesses them with gifts of grace and they bless Him in responsive adoration. Moses, whom God used as mediator to carry His words to His people at the time of the Exodus, stands at the head of a long line of prophets in whose mouths and writings God put His words for delivery to Israel. God's purpose in this succession of messages was to maintain His covenant by causing His people to know His name—that is, His nature—and His will both of precept and purpose in the present and for the future. This line of prophetic spokesmen from God came to completion in Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Word, who was Himself a prophet—more than a prophet, but not less—and in the apostles and prophets of the first Christian generation. When God's final and climactic message, His Word to the world concerning Jesus Christ, had been spoken and elucidated by those in the apostolic circle, the sequence of revealed messages ceased. Henceforth, the church was to live and know God by what He had already said, and said for all time.

At Sinai, God wrote the terms of His covenant on tables of stone, as His enduring witness and for lasting accessibility, and throughout the period of prophetic and apostolic revelation He prompted men to write the messages given to and through them, along with celebratory records of His dealings with His people, plus moral reflections on covenant life and forms of praise and prayer for covenant mercy. The theological reality of inspiration in the producing of biblical documents corresponds to that of spoken prophecies: although the human writers' personalities were expressed in what they wrote, the words were divinely constituted. Thus, what Scripture says, God says; its authority is His authority, for He is its ultimate Author, having given it through the minds and words of chosen and prepared men who in freedom and faithfulness "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Holy Scripture must be acknowledged as the Word of God by virtue of its divine origin.

*Authority: Christ and the Bible*

Jesus Christ, the Son of God who is the Word made flesh, our Prophet, Priest, and King, is the ultimate Mediator of God's communication to man, as He is of all God's gifts of grace. The revelation He gave was more than verbal; He revealed the Father by His presence and His deeds as well. Yet His words were crucially important; for He was God, He spoke from the Father, and His words will judge all men at the last day.

As the prophesied Messiah, Jesus Christ is the central theme

of Scripture. The Old Testament looked ahead to Him; the New Testament looks back to His first coming and on to His second. Canonical Scripture is the divinely inspired and therefore normative witness to Christ. No hermeneutic, therefore, of which the historical Christ is not the focal point is acceptable. Holy Scripture must be treated as what it essentially is—the witness of the Father to the incarnate Son.

It appears that the Old Testament canon had been fixed by the time of Jesus. The New Testament canon is likewise now closed inasmuch as no new apostolic witness to the historical Christ can now be borne. No new revelation (as distinct from Spirit-given understanding of existing revelation) will be given until Christ comes again. The canon was created in principle by divine inspiration. The church's part was to discern the canon that God had created, not to devise one of its own.

The word canon, signifying a rule or standard, is a pointer to authority, which means the right to rule and control. Authority in Christianity belongs to God in His revelation, which means, on the one hand, Jesus Christ, the living Word, and, on the other hand, Holy Scripture, the written Word. The authority of Christ and that of Scripture are one. As our Prophet, Christ testified that Scripture cannot be broken. As our Priest and King, He devoted His earthly life to fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, even dying in obedience to the words of messianic prophecy. Thus, as He saw Scripture attesting Him and His authority, so by His own submission to Scripture He attested its authority. As He bowed to



His Father's instruction given in His Bible (our Old Testament), so He requires His disciples to do—not, however, in isolation but in conjunction with the apostolic witness to Himself which He undertook to inspire by His gift of the Holy Spirit. So Christians show themselves faithful servants of their Lord by bowing to the divine instruction given in the prophetic and apostolic writings that together make up our Bible.

By authenticating each other's authority, Christ and Scripture coalesce into a single fount of authority. The biblically interpreted Christ and the Christ-centered, Christ-proclaiming Bible are from this standpoint one. As from the fact of inspiration we infer that what Scripture says, God says, so from the revealed relation between Jesus Christ and Scripture we may equally declare that what Scripture says, Christ says.

*Infallibility, Inerrancy, Interpretation*

Holy Scripture, as the inspired Word of God witnessing authoritatively to Jesus Christ, may properly be called infallible and inerrant. These negative terms have a special value, for they explicitly safeguard crucial positive truths.

Infallible signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled, and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters.

Similarly, inerrant signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake, and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.

**We affirm** that canonical Scripture should always be interpreted on the basis that it is infallible and inerrant. However, in determining what the God-taught writer is asserting in each passage, we must pay the most careful attention to its claims and character as a human production. In inspiration, God utilized the culture and conventions of His penman's milieu, a milieu that God controls in His sovereign providence; it is misinterpretation to imagine otherwise.

So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, nonchronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers. When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.

The truthfulness of Scripture is not negated by the appearance in it of irregularities of grammar or spelling, phenomenal descriptions of nature, reports of false statements (e.g., the lies of Satan), or seeming discrepancies between one passage and another. It is not right to set the so-called "phenomena" of Scripture against the

teaching of Scripture about itself. Apparent inconsistencies should not be ignored. Solution of them, where this can be convincingly achieved, will encourage our faith, and where for the present no convincing solution is at hand we shall significantly honor God by trusting His assurance that His Word is true despite these appearances, and by maintaining our confidence that one day they will be seen to have been illusions.

Inasmuch as all Scripture is the product of a single divine mind, interpretation must stay within the bounds of the analogy of Scripture and eschew hypotheses that would correct one biblical passage by another, whether in the name of progressive revelation or of the imperfect enlightenment of the inspired writer's mind.

Although Holy Scripture is nowhere culture-bound in the sense that its teaching lacks universal validity, it is sometimes culturally conditioned by the customs and conventional views of a particular period, so that the application of its principles today calls for a different sort of action.

### *Skepticism and Criticism*

Since the Renaissance, and more particularly since the Enlightenment, worldviews have been developed that involve skepticism about basic Christian tenets. Such are the agnosticism that denies God is knowable, the rationalism that denies He is incomprehensible, the idealism that denies He is transcendent, and the existentialism that denies rationality in His relationships with us.

When these un- and antibiblical principles seep into men's theologies at a presuppositional level, as today they frequently do, faithful interpretation of Holy Scripture becomes impossible.

*Transmission and Translation*

Since God has nowhere promised an inerrant transmission of Scripture, it is necessary to affirm that only the autographic text of the original documents was inspired and to maintain the need of textual criticism as a means of detecting any slips that may have crept into the text in the course of its transmission. The verdict of this science, however, is that the Hebrew and Greek text appear to be amazingly well preserved, so that we are amply justified in affirming, with the Westminster Confession, a singular providence of God in this matter and in declaring that the authority of Scripture is in no way jeopardized by the fact that the copies we possess are not entirely error free.

Similarly, no translation is or can be perfect, and all translations are an additional step away from the autographa. Yet the verdict of linguistic science is that English-speaking Christians, at least, are exceedingly well served in these days with a host of excellent translations and have no cause for hesitating to conclude that the true Word of God is within their reach. Indeed, in view of the frequent repetition in Scripture of the main matters with which it deals and also of the Holy Spirit's constant witness to and through the Word, no serious translation of Holy Scripture will so destroy its meaning as to render it unable to

make its reader “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

*Inerrancy and Authority*

In our affirmation of the authority of Scripture as involving its total truth, we are consciously standing with Christ and His apostles, indeed with the whole Bible and with the mainstream of church history from the first days until very recently. We are concerned at the casual, inadvertent, and seemingly thoughtless way in which a belief of such far-reaching importance has been given up by so many in our day.

We are conscious, too, that great and grave confusion results from ceasing to maintain the total truth of the Bible whose authority one professes to acknowledge. The result of taking this step is that the Bible that God gave loses its authority, and what has authority instead is a Bible reduced in content according to the demands of one’s critical reasonings and in principle reducible still further once one has started. This means that at bottom, independent reason now has authority, as opposed to scriptural teaching. If this is not seen and if for the time being basic evangelical doctrines are still held, persons denying the full truth of Scripture may claim an evangelical identity while methodologically they have moved away from the evangelical principle of knowledge to an unstable subjectivism, and will find it hard not to move farther.

We affirm that what Scripture says, God says. May He be glorified. Amen and Amen.





# THE BIBLE AND AUTHORITY

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy rightly affirms that “the authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian church in this and every age.” But authority cannot stand in isolation, as the statement shows. The authority of the Bible is based on the fact that it is the written Word of God. Because the Bible is the Word of God and because the God of the Bible is truth and speaks truthfully, the Bible’s authority is linked to inerrancy. If the Bible is the Word of God and if God is a God of truth, then the

Bible *must* be inerrant—not merely in some of its parts, as some modern theologians are saying, but totally, as the church for the most part has said down through the ages of its history.

Some of the terms used in the debate about the authority and inerrancy of the Bible are technical ones. Some show up in the Chicago Statement, but they are not difficult to come to understand. They can be mastered (and the doctrine of inerrancy more fully understood) by a little reading and study. This commentary on the Chicago Statement attempts to provide such material in reference to the Nineteen Articles of Affirmation and Denial, which form the heart of the document. The full text of the statement appears as an appendix.

#### ARTICLE I: Authority

*We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God. We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the church, tradition, or any other human source.*

The initial article of the Chicago Statement is designed to establish the degree of authority that is to be attributed to



the Bible. This article, as well as Article II, makes the statement clearly a Protestant one. Though the Roman Catholic Church consistently and historically has maintained a high view of the inspiration of Holy Scripture, there remains the unresolved problem of the uniqueness and sufficiency of biblical authority for the church.

Rome has placed the traditions of the church alongside Scripture as a supplement to Scripture and, consequently, a source of special revelation beyond the scope of Scripture.

The Roman Catholic Church has asserted continuously that since the church established the extent and scope of the New Testament and Old Testament canon, there is a certain sense in which the authority of the Bible is subordinate to and dependent on the church's approval. These issues of the relationship of church and canon and of the question of multiple sources of special revelation are particularly in view in Articles I and II.

In early drafts of Article I, the extent of the canon was spelled out to include the sixty-six canonical books that are found and embraced within the context of most Protestant-sanctioned editions of the Bible. In discussions among the participants at the summit and because of requests to the Draft Committee, there was considerable sentiment for striking the words "sixty-six canonical books" from the early

drafts. This was due to some variance within Christendom as to the exact number of books that are to be recognized within the canon. For example, the Ethiopic Church has included more books in the canon than sixty-six. The final draft affirms simply that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God. For the vast majority of Protestants, the designation “Holy Scripture” has clear reference to the sixty-six canonical books, but it leaves room for those who differ on the canon question to participate in the confession of the nature of Scripture. The specific question of the number of books contained in that canon is left open in this statement.

The question of the scope of the canon, or the list of books that make up our Bible, may confuse many people, particularly those who are accustomed to a number of books clearly defined by their particular church confessions. Some have argued that if one questions a particular book’s canonicity, the implication is that one does not believe in a divinely inspired Bible. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this in history comes from the life of Martin Luther, who, at one point in his ministry, had strong reservations about including the book of James in the New Testament canon. Though it is abundantly clear that Luther believed in an inspired Bible, he had questions about whether a

particular book should be included in that inspired Bible. Several scholars have tried to use Luther's questioning of the book of James to deny that he believed in inspiration. It is very important to see the difference between the question of the scope of the canon and the question of the inspiration of the books that are recognized as included in the canon. In other words, the nature of Scripture and the extent of Scripture are different questions that must not be confused.

A key word in the affirmation section of Article I is *received*. The initial draft mentioned that the Scriptures are to be received by the church. The phrase "by the church" was deleted because it is clear that the Word of God in Holy Scripture is to be received not only by the church but by everyone. The word *received* has historical significance. In the church councils that considered the canon question, the Latin word *recipimus* ("we receive") was used; the councils were saying "we receive" various books to be included in the canon. By that usage of the word *receive*, the church made clear that it was not declaring certain books to be authoritative by its own authority, but that it was simply acknowledging the Word of God to be the Word of God. By using the word *receive*, the church fathers displayed their willingness to submit to what they regarded

to be already the Word of God. Consequently, any notion that the church creates the Bible or is superior to the Bible is denied by those who spelled out the canon.

If any ambiguity about the relationship of Scripture to the church remains in the affirmation, it is removed in the subsequent denial: The Scriptures receive their authority from God, not from the church or from any other human source.

#### ARTICLE II: Scripture and Tradition

*We affirm that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the church is subordinate to that of Scripture. We deny that church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.*

Article II of the Chicago Statement reinforces Article I and goes into more detail concerning the matters it addresses. Article II has in view the classical Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, which speaks of the unique authority of the Bible to bind the consciences of men. The affirmation of Article II speaks of the Scriptures as “the supreme written norm.”

At the summit, there was lengthy discussion concerning the word *supreme*; alternative words, such as *ultimate* and *only*, were suggested and subsequently eliminated from the text. The question had to do with the fact that other written documents are important to the life of the church. For example, church creeds and confessions form the basis of subscription and unity of faith in many different Christian denominations and communities. Such creeds and confessions have a kind of normative authority within a given Christian body and have the effect of binding consciences within that particular context. However, it is a classic tenet of Protestants to recognize that all such creeds and confessions are fallible and cannot fully and finally bind the conscience of an individual believer. Only the Word of God has the kind of authority that can bind the consciences of men forever. So while the articles acknowledge that there are other written norms recognized by different bodies of Christians, insofar as they are true, those written norms are derived from and are subordinate to the supreme written norm that is Holy Scripture.

The denial clearly spells out that no church creed, council, or declaration has authority greater than or equal to that of the Bible. Again, any idea that tradition or church officers have authority equal to Scripture is repudiated by

this statement. The question of a Christian's obedience to authority structures apart from Scripture was a matter of great discussion with regard to this article. For example, the Bible itself exhorts us to obey the civil magistrates. We are certainly willing to subject ourselves to our own church confessions and to the authority structures of our ecclesiastical bodies. But the thrust of this article is to indicate that whatever lesser authorities may exist, they never carry the authority of God Himself. There is a sense in which all authority in this world is derived from and dependent on the authority of God. God and God alone has intrinsic authority. That intrinsic authority is given to the Bible, since it is God's Word.

Various Christian bodies have defined the extent of civil authority and ecclesiastical authority in different ways. For example, in Reformed churches, the authority of the church is viewed as ministerial and declarative rather than ultimate and intrinsic. God and God alone has the absolute right to bind the consciences of men. Our consciences are justly bound to lesser authorities only when they are in conformity to the Word of God.

## About the Author

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