



Beating the Systems

A Plea for Humility in Exegesis

by

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Abstract: The greatest divisive force in Christianity are the various theological systems that exist among her adherents. An examination of the fundamental features of all theological systems that cause these divisions, *Beating the Systems* challenges the reader to hold the Bible as the greatest authority, to take a new view of their personal system and to display a biblical attitude towards those whose systems differ from theirs.

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Beating the Systems

A Plea for Humility in Exegesis

What is a tendency in the professor will become a heresy in the student.

— Dr. Ferris “Chip” McDaniel

I. Sparring

We called it “sparring.” It was one of the favorite pastimes on our seminary campus. If you were bored, or simply together with people who “enjoyed discussing things”, you could bring up a controversial theological topic and watch them have at it. Often someone would play the devil’s advocate and needle his friends about their viewpoint. Sometimes there were people who truly stood on the other side of the question and were arguing their position from a sincere heart. At times the discussion would get personal, tempers would flare and personal insults might be exchanged (though in a “loving” and “Christian” manner), and the discussion would terminate with the angry parties stalking off, muttering to themselves how narrow-minded their counterparts were. By dinner time usually the debaters would have reconciled somewhat, but they’d still be touchy about their pet theological subject.

Well, we *were* seminary students, after all. Discussing the minutiae of Christian theology was bread and butter, light and air to us, much like it might be to a student in a Jewish Yeshiva. We were being trained for this, for “accurately handling the word of truth,”¹ for defending the Faith, for making sure that people did not introduce heresy into the Church or alter her time-honored doctrines and systems. Fortunately, we were able to remain friends despite our sometimes violently differing theological viewpoints. But I have found that not to be the case with many every-day Christians.

Your average Christian layperson, regardless of which flavor of Christianity he or she belongs to, will often cling to a certain theological viewpoint without ever having thought through all of the implications of it and they will defend it viciously, not allowing any flaws to be pointed out in it. They are the death commandos of their Christian theology, those who would rather die than be shown that there are any weaknesses in their understanding of Truth. And it is in a great part to these beloved brothers and sisters that I am writing.

II. The Problem With Systems

The biggest problem facing the Christian church today are her internal divisions, most of which arise to some extent from our differing theological systems. A theological system is the way that a person understands how the various topics of Scripture fit together into one big picture. As our systems seek to categorize and explain the Bible and its teachings, we seek to assemble the various topics of Scripture into a coherent picture, which is often meant to explain everything.

Before I go any farther here, I want to point out that I am not against systems. As Dr. Richard Belcher put it, “Whether it is realized or not, every person has a system of theology.”² God has created us in His image, which means in part that we, like the One who ordered the universe, have an innate desire to order and catalogue things. This sense of order differs from person to person, but in the end it will result in our building a system for our theology. Some know what their system is as it is meticulously built by their reason, block by block. Others have assimilated various truths and untruths

¹ II Timothy 2:15

² Richard P. Belcher, *A Comparison of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, Inc., 1986), p 1.

and have formed them into a loosely-knit system that easily shifts and morphs as they encounter new truths. Still others don't even know they have a system, even though they behave like they do when backed into a corner. We all have it, we all use it, we all need it to make sense of God's truth and this universe.

As indispensable as these systems might be to us, there are four dangers that arise as we use the systems.

1. The system can try to explain everything.
2. The system can prefer deductive logic over inductive logic.
3. The system can easily become the ultimate authority, replacing Scripture.
4. The system can read its ideas into Scripture rather than bringing them out of Scripture.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

A. Trying to Explain Everything

Perhaps the biggest danger in any system is that it will seek to explain everything in Scripture and in the universe. This is a natural impulse for us humans, as most of us desire harmony around and within us. We have tried various ways of achieving this harmony, sometimes trying to alter our surroundings, sometimes trying to alter ourselves to fit our surroundings. This desire for harmony is extended to our understanding of Scripture and so we build constructs that attempt to explain everything. We want answers for every possible question and if we think we have all the answers we get proud.

The thing is that there are some things in Scripture that are not meant to be explained, or that cannot be explained using our human logic. Much of this lies within the character of God and the way He has chosen to reveal Truth to us. We'll deal with this a little later on.

B. Primarily Using Deductive Logic

Because the system tries to explain everything, it will often use deductive logic rather than inductive logic as its primary form of construction.

Inductive logic is "reasoning from particular facts or individual cases to a general conclusion."³ In other words we work *from* the source. We gather all the evidence, take a careful look at it, and then decide what it means. This is what the followers of the Inductive Bible Study Method use when they approach Scripture. The Bible is allowed to say what it will say *before* a conclusion is reached. In this case the object studied is the authority and the person studying the student.

Deductive logic, on the other hand, is "reasoning from a known principle to an unknown, from the general to the specific, or from a premise to a logical conclusion."⁴ In other words, we know something to be true, therefore something similar that we encounter, but are uncertain of, *must* mean the same thing. Sherlock Holmes is perhaps the best example of deductive logic, being an expert on many different things, he is able to deduce the truth about a person using his expertise. In this approach the person studying the object is the authority. The object is simply interpreted within a framework that the expert has already espoused and is not allowed to speak for itself.

³ David B. Guralnick, *Webster's New World Dictionary* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1986) as quoted in C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002) p 19.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp 19-20.

Which type of logic is the correct logic for approaching the Scriptures? Probably the former, because of the fact that when deductive logic is used, the interpreter becomes the authority. Dr. Brad Mullen's contention regarding authority is that "any additional authority supplants the Truth."⁵ Thus when the interpreter is the authority, Scripture ceases being the authority. (Oops, am I using deductive logic here? Well, well, well!)

Now, deductive logic has its place and is often necessary, but when dealing with the Word of God my contention is that inductive logic should come first, because when deductive logic is given primacy, the theologian will often make statements that are not only un-Biblical, they are anti-Biblical.

C. Becoming the Ultimate Authority

As already mentioned above, when the deductive method is used in constructing the system, the authority in regards to the Truth moves from the Bible to the system. For that reason when the system is criticized using passages in the Bible that seem to contradict it, the person who holds to that system will perceive an attack on the entire integrity of their construct of truth and they will seek to defend it most vehemently.

The interesting thing is that when the system becomes the ultimate authority, the people holding to that system will look down on those who only partially accept it or don't accept it at all. As an example, at one point my father was in a dialogue with a man who was an extremely strong proponent of the Five-Point Calvinistic System of Theology. While discussing that the Bible does support the idea of a free will in man (which Five-Point Calvinism denies), the young gentleman haughtily told my father that he had "not yet understood the doctrine of grace." It seemed that this man viewed his understanding of the "doctrine of grace" as some sort of specialized, Gnostic knowledge that only Five-Point Calvinists could comprehend.

D. Reading Into Scripture

And that brings us to the fourth danger that threatens all theological systems. When the system is the ultimate authority, then all Bible passages that contradict (or seem to contradict) the system must be explained away. The exegete then reads his or her ideas into the Bible, rather than letting the Bible form or reform his or her ideas.

An example of explaining away passages is how those who hold to eternal security deal with passages such as Hebrews 6:4-6, which do seem to support the loss of salvation. Conversely those who hold to a loss of salvation deal just as badly with passages that seem to support eternal security, such as John 10:28-29. In either case, the problem passages are not treated fairly because they *could* prove the other side's point.

An example of reading one's ideas into a passage is the way that some Christians read I Corinthians 13:8. These verses are used to "prove" that the miraculous spiritual gifts (such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, healing, etc.) have already ceased. The passage does say that the tongues will cease, but gives no direct reference to the time frame, making it an easy passage to twist one way or the other, depending on one's preference.

There are many examples of how various theological systems twist Scripture, and no system is innocent of doing so, though there are some who are less guilty than others. It is not the scope of this paper to deal with those failings. Others have written eloquently about these errors in their various books. My point here is to rather encourage a rethinking of our individual approaches to Scripture, to

⁵ Quote from his class *Advanced Hermeneutics: History and Issues* at Columbia International University, Fall 1999.

understand the necessity for tension in Scripture, as well as to prompt a constant willingness to allow our systems to be updated and maintained by the Word of God itself as we gain a deeper understanding of this one-of-a kind book, rather than allow them to become stagnant and so detrimental both to ourselves and those around us.

If you are interested in some of the ways that various systems mess with the Bible, I have listed a summary of some of these in Appendix A.

III. The Human Factor

Regardless of the variety of theological systems out there and how well they reflect reality as portrayed in Scripture, there is *one* factor that is common to all of them: the human being.

Systems more often end up being a showcase for the prowess humans, rather than the comprehension of Scripture, because they attempt to offer full explanations for something that cannot be fathomed this side of Eternity. The simple reason for that is the human condition. Those of us who have systems that attempt to explain everything have either forgotten about that or they don't take it as seriously as they say they do. There are three factors of the human condition that need to be addressed: finiteness, depravity, and logic.

A. The Finite Human

I watch a lot of science fiction, mostly because I like the story lines and sometimes because I like to laugh at those who think they can solve all the world's problems with a little bit of technology.⁶ One of the ever recurring mantras of sci-fi is the idea that we as humans have not reached our fullest potential ("We only use 10% of our brains."⁷) and that we must learn to grow beyond ourselves to become gods and take our rightful place in the universe.

Theologians do the same thing, except that they take the Bible as their basis, thinking that their minds can wrap themselves around something that is vastly larger than themselves.

Let's face it, we're finite. We have a beginning. According to a plain reading Scripture we won't have an "end" in the sense that we'll cease to exist entirely⁸, but there will be terminus of life on this small blue planet.

Our having a beginning sets us apart from God, who is infinite. Scripture is unequivocal about that. Psalm 90:2 states:

Before the mountains were born
Or You gave birth to the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

God's infinity does not only deal with His existing before everything else, but also with other aspects of His character, such as His intelligence and wisdom. In a moment of supreme theological wonder, the Apostle Paul shouts out:

⁶ On a side bar, ever notice how both sci-fi and fantasy literature are about the same thing? They're both about control. Sci-fi controls the world through technology, fantasy through magic and in both cases simple, finite humans cease being what they are and become gods.

⁷ This is claimed on many occasions in various sci-fi works, but one recent place I've heard it used was by Dr. Janet Frasier (played by Teryl Rothery) in the Episode entitled "The Rite of Passage" of the TV show *Stargate SG-1*.

⁸ See here Revelation 20:11-13 for the damned and Revelation 21-22 for the redeemed.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
 How unsearchable his judgments,
 and his paths beyond tracing out!
 “Who has known the mind of the Lord?
 Or who has been his counselor?”
 “Who has ever given to God,
 that God should repay him?”
 For from him and through him and to him are all things.
 To him be the glory forever! Amen.⁹

God Himself says through Isaiah’s pen,

“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 So are My ways higher than your ways
 And My thoughts than your thoughts.”¹⁰

God is far beyond the human mind. He created it after all and the creation is by necessity inferior to the uncreated Creator, simply by the fact that it *had to be created*.

The fact that we are finite dictates the conclusion (deductive logic, again) that we cannot comprehend the infinite. One picture that we might use to illustrate this is the medieval cathedral which abounds in Europe. Most of these were built in the shape of a cross with a steeply sloped roof and many crenellations and much ornamentation. Because of the immense size and unusual shape of the cathedral it is impossible for a human standing beside it to see any more than three or four sides at once. And if you stand far enough back to do that, you miss out on all the detail on the sides. I will not even mention that when you’re outside you can’t see the inside and vice versa. Add to that the subterranean levels found in most cathedrals, which few people will see, and it becomes clear that we tiny human beings cannot look at any more than a small portion of this vast building at any one time.

Now, the more pious builders of the cathedrals meant them to represent God to an illiterate populace and they do indeed capture a modicum of the grandeur of the One to whom they are dedicated. But what they perhaps best captured was a picture of how one person alone cannot see all of God. Standing at the base of a cathedral is like contemplating God. Just as the human eye cannot take in any more than a mere fraction of the great building at any one time, so the human mind cannot apprehend more than the smallest part of Yahweh. Just the idea of the Three-In-One is enough to blow the mind, not to mention all other parts of Him!

Transferring this concept to theology – which is the study of God – and the systems that result from that, due to the finiteness of the human mind, it is not possible for us to fully explain spiritual realities. If we seek to put all of the Truth in Scripture under only one large theme¹¹, we will fall short and there will always be pieces that don’t fully fit within our chosen rubric.

If you think me to be crass in saying this, take for example the relatively small area of Old Testament Theology. This field deals only with what the Old Testament has to say about God. Gerhard Hassel’s *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*¹² catalogues the various attempts of

⁹ Romans 11:33-36 (NIV)

¹⁰ Isaiah 55:9 (NIV)

¹¹ One prime example here is the Calvinist system’s trying to order everything under the rubric of God’s sovereignty. See here H. Henry Meeter, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956).

¹² Gerhard Hassel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Fourth Edition. Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) is a hassle to read but is extremely informative.

many different theologians to distill an overarching theme about God from the Old Testament. After a very careful study and a listing of the shortcomings of the various approaches, Hassel concludes:

Our attempt to focus on unresolved crucial problems which are at the center of the current crisis in OT theology has revealed that there are basic inadequacies in the current methodologies and approaches.¹³

If that is his conclusion dealing solely with the *Old Testament*, which is only a *part* of overall Scripture, what happens with the rest of the Bible? The interesting thing is that, as prolific as Old Testament theologies are, they are eclipsed by the New Testament theologies!¹⁴ No one seems to be able to agree on one overriding principle as to how to order or explain all of Scripture, which clearly supports the idea of God being like a cathedral.

B. The Depraved Human

Added to this innate finiteness is another aspect of humanity that few of us like to admit to and that is our depravity. The Calvinist system makes much of the evil that resides in the human heart, as any system of theology that takes the Bible seriously should. Scripture minces no words about how evil we are. Jeremiah dryly remarks:

The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?¹⁵

Quoting the Old Testament, Paul the apostle writes:

There is none righteous, not even one;
there is none who understands,
there is none who seeks for God;
all have turned aside, together they have become useless;
there is none who does good,
there is not even one.¹⁶

He then later goes on to write, “[F]or there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God....”¹⁷

Most Christians will agree with this assessment. However what we don’t seem to agree with is the fact that, this side of Eternity we still wrestle with that fallen nature. Once more Paul so eloquently puts it in his letter to the Romans:

For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But

¹³ Hassel, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 194.

¹⁴ A simple search of an on-line Christian book store will confirm this fact.

¹⁵ Jeremiah 17:9 – The tenor of the question and the context suggest that the answer here be “no one.”

¹⁶ Romans 3:10-12, quoting Psalm 14:1-3 and 53:1-3

¹⁷ Romans 3:22b-23

if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.¹⁸

If Paul of Tarsus, one of the most godly men to have ever lived, could say something like that, how much more we who struggle to follow in his footsteps! The depravity clings to us this side of Eternity, it infests us and fights against God's Spirit's changing power. And the insidious thing is that we often don't notice when it strikes, especially when we deal with our theological systems. We think that, because they deal with the spiritual things, they won't be tainted by the twistedness of our fallen nature. This is where we must stop and rethink. We must realize how permeated we are with sin, how even our moments of highest, most godly bliss will incorporate a few motives that are not in tune with God's will. This includes our understanding of God.

If we stop and honestly examine ourselves we will find that often two things swing in our building our theology and our defending it. The first is pride. We have labored hard, we understand the Truth about the One God. He has revealed Himself to *us*!

Beware! Duane Garret once very astutely observed, "Nothing is more harmful to the soul as the notion that my thoughts are God's thoughts and that He is on my side."¹⁹ If we feel that we are the ones who have "eaten the truth with a spoon"²⁰, as the Germans put it, then we will view our flawed system to be God's one and only tool to explain Truth to the world. We'll be trying to squeeze the Bible into our tiny, odd-shaped constructs and will be shocked to find corners of it poking out in places we don't expect.

In addition to pride, we will often draw our significance from the coherence of our system and our understanding of Scripture through it, rather than from the God who has made us and redeemed us. If our system is threatened, be it by another person or by the Word itself, then our very significance will be threatened and we will fight tooth and nail to keep anything from tearing this significance away from us. This might account for the death-commandos of the various systems as they have hung their whole worth on this "correct" reading of the Bible.

Add to this that God *does* allow a spiritual blindness to claim people who have rejected the Light. This is not to say that most systems are darkness, but any system *can* lead to darkness if any Light given which contradicts or alters the system is rejected in favor of the coherency of the system.²¹

C. The Logical Human

Another area where our humanity surfaces is in how we have been taught to think. Logic is something that is learned and it clearly differs from society to society. This is why eastern and western thought processes so often clash. It is not merely an issue of differing values, but even a complete difference of how an easterner and a westerner arrive at varying conclusions when faced with the same problem. A very typical eastern response to a problem is to ignore it as long as possible, hoping it will go away, whereas westerners tend to grab the problem by the horns and get rid of it.

Tied in with this is the fact that the Bible is not a western book. It is an extremely *eastern* book, middle-eastern to be precise and so the logic behind its writing is alien to us westerners. We have been

¹⁸ Romans 7:14-21

¹⁹ Duane Garrett, *Angels and the New Spirituality* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995).

²⁰ The literal German proverb is even a little more crass than that. "*Sie haben die Wahrheit mit Löffeln gefressen*" uses a term for eating that is only used of the way that animals eat and might be translated more accurately as, "They have gorged themselves on the Truth with a spoon."

²¹ The cults of the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are a good testament to this.

brought up to use Greek logic and Greek thought processes which are highly analytical and deal mostly with deconstructing an issue and looking at its minutiae before trying to reassemble it into the big picture. Hence we run afoul such issues as how to reconcile the free will of man with the absolute sovereignty of God or the idea that we are eternally secure versus the idea that our actions do affect our salvation.

The answer here is the Bible was written not by Greeks, but by Hebrews, who employ a very different system of thought and logic than the Greeks do. The Hebrews seem to espouse a more holistic thought process in which the statement of two opposites to make a point is regular. The Hebrews love comparisons. Their entire poetry is based upon that, comparing similar things, comparing opposites, expanding on those comparisons. Thus it would only be natural for a Hebrew to express the deep things of God in statements that might seem paradoxical to a Greek mindset.

Being trained in western thought, not only in our schools, but also in our seminaries, we wrestle with questions that did not even exist to the Hebrew writers of the Bible. It is often our shortcoming that we try to invent solutions to problems that don't even really exist in Scripture! We need to learn to think like the Hebrews when we read the Bible, rather than using our Greek thought systems.

Now, there is nothing wrong with the Greek system of logic, as a matter of fact, when used in tandem with the Hebrew system, it is an incredibly powerful tool, but it remains a man-made thing, just as Hebrew logic is. However, for some reason, God chose to reveal Himself through Hebrew thought processes and not through the Greek ones. Perhaps it was because the only way to describe someone like Himself to us limited, depraved humans was through the concrete terms and holistic thought processes of the Hebrew mind. Imagine how it would have been if He'd used the abstract ideas of the Greeks, which are sometimes so esoteric that the seminary student can't understand them, much less the every-day Joe on the street.²²

When we honestly look at these three aspects of the human nature, our finiteness, depravity and lack of training in Hebrew thought should make us extremely humble as we approach Scripture. We must remember that, regardless of how brilliant we are, we will only apprehend the smallest amount of who and what God really is and our system of theology *must* reflect that. We *can't* know it all, at least not this side of Eternity.

IV. The Faith Matrix²³

In addition to our human short-comings comes the point that our systems should be based on *faith*, not on logic. Faith is what really drives every human being, it is central to his or her life. We base everything we do and say on certain propositional mores that we hold to be true, things that usually can't be fully corroborated by hard facts. I like to call this group of propositional mores the faith matrix.

The faith matrix of one human being can strongly differ from his or her beliefs, because we will often say one thing, but do another. It is our actions that prove what is in our faith matrix and thus our faith matrix will affect our theological system much more than our mind will, because it is much more fundamental than our mind.

Often the pride of our system and our finding our security in our system are an integral part of our faith matrix that we deny. What we truly believe will manifest itself in the way we respond to threats to our system of theology or the way that we will act in an every-day situation.

²² For more about the difference between Greek and Hebrew thought, see Appendix B.

²³ For more on faith, see J.M. Diener's paper "Faith: Taking God at His Word and Acting Upon It" available from WolfHawke.com <<http://www.wolfhawke.com/musing/defide.php>>

V. Living On the Net

So what should our systems be like? This is a difficult question to answer, mostly because there are no final answers. I would like to use a word picture to suggest how we should view our theological system.

Most of us think of our system as a strong structure, based on the solid rock of Biblical teaching. It will withstand anything that the winds of doubt can send at it. But what happens when the supposedly so solid bedrock shifts, because our understanding of Scripture deepens? The concrete structure begins to collapse in on itself, because it was only built to withstand outside effects, not fundamental ones.

Perhaps a better image of a system that is based solely on Scripture is that of a round chasm. You might say that the chasm is the unknown. On every side of this deep cleft are various eyelets, axiomatic truths that are drilled deep into the bedrock of truth. Anchored to these eyelets are heavy steel cables that span the chasm, crisscrossing one another and forming a strong, secure mesh that can support enormous amounts of weight. The net is flexible, but it is still extremely safe, because if the tension in one strand lessens, the tension in another one will tighten, keeping the entire construct stable.

This picture is what our theologies should look like. We must live on the net itself, understanding that many of the axiomatic truths in Scripture are diametrically opposed from one another and it is the tension between the two that makes them work! Take, for example, the fact that we are utterly depraved. At the same time we are saved and completely holy. God is utterly sovereign, in control of every facet of all creation, and yet we have a completely free will. God is completely just and must punish sin, but He is also completely merciful and will forgive those who come to Him. God is Three and yet He is One. There are many more examples like this in Scripture and it is precisely the tension that exists between these points that keeps the system secure.

Most theological systems will place their buildings on a given eyelet and shoot at everyone else who has built theirs on another eyelet. Take here, for example, the eternally sparring Calvinists and Arminians. They shoot at each other across the chasm, not realizing that there is Truth in both positions and that it is precisely that tension that makes their systems secure.

Now, the fact that this construct hangs over a chasm is another important part of the picture. God does not reveal everything. To put that in layman's terms, that would be like trying to download the FBI's entire fingerprint files on to a single floppy disk. It just won't work. There isn't enough space to store all the information! God is so big, so vast that we *can't* know everything, but He still gives us enough to be secure – the strands crossing the chasm of the unknown.

And that is where we must allow mystery to remain mystery. Trying to peer behind every curtain, to ascertain all the truths is a very human trait, but it is precisely in the mystery of God that the most worship abounds. Maybe the mystics have a point in trying to experience God. They are content to let the mystery be what it is, while we scholars stumble around in God's china shop, clumsily knocking over His wonderful truths, shattering them at times, and not really stopping to marvel at the beauty of the way they are put together, only looking at the fine lines etched into the whole or at the shards on the floor, not comprehending the entire picture.

That said, one lesson that can be drawn from this image is that Truth is often, but not always, found in the middle. Perhaps it is so in the case of God's sovereignty and the free will of man, or in the melding of the symbolism and the spiritual effect of the Eucharist. At other times the answer is found on a completely different plain, one that the human mind cannot even conceive. Who would have thought that God could satisfy both His mercy and His justice through His grace? What human could have conceived of a salvation that would have resulted from *God* dying for us? That is beyond all human scope and the only result it can engender is abject humility and soaring worship.

VI. *Knowing the Center*

And that is where it all focuses: on God, the Three-In-One, Himself. He is the center of Scripture and without Jesus Christ all that is written in that magnificent book is null and void. If you don't know Jesus then your exegesis *will be* flawed, because as much as the Bible is the written Word of God, Jesus Christ is the *spoken* Word of God, the *living* Word of God. Knowing Him is all and truly knowing Him will affect our whole being, right down to our faith matrix!

Now, note that this knowledge is not merely in our head. This is where the weakness of the English language becomes apparent, because we have no term to directly convey the Hebrew concept of *yadah*, that deep, experiential knowledge that describes even the deepest, most intimate relationship between a husband and wife. This knowledge encompasses every part of our being, from our mind, will and emotions to our physical self. It supremely impacts our faith matrix, filling it with love, facts, and experience of Christ Himself, and so it will impact our theological system in a way that we could never even *dream* possible.

It is precisely our relationship to Him and our respect and love for Him that will cause us to act differently towards those who don't see everything the same way we do. We will learn to love our fellow Christians in such a way that we can allow opinions to remain opinions and we will not force them on others. We will learn to gently, lovingly pass on the Truth. This may still hurt our brothers and sisters sometimes, but that can be also necessary.

As knowing the center is a whole-being thing, it is immensely practical, especially when dealing with those who do not believe everything just the way we do. There are basically two things that you can do to know the center better. First, you protect yourself and, second, you practice love toward your brother or sister in Christ.

A. **Protect Yourself**

Solomon put it best in Proverbs 4:23: "*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*"²⁴

Guarding one's heart is a constant occupation, watching what we put into it so that what comes out of it is good, too. The old computer term GIGO (Garbage In – Garbage Out) applies quite well here.

How do we guard our hearts? First of all we need to know what we believe and why we believe it. There are too many people out there who believe things because their pastor said so and/or because they liked the way something sounded to them. More often than not these people know the what, but not the why. Learning the why takes time and it can sometimes end up being rather upsetting, because it might turn up some major flaws within our thinking and may have to cause us to substantially revise our system.

One thing must be stressed here: There are certain aspects to true Christian theology that *must not* be compromised. There is only One God, who is also Three. This God became an historical man, Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ. He lived an exemplary life on this earth, died on the cross for our sins and rose again on the third day. He ascended into heaven where He sits at the right hand of God the Father. *Anyone* who accepts that Jesus died for their sins and rose again and confesses this (whether in prayer or otherwise) is saved²⁵ and this salvation will show itself through a life that is pleasing to the principles God set forth in His Word²⁶, which is the ultimate measure of Truth on this earth. Every *true* Christian should be able to agree with these core values. Other things can be debated.

²⁴ NIV

²⁵ See here the Apostle Paul's masterful summary of what it takes to be saved in Romans 10:8-10.

²⁶ See Ephesians 2:8-10 and James 2:14-26

As said above our number one tool in all of this is the Word of God, all 66 books of the Bible. It is not our logic, not our training, but the Ancient Words past down to us through the Ages. It is very clear in II Timothy 3:16-17.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Anyone who brings any knowledge beyond what is contained within the Word of God and anyone who tries to limit it is not to be trusted, regardless of what tools they use to justify their positions. Paul has a lot to say about such teachers and most of what he says is much more harsh than any of us would dare to say nowadays, but in the end he always comes back to the same thing. Take Philippians 3:2-3 as an example:

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

After using some very strong terms for those who did not teach in accordance with what he taught, Paul points us to what is important, where our confidence must lie: in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit, not in our earthly being, of which our logic is a part. There is much more at stake here than simply having wrong teachings though, as he warns the Colossians:

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.²⁷

Having wrong teachings keeps us from attaining what God wants us to reach, which is becoming more like Christ. It is interesting that Paul points out the “fleshly mind” here as something that needs to be avoided. This includes a logic that is not constantly infused with the Truth as found in the Word of God and which espouses worldly systems of thought to explain what is beyond the grasp of one who lives in this mortal realm.²⁸

Another *highly* important quality of self-protection is the humility of mind that comes from constantly being in the presence of God and knowing that we can't understand it all. We must be drawing our worth from who we are in Christ and not from the ideas that form in our heads. That way if they're shot down we won't react angrily, but will simply pick up the pieces and try to find what we need to change to be more in line with Scripture. If we simply and honestly hold to this point of view, then we have already won half the battle.

B. Practice Love

Once we are secure in our knowledge of who we are, what we believe, and why we believe it, we can turn outward to those around us and fulfill Christ's greatest commandment to us: “This is My

²⁷ Colossians 2:18-19

²⁸ One example might be the various attempts of the Source Criticism Movement in trying to determine who wrote certain books of the Bible, not believing the plain reading of the text because there is no such thing as prophecy (since the supernatural doesn't exist), and thus the writer *must* have lived after the events, only using a more famous pseudonym to sell their books more easily.

commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you."²⁹ Many years later the Apostle John expounds on this in his first letter.

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.³⁰

Laying down our lives for our brothers, includes putting ourselves in a vulnerable position that can often result in our Christian siblings severely wounding our pride and sense of self-worth when it comes time to point out the error of their ways. No one ever said that loving someone would be easy. As a matter of fact it's a whole lot harder than simply tolerating them.

Living on the net is much harder than living in a rigid structure and those who don't dare to hold to the Word and the Word alone often can't understand what makes those of us who live on the net so secure. We need to help them come out of their little constructs and see the true freedom that there is in a flexible system of theology that puts God above the system. True freedom is scary and I don't blame anyone who doesn't want to attempt it. But if we *truly* love our brothers and sisters, we'll sacrifice time, energy, money, self-worth, and everything else to help set them free.

This will often involve confronting that person and Paul gives guidelines for that in the book of Galatians.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.³¹

There are two key thoughts here: first of all is the spirit in which we must approach the situation and that is one of gentleness. We may want to ram the point home, because we *are* right and we *know* it! However, a gentle word is more often received than a harsh one, even by someone who doesn't quite see things their own way. So we must learn to temper the way we present the Truth to those who are partially blinded from it by their own logic and concrete walls.

The second thing is what I mentioned in the previous point. Remember that we are fallible and that even our understanding of the Truth is incomplete. It is easy to be tempted by the relative security of a solid theological structure over the sometimes disconcerting movement of the net. As a matter of fact we sometimes think we're living and operating on the net, but are really now living in our little concrete structure on one of the eyelets. Our personal response to Truths that come along that differ from our understanding of Scripture can help us gauge where we're at.

Paul gives a very good example of this when he confronts fellow Apostle Peter in Galatians 2:11-14. While visiting with Paul, Peter began to exhibit some un-Christian attitudes and actions towards the Gentile believers when other Jewish believers showed up. Peter's actions arose from a human teaching not arising from Scripture, but from the extensions to Scripture that certain Christians who had come from the sect of the Pharisees had introduced into the Church. It took Paul standing up *publicly* and denouncing Peter's actions to bring things back on track. From what we know of Peter, I believe that he was duly chastised and changed his ways, but it is interesting how pernicious such teachings can be especially if we try to bow to the "weaker brother" and make him feel comfortable. If it's true, it's true

²⁹ John 15:12

³⁰ I John 3:14-18

³¹ Galatians 6:1

regardless of how it offends someone who doesn't want to accept it. We don't have to apologize for the Truth, we just have to present it as a surgeon wielding a scalpel rather than a warrior swinging a sword. And this takes practice – lots of practice.

VII. Where Do We Go From Here?

You may have noticed that the key concept of “living on the net” is not necessarily found in so many words in Scripture. I will admit to that and I view this as only the beginning to this idea. It is fascinating and it has broad applications, but it also has its dangers. As with any teaching there may be seeds of heresy within this one. I am not advocating a free-for-all bashing of all theological systems, nor am I suggesting that my way is the only right way. I know my personal failings and my lack of understanding of the Cosmic Order much too well to say that. The key to everything is that we need to be *humble* in the way we approach the Unseen and keep our study of it to the one place and the one authority that has anything to say about the Eternal World – the Holy Bible.

That said, all theological systems that are even remotely based on the Bible will have *some* Truth in them somewhere, simply because they have taken the Bible as their basis. This Truth can be as obvious as marble walls in a building, or more hidden like gold in a gravel bank. Sometimes the system even makes the Truth found in it as worthless as rice kernels strewn in a puddle of motor oil, but the Truth is still there.

For that reason let's respect our Christian brothers and sisters and love them with all their flaws and weaknesses. Let's remember our own limitations and that our true worth comes not from our system of theology but from the fact that we are Children of the One Living God who has chosen us despite ourselves and has adopted us into His Holy Family.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.³²

³² Jude 24-25 (NIV)

Appendix A: System Errors

All systems contain errors, as they are built on a human understanding of Scripture. I have summarized some of the discrepancies found within these systems here. This is not an exhaustive list, nor is it meant to be, nor are the arguments presented on either side complete. As mentioned above, others have eloquently argued both sides of each issue and I will leave it to you, dear reader, to delve into these subjects.

If your particular brand of Christianity is not found here, it probably simply means that I have not yet had the chance to study it as carefully as those listed here. Please do not be offended about these statements. I will try to add references and opportunities for further reading on the various systems where I can.

Each of the entries will define the system, give a brief summary of the erroneous point and then attempt to explain from where the error might stem and what makes it an error. These will be brief summaries *not* exhaustive treatises. Others have already done an admirable job at that. Suffice it to say that there are two things that I will assume as I put these together.

1. God exists and He has chosen to speak to us, coming to earth as the man Jesus Christ, dying for our sins and rising again from the dead.
2. The Bible is a supernatural book, coming from the very mouth of God, His missive to us and it is the authority for all things supernatural. Nothing else is needed, nothing else need be consulted.

A. Arminianism

Issue: Man can lose his salvation.

Key passage: Hebrews 6:4-6

Basis: Man's free will is extremely important in coming to God and he can chose for or against God *freely*.

Argument: Because man has a free will and has the ability to aid in his salvation by choosing God, he also has the ability to decide to leave the fold of God and turn his back on God's offer. This choosing against God is shown through the actions of the individual and he will have lost his salvation if he lives contrary to what God desires.

Result: Legalism, judgment of individuals, constant fear of losing salvation

Rebuttal:

1. Jesus' words in John 10:27-29:

*"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and **no one** will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and **no one** is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."*

"No one" is assumed to include oneself, which the plain reading of the text suggests.

2. Paul's statement concerning the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 1:13b-14 (NIV):

*"Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised **Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance** until the redemption of those who are God's possession — to the praise of his glory."*

A deposit that guarantees our inheritance strongly suggests that the deposit cannot and will not be taken back.

Further Reading:

C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002)

B. Calvinism

1. *The Sovereignty of God*

Issue: God's primary attribute is His sovereignty

Origin: A fundamental assumption supposedly set forth by John Calvin himself.

Scripture: Lacking

Argument:

"According to the Calvinist, God is not only the supreme Lawgiver and Ruler; but God is supreme also in the realm of truth in science, and in art quite as much as in the realm of morals, in the dissemination of His love and grace and all His gifts as well as in the administration of the laws which men are to live by or which operate in nature. The Calvinist believes that God does not act arbitrarily either in the dissemination of His gifts or in His providential control of man and nature. Order is heaven's first law."³³

Result: The entire Calvinistic System of thought; dual predestination; God is responsible for sin; we are no more than automatons.

Rebuttal:

God's nature is perfect (Psalm 18:30). This suggests that none of His attributes would supersede another. He is a perfect balance of all His attributes, His sovereignty included. Therefore, to build a system on one attribute of God is to focus only on the exterior of one wall of the cathedral and to deny the existence of all other parts of it.

It is also interesting to note that in I Corinthians 14:33 Paul does not contrast God's dislike of disorder with order, but with *peace*!

2. *Dual Predestination*

Issue: Just as God has predestined humans to be saved, so He has also predestined them to be condemned.

³³ H. Henry Meeter, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956) pp. 33-34.

Basis: God's sovereignty allows Him to choose whom He wants to accept and whom He wants to condemn.

Key passages: Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:4-6

Argument: Because God has decreed that certain people will accept Him, the logical conclusion is that He has also decreed which ones *won't* accept Him. Because God's will is irresistible, it will happen as He decreed it, regardless of what we think or do.

Result: Fatalism; Man has no responsibility; God is responsible for all of our actions; God cannot be just in punishing us for not choosing Him.

Rebuttal:

Scripture is clear that God has chosen those for salvation (see Romans 8:29-30 and Ephesians 1:4-6), however it is equally clear that God does not want anyone to be lost, but for *all* men to come to salvation (I Peter 3:9; I John 2:2; and a strict reading of Romans 5). The only way, regardless of what logic we take, that God's desire for all men to be saved can be thwarted and we can be truly responsible for our actions is if we have *some sort* of free will.

3. *Further Reading*

About Calvinism by a Calvinist: H. Henry Meeter, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956)

A Rebuttal: C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002)

C. Cessationism

Issue: All "sign" gifts, such as tongues, miraculous healings, miracles, and prophecy pertaining to the future have ceased.

Basis: Being uncomfortable with the Charismatic movement's excesses in practicing the sign gifts and needing a rebuttal against it.

Key Passage: I Corinthians 13:8

Argument: A reading of the original Greek of I Corinthians 13:8 clearly suggests that the tongues will be stilled on their own and prophecies and knowledge will be actively gotten rid of. We now have the full canon of Scripture and don't need special prophecies or knowledge or the tongues, all of which were needed when the Early Church first established Christianity. Because we have progressed beyond the need of such signs and wonders they must have ceased today.

Result: A sense of superiority in one's own position and a dismissal of certain passages in Scripture, including I Corinthians 14.

Rebuttal: The cessation of the “sign gifts” is clear in Scripture, but I Corinthians 13:8 alone gives no time frame as to *when* that might happen. The immediate context following (vv.9-13) strongly suggests an end-time application of this cessation. Also, when read in the section context of I Corinthians 12 – 14, it becomes apparent that Paul did not view the gifts of having ceased, precisely because he gives guidelines as to how they should be handled. God’s continued inclusion of the ordering of the use of the gifts in Scripture suggests that even today these gifts will be active and need to be subjected to the same rigorous control that God set forth through Paul in I Corinthians.

In addition to this, the whole cessationist doctrine is based *solely* upon a reading of the *Greek* of only this one verse in Scripture. This is dangerous for two reasons. First, basing a doctrine upon one verse in Scripture makes it tenuous at best, because there is no other support for it elsewhere and it would so be considered marginal in God’s grand scheme of things. Second, the ability to check this contention would require special knowledge (i.e. being able to read Koinē Greek) which the average Christian does not have. So they have no way of knowing whether this is truly something that the Bible teaches or something that the exegete has come up with himself.

D. Charismatics

Issue: All believers must receive a second baptism of the Holy Spirit to be truly saved.

Key Scripture: Acts 1:5; 2:1-4; 8:14-16; 10:44 connected to I Corinthians 12:13

Basis: A desire to transcend the mundane, hum-drum Christianity and to really *experience* God and see Him moving (a mystical experience).

Argument: When God first moved in the church, the outpouring of His Holy Spirit prompted His apostles to speak in various tongues. This was a second act *after* they believed in Jesus and were baptized in water. It happened to the first Jewish Christians (Acts 2:1-4) and the first Gentile Christians (Acts 10:44). The Holy Spirit did not come upon the first Samaritan Christians until bestowed by Peter (Acts 8:14-16). Therefore it must be the same way with us: we need the second empowering of the Holy Spirit to really know God and to be in ecstasy before Him. If we have this second empowering we will *all* speak in tongues.

Result: A disdain for any “Christians” who don’t speak in tongues, “learning” to speak in tongues and often a wishy-washy, endorphin-based Christian life that flits from one high to another and is always looking for flashy results with an attitude that if it’s not exciting it’s not from God.

Rebuttal: I Corinthians 12 and 14 very carefully regulate the speaking in tongues and a plain reading of I Corinthians 12:10 strongly suggests that the gift of tongues was not given to everyone. Equally, if I Corinthians 12:13 is taken in context it is clear that we *already have* the baptism of the Spirit and if read in concert with Romans 6, the plain meaning of Scripture says that this baptism happens at the time of our conversion, not after.

Also, the definition of “tongues” as put forth by the Charismatics is not the same one as the definition garnered from their favorite passages in Acts and arises once more from *one* verse in I Corinthians 13:1. Using one verse to support one’s position is extremely tenuous, as was pointed out with the cessationist point of view above.

E. Covenant Theology

Issue: The Law of Moses is still applicable to us today, if only in part.

Key Scriptures: Lacking

Basis: a desire to order the Scripture into epochs

Argument: The way God deals with humans is by making agreements with them in the form of covenants. He did this with two key covenants: the Covenant of works with Adam before the fall and the Covenant of grace with the rest of mankind once Adam fell. He continued to elaborate these covenants in various ways, including the Law of Moses. Because all of these covenants were part of the covenant of grace, the moral and civil law is still applicable to us, whereas the ceremonial is not, as Jesus has fulfilled that.

Result: Legalism; exegete decides what parts of the Bible are valid for life today.

Rebuttal: There are three issues here. First there is no suggestion in Scripture of the covenants of works or grace. These are extra-biblical constructs that were set up to make sense of the Bible.³⁴

Second, the contention that the Law of Moses is still applicable to all of us today is rebutted in Scripture by Acts 15, where the Gentiles are expressly told they are not under the Law, and also Galatians 3:19 makes it clear that the Law was meant to be temporary until salvation through Christ was available.

Thirdly, the contention that we can split the Law between the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws is contrary to the contention that Scripture is authority, not the exegete (which every good Covenant Theologian will hold to). If we begin deciding what is obsolete and what isn't *we* become the authority and Scripture is set aside

Further Reading:

Richard P. Belcher, *A Comparison of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, Inc., 1986).

Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995).

F. Dispensationalism (Darbyism)

Issue: Parts of the Bible are obsolete, because they belong to a previous dispensation.

Basis: God deals with His people in various dispensations.

Key Passage: Ephesians 3:2

Argument: God deals differently with His people in each dispensation. Each one has a test that must be followed. If that test fails, then God will discard the dispensation and all that had to do with it and start

³⁴ See here Dr. Charles Ryrie's rather caustic, but good rebuttal in his book *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995) pp.183ff

all over again. For this reason the Old Testament, which belongs to the previous dispensation of the Mosaic Law, is no longer valid for the Christians in New Testament times, who are now under the dispensation of grace. It is only of limited use to us today.

Result: only the New Testament is studied and the richness of Scripture is lost.

Rebuttal: II Timothy 3:16-17: “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*” This includes the Old Testament. It is no more obsolete or of limited use than pen and paper in the computer age. It is *necessary* to understand where we are and what the New Testament teaches.

Further Reading:

Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Second Edition; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994).

Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995).

G. Evangelicalism

1. Faith-only Salvation (a.k.a. Easy-Believe-ism)

Issue: If you say you believe in Jesus and say the prayer you are saved, regardless of what your life looks like afterwards.

Basis: Salvation is through faith alone.

Key Scriptures: Romans 10:8-10; Ephesians 2:8-9

Argument: We are saved by faith and faith alone. Therefore if we have said the prayer and expressed this faith we are saved, regardless of what our life looks like afterwards. After all we *prayed*.

Result: Lots of “Christians” without any evidence of their faith; a cheapening of the Faith.

Rebuttal: That’s just the *first* step. Faith is not a simple cognitive process. It is much deeper than that. It deals with the very fabric of who we are. It is interesting that the key faith passages *all* connect faith with works. Ephesians 2:8-9 should never be read without v. 10 which stresses the works that God has prepared for us. James³⁵ is unequivocal in what the connection between faith and works is. “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.”³⁶ There is a close connection between faith and works.³⁷

³⁵ James 2:14-26

³⁶ James 2:18b (NIV)

³⁷ For more on faith and what is involved, see J.M. Diener’s devotional *Faith – Taking God at His Word and Acting Upon It*. Available from <<http://www.wolfhawke.com/musing/defide.php>>

2. Lordship Salvation

Issue: It's not enough to say you believe, you must also actively proclaim Jesus Christ to be your Lord.

Basis: An antidote to Easy-Believe-ism is needed, because it's turning out too many false Christians.

Key Scriptures: Romans 10:8-10

Argument: Faith is one thing for salvation, but because it can be so easily counterfeited, the new "believer" must also declare his or her allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ and proclaim Him Lord of his or her life. This arises from the fact that we must say "Jesus is Lord" when we are saved.

Result: Adding to Faith being the defining point of salvation; superior attitude; a legalism of sorts

Rebuttal: That's all well and good, but adding something to the faith issue is anti-Scriptural. The Bible clearly says that faith is all that is needed. Perhaps this arises from a wrong definition of faith by both those holding to Lordship Salvation and by Faith-Only Salvationists. It seems that what was said in the passage above applies here, only in the other direction.

H. Legalism

Issue: Rules are more important than the freedom God gives.

Basis: The idea that we need to follow rules to please God.

Argument: God has certain things He wants us to do and does not want us to do. In order to protect ourselves from stepping over the line on these issues, we must be even more careful about the way we go about everything. For example, listening to certain music is sinful, because it is used in negative venues, therefore we will not listen to it and anyone who does is a sinner.

Result: pride; sense of superiority; condemnation of other Christians; ghetto mentality

Rebuttal: This is exactly the issue that Jesus had with the Pharisees. His rebuttal was pretty harsh. See here Matthew 23. The key passage to rebut this is Galatians 5:1. *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."* (NIV) One who needs to cling to extra-biblical rules to keep himself from sinning is called a "weaker" brother in Romans 14, which gives the "stronger" brothers guidelines of how to deal with them.

I. "Modern" Theology

Issue: The Jesus of Christianity is not the *real* historical Jesus. He was simply made up by Jesus' followers.

Basis: There is no such thing as the supernatural. Everything must be explained through natural causes.

Argument: All religions are man-made and evolved the same way, moving from a mother-goddess religion forward to polytheism and from there to a father-god religion which spawned Christianity. Because of this, most of the texts in the New Testament were written by humans without any divine intervention. They contain the ideas of men, not of any god and therefore Jesus Christ could be no more than a man. Since Jesus could be no more than a man, it is important to realize that all and any miracles he did, any claims to divinity he made were put into his mouth by well-meaning but misguided followers. They must have written this over a long period of time, completing the New Testament long after 100 AD, perhaps even into the third or fourth century.

Result: A dismissal of the Bible and a complete erosion of the Christian faith into a “we are saved because we’re all good” religion.

Rebuttal: The Bible is *the* oldest historical document with the most extant manuscripts. It has many old manuscripts dating from a time that suggests that they were written much earlier than previously thought. It is also clear that the Bible considers itself the Word of God passed on to man (see here all of the “the Lord said” in the Old Testament and II Timothy 3:16 and II Peter 3:15 in the New). Most of this comes from a desire to *not* believe in Christianity and undermine it, so technically “modern” theology has no place in the Christian church and should be viewed as a very destructive heresy.

Further Reading:

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998)

Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict Volume 1* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999).

J. Roman Catholicism

1. Transubstantiation

Issue: The bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ when the priest says the words from Scripture.

Basis: The Eucharist is a sacrament with salvific properties. Christ’s death was only to take care of original sin, we’re still responsible for our daily sins and therefore need the Eucharist.

Key Scriptures: Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; and I Corinthians 11:23-25 combined with John 6:53-58.

Argument: As Christ’s death is only efficacious for taking away the original sin committed by Adam, we need a form of cleansing outside of that. Since His sacrifice is the only cleansing for sin, it must be performed again and the bread and wine must be ingested to give us true life per John 6. Thus the bread and wine *must* literally become the body and blood of our Lord in order to be efficacious for our salvation and for the forgiveness of sin.

Result: Faith in the efficacy of the Eucharist rather than in the death of Christ; viewing the Eucharist as a magical rite that buys salvation.

Rebuttal: There are three points to this. First of all we must look at the key passage that deals with the Eucharist and that is John 6:53-58. The audience that Jesus is speaking to in this passage, the unbelieving Galilean Jews, makes it clear that He is not speaking of the Eucharist. The very text itself suggests that one must take the terms that Jesus uses here figuratively to point to salvation and faith in Him.

Second, the re-sacrificing of Christ is actually a blasphemous act, as Hebrews clearly states that Christ only suffered and died *once* (Hebrews 9:24-28). This sacrifice is efficacious for all time and need not be repeated, whether in the Eucharist or anywhere else!

Third, the whole idea that Christ's death is only useful for the forgiveness of the original sin flies in the face of everything that this ultimate sacrifice has accomplished. Certainly we still struggle with sin this side of eternity (Romans 7), but it is clear that *we are forgiven and are the children of God* (see Ephesians 1 and especially the classic passage Ephesians 2:8-10). Nothing else is needed to affect salvation.

2. *Mary the mother of God*

Issue: Mary is the mother of God and so we can pray to her as well.

Basis: A logical connection between Jesus the man and Jesus the Son of God

Key Scripture: None

Argument: Because Jesus is God, his mother Mary must have borne God. Therefore she becomes the mother of God. As the mother of God she has special ability to talk to the exalted Christ for us lowly sinners and He will listen to her more readily than to us.

Result: A worship of the created Mary rather than of the True God; idolatry.

Rebuttal: This is a flawed argument, simply from the place it comes from. Nowhere in Scripture does it suggest that Mary the mother of Jesus was any more than a simple human. It is true that she bore the God-man, but at no time did she become the mother of God, because God existed before her. It is true that she is the mother of the Christ, no one can deny that, but she is *not* the mother of God by any stretch of imagination. If God needed a mother, He would not be God, regardless of which person of the Three-In-One we're talking about.

Second, we are commanded to pray directly to the Father in Jesus' name in John 15 and parallel passages (consult your study Bible). There are no mediators, save one: the Man Jesus Christ (see here I Timothy 2:5-6). If we pray to any we pray to Him and to the Father, as they are One, not to any saints or humans who have lived exemplary lives.

3. *The immaculate conception*

Issue: Mary the mother of Jesus was conceived without sin.

Basis: Sex is sinful. Jesus was sinless, so God needed a sinless vessel to bear Him.

Key Scripture: An interpretation of Genesis 3:1-7 connected with the cleanliness laws in Leviticus 15.

Argument: This here is two-fold. First of all is the contention that sexual intercourse for pleasure is sinful and that when even when it is used for procreation it conveys sin. The idea from this comes from the interpretation that the “eating of the fruit” in Genesis 3 was really Eve having sex, first with the serpent, then with her husband Adam.

Because sex is sinful in and of itself, anyone born of a sexual union must be sinful. However, God could only use a sinless vessel to bear His Son. Therefore He had to enact a miracle for another sinless child (this one a girl) to be born of natural means so that this sinless girl could bear God’s sinless Son.

Result: A disdain of sexual intercourse; an undue exaltation of Mary; reinterpretation of Scripture in invalid ways, e.g. saying Jesus “brothers” were his cousins.

Rebuttal: To the first issue, the idea that having sex is sinful arises mostly from the cleanliness laws in Leviticus and the elaborate rituals that the priests had to go through to cleanse themselves. It is interesting the Bible contains one of the most erotic books ever written as part of its canon – The Song of Songs. The fact that this book is blatantly sexual creates a problem for those who are afraid of sex. It is true that it is an animal passion of sorts that drives us to procreate and that should not be surprising, as we are created that way, but saying that Adam and Eve fell because they had sex with one another is ludicrous. The only places where sex is compared to eating is in Proverbs and the Song of Songs, both of which are highly poetical books. The narrative in Genesis is prose which begs to be taken at face value. Thus the whole contention arises out of a misreading of a passage by combining it with one that had nothing to do with it and the difficulty that certain exegetes had with their sexual drives.

The idea that Mary was sinless is nowhere supported in Scripture. Scripture is clear that sin is passed on not from mother to child, but from father to child (see here especially Romans 5).³⁸ Thus, if a sinless Father is involved, the mother need not be sinless. She is the vessel carrying the sinless child, because his blood is from his father and no sin will flow in his veins.

K. Sabbatarian Movements

Issue: Saturday is the only day on which we can correctly worship God.

Basis: God declared the seventh day to be the Sabbath, the day of rest.

Key Scriptures: Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8-11

Argument: God made the Sabbath day the holy day for worshiping Him and resting. Our modern Saturday is the actual day on which the Sabbath falls. For that reason we must stop meeting on Sunday to worship God and start meeting on Saturday, as the meeting on Sunday is a corruption introduced by the Roman Catholic church.

Result: false pride; sectarianism; ghetto mentality

Rebuttal: It is definitely true that God has decreed the seventh day to be the day of rest. It is also interesting, though that He never said anything about His Son’s disciples meeting on the first day of

³⁸ This is confirmed by the fact that children will carry the father’s blood type, not the mother’s.

the week rather than on the Sabbath. This probably arose from the fact that the Jewish day begins at sundown, rather than midnight. So, after worshipping in the Temple in the Jewish fashion, many of the early Christians – who were Jews, by the way – would meet to worship and “break bread” (i.e. have Communion) on that evening, which was already considered the first day of the week – Sunday. This was later adopted by the Gentiles, who tended to reckon midnight-to-midnight, so they met on Sundays, usually in the evening as well.

That’s the historical background. That does not address the Scriptural issue of the Sabbath, though. It is interesting, however, that all of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament with the exception of the command to keep the Sabbath. There is only one passage that deals extensively with the Sabbath rest and that is found in Hebrews 4:1-11. The interesting thing is that this is a *perpetual* Sabbath rest that we are supposed to be in, one in which we cease from our works, i.e. from trying to earn our own salvation. We are to rest in God’s finished work, an interesting concept, which automatically makes every day of the week a Sabbath!

Appendix B: Hebrew Thought Vs. Greek Thought

This is the Excursus taken from J.M. Diener's devotional *Faith – Taking God at His Word and Acting Upon It*. It is better read in the direct context of that monograph, but as it is pertinent to some of the discussion in this treatise it is included for completeness.

We must remember that the books of the New Testament are *not* Greek documents. They are primarily Hebrew or Jewish documents, as almost all authors were of Hebrew origin. The only person who could be considered to have written from a primarily Greek perspective would be Luke, who was Greek. However, much of what he writes is unquestionably tinted with Hebrew ideas and meanings. I guess living with Paul of Tarsus might do that to you.

Jesus was unquestionably Jewish, using Hebrew literary forms in His teaching, and lovingly quoting Deuteronomy and Isaiah. John is so Hebrew in his expressions that it has puzzled scholars who try to do studies of his books from a purely Greek perspective. Paul was schooled by Gamaliel and was a Pharisee, "a Hebrew of Hebrews,"³⁹ by his own admission. Luke spent years with Paul and absorbed many Hebrew ideas, which then flowed into his Gospel and his account of the Acts of the Apostles. Peter's mind-set was unquestionably Hebrew, it was what he grew up with and his influence on Mark, though he writes for Romans, makes even that Gospel Hebrew in its basis. Jude appeals to Hebrew apocrypha in his letter as well as punctuating his entire message in Old Testament examples – very rabbinical. James belonged to the Jewish party of the church and his book is the very example of Hebrew wisdom literature. The author of Hebrews very definitely is a Hebrew. He knows Scripture inside and out and bases most of his letter on Hebrew temple practices described in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

For this reason when we approach the study of the New Testament we should set aside the Greek presuppositions that we have. I would argue that most Christians, perhaps with the exceptions of the Thomasites in India and the Assyrians in southern Turkey, Iraq and Iran, use Greek philosophical presuppositions in their approach to their study. It's not surprising – it's part of our church history. There is value in using Greek ideas, but the Bible is *not* primarily Greek. It is primarily Hebrew. God used the Hebrew language and culture for a reason, just as He later used the Greek language for a reason. But as we've already seen the New Testament was primarily written by Hebrews, not by Greeks. Even if they couch their ideas in Greek terminology and perhaps have assimilated a few Greek ideas, they are still Hebrew in essence.

It's like reading one of those books that they sell at international touristic sites, like Ephesus in Turkey. Often we Americans chuckle at the English used. Sure, they're writing in English, but the thought processes that produced that English were clearly from a different language and mind-set. It reflects in the expression, in the grammar, in the context and if you speak the language you can tell where they're coming from.

It is precisely the same with the New Testament. If we don't realize that we're not dealing with a Greek world view but with a Hebrew one we run into all kinds of problems and seeming contradictions in the New Testament that can usually be answered by interpreting them through the lens of the Old Testament. Now this is not a cure-all, but it certainly makes life easier when studying the Bible. When we do our word studies, we should look at the Old Testament meaning as well. When we look at the way the New Testament handles things we should take a more holistic view, seeing how it fits into the big picture, rather than dissecting it into its smallest parts and then trying to reconstruct the whole situation from there.

³⁹ Philippians 3:5 (NIV)

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