

# CHRISTIANITY AND THE FUTURE

*Book One of the  
END TIMES SERIES*



*C.H. Ren*

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Book One of the End Times Series

**C. H. Ren**

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*To Heather and Gloria*

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# In the Balance

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our world is at a crossroad where two thousand years of Christian growth is being pushed back by other religions, social and scientific ideologies, secular priorities, and escalating apathy. Accusations of Christian misdeeds and misinformation about Christianity have been spreading rampantly. Further, we are bombarded with images of violence and worldly passions that proclaim Christianity as obsolete. Christians, in response, have largely retreated to enclaves of worship, fear, and denial. Everywhere we look, there is another flavor of Christianity in another enclave. Some want to ignore the rise of non-Christianism beside them to focus on the developing world. Others want to tolerate the secular world to engage non-Christianism with love and compassion. Then, there are Christians who want to reject everything as temptations to await God's punishment and coming kingdom. Regardless of each Christian group's perspective and endeavors, Christianity as a whole is being pushed back and weakened from within.

Our Lord's plan for this world and the next will surely prevail, but the future of each Christian church, as an effective instrument of God, will depend on how we exercise our free will in the coming days. At no time since the first century of Christianity has so much hanged in the balance.

Christians have been disagreeing with one another and parting ways since the departure of Jesus our Lord two thousand years ago.

**Acts 15: 36 – 39** Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise

to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

However, my faith tells me that God has permitted this, in many cases, to allow Christians to mature spiritually at different rates and in different ways. What has dramatically changed in our times are: 1) a startling escalation in Christian division to the point that there are now thousands of denominations, 2) a decline in Christian influence in their lands to the degree where Christian groups are adrift in a sea of secularism, and 3) a loss of Christian power and will to bring our fellow Christians back to the table of debate to prevent churches from leaving denominations and people from leaving churches. As a result, we must pray deeply and listen carefully to see whether God is calling Christians to unite. The answer that I hear is, "Yes, and hurry."

How can we bring Christians back to the table of debate to prevent of further fragmentation? Christian unity should be based on a common pursuit of God's truth, not a tolerance of one another's erroneous perceptions. Only this manner of ecumenicalism will allow the churches to resist and defeat the rise of dark forces. I have no doubt that Christians will endure the harshest trials of our times onto the End of Days. However, how we experience these trials will depend on the role of the churches. To those who call unity wishful thinking, let us not forget that all is possible through faith and a mature understanding of the will of our Lord. To those who proclaim that their understanding of the gospel is complete, let us truly listen to others, if only to gain understanding of their positions so that we can help them understand ours. Finally, to those who question the qualifications and authority of anyone who pleads for Christian unity, let us be patient with all who want to take on the role, for someone must help Christians come together.

My voice is not the only voice for Christian unity - not the first, loudest, nor most authoritative. What I can offer, however, is



the voice of one who walks between the enclaves of Christianity. I can step back from the positions of every Christian denomination to see how all sides can change. The following pages are thus dedicated to this purpose. Topic by topic, we will walk between Christians. We will try to draw insights on God's will from each side to discover new positions that could integrate the Christian enclaves. It will be hard for many Christians to change what may be their foundations of faith, but I do hope and pray that some will heed and ponder about what is possible. Please join me in this urgent quest for Christianity and the world.



# Chapter 1: A Framework for Studying Christian Disunity

There are two ways to study the divisions across Christian churches. The historical perspectives way is based on researching the origins of theological, cultural, and political disagreements among Christians and tracing the course of related conflicts and negotiations thereafter. Interpretations of history show us the consequences of Christian arguments and actions. However, the spiritual characteristics of Christians involved in church division then and now remain largely hidden. As political conflicts end with the passing of leaders and cultural divides fade with the rise and fall of empires, historical perspectives alone leave us quiet perplexed about why Christians simply cannot resolve theological disagreements even after hundreds of years of scholarly endeavors. What happened in the past surely cannot be so enduring unless modern forces are still perpetuating divisions.

The second way of studying the divisions across Christian churches is through spiritual perspectives. This course of study focuses on the emergence and continuation of worldly forces that influence the spiritual development of Christians and pull Christians in different spiritual directions. Naturally Christians are spiritually unique individuals who often exert or suppress our thoughts within groups. However, there may be spiritual characteristics that are common or dominant within groups / churches that influence the collective behaviors of Christians. Very few scholars have taken the path of studying such Christian spiritual characteristics. But, what if it is these characteristics that have trapped Christians in perpetual states of spiritual immaturity and intellectual disagreements? Spiritual perspectives are difficult to formulate because the fabric of the spirit is complex and the forces on the spirit are at times elusive.

To overcome the difficulties, new conceptual frameworks for mapping spiritual posture may have to be discovered.

Our quest for Christian unity requires that both ways of study be undertaken in an integrated manner that stretches beyond the practice of systematic theology. In the following chapters, the major topics that are still dividing the Christian churches will be studied in an attempt to resolve spiritual misalignments and theological disagreements. The brief summary of the history of Christian division in this chapter will help set the stage for exploring divisive topics by showing how the separation of Christians has become common practice. Historical studies to investigate specific topics dividing Christianity can then extend from this summary.

A proposed framework for capturing the effects of worldly forces on Christian spiritual characteristics and the impact of spiritual characteristics on Christian division is further offered in this chapter to help us start studying each divisive topic. The framework will help us understand what is preventing Christians from considering the points of others. If we can overcome these mental barriers, we can then turn to the Holy Bible to find the way across the spiritually influenced terrain of theological disagreements.

### **A Historical Summary of the Divisions between Churches**

During the first century of Christianity, the apostles kept the churches largely united in spirit despite geographical separation and political suppression. This unity faded in the second and third centuries even as Christianity grew rapidly under persecution by the Roman Empire. When Christianity finally became the favored religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine, the regional churches of Christianity attempted to unite in the spirit of ecumenicalism at the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325. Earlier Christian sects with highly non-scriptural ideologies, such as the Gnostics, Novatians, and Montanists, had already begun to decline due to increasing awareness of their errors by that time. However,

more challenging disagreements had emerged and would continue to emerge to plague Christian churches to our modern day.

At Nicaea, the Christian faction of Arianism, which argued that Christ who was created by God cannot be as divine as the Father, was ruled as heresy. Yet, the idea of Arianism would crop up throughout Christian history, and even the historical Jesus movement today reflects similar thoughts by emphasizing that Jesus was a man within the constraints of the historical environment. First Nicaea and later councils of bishops also could not resolve the theological differences between the western and eastern Roman churches. The first major group of eastern churches to break away from ecumenicalism did so after the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, which declared that Jesus is of one nature. These Assyrian churches of the East supported Nestorians who would call Mary the mother of Christ but not the mother of God. As a result, they were accused of dividing the nature of Jesus into both human and divine, and this accusation led to the Nestorian Schism.

The second major group of eastern churches to break away did so after the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451, which declared that Jesus and God are one and Jesus is truly God and truly man. Churches in Egypt, Ethiopia, Syria, Armenia, and other parts of the Middle East disagreed with the return to the more dualistic view of Jesus. As a result, they separated from ecumenicalism into the Oriental Orthodox churches. The remaining churches of the East also preferred to emphasize the God nature of Jesus but remained in communion with the West as tension between diverging traditions and the authority of the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) and the Patriarch of Constantinople grew.

The eastern emphasis on Jesus as God led to the preference of describing the Trinity as three distinct persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit that is of one essence united in a harmony of will. In contrast, the western emphasis on Jesus being fully man and God led to the preference of describing the Trinity as

the Father, Son and Holy Spirit being distinct persons in the one essence (being) of God. This subtle difference, which did not cause either side to reject the eternal and mutual indwelling nature of the Trinity, influenced the understanding of Jesus' role in salvation and contributed to the formal division between the western (Roman Catholic) churches and the eastern (Orthodox) churches in the Great Schism of AD 1054.

In the East, many small Catholic denominations endured and various major Orthodox denominations grew around national patriarchs after the decline of the Eastern Roman / Byzantine Empire. In the West, the Roman Catholic Church fought for unity and accepted many different factions of Christian expression within its structure. Those who were committed to self-denial within the monastic orders, spiritual exploration through forms of mysticism, and humanistic accomplishments by scholarly and artistic endeavors have all found a place in Catholicism. At the same time, the Roman Catholic inquisition process hunted down and mercilessly eradicated groups that threatened church unity. One such group was the Cathars, which saw an evil God that created the material world and a good God that created the spiritual world. Another group was the Waldensians, which viewed the institutional church as impure.

The endeavors of the Roman Catholic Church to preserve unity failed in 1517 when Martin Luther presented arguments against the church sale of indulgences. Indulgences were originally established to reduce the severity of penance for sins. Instead of changing to allow for reformers like Luther, the Papacy chose to excommunicate and hunt down reformers who will not recant without realizing the magnitude of the reformation movement. Those reformers who remained loyal to the church formed the Oratory of Divine Love, which eventually helped launch the Catholic Reformation in 1536. However, large factions of the western European churches had already broken away as Protestants to follow the teachings of Martin Luther. He defined Protestantism

as being purely based on Scripture, understood that salvation is attained only by the grace of God, and called all Christians to discipleship with equal responsibility to read and spread the Bible. Decades of war did not bring the Protestant faction back, and the Catholic reaffirmation of salvation by faith and good works, celibacy, purgatory, and proper use of indulgence at the Council Trent in 1545 further sealed the rift.

Protestantism grew as a third major branch of Christianity with initial sub-groups based on national origin, such as the Anglican Church of England, and forms of church government, such as the Presbyterian structure advocated by John Calvin. Within the sub-groups, early Protestants also tried to maintain unity by stamping out nonconforming Christian expressions, such as the Quakers and Anabaptists. These attempts at constraining Christian and false Christian expression encouraged the migration of many Christians to the new world. In North America, Protestant Christianity began to spread and subdivide in earnest. Today, beyond the initial Anglican / Episcopal, Lutheran, and Presbyterian Churches, one can find Methodists, Baptists, Brethren, Disciples of Christ, Reformed, United or Uniting Churches, and other independent churches in the Protestant realm. Some of the above Protestant branches, such as the Baptists, Presbyterians, and most recently the Episcopal Churches, have further divided because of disagreements. Many smaller denominations continue to emerge or survive under Protestantism. And, some churches of the 20th Century charismatic movement, such as the Assemblies of God, Church of God, and Church of God in Christ, have launched Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism is a significant enough separation from other Protestants that it can be viewed as the fourth major branch of Christianity.

I should also point out that Christianity is not neatly divided into the four major branches. There are many other forms of independent churches based on individual theology, ethnicity, and

needs. There are nondenominational or interdenominational Christian churches. There are Jewish Christians under the Messianic Judaism movement. There are groups whose theological differences from the core Christian beliefs are so great that their right to be called Christians comes into question. To make things more complex, Christian churches and individuals can belong to cross cutting movements. Those of the charismatic movement can be in mainline Protestant churches as well as in Pentecostal churches. Churches from a variety of conservative denominations can embrace fundamentalism through literal Biblical interpretation, worldly detachment, personal experience of Scripture, and attentiveness to prophecies. Churches from a variety of progressive denominations can embrace ecumenicalism through tolerance of theological differences, openness to common worship, and willingness for collaborative efforts. Finally, there is the evangelical movement that, as explained by the scholar John Stott, advocates the supremacy of the Holy Spirit, majesty of Jesus Christ, lordship of the Holy Spirit, necessity of conversion, priority to witness, and importance of fellowship. However, even evangelism is further divided into New Evangelicals, Strict Fundamentalists, Confession Evangelicals, Evangelical Pentecostals, Radical / Social Justice Evangelicals, and Ecumenical Evangelicals.

At a point soon after the separation of Protestantism from Catholicism, we might notice that many church divisions were no longer based on a singular theological disagreement but on entire sets of grievances. We might also notice that even a singular disagreement could have ranges of perspectives beyond the original polarized positions. This shift could be due to the decline of church powers in enforcing intellectual conformance, the spread of Christian scholarship and theological pursuits, and / or the advancing of disagreements to more complex areas. Amidst the growing frenziness of debate and the complexity of reasons for division after division, we can still narrow down the primary disagreements into



ten major divisive topics. Debates in some of these topics, such as *the relationship between the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit* as well as the meaning of *the cross and salvation*, stretch to the dawn of Christian history. Debates in other areas, such as *the role of men and women in the church* or *the theological concept of rapture*, are relatively new to Christian history. Either way we will focus on these ten divisive topics in discussing how Christianity can move forward to unity in the future. If the churches of Christianity can find common ground regarding these topics, then all the remaining issues may also be surmountable.

Many denominations avoid teaching the origins of Christian disunity for fear of raising questions that they cannot answer. However, we need to recognize the past in order to see that the leaders and cultures which originally fueled disunity have long disappeared. The future of Christianity lies in our hands, and there are really no constraints on what we can make of it. The diversity of Christian perspectives and traditions stemming from two thousand years of history can be interpreted as 1) our Lord testing true Christians by allowing many false teachings to persist, 2) our Lord leaving Christians in different conditions that reflect their spiritual needs and limitations of awareness, and 3) our Lord guiding Christians along many paths of spiritual growth so that they can one day help one another better understand His will. I am sure that there is truth to all these interpretations as some incorrect or incomplete teachings do exist within the Christian churches and some Christians are more spiritually mature than others. However, I also see that the time for Christians from many paths to help one another is now. The troubles of the world demand that we Christians overcome our limitations of awareness immediately, for the days of final testing and sacrifices for Christians are near.

## **A Framework for Understanding Divisive Christian Spiritual Characteristics**

At the beginning of this chapter, I proposed that the churches of Christianity have remained divided not only because of theology but also due to spiritual differences caused by the continued presence of worldly forces. These spiritual divides have caused mental stubbornness, fanned the fires of mutual disapproval, and sustained historical attitudes even when the reasons behind the attitudes have faded. Therefore, understanding the effects of worldly forces on the spiritual development of Christians is imperative in our endeavor to develop common paths on the ten key divisive topics in the following chapters.

Christians are actually quite good at identifying *hate, greed, pride, jealousy, and deceit* as corruptions of the spirit. They can at times also see the worldly forces that cause such spiritual characteristics. So while many, if not all Christians, are still spiritually affected by these emotions of a troubled world, the resulting spiritual damage can be more easily separated from theological disagreements. Some church divisions are still caused by outright hate, fights over resources, and the clever deceit of false Christian leaders. However, a united Christianity can correct for such immature behaviors and separate the Body of Christ from those who continue to preach hate, greed, pride, jealousy, and deceit.

Alternatively, I shall propose that the worldly forces or emotions fueling theological disagreements and causing church divisions are more subtle and insidious. They invade Christian communities without notice, and Christians subconsciously try to resist them leading to shifts in Christian spiritual characteristics. Even when the resistance has prevented Christians from being consumed by the world, the movement of their spiritual characteristics away from the center of God's truth creates divisions because Christians and churches are headed in different directions. Forces in our world exist in opposition to one another, but forces

sustaining church division are not like love and hate or honesty and deceit where one side extends from the power of God. Instead, forces sustaining theological disagreements belong to the world on both sides, making their identification quite difficult.

The most ancient pair of insidious forces involved in Christian disunity is caused by the weaknesses of the human spirit when confronted by worldly events. From the very beginning, men and women have chosen to be either apathetic about the troubles in the world or become obsessed about solving them by human means. But, the human perspective cannot be correct without insights from God. We Christians, like other human beings, are very vulnerable to the force of *complacency*, which leads us to be very satisfied with our current state and to not care about whether our situation is in accordance with God's will. However, Christianity is about caring, and so those denominations influenced by complacency tend to make caring decisions about traditions that preserve the best of Christian practices at a specific time. People might ask what harm can come with Christians trying to keep traditions and not change with modern tides. But what if Christian traditions are blocking us from unity? On the other side, we Christians are also vulnerable to the force of *activism*, which leads us to become consumed with the inadequacies of our personal conditions and the situations around us. However, Christianity is about the temperance of obsessions, and so those denominations influenced by activism tend to channel obsessions toward embracing the call to witness for Christ. People might also ask what harm can come with Christians acting in evangelical zeal? But what if evangelical zeal based on personal obsessions is blocking us from unity?

The second pair of forces involved in Christian disunity is caused by a more aware and liberated humanity trying to exert their vision to change the world instead of just being pushed by the world to change. The human vision, as shown in modern democracies, tends to either be based on the fear of change or the desire to change.

Yet, no vision can be correct without insights from God. As Christians became more concerned with social conditions, *liberalism* and *conservatism* began to pull them in different directions. Liberals often display a strong desire for positive change for the world, but Christianity is not about desires. Therefore, denominations influenced by liberalism tend to emphasize Christian love as the basis for affecting changes in the world. Again, people might ask what harm can there be in the love of progressives? But what if progressive thinking is blocking us from unity? In contrast, conservatives often display a fear of changing things for the worst, but Christianity is about rising above fears. Therefore, denominations influenced by conservatism tend to emphasize Christian faith as the shield against the corruptions of the world. Finally, some might ask what harm can there be in the faith of fundamentalists? But what if fundamentalist conviction is blocking us from unity?

In response to these questions, I wish to propose that while the churches of Christianity have endured the onslaught of worldly forces, the spiritual characteristics of Christians have been sadly pulled in all four directions. Some Christians gravitate towards resisting change while others towards evangelism, progressivism, and fundamentalism. Christians in all directions may still be pursuing an understanding of God's will, and Christians closer to the center may still have some affinity towards the characteristics of other directions. However, they are letting their dominant spiritual characteristics shape their theological positions and fuel disagreements. In turning vulnerabilities into strengths, Christians may be losing sight of other spiritual qualities. For example, a Christian less vulnerable to fear might become less concerned about faith, and a Christian less vulnerable to desires might be less concerned about love. Sometimes, we only see our best qualities when they are used to resist our vulnerabilities.

Christians are furthermore not always pulled cleanly in one of the four directions. Progressivism and evangelism can both tug at a Christian spirit in varying degrees to yield a variety of potential spiritual characteristics that fall between the two directions. Likewise, Christian spiritual characteristics can fall within other quadrants formed by the four directions. The four directions, therefore, create a two dimensional reference frame as shown in Figure 1.1. In this reference frame, two Christians or two churches can have spiritual characteristics that are from zero to 180 degrees apart from one another. If a group of Christians or churches have spiritual characteristics that are close or related to one another, we can treat the range of spiritual characteristics occupied by the group as a single entity for comparing and contrasting with other groups. We will be studying many types of oppositional groups in attempt to resolve the divisive topics.

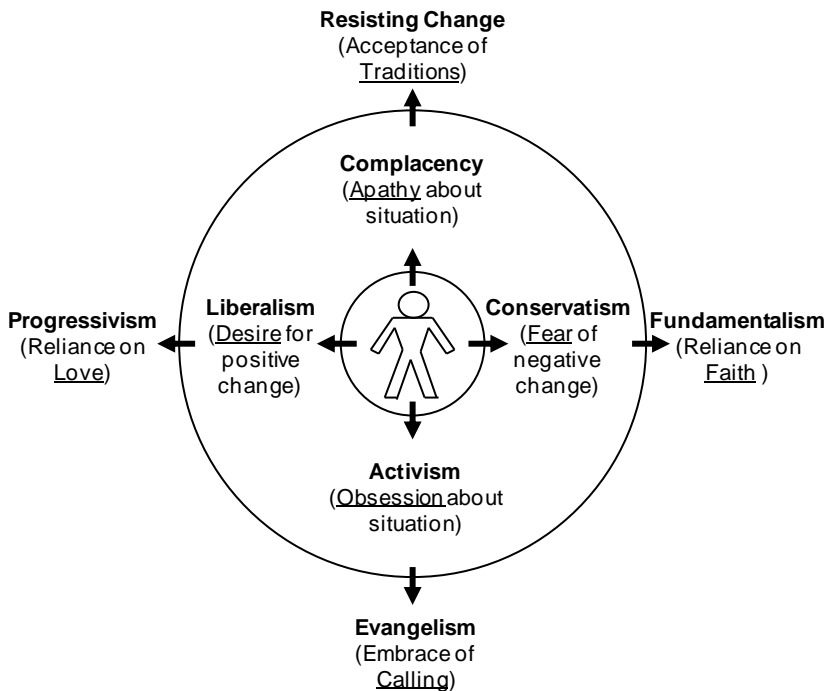


Figure 1.1: Worldly Forces and Associated Christian Positions

To illustrate our concept of groups, Figure 1.2 shows the ranges of Christian spiritual characteristics for the most obvious groups - the Catholic, Orthodox, and divided Protestant churches. Clearly all the Christians and / or churches in each of these and other groups do not have to agree on everything, and there will always be those in each group who want to stretch beyond the proposed constraints. However, for topics where there is a central perspective for each group, studying the overlaps and non-overlaps in the ranges of spiritual characteristics between the groups can reveal why theological disagreements cannot be resolved by pure rationality and why the divisions between churches endure. The disagreements within topics are not always across Christian denominational lines. In many cases, new group structures will have to be identified to figure out how different ranges of spiritual characteristics tied to theological positions are in conflict with one another.

The types of conflicts between groups are shaped by the following alignment in their ranges of spiritual characteristics:

- Complete overlap in ranges of spiritual characteristics
- Partial overlap in ranges of spiritual characteristics
- Complete non-overlap in ranges of spiritual characteristics
- Ranges in spiritual characteristic are diametrically opposed

When multiple groups are involved in a disagreement with varying perspectives, the alignments and misalignments of spiritual characteristics can be quite complex.

Before we delve into divisive topics, let us return to our example of groups based on Christian branches and ask how do the ranges of spiritual characteristics impact the potential for interactions between branches? This general understanding, which does not take into account the causes of divisions, might nevertheless help to establish analytical methodologies for finding solution paths toward Christian unity.

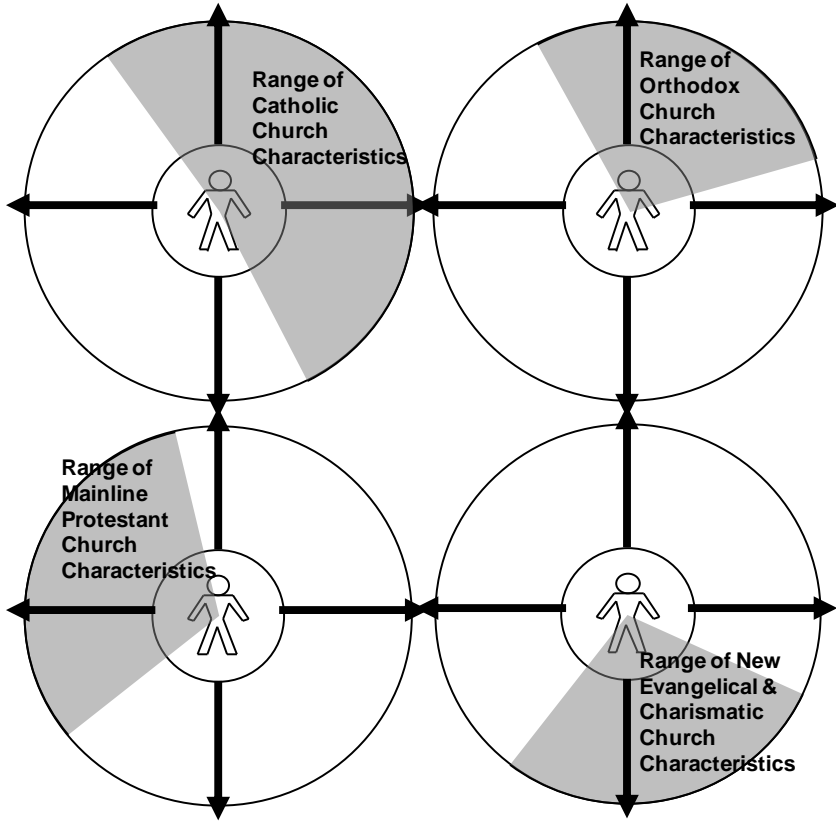


Figure 1.2: Ranges of Spiritual Characteristics Based on Christian Branches

As John’s messages to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation revealed, different spiritual characteristics between churches is not a new occurrence. Among the example groups shown, today’s Roman Catholic churches cover the broadest range of spiritual expressions. This range extends from the Latin American churches that are progressive in political ideologies but cling tightly to traditions to organizations, such as Opus Dei, that are very concerned with maintaining foundational Christian theology while zealously advancing Christian practice. The range of the Catholic churches overlaps the range of the Orthodox churches. The Eastern

Orthodox churches, rooted in traditions and fear of negative change, appear to be quite aligned with the conservative foundations of Roman Catholic expression, and the progressivism of Western Orthodox churches may allow them to understand social justice related Catholic activities. Although evangelism is also a concept within the Orthodox churches, I propose that it is not a dominant spiritual characteristic stemming from the need for activism, and therefore not a point of alignment with other Christian branches that are shaped by evangelical zeal. The overlap between the Catholic and Orthodox ranges of spiritual characteristics suggests that the unification of the two branches may not be as hard as many believe despite theological and organizational differences. Dialogue regarding unification is indeed ongoing.

Today's mainline Protestant denominations in contrast seem to only overlap the Catholic expressions at a location on the reference frame that is between progressivism and resistance of change. This point is represented by the Anglican / Episcopal churches. At one time when the Anglicans were more fundamentalistic than progressive, their overlap with the center of Catholicism suggested a higher feasibility for unification. Still, the high church service held by the Anglicans today closely resembles Catholic mass, which is filled with rituals and traditions. In contrast, the casual low church service of many other Protestant churches shows how far the branches of Christianity have moved apart.

On the other side of the range for mainline Protestant churches, those individual churches that are more evangelical in culture might find themselves closely aligned to the activities of New Evangelicals, such as the Rev. Billy Graham. However, even the most activism driven mainline churches are still distant from the charismatic movement, which often clings to fundamental Christian values with varying degrees of evangelical zeal. Many conservative protestant churches that broke away from the progressive mainline denominations ironically display characteristics similar to the



Catholic churches at the fundamentalism driven end of their range in spiritual characteristics. Both Protestant and Catholic groups might advocate a return to core Christian values and a dedication of one's life to Christ. However, theological differences and a lack of dialogue still divide them.

Combining our understanding of the spiritual nature of Christian groups with our understanding of Christian history, we can further propose that the growth of Christian churches and shifts in Christian attitudes have essentially gone full circle over the past two thousand years:

- Starting with Christian foundations based on faith in the early churches
- Moving to maintaining status quo based on traditions as institutions grew
- Reforming under progressive ideologies based on love
- Reviving to the needs of the spirit based on calling
- Realizing again the importance of fundamentalism based on faith

We can adopt two directions in discussing Christian unity given this circle of spiritual change. We can pragmatically accept that Christian churches will remain under the influence of these worldly forces that limit their perspectives, and try to create ecumenical organizations across the churches based on mutual tolerance of strengths and weaknesses. Alternatively, we can argue that the churches by God's grace can overcome worldly influences and embrace faith, tradition, love, and calling as being equally critical to the foundations of unity. Churches that are strong in one or more of these qualities can help other churches grow in such ways. Churches that are weak in select qualities should be open to the experience, insights, and practices of others. The churches of Christianity can, in this manner, pull one another to the center of God's truth in spirit, mind, and practice, as shown in Figure 1.3. This is the Christian unity I dream of and pray for, but is this

spiritual unity possible while theological disagreements remain? I fear not, for as spiritual separation can perpetuate theological impasse, theological disagreements can hinder efforts at spiritual unity. Therefore, we must go forth and try to resolve the divisive topics within Christianity.

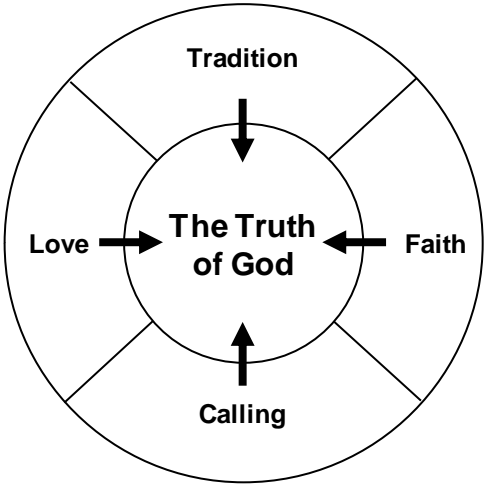


Figure 1.3: Qualities within the Churches that Can Bring Us to Spiritual Unity

The journey to the future of Christianity requires a commitment of the mind and the spirit. All Christians must be mentally and spiritually dedicated toward seeking God’s immutable truth, which is not necessarily based on how many churches agree or disagree. Even when all the Christians are pushed in one spiritual direction by the world, they should all have to be brought back to the center of truth. Even when Christians have struck compromises in theological arguments, the arguments should be reopened until a genuine common understanding of God’s will has been achieved by all sides. This is the philosophy that I will use to tackle the divisive topics.

Out of respect for the unique qualities of independent churches, I will not try to push such churches into any specific

groups of spiritual characteristics. Out of the reality that I cannot study all the small independent Christian denominations, I will not try to consider every single Christian in the proposed resolution of divisive topics. Independent churches and churches from small independent denominations to include Catholics not affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church can be spread across the terrain of spiritual characteristics. Some of them might be a part of theological disagreements that have blocked Christian unity. Others might be trying to avoid Christian debates all together. Regrettably, we will focus on churches within the main branches of Christianity and major denominations in studying divisive topics. Hopefully, the independent churches and denominations will eventually be pulled into the momentum of Christians endeavoring to unite.



# Chapter 2: The Relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Let us start our discussion of divisive topics with the oldest theological debate within the Christian realm. This debate has existed for so long that few want to continue the disagreement. Most Christians are satisfied with declaring that God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of one essence known as the Trinity with nothing more said. However, our understanding of this relationship known as the Trinity is still deeply rooted in our denominational background. The Orthodox churches of the East still view the concept of one essence in the Trinity as largely a harmony of will between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. There is absolutely no overlap between the three who are each considered God. In contrast, all the Catholic and Protestant denominations of the West have adopted the concept of one essence in the Trinity as being of much higher unity, but still with no modality (interchanging of identity). This inseparable Trinity can be termed our Lord. Some Pentecostal churches have gone further to argue for modality, stating that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are simple expressions of one being with no separation of identity. However, this is still a very fringe view like those who still question the full divinity of Jesus.

If we focus on the very quite and subtle debate about the nature of the Trinity between eastern and western Christian churches, the range of spiritual characteristics driving each side of the debate can be compared as shown in Figure 2.1. The overlap in this case does not indicate that Christians with common spiritual characteristics are more likely to resolve this debate. Instead, the

location of the overlap shows that both sides most likely have factions that do not want to debate, as well as factions that are constraining debate because they feel debating might weaken the Christian position. After all, the Trinity is the one theological concept that opposes external accusations by Jews and Muslims that Christianity is not a monotheistic religion.

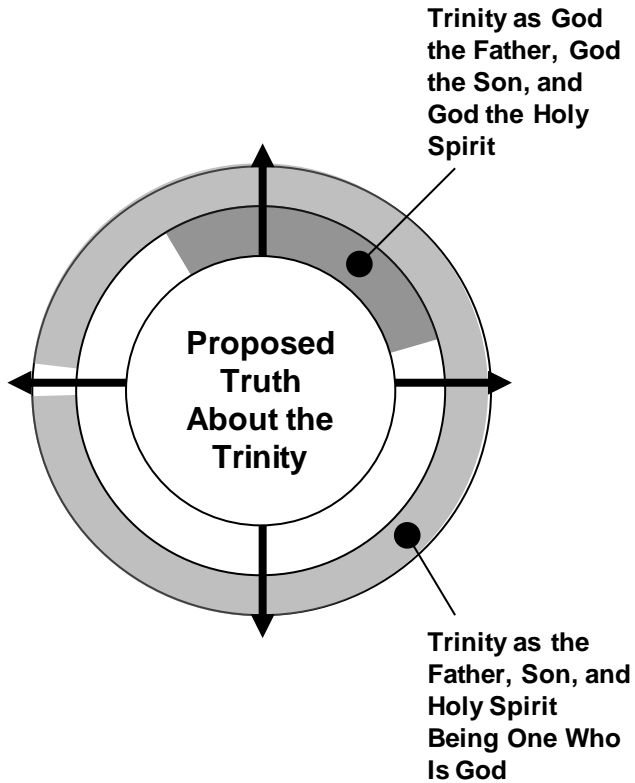


Figure 2.1: Ranges of Spiritual Characteristics on Each Side of the Trinity Debate

No matter how vague our understanding of the Trinity, many feel that Christians cannot debate the definition of Trinity even for the purpose of uniting the Christian churches. This feeling might actually be stronger in the churches of the West because of the

western spiritual swing toward fundamentalism and evangelism. Under evangelism, the mission is to spread the truth and how can this be done if Christians are still trying to understand the truth. Therefore, the only churches that might be initially open to this exploration are the pure progressives who emphasize mental openness on traditional topics.

For the sake of Christian unity, I wish to again stir up this debate that may have faded for the wrong reasons. Regardless of who will listen, we can still ask why the Orthodox churches simply cannot overcome their spiritual resistance to change and join the Catholics and Protestants. The scale of debate, after all, is clearly tipped towards the western understand of the Trinity because of the magnitude of advocacy. However, we can also ask whether the magnitude of advocacy in the West automatically makes them the winner in this debate. Perhaps the center of truth is between the two perspectives. If so, we should treat the opposing groups of spiritual characteristics as equal until proven otherwise.

Bringing the Catholics and Protestants to this unrealized center of truth may be more complex because Christians on this side of the debate have spiritual characteristics that span all four directions of worldly influences. Convincing everyone to relinquish their positions to openly reengage the Orthodox churches will be no small feat. Regarding this topic, however, the political separation between Catholics and Protestants mean that Catholics could dialogue with the Orthodox churches without first gaining concurrence from the Protestants. Equally, progressive Protestants can also initiate a dialogue with the Orthodox churches without first talking with the Catholics. This dialogue must always remain focused on seeking the truth unhindered by spiritual characteristics. Otherwise, we could run the risk of causing a permanent divide between the Catholics and Protestants regarding this topic as one of them might start to forge a new agreement with the Orthodox

churches. Shifting the balance of the opposing groups is not our objective.

To understand the two competing theological perspectives in a search for the truth, we must return to Scripture to rediscover the relationship of Jesus with God the Father and the relationship of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. In support of western theology, the Gospel of John makes a powerful proclamation that Jesus (the Word) was with God at the dawn of creation and that Jesus was God. How could this be true unless Jesus and God are of one, and this oneness was declared by Jesus our Lord. Jesus further explained that a nature of this oneness is that God is in Him and He is in God.

**John 1:1-4** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

**John 10:30** I (Jesus) and the Father are one.

**John 10:38** But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."

The eastern perspective is supported by Jesus' own words that there are things that only God the Father knows. Therefore, Jesus the Son cannot be the totality of God the Father. Further, Jesus also declared that speaking against Him is not the same as speaking against the Holy Spirit, which directly extends from God to save the spirit of man. Therefore, there is a distinction between Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit at least in their relationship with man. Finally, this distinction is affirmed with the fact that only God the Father can be called good.



**Matthew 24:36** "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

**Matthew 12:32** Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

**Mark 10:18** Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone.

The Scripture seems to support the arguments of both the West and East at first glance, but are these arguments really in opposition to one another? Can God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit be one and yet have a uniqueness of identity? We need to look deeper into Scripture and pray harder for insights on how Christians can move to a new center on this topic. Our first question in all humility must be about the nature of God. The Holy Bible has given us a complete understanding of God's will for man but only disclosed a few words on the supremacy of our Creator. God is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, infinite, sovereign, holy, just, and the complexity of his ways is beyond human comprehension as explained by the Apostle Paul. These overwhelming words have convinced many scholars through the ages to avoid trying to understand God, but what father does not want his children to understand his nature? Recognizing our limitations, if we can glean even one more insight about God through faith, then such is an expression of our love for Him. One such insight lies at the very start of the Bible and holds profound impact for our understanding of the Trinity when studied in the context of other Bible verses.

Before God created light, which some might interpret as the start of our universe, and long before God divided the matter in the universe to form the solid planets and stars, the Bible talks about the Spirit of God over waters when the earth was empty and all was surrounded by darkness. What could this first water be if it predates

matter and energy? The Apostle John affirms that God is of the spirit. Therefore, we must ponder whether the first water is a spiritual fabric that God used to create everything. Through this spiritual fabric, which is connected to God, He is then present across all creation, and all creation literally extended directly from Him. Thus, we can consider that God's name "I AM" means that He is all or the center of existence and that to be separated from the presence of God is to be cast into the darkness of non-existence. Therefore, God is the definition of good and what is against God's plan for existence is the definition of evil. This allness of God is affirmed by Scripture which declare that God is one.

**Genesis 1:1-2** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

**John 4:24** God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

**Exodus: 3:14** God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' "

**Deuteronomy 6:4** Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

If God is one and God is everywhere, then how can Jesus take part in God's creation? First, Jesus is the Son of God, and the Son has been given the full authority of God. This authority includes the ability to reward people when He returns. When we look back into the Old Testament, there was only one entity with the same authority as Jesus. This was the entity which the Jews recognized as the Angel of the Lord, not just any angel of the Lord. The Angel of the Lord guided the growth of Abraham's descendents, stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, appeared with God to Moses at the

burning bush, said that His is a name of wonders, and was recognized by Jacob as the face of God. With all these scriptural references related to the understanding of Christ or Christology, we are strongly led to conclude that the Angel of the Lord was Jesus more actively manifesting Himself to God's chosen people in the early days of their growth. This conclusion affirms that the Word has always been with God and guided the progression of God's creation. In the act of creating man, God specifically used the word "us" which can be interpreted as Jesus and the Holy Spirit being a part of the creation process.

**Matthew 16:16** Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

**Matthew 28:18-19** Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

**Matthew 16: 27** For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.

**Genesis 16:10** The angel (Angel of the Lord) added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."

**Genesis 22:11-12** But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

**Genesis 22:15-17** The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your

descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.

**Exodus 3:2** There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.

**Judges 13:17-18** Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?" He replied, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding."

**Genesis 32:24-30** So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

**Genesis 1: 26** Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

If we combined the allness of God and the authority plus role of Jesus across creation, we are left with only one possible conclusion. The spirit of Jesus must be connected with the Spirit of God in a manner where there is no identifiable division on where God ends and Jesus begins. Thus, Jesus is a part of the allness of God. This connective of spirits is more than a harmony of will as declared by the eastern churches and less than Jesus embodying the

total spirit of God. There are parts of the spiritual fabric of God that are beyond the instant reach of Jesus.

According to Scripture, we are further left to consider that Jesus' connectivity with the spirit of God was disrupted when He became the son of man. This connectivity was not regained until the Holy Spirit entered Him at His baptism. If this interpretation is correct, then Jesus, the Son of God, was fully man from birth to adulthood - the spirit that has been a part of God since the beginning fully experienced the trials, suffering, and limitations of a human body. At the moment of Jesus' death on the cross, the spirit of God again left Him. Some might view this act of God as recognizing Jesus bearing our sins. However, another interpretation is that God had to let Jesus die as a man. A father who is holding on to his son cannot let the son die, and so God had to let go of Jesus. So by having been born as a man and died as a man, the Son of God took our humanity to God so that a new bridge between God and man can be formed. This bridge starts from God's end with the Holy Spirit reaching into us, and from our end with our embrace of Jesus as our personal savior.

Though Jesus lived as a man, we cannot deny that the spirit of Jesus has been with God since the beginning. Mary was the mother of Jesus as a man, but she was not the wife of God. The spirit of Mary and God did not combine to form a new spirit. Instead, the Holy Spirit delivered the spirit of Jesus into Mary's womb so that Jesus can be close to Mary's spirit for nine months prior to entering the world.

**Luke 20:41 - 44** Then Jesus said to them, "How is it that they say the Christ is the Son of David? David himself declares in the Book of Psalms: 'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.' David calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?"

**Mark 1:10-11** As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

**Matthew 27: 46** About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi,lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Completing the Trinity, we have read above that to reject the Holy Spirit is to reject God. This leads us to conclude that the Holy Spirit must be a direct extension of God's spirit and a part of God's allness. Jesus stated that it is better to receive the Holy Spirit than to be with Him on earth. When the concept of the Holy Spirit being in us and Jesus praying for us to be one is combined, we understand that the Holy Spirit is what allows Christians to be one in spirit and one with Jesus and God in the coming kingdom. This understanding completely changes the Trinity debate by adding Christians ultimately to the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This inclusion does not diminish the importance of the Son and the Holy Spirit being one with the Father because that oneness makes all things possible. Also, our eventual spiritual unity with God does not mean that we will be equal to God or even to one another. Our spiritual union with God through the Holy Spirit will be according to how each of our spirits has matured and remained pure in life. Salvation is thus another debatable matter, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Jesus the Lamb, as described in Revelation, stands at the center of the throne of God, and we will one day surround the throne and worship the oneness of the Father and the Son.

Christians comprehending the truth of our spiritual connection with our Lord should also see that all the human spirits in the "Book of Life" will be connected to one another, like the branches of a tree. The destiny of this tree, which is to be with God,

is perhaps what Moses saw on Mount Sinai. The burning fire that does not destroy the tree would be the Holy Spirit. God's unity with the tree of humanity is displayed by His voice coming from the center, and Jesus' unity with the tree is displayed by His rising from it as the Angel of the Lord. Therefore, the story of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and man is that there are no human spiritual separations in Heaven, but only spiritual entities within the infinite spirit of God. There is no harmony of will, but simply the will of God and all united spirits that freely share in the will of God.

Because the Holy Spirit stretches across the tree of humanity, it has the awareness and power to shape humanity according to God's plan. The Holy Spirit empowers us differently and looks deep into us for God. Until God the Father wipes away the sin (effects of evil) within our spirits, we cannot be in Him, and thus He must use Holy Spirit to be in us. Unlike God, the Holy Spirit has the ability to work in places where evil still lurks without instantly destroying all that is affected by evil. Sinful man cannot face the goodness of God, but we can receive the Holy Spirit which brings salvation. This unique characteristic of the Holy Spirit suggests that it could be represented by the four creatures that surround the throne of God, as described in Revelation. These creatures are closest to the throne and maybe they have different responsibilities over the ages of man.

**John 14: 16-17** And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

**Acts 1:2** until the day he (Jesus) was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

**John 17: 20 -21** My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

**Romans 8: 27** And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

**1 Corinthians 12: 10-13** to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

By studying the perspectives of the eastern churches and western churches, we have arrived at not only an expanded understanding of the Trinity but also man's relationship with the Trinity, as shown in Figure 2.2. The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are indeed of one essence, because there is no way to delineate them, and the will of the Father is the will of the Trinity. However, there is a uniqueness of identity and mission for the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is the embodiment of creation and the source of good. The Son allows the Trinity to understand man and reach out to man, because the Son was man. The Holy Spirit can reach into the sinful spirit of man, as long as that spirit is willing to resist evil and embrace the truth presented by the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit further weaves together the spirits of Christian to create a unity that will one day enable the tree of humanity to dwell with the Trinity.

While neither the eastern nor the western view of the Trinity has caused the collapse of Christianity, the willingness for Christians to move way from their differences to a common center on this one topic will be a critical step towards uniting the Body of Christ. The Catholic and Orthodox churches from where this debate emerged



may be the right ones to restart the dialogue, but may not be the best to encourage a convergence.

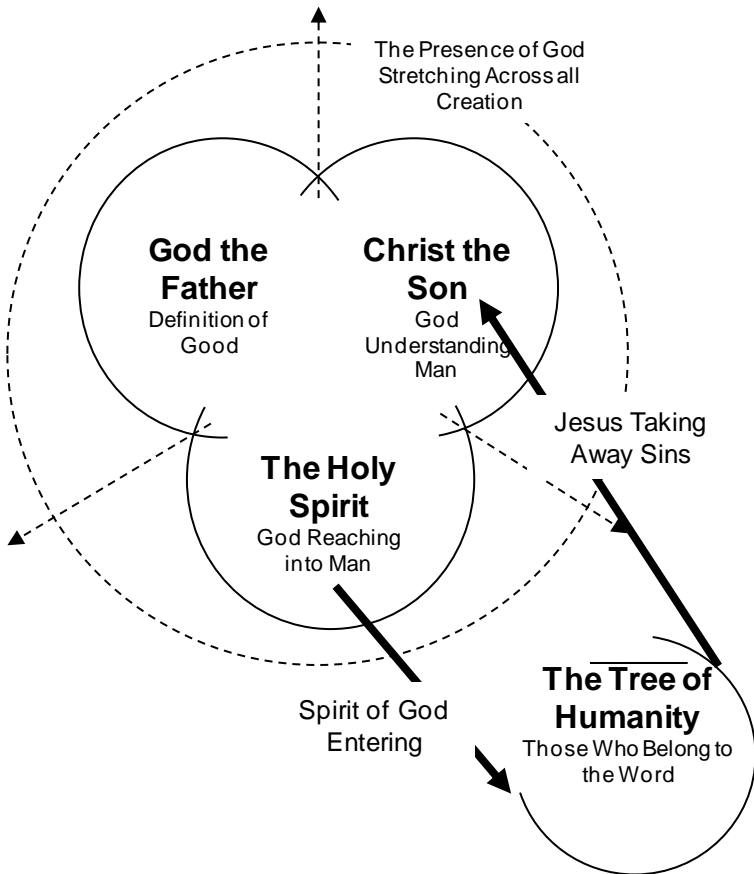


Figure 2.2: An Expanded Understanding of the Trinity

Instead, the progressive churches may be better able to explore and embrace an expanded understanding of the Trinity, and the evangelical churches may be able to pull both the Catholic and Orthodox churches to the new common position. All this dialogue is predicated on the hope that Christians still believe that unity is both possible and desirable.



# Chapter 3: The Cross and Path to Salvation

The second divisive topic we will discuss is perhaps more important to many Christians than the first, because it makes Christianity personal to each believer. The Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches all have theological positions on how Christians will gain spiritual salvation. And, the theological disagreements have been both hot and cold over the centuries because of the spiritual characteristics sustaining the conflicts. While Christians are no longer killing one another over the meaning of salvation, scholars on all sides are still trying to defend their theological positions through the discipline of Soteriology. These defensive postures, influenced by spiritually caused biases, are limiting our understanding of salvation for the sake of Christian coexistence.

If we start our study of salvation from the point of conflicting spiritual characteristics, we can see that the theological positions are in part shaped by spiritual needs. As the groups of spiritual characteristics associated with the major branches of Christianity reflect the most apparent needs, no new groups of spiritual characteristics need to be identified for this topic, as shown in Figure 3.1. The Orthodox Church has focused on sustaining its traditions and realm of believers for centuries. Therefore, it is very natural that it would adopt a salvation theology where all, including the righteous who were sent to Hell / Hades before the birth of Jesus, are saved by the life, death, and resurrection of God Jesus which reunited the human and divine. This view of salvation based on the cross and resurrection alone embodies a more generous view of God's grace and reduces the need for evangelism which is not well aligned with the Orthodox spiritual characteristics. Orthodox Christians can also coexist better with neighboring non-Christian

people because of provisions for the righteous who have not received the Word to potentially be saved.

In contrast, the Catholic Church has emphasized preserving Christian behavior admits great corruption and turmoil during and after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Further, it had to push Christianity into opposing pagan regions. It is therefore also very natural that the Catholics would adopt a salvation theology that is centered on faith and good works. Given the turmoil within the Catholic realm, good deeds were very important not just for salvation but for the survival of the church. Although hard to prove physically, we can suggest that the Catholic interpretation that the original sin of Adam did not wipe away the goodness of humanity completely came at a time when evilness in man was so great that goodness had to be encouraged as a Christian concept. As both the Catholic and Orthodox churches are respectful of traditions, their schism essentially left their theological disagreements as a cold topic, as long as neither side sought to push the other.

The path to salvation is in contrast a very hot topic between the Protestants and the Catholics, because Protestantism started by pulling Christians and whole Christian nations away from the Catholic realm. We can debate whether the Protestant spiritual characteristics are causing their conflict with the Catholics or are created as a result of the conflict. Either way, the integrity of their total theological argument against Catholicism is sustained by the criticality of faith. The central point of Protestant faith is the greater emphasize on the authority of God expressed through grace, as well as the clear fall of man if there was no grace. The associated interpretation that the original sin of Adam led to the fall of man denies the ability of all people to work toward salvation and affirms salvation by grace alone.

While the Protestants profess to truly understand grace, the grace of God is by no means a Protestant concept. In fact, grace, as seen by the Orthodox Christians, is given more completely after the

point of Jesus' resurrection. Grace, as seen by the Catholics, is given after our spiritual penitence. It frees us from our sins, and sanctifies us. However, as we look at the misalignment of spiritual characteristics between the Protestants, the Catholics, and Orthodox Christians, there is not much overlap to encourage discussions. The Episcopal churches of Protestantism might engage the Catholic Church hierarchy about this topic, and the New Evangelicals of Protestantism might wish to engage Catholic organizations, such as Opus Dei, about this topic.

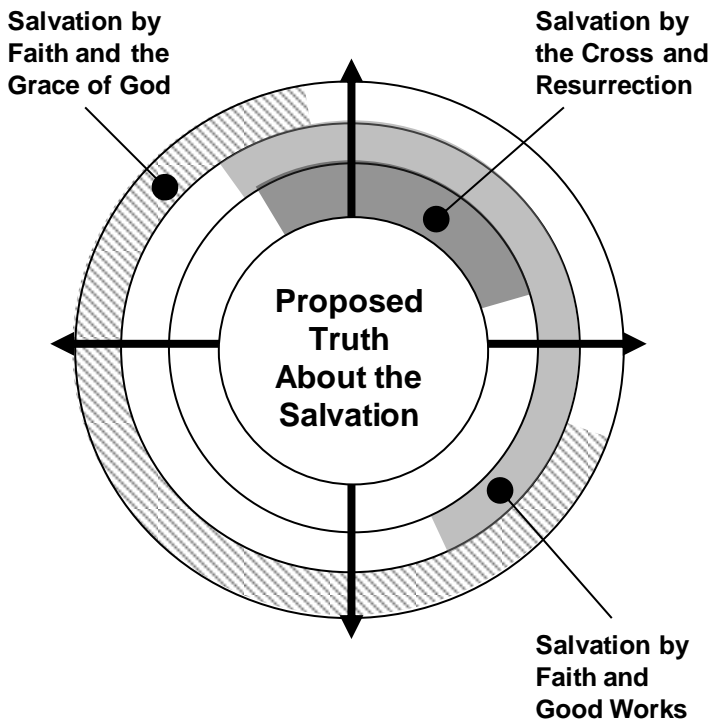


Figure 3.1: Ranges of Spiritual Characteristics around the Salvation Debate

With the hope of resolving this disagreement, I will make a big assumption that we can get past the hidden conflicts between spirit characteristics and bring Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox

Christians to the table of open consideration about theology. The first question is, what does the Scripture say about the different views of salvation? First, all Christians must recognize that no one can fight or earn their way into Heaven without the grace of God, and that Christ our Lord can grant entry into Heaven even for grave sinners if they recognize His authority.

**Luke 18:26-27** Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."

**Luke 23:42-43** Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

**Matthew 10:32** "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in Heaven.

For the Orthodox Christians who see how easy it was for a criminal to be saved once Jesus returned to Heaven, the power of Jesus' salvific act in redeeming the whole world inclusive of the past, present, and future might be evident. As long as we do not reject salvation, then salvation is ours to receive. The Protestants could also see how remarkable faith can be, for a spirit can be saved even if it turns to Jesus at the last minute. But, accepting Jesus as the savior is all important, and it must be a spiritual embrace of the Word. This embrace of Jesus' teachings through discipleship is further discussed in Scripture. Apostle John declared the criticality of believing in Jesus while Apostle Paul taught us about the meaning of justifying faith that enables redemption.

**John 3: 17-18** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe

stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

**Romans 5:1-2** Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

**Ephesians 2:8-9** For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

For the Protestants, the affirmation that faith is empowered by God through the Holy Spirit surely affirms that we cannot work our way to salvation. However, the Catholics might argue that though we cannot work our way to Heaven, it does not mean that good works does not matters. After all, Jesus did warn that our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees, our spirits must be like that of a child, and we must do the will of our heavenly Father. Paul further taught us that faith and deeds must all be based on love, for without love, faith and deeds are nothing. Finally, James explained that true faith must be reflected by deeds or the faith is worthless. Still, at no point did the Scripture say that our actions and the magnitude of our love can earn us the righteousness to be free of judgment.

**Matthew 5:20** For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

**Matthew 7:21-23** Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

**Luke 18:17** I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

**1 Corinthians 13:1-3** If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

**James 2:18** But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

**James 2:26** As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

The bottom line of the theological disagreements between the Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic churches is what is faith? Scripture at first glance appears to allow for many interpretations, and some might say that all interpretations may be acceptable, depending on the spiritual condition of each individual Christian. However, are the spiritual conditions of individuals aligned correctly with the theology of their sides? Can Orthodox Christians have the purity of faith through simple rituals and the acceptance of Christ? Can Protestants achieve powerful faith through the pursuit of the Holy Spirit? If so, how does the Holy Spirit work within the Protestant realm? Are some progressive Protestants adopting a more generous view of God's grace that reduces the demand for pursuing the Holy Spirit, thus bringing them closer to Orthodox views? Finally, can the actions of Catholics shape their spirits so that their faith is adequate? Both the Orthodox Christians and the Catholics have an understanding that allows for a weakness in faith. Orthodox Christians who ended up in Hades can be spiritually bolstered and



Catholics who ended up in purgatory can do penitence until saved or released on the day of Final Judgment. However, for the Protestants who have based their faith on a direct relationship with God, there is no alternative path if faith falters.

My great concern in these theological positions is that danger lurks for Christians on all sides. I fear that many Protestants have a false impression of their faith. They are confident of their salvation, even though they have only called Jesus by name without truly embracing the Word. I fear that the Orthodox Christians will be too comfortable with sin, without realizing that they have not turned away from it enough for God to pull them to safety. I also fear that Catholics will become too consumed with the superficiality of actions and deeds, losing sight of the spiritual meaning, which must be the driver to physical expression. Therefore, finding the center of truth in this topic is critical, perhaps not to the most faithful on all sides but to the many struggling with faith.

To understand how salvation is achieved, we must look deeper into the meaning of the cross in Christology and the relationship of the cross to our spirits in Soteriology. Christians, since the first century, have understood that our sins trap us in God's judgment, and that Jesus died on the cross to free us from our sins. Through Jesus' sacrifice, we are able to receive God's gift of eternal life. Beyond this fact, our understanding of why Jesus had to die on the cross, and how Jesus took away our sins has been a matter of interpretation. Why could not our Father simply forgive our sins out of love without sacrifice? Is punishing the Lamb of God, who is faultless, for our sins truly just? And, can sins really be transferred like an object from one to another? The answers to these questions are not as simple as most Christians believe, and they offer a better understanding of salvation.

**John 1:29** The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

**Romans 6:23** For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**1 Corinthians 15:3-4** For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scripture,

**Ephesians 5:2** and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

**Colossians 1:22** But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—

Why Jesus had to be sacrificed raises two possibilities: 1) Jesus had to return to God with the experience of being human, so that God can understand our weaknesses to send us the Holy Spirit, and 2) Jesus died on the cross as a result of the Jews' accusation so that the first covenant with the Jews can be broken. God's separation from the sinful spirit of man started in Eden when Adam was able to hide from God after eating a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. In places of great sin like Sodom, the Lord had to hear about their sins from far away first before going there to confirm. The Holy Spirit did not descend to breakdown the barrier between man and God until Jesus returned to God forty days after His resurrection. Prior to Jesus' sacrifice, He never offered His teachings to non-Jews. He further described the gentiles as mere dogs eating beside the master's table, affirming God's covenant with the Jews as His people. If this covenant was not broken through betrayal, then all the other peoples of the world would still not have the right to God's grace.

Once Jesus became the bridge between man and God, the sins of man were revealed to God through Jesus for forgiveness. Just because Jesus is able to take away our sins, it does not mean that His crucifixion is a punishment for our sins. Paul taught that Old

Testament concept of substitution for sins did not work. Then the sacrifice of Jesus must work by a different mechanism. In fact, Jesus was already forgiving sins before His sacrifice, telling us to sin no more. If sins can be forgiven by God without a price, such as a substitution by Jesus, then the only requirement for our salvation is having enough faith to sustain the relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. This faith is not an exchange for forgiveness, but a spiritual commitment that enables forgiveness. What can our Lord do if we deny a relationship with Him? When God treated His people as children thousands of years ago, He sometimes showed wrath so that they will learn. But, I believe in a God of love where propitiation, a diverting of His wrath, is not required. All is done to help us to receive salvation.

**Hebrews 10:2-10** If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins... And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Unfortunately, faith is hard for many, and the evils of this world tug at our faith constantly. Can a Christian trapped in misunderstanding or spiritual immaturity ever obtain the baptism of the Holy Spirit? Probably yes. If we think of Jesus' sacrifice in the same way the Jews thought of animal sacrifice as substitution for sin, then much is in jeopardy. Can a professed Christian without receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit still obtain salvation after being sent to the World of the Dead? That is up to our Lord. However, we know that salvation is very hard for those who had a relationship with our Lord through the Holy Spirit but betrayed it. For those in the World of the Dead who did not receive the fullness of the Word, we know that the Word will be given to them. After

receiving the Word, the dead cannot change their spirits. They can only be spiritually condemned or saved at judgment day. Some Christians who have tried to live righteous lives but never fully received the Word and the Holy Spirit may live again after judgment at the second resurrection. This may be particularly true for Christians of the Middle Ages who could not read nor have access to hand copied Bibles. Perhaps the Catholic concept of purgatory and accepting penitence in purgatory prior to salvation is the hedge against people who were unable to receive the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the Orthodox concept of Hades and redemption from Hades reflect the above understanding of the World of the Dead.

**John 5:24-25, 28-29** I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live...."Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

**Romans 8:9** You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

The Protestant position basically suggests that Christians, in an age where Bibles are available to everyone, must receive the Holy Spirit, because we will have little excuse for not receiving the fullness of the Word. While this may be true, the all or nothing approach is very dangerous, because when one's faith fails to gain the Holy Spirit one is doomed. Faith may fail due to the misunderstanding that verbal acknowledgement of Jesus, without spiritually embracing the teachings of Jesus, is good enough for salvation. When we declare that we belong to Jesus, that declaration

must come from the spirit. Faith may fail due to spiritual weaknesses, causing us to not follow Jesus' teachings. Discipleship requires us to try to live by the Word in mind, body, and spirit despite of our overwhelming inadequacies. Finally, faith may fail when we are unable to grow the initial bond of the Holy Spirit to resist worldly evils. The Holy Spirit gives us power to resist evil and strengthen our faith. Strong faith in turn allows us to receive the Holy Spirit in greater fullness. If Christians are weakly touched by the Holy Spirit, this cycle of growth may be hard to initiate. Such Christians must make a concerted effort to live by the teachings of the Bible, for actions can strengthen faith. Actions, however, must stem from love of our Lord and one another.

In short, the Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians simply see different sides of a single path to salvation. The Protestants need to see the challenges of faith, which brings God's grace, and realize that actions are integral to achieving initial faith and further growth. The Catholics need see that faith, which brings God's grace, is the only way, and that actions void of love cannot growth faith. And, the Orthodox Christians need to see that, while those who did not have a chance to receive the Word might be redeemed from the World of the Dead, there are very few in our modern world who have been denied the Word.

Could Protestants allow faith to enable actions, Catholics use actions to grow faith, and Orthodox Christians allow the Cross to lead faith and actions? If so, then the theological divides do not matter. What matters is where we go. If Christians do not grow in understanding God's will through love, then they are in jeopardy in these days of great spiritual threats.

To seek the will of God, Christians on a path of spiritual growth through the Holy Spirit should move beyond the psychological constraints established by our history and institutions. It is true that the journey of faith has been so challenging that it has taken many generations of Christians to advance our spiritual

understanding. It has taken special Christians with higher faith to bring unique insights into the Body of Christ. During our moments of greatest need, the Holy Spirit has further selected the very few to witness miracles and prophecies to carry the Body of Christ forward. These facts should not discourage Christians from believing that anybody can know the will of our Lord, as anybody can have visions, insights, and prophecies. Jesus said that we just have to ask with persistence and sincerity.

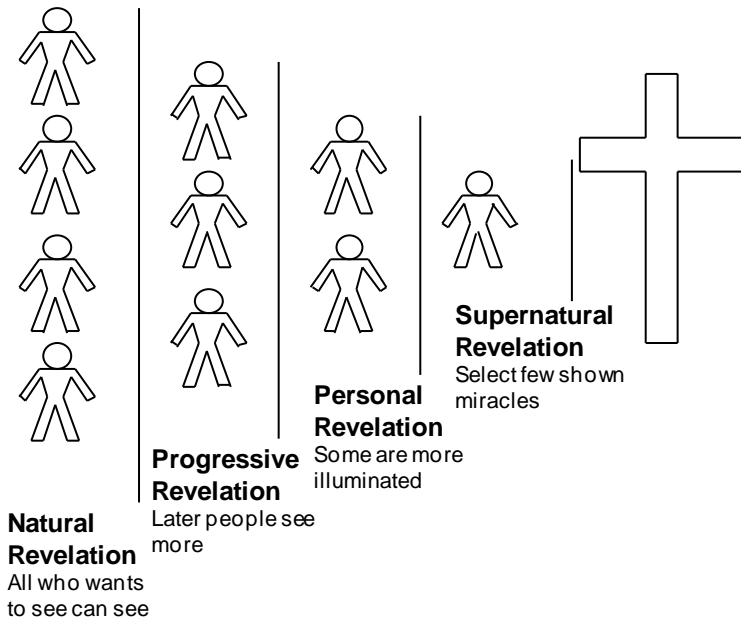


Figure 3.2: Historical Path in which People Reached to the Cross

The historical diagram of people reaching to the fullness of the Word, as shown in Figure 3.2, should not be our guide for the future. All of our need to embrace the Lord in spirit is clear in Scripture. Jesus revealed that He has shown us everything. Thus, it is our lack of faith that hinders us from understanding God’s will, and God does not hide His will from us. The importance of our journey of faith is affirmed over and over again by the apostles. This

journey, once we have received the Holy Spirit, should start from the cross outward in our unity with Jesus as God’s children. Many new Christians still want to rush to the cross, but the Holy Spirit has already placed the cross in us. If we can but recognize that cross, then we can grow to be God’s friends and understand God’s will. After understanding God’s will, we can become His willing servants by participating in His plan. The whole world is God’s slave, but only a few serve God with faith, love, and hope.

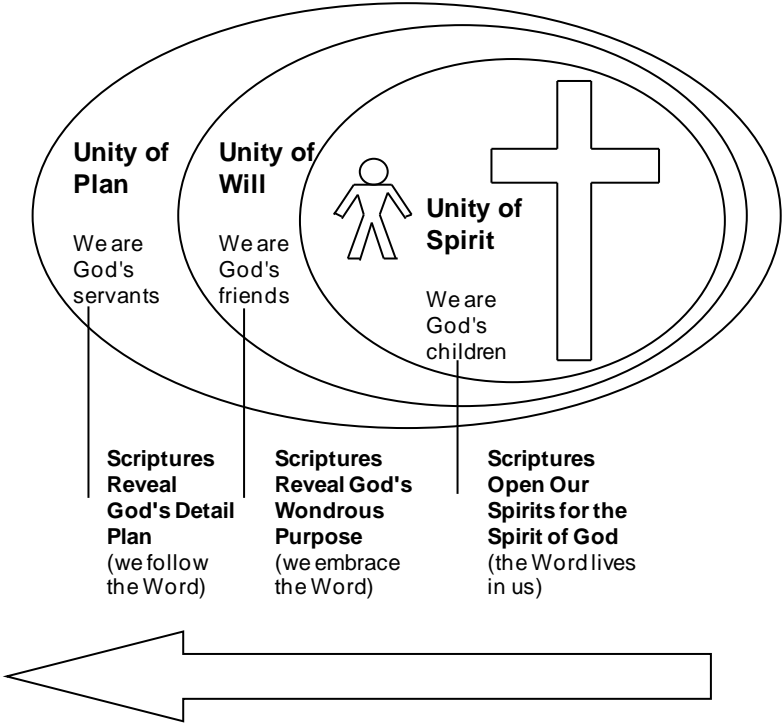


Figure 3.3: Letting the Cross Grow within Us

**John 4:24** God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

**John 15:15** I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

**Hebrews 11:6** And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

I have suggested that the cross lives within us through the Holy Spirit. Faith and actions, with the help of Holy Spirit, will lead us on a journey to where we will be fully united with God and Jesus after this life. Different Christians will progress at different rates in this journey which is conceptualized in Figure 3.3. Importantly, we need to stay on the path to God in order to be saved. As long as we are on this path, God will pull us in after this life. However, Christians can fall off this path and become separated from the Holy Spirit. If this happens, they need to recognize their loss of grace and rush back to the path at once.

Our study of the deeper nature of salvation shows that it is a path, as shown in Figure 3.4, which requires the combination of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox perspectives. There is no doubt that the cross is at the center of our salvation.

**Act 2:36** Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."



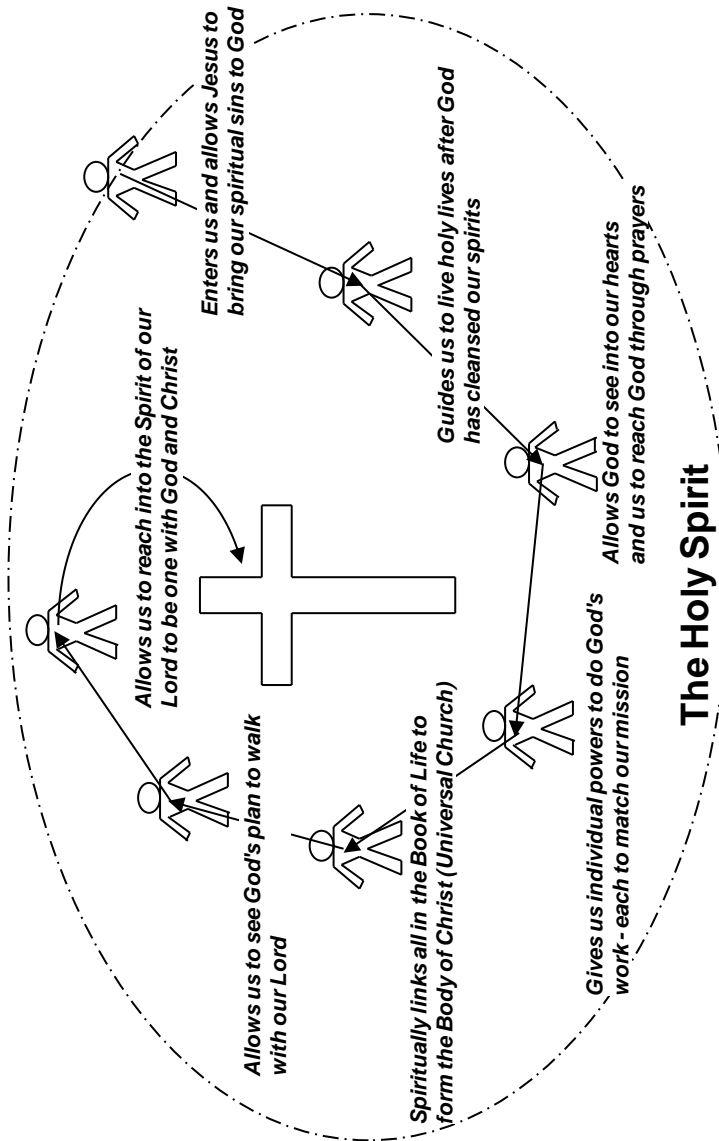


Figure 3.4: Our Spiritual Path to God as Led by the Holy Spirit

Our salvation is also dependent on faith empowered by the Holy Spirit, in addition to actions that follow God's will which affirm our love for Him. We can endlessly debate who has more

often fallen off the path of salvation - Protestants, Catholics, or Orthodox Christians. What matters is that Christians stop thinking about the exclusivity of salvation theology and start raising one another along a combined path. Christian unity regarding this decisive topic may literally be a matter of life or death.

# Chapter 4: The Consistency of Free Will and Predestination

The third divisive topic in the Christian realm once again extends from the origins of Christianity. Christians are taught the preciousness of free will and to accept prophecies, some of which provided directly by Jesus. If prophecies mean that the future is predestined, then how can predestination occur with everyone having free will? Many early Christians emphasized free will, for the act of choice was what helped Christians resist corruptions within the Roman Empire and from Christian sects such as the Gnostics. Univocal free will, where God steps back from His creation to let events unfold based on human choices in a deterministic manner, was first challenged by Augustine of Hippo. Augustine's later writings argued that salvation cannot be attained by the pure foreknowledge of God. Rather it requires the intervening grace of God to select those who will be saved. This sparked a multi-century debate with theological positions again linked to the spiritual characteristics of Christian branches and changing denominations.

Interpreting the Augustinian arguments, the Catholic Church gradually settled on the theological position that predestination still grants equivocal free will where man's spiritual choice for good or evil is critical in salvation, even though God may be steering the events of the world. This position, known as single predestination, preserved the reliance on prophecies which must have been very important during the turmoil within western Europe. However, it also kept a concept of free will that supported the Catholic emphasis on faith and good works.

The Orthodox Church gradually settled on the theological position that God foresees how man will act and controls the worldly environment accordingly. This position reflects some of its early

challenges to Augustinian arguments, and set God as more of an infallible predictor. With grace and human effort working together to cause effect, the fulfillment of prophecies is more complex. This complexity supports the spiritual characteristics of Orthodox Christians in not wanting change, because prophecies, such as those within the Book of Revelation, are too hard to understand. They can simply be relegated to being a mystery without further focus.

With the early Protestants, the teachings of John Calvin steered many Christians toward the idea of double predestination where God controlled the events of the world as well as our spiritual choices. Therefore, who is saved and condemned is strictly by the decision of God, which man cannot fathom. What man perceives as free will is merely an extension of God's plans and we are shaped by God through our experiences. Our choice to follow the Word is simply an act to affirm God's plan for us to follow the Word. The Calvinistic view of predestination is unique, but it has the quality of supporting exclusiveness and elitism within Christian groups. Elitism in being among God's select people may be very appealing for Christians choosing to leave Catholicism for Protestantism at the dawn of Protestantism. This appeal is still quite strong today, particularly among those focused on tribulation theology.

Alternatively, as Protestants began to spread the good news of Jesus into non-Christian realms, many more progressive Christians started to reject predestination all together in favor of the view that the whole world can be saved. Denominations, such as the Methodists, might argue that the presumption that some people are condemned is not constructive for the Christian mission. Instead, man can and should strive to change the world in accordance with God's teachings. We should try to stop injustice and help the suffering. Finally, considering the religious freedom of modern times, one's view of free will and predestination may not necessarily be governed or enforced by denomination affiliations. Thus, the exact range of spiritual characteristics aligned with each theological

position, as shown in Figure 4.1, is fuzzy. Also, the views in those fuzzy regions may be quite confusing.

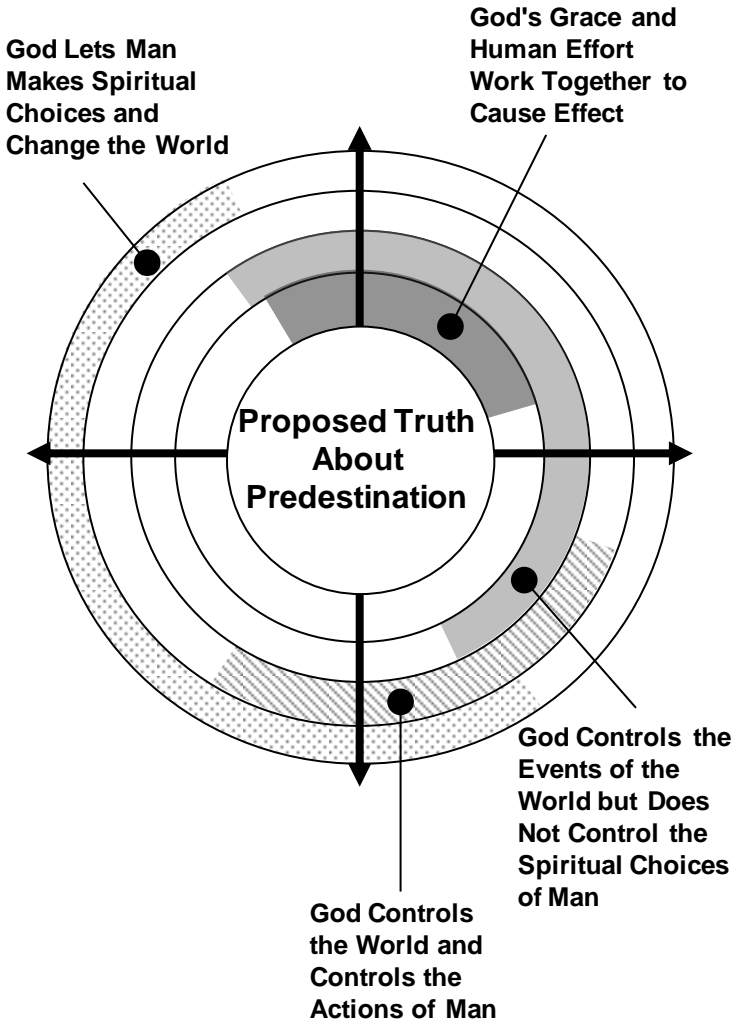


Figure 4.1: Ranges of Spiritual Characteristics Around the Predestination Debate

With so many views on predestination and the free will of man, we have to turn again to Scripture to understand how the theological positions of all sides started. Maybe this understanding

can be integrated to find the single path of truth. First, the component of predestination that consists of God choosing those who will be saved and enabling their salvation with His grace is an undeniable scriptural concept.

**Ephesians 1:5** He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will—

**Romans 8:28-30** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified.

**1 Corinthians 2:7** No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

**Act 4:27-28** Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

The direct references to predestination, however, do not explain how God chooses. Is it based on omniscience of our path only, influencing our path, controlling our physical situation, or controlling our physical and spiritual state? What we do know is that God's choice of who will be saved can be made before those people are born.

**Jeremiah 1:5** Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

The most pivotal fact is that God has written down the names of all people who are to be saved in the Book of Life. This book will be opened on the Day of Judgment, and there is no hope for evildoers whose name is not in the book. The existence of this book is affirmed throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament. While Christians do not know who is or is not in the book, merely knowing that some people will surely be thrown into the lake of fire has shaped our attitudes toward the world.

**Palms 69:27 - 29** Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous. I am in pain and distress; may your salvation, O God, protect me.

**Daniel 7:10** A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.

**Luke 10:20** However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

**Hebrews 12:23** to the church of the first born, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,

**Revelation 20:15** If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

The concept of the Book of Life works in conjunction with other parts of the Bible containing and even dedicated to prophecies. Given that each action one takes could ripple across time to change the world, the only way that God's plan and prophecies are guaranteed to come true is for God to account for ever action and everything across time. Some actions are guided by God through faith of His people. Others are either shaped by Him via external

forces or permitted by Him. Not all permitted actions are aligned with God's will, but all permitted actions are a part of God's plan. Even the evildoers are accounted for by God. The notion that prophecies could be foiled by evildoers is only for those weak in faith. The existence of very detailed prophecies argues against the concept of a merely observing or foreseeing God. Indeed, God's control of the physical world, including the course of our lives, is validated in Scripture.

**Luke 12:6-7** Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Those Christians preferring the concept of complete (univocal) free will can point out that God and Jesus have provided guidance for man to follow willingly throughout the Old and New Testaments. Even when God has decided the fate of a city, such as Nineveh, their sincere repentance can help God to change His mind. Jesus offered the ultimate choice of free will to the entire world – the choice of salvation. Since anyone can gain God's grace, the hope of salvation for the entire world has shaped Christian attitudes despite the fact that some has and will choose to reject God's grace.

**John 5:24** I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

**Titus 2:11-12** For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,

If we try to understand free will independent from predestination, then the facts start at the beginning, when man's



journey in this world began with an act of free will. The fact that Adam chose to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in defiance of God shows that free will has always been given to man. It does not make sense that God would control Adam to defy Him, so that Adam can be tossed out of Eden. Alternatively, God could easily have blocked Adam from the Tree of Knowledge, but He did not. God could easily have made Adam a creature of instincts which would not eat from the Tree of Knowledge. But then, Adam would not have a spirit in the image of God. Free will is what allows us to be God's children and Jesus' friend. However, the price of free will is that our spirits have to learn how to resist the forces of evil in us and around us. Double predestination is therefore an erroneous theory to resolve Christian discomfort with the fact that evil can taint God's creation. God allows evil to affect man in the world so that we can overcome it in the next world, but we cannot falsely conclude that God would induce evil acts.

We have ruled out double predestination as Biblically indefensible. Next, we must examine the concepts of salvation being offered to all and God changing His mind. If we interpret these concepts as other ways for God to influence our choices, then they in no way conflict with the idea of God having the power to see how His creation will behave across time. Knowing how we would choose every single time, the creator at the beginning laid a plan for how He will steer outcomes for the world and place choices before us. God designed the entirety of creation across time to give all of us the right situations to choose and to give Christians guidance on our choices through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Because the Creator does not dictate how we will choose, many have and will continue to embrace sin. We can ponder why God created situations that allow people to sin, but we know God does not cause people to sin.

At this point, the Catholic and Orthodox understandings of free will and predestination are closer to the truth. The difference is how much does God control physical events in this world verses

how much does He let our actions change the world? Both interpretations carry some truth in them. For Christians who follow the will of God passed to us by the Holy Spirit, our choices may indeed be changing the world, as God looks on with acceptance. Our free will could thus be more than simply a spiritual choice. For the rest of the world, which is often in defiance of God's will, controls must be applied to steer the outcomes of people's choices to God's will, or to meet what is acceptable in God's plan. The varying levels of control to get people to align with God's plan are too complex for our comprehension. Further, the ability of free will to go beyond spiritual choice to actually shape the world is a part of this complexity. One thing is for sure - God's plan will manifest and His kingdom will come exactly as had been foretold. People are either willing participants or slaves in God's plan.

Even though we Christians have a tendency to focus only on free will or predestination, they are completely intertwined, as shown in Figure 4.2. If we suggest that there is no free will, then we accuse God of controlling us to sin. If we suggest that there is no predestination, then we deny the power of God to see the outcome of His creation and the love of God to establish the best outcome. Understanding the intertwining of these two truths allows us to see two aspects of God in the Bible and in our lives. God is the God of the present. He interacts with us and shapes our decisions. This interaction may include God changing His mind, as at Nineveh, once we change course toward His will. God is also the God eternal. This means that God always knew that He will change His mind, as He knew how we would choose and change.

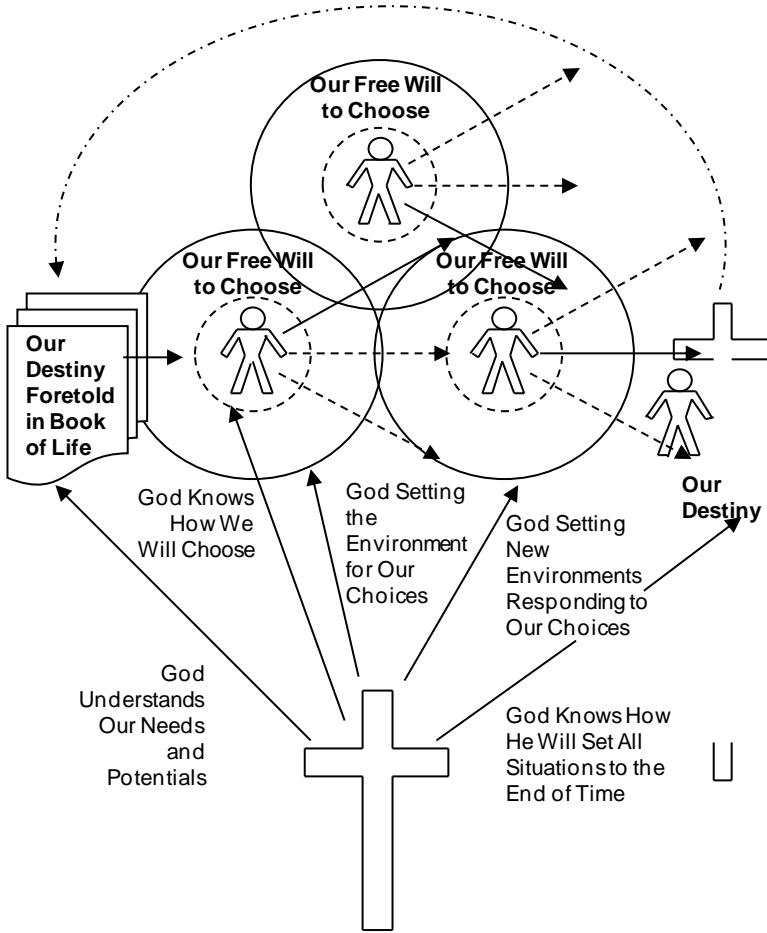


Figure 4.2: Intertwining of Our Free Will and Predestination

To those of us who seek greater understanding of our Lord's will, we are given insights into the unfolding of worldly events to the point where it benefits our choices. This insight can come from the Holy Spirit enabled abilities to interpret prophecies, prophesize, and interpret the unfolding of events. Seeing what will happen, we are then burdened to respond with love and compassion. The only way we can act correctly, however, is by understanding our Lord's will for us. Therefore, Christians should not ask for insight about the world without asking for wisdom on how to use those insights.

Beyond the theological disagreements that we started with and with the single path of truth that we are proposing, most Christians will still want to emphasize either free will or predestination in their outlook. This is particularly true in the Protestant realm where centralized authority is lacking. For those Christians emphasizing free will, we must continue our fervor to deliver the good news of Jesus, but temper our tolerance of sins. Jesus warned us not to let the spiritual weaknesses of others drag down our spirits. Having hope is important, but believing that the whole world will or could be saved is an illusion. Such an illusion traps us in the present and burdens us with the responsibility for charting the future. In the end, so many Christians fail to realize that the ultimate expression of our love for God is to voluntarily surrender our free will to the will of God. Only one act of free will truly matters in the end, and that is the will to cling on to God through the Holy Spirit no matter what evil faces us. When we do this, then the will of God is for us to be fully free to enjoy the wonders of His creation after the unfolding of His plan. However God wants us to participate in the unfolding of His plan, we should follow. Do not deny the importance of prophecies, and do not relegate prophecies to a period that is of no concern to us. Most prophecies from Daniel to Revelation have been unfolding over the past centuries.

For those Christians emphasizing predestination, we must continue to trust in God's plan but understand that we are expected to participate in love and faith. Remember, Abraham pleaded for Sodom knowing that it is God's will to destroy it. Abraham was not defying God but showed his compassion as he could not fully comprehend the ways of God. Compassion was Abraham's role and our role, given the teachings of Jesus is to love all people even though some may continue to embrace evil. This love is reflected in God's desire for all people to repent of their sins and turn to Him. How we must endeavor to help people turn to God differs in each

situation. There is a fine line between condemning people and showing people the sins within them. The wrongful act of condemnation is usually associated with feelings of elitism and condescension towards non-Christians. Christians should not be too willing to shut out the world while ignoring the evil that grows within. We need to feel sad that evil will claim its own, but we, as God's people, must still oppose it with all our might.



# Chapter 5: Response to Sins within the Church

The fourth divisive topic is so polarizing that even Christians within a single denomination sometimes find themselves on opposite sides of the debate. The Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches all have a unique understanding of sins. However, Christian responses to sins within all the churches are becoming increasingly based on either the concept of forgiveness with non-judgment or the concept of exposure with efforts to correct, as shown in Figure 5.1. While these two theological positions do not have to be in opposition, Christians favoring one side have at times accused those on the other side of straying away from the will of God. The spiritual characteristics fueling the debate on each side creates the division and opposition.

Christians understand that our past sins are forgiven once we repent of them and accept the baptism of the Holy Spirit as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, continued sinning by Christians has troubled the churches since the first century. In an age when the church ruled over the state and when whole nations were expected to be Christians, real or perceived grave sins, such as apostasy (rejection of God to include practicing witchcraft), heresy (teaching a false gospel), and schism (dividing the church) were sometimes dealt with through physical violence and even executions. The blood of many has been on Christian hands, and we will leave those Christian persecutors to our Lord. Today, spiritual maturity and love for others have taken Christians beyond the brutality of the past, but not beyond sin and confusion about how to respond to sin.

Clearly our response to sins has to match the nature of each type of sin, and that requires deep understanding. However, theologians have been debating sins and consequences within the

church for centuries without getting us closer to Christian unity. Perhaps looking at the spiritual characteristics dividing Christians will help us bridge the theological divide.

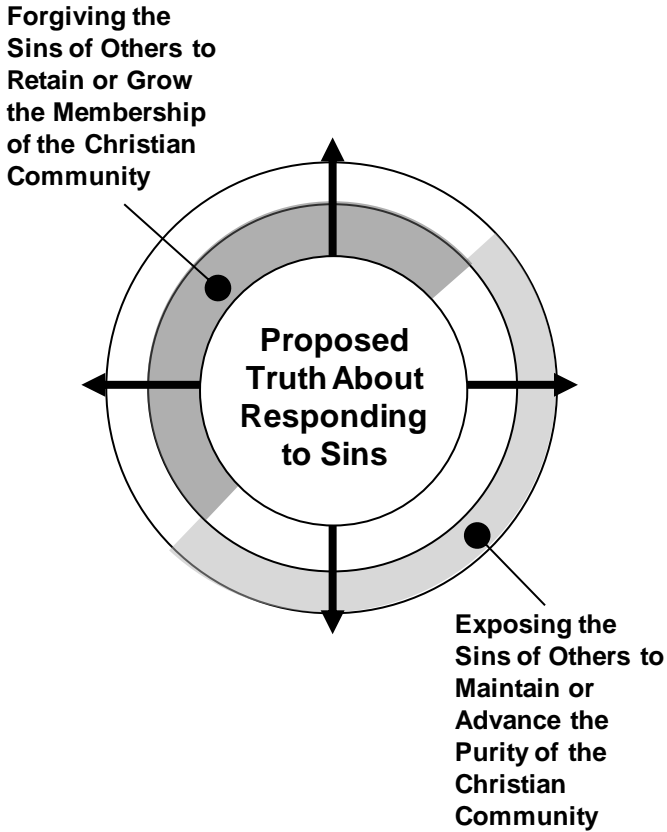


Figure 5.1: Ranges of Spiritual Characteristics Polarizing Our Response to Sins

Christians who do not want to take actions that jeopardize traditions and Christians wishing to embrace non-Christians in our modern world with love are all motivated to emphasize the concept of forgiving sins even among Christians. Not making sin an internal issue causes fewer disturbances, making it easier for churches to retain or grow membership. This range of spiritual characteristics



matches that of many Orthodox churches, some Catholic churches, and most of the mainline Protestant churches. In contrast, Christians desiring to preserve fundamental values within the church and evangelize Christ's teachings to the rest of the world are motivated to expose and correct sins. This range of spiritual characteristics matches that of a few Orthodox churches, many Catholic churches, and most of the fundamentalist and evangelical churches.

Given this division, we have a new insight as to why the Orthodox churches continue to discuss sins in terms of man's relationship with God and grave sins as those that break this relationship, thus requiring confession and communion. Levels of sin are specifically not addressed, and the criteria in which a Christians can lose salvation are not set. Similar to Orthodox views, the mainline Protestant churches have also shifted the emphasis to our relationship God. However, because more mainline churches are clearly on the forgiving side, the emphasis has evolved to focus on God's love in His relationship with man. As a result, the subject of Christians losing God's love caused by grave sins is generally not addressed.

On the side of exposing sins, the Roman Catholic churches and the fundamentalist Protestant churches all have a legalistic view of sin. Sin is breaking God's moral law. It requires man to regain and sustain God's grace through salvation. The Catholic definition of sins include 1) original sin, where Adam's defiance taints the spirituals of all man, 2) mortal sin, which separates even Christians from God's grace, and 3) venial sins, which weakens man's relationship with God. The original sin is dealt with by the Christian commitment to good works as a part of one's salvation. Mortal sins require Christians to pursue repentance in confession, and reconciliation with God plus the church through the sacrament of the Eucharist (Holy Communion). Communion relieves guilt and helps one accept punishment, such as those that will be levied in purgatory. Venial sins, which include light violations and

unintentional violations, may also garner punishment, but the lack of reconciliation in life will not jeopardize our salvation. This leveling of sins gives Christians a framework for addressing the sins of others. However, it also provides room for sins to be dealt with by God, not by fellow Christians, through punishment. Interestingly, Catholic churches lie on both sides of the divide on responding sins even with the legalistic definitions.

The fundamentalist Protestant churches, which are by large on the side of exposing sins, define original sin as the spiritual fall of man into such inherent sinfulness and depravity that salvation can only be achieved by the grace of God. Exposing our sins is thus a validation of our fallen spiritual state. Turning away from sins then reflects the power of God within us. Some Protestants add to the Catholic categories of sins the additional categories of concupiscence, which is the internal sins of desire, and eternal sin, which are sins that cannot be forgiven. We might even argue that the Catholic mechanism of excommunication, which has largely been abandoned, is still alive and well in the fundamentalist Protestant realm as churches continue to split over the accusation of sins.

Now that the motivations of the spirit have been discussed, maybe we can set them aside to explore what the Scripture say about each theological position. From Jesus' guidance, we understand that all are sinners before God, and only God has the right to judge sinners. Our role is to love God and one another unconditionally. We should love one another even when we do not understand why people sin against us, and why it was permitted by God. God may allow people to sin against us so that we can help them to rise above sin. Facing sin may help strengthen our spirits against sin. Finally, our persecution and sacrifice maybe what condemns evildoers in God's judgment. Our willingness to forgive does not mean that we just let ourselves be harmed. We Christians must still be shrewd about protecting ourselves and our loved ones. However, it would be sad if someone who sinned against us found God's forgiveness while

our anger and hatred over that person's sins keep us from being saved by God. Resolving our feelings towards those who hurt us is critical to our faith and relationship with the Lord.

Recognizing that all things occur with the permission of God, we are further instructed to pray for sinners, as long as their sins are not those that cannot be forgiven by God. Thus, we should pray for God's forgiveness and help people stop sinning so that they can eventually overcome sin. Understanding what are sins, and which sins bring death, however, is a complex matter that has launched many debates. This debate extends to our ability to forgive sins in the name of Jesus.

**Luke 6:7** "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

**John 8:10-11** Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

**Matthew 18:20-22** Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

**James 4:11-12** Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

**1 John 5:16-17** If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to

death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

**John 20:21-23** Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

With our understanding of sins still in question, Christians have accused other Christians of taking non-judgmental stances to the point where we do not even recognize sins. The counter argument is that Jesus walked among sinners, so through love we can help people get closer to our Lord and away from sin. Bringing all people to the love of our Lord without emphasizing their sins has thus become a central strategy of many progressive churches in our times.

Christians in favor of exposing sins and casting out unrepentant sinners can also point to Scripture that states that we are to confront our Christian brothers and sisters who egregiously sinned against us and separate from them if they continuously refuse to recognize their sins. The confrontation should first be private and gentle to allow one to turn away from sin without shame. If one refuses to turn away from sin, then one could be brought in front of the church. If one still refuses to repent, then we can treat the person like a non-Christian. It means that the person cannot be accorded the trust and spiritual openness that we should accord fellow Christians. Christians' physical separation or distancing from serious sinners should include all social activities, even eating together as stated in the Bible.

The guidance to separate from unrepentant sinners and the precise definitions of serious sins should be well understood before any Christian takes action against another Christian. Otherwise, those Christians taking actions might themselves become guilty of sinning through false accusations. For example, treating an

egregious sinner as a pagan or expelling him from the group does not have to mean physical exile from the church. It could mean barring someone from participating in communion, sharing money and fellowship, promulgating their understanding of God's will, and teaching the Scripture. If we cast people physically out of the church into harm's way, we may be sinning regardless of whether their sins demanded separation.

Apostle Paul's words in regards to judging people's actions and intentions within the church (the Body of Christ) cannot be interpreted as condoning Christian condemnation and non-forgiveness. Instead, we are simply instructed to leave some of our Christian brothers and sisters lost to sin in the hands of God for they have become a corrupting force to the overall Body of Christ.

**Matthew 18:15-17** If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

**1 Corinthians 5:11-13** But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

The problem with exposing sins is that the levels and ways of exposing Christian sinners and separating them from other Christians are greatly varied among the fundamentalist and evangelical churches. The debate about sins ranges not only across our proposed divide but also between denominations, churches

within denominations, and even from Christian to Christian. In some cases, churches or individuals can be accused of: 1) calling too many actions as unacceptable sin, 2) selectively addressing the sins of the minority while ignoring the sins of majority, 3) being too quick to shame people in front the congregation, and 4) casting people out of the church when it is not the will of God. Few Christians will argue against gentle ways of protecting the Body of Christ from apostasy, heresy, and schism. However, topics such as sexual immorality, greed, damaging slander, intoxication, and harmful interactions that might need Christian to Christian response have plagued churches since the first century. This question must nevertheless be consistently answered across all the churches inclined to exposing sins if their theological positions are to be defended. We must also take into account the teachings of forgiveness if we are to resolve this divisive topic.

The search for a single answer to sins within the church requires us to set theological positions aside while focusing on scriptural understanding about the nature of sins. First, sin can be defined as the effect of evil on our spirits. Sin within the spirit is expressed through thoughts and deeds. Our sinful actions allow more evil to enter us to further distance us from our Lord and one another. The baptism of the Holy Spirit when we became Christians brings forgiveness to our past sins. The Holy Spirit can help us resist future sins and recover from the effects of past sins as we repent. However, Christians will still sin because we are still spiritually immature. What are the types of sins that could cause Christians to fall? What sins will harm others? And, what sins will corrupt the whole church? Any of these sins may require Christians to take action, but we must understand the complex nature of each sin before we act. Addressing sins that only weaken our relationships with God but do not seriously harm others is a uniquely challenging matter. Sins that have already gone through repentance may still leave victims who require Christian support.

Sin, for Christians who deeply understand love, is simply failing to love God and our fellow human beings enough. All sinful thoughts and actions are traceable to the violation of these two great commandments from Jesus. All the other commandments are also traceable to these two commandments. The tough question is: How much do we have to love in order to conform to the two great commandments?

Preaching a false gospel (not a misinterpretation of the gospel) or rejecting the gospel are clear acts that will break our relationship with the Lord. However, can our mind betray the Lord by simply desiring things that are against His teachings, or having doubts about His plan? Paul affirmed that the mind of man sins against what is even obviously against the commandments of God. But, the Holy Spirit can help the mind embrace the will of God and peace.

If Christians want to expose all sins, then everyone, including the saints, must be brought to confession. Even if Christians want to just expose sins that could cause other Christians to fall, they will still have to examine the heart of each person. What corrupts one person's spirit may not corrupt another. Finally, if Christians want to expose sins that are proliferating across the Christian community, we will have to define what are truly causing Christians to drift away from God in our modern times. Then, that subset of sins might be isolatable.

**Galatians 1:8** But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!

**1 Corinthians 16:22** If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!

**Romans 8:6-8** The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to

God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

**Titus 1:15** To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted.

**Romans 1:29-31** They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

**Romans 13:13** Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.

Basing our study of sins on understanding love, a clear inability to love is the act of murder. However, enduring hate or burning anger may also cause love to fade to a point where we are in spiritual jeopardy. Christians can resolve their hate, but can they spiritually recover from committing violent acts such as murder? At the same time, overt acts such as murder are easier to identify than the hate that may secretly lurk in our hearts. If God permits all things to occur, then what is murder? Does God let people defy His will, and condemn themselves? If someone is hateful or angry enough to commit murder, then that anger constrained by laws is nearly as spiritually damaging as an act of violence. Only God knows whether such Christian sinners can avoid a fall from grace.

For Christians inclined to expose sins, murder and hidden hate represent two ends of a complex regime of thoughts and actions against love. Murder tends to be a self exposing act, but how do we help a murderer find any possibility of repentance? Hate can be camouflaged, but if it has not yet harmed others, should we leave troubled Christians to the care of God? Perhaps this is why God has



given us more tangible bonds of love for us to grow the spirit and test our vulnerability to sins.

One bond of love is between a parent and child. A deeper bond of love, as well as a test of love, might be between a husband and wife through marriage. This bond has always challenged Christians because the betrayal of love through adultery, or just thoughts of it, can proliferate if condoned. The question is whether adultery alone can jeopardize one's salvation? Further, should we speak out against adultery, if salvation is still sustainable? If we should speak out against adultery, then should we speak out against lust – thoughts of adultery? The bond of marriage is violated when a married person lust after someone other than the spouse. Someone desiring a married person is disrespectful of the bond of marriage. However, is lust associated with the passions of youth prior to marriage also a concern? If not loving enough is the definition of “sin”, then how can we grow love within people and does exposing the lack of love help?

**Matthew 5:21–22** "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

**Matthew 5:27-28** You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

**Romans 1:26-27** Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Our exploration of the nature of sins reveals how each person's spiritual quality shapes the way he or she struggles against sins. As shown in Figure 5.2, the first layer of sin within us is the tainting of our spirits at birth by the evil that extends from the days of Adam. This layer of original sin influences our sinful thoughts and actions. Some actions and thoughts are disputable as sins because they could be sinful to one Christian and not sinful to another. More actions are disputable than thoughts because it is harder to understand the spiritual motivations behind a vast array of actions. Equally, some actions and thoughts will spiritually weaken Christians and cause Christians to fall. The boundary between what will cause Christians to spiritually weaken and spiritually fall is further filled with uncertainties. This boundary is much broader regarding thoughts because thoughts will have to be very specific and enduring to achieve unrecoverable spiritual damage. What types of actions and thoughts can a Christian repent from is only known by God. God sees not only our sins but all the factors surrounding our sins that determine our final spiritual condition.

Christians generally appear to possess a higher state of spiritual maturity compared to non-Christians in the way they deal with sins. This is based on our understanding of God's will and spiritual strength provided by the Holy Spirit. The higher state frees us from laws that only control actions, but it places more demands on our spirits to resist sins. How well we resist sins shows how deeply we understand the concept of sin.

**Romans 14:1-4** Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are

you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

**Galatians 5:18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

**Luke 12:47-48** That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

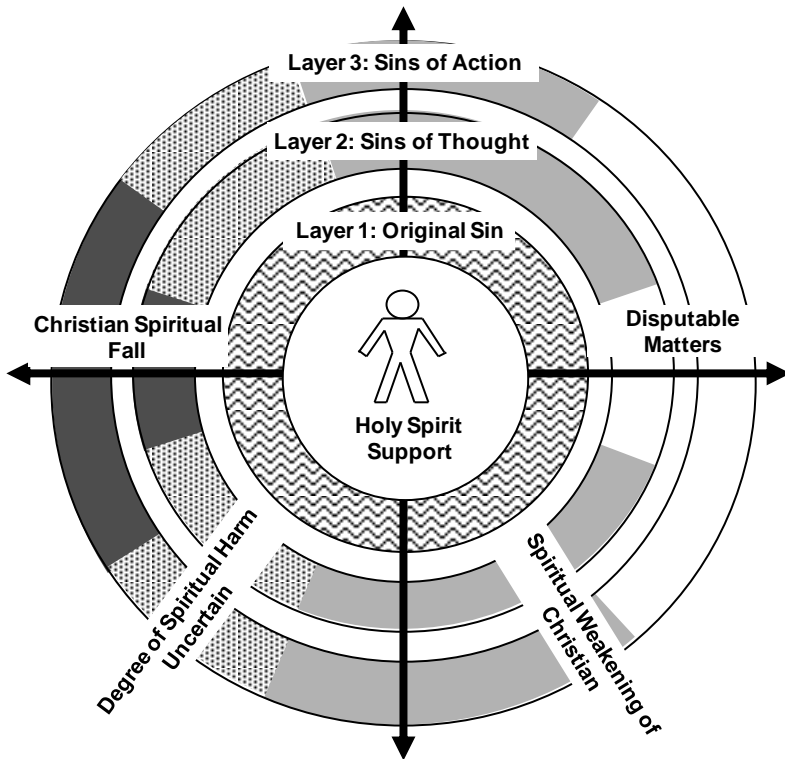


Figure 5.2: The Dimensions of Sin within Us

Finally, let us examine how all churches can agree on a common way to respond to sins. We now have a perhaps better understanding of sin, but forgiving sins and protecting Christians from sins both have valid points. If Christians can work together, our Lord has given us the authority to decide what is appropriate for the Body of Christ. This authority must be exercised given that the nature of disputable matters as well as uncertainty in the levels of sins may change with the conditions of modern times and the degree of scriptural understanding with the churches. In our decision, we must remember that the personal confession of sins is always more preferable than the exposing of sins by other Christians and we must recognize that the power of prayer may be better than the power of community pressure.

**Matthew 18:18-19** "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

**James 5:16** Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

With Christian authority and gentleness in mind, I wish to propose four tiers of decisions that the Christian community should make regarding sins. These tiers can help satisfy arguments on both sides of the theological divide. In the first tier, Christians should teach and embrace an ideal set of behaviors that would bring us closer to our Lord and push back the influence of original sin in us. In the second tier, Christians should recognize a range of disputable matters that are left for each Christian to spiritually deal with. In the third tier, Christians should pray about a class of sins that weaken our bond of love with God and one another but not necessarily

expose such sinners to the community. In the forth and final tier, there are sins that jeopardize our love for God and one another. Some of these sins will cause Christians to fall, and others will still do great spiritual damage. The churches must respond to these sins in a gentle but firm manner.

If the community of Christians can agree that the four tiers of decisions need to be made, then we can proceed with discussing how to make these decisions regarding sins and ideal behaviors.

**Decision Tier 1 (Ideal Conduct for Christians):** The first set of teachings Christians need to agree upon are the conditions of the spirit, mind, and actions that allow us to fight the roots of evil causing us to sin. We may never achieve such ideals, but focusing on them keeps us on the right course. The following are some positions to consider.

- Christians totally dedicated to God in spirit, mind, and body may receive the calling to forgo marriage. However, those with sexual desires and the need for companionship should still seek the one partner of the opposite sex that God had planned for them.
- Christians totally dedicated to God in spirit, mind, and body may receive the calling to forgo all wealth and personal possessions. However, one may still need to acquire wealth, if the calling is to serve God within this world.
- All Christians are expected to share capabilities and resources with Christian brothers and sisters and avoid indulging in luxuries.
- All Christians are expected to help suffering people out of love, with the wisdom inspired by the Holy Spirit. The greatest help is to spread the good news of salvation through Christ in a manner that is most effective to people's spiritual conditions and needs.

- All Christians should learn to overcome jealousy, fear, anger, aggression, and arrogance to boldly and wisely serve our Lord.
- All Christians should endeavor to reach out to the Lord in prayer and repentance, open our spirits up to the power of the Holy Spirit, and pursue an ever greater understanding of the Word.

**Decision Tier 2 (Disputable Matters that May or May Not Affect Our Spirits):**

There are many temptations in this complex world, and we Christians are instructed to avoid things that cause us to sin in mind and body. However, what causes one Christian to sin may be completely harmless to others, and overcoming temptations is a way of building our spiritual strength. Christians should not be like Muslims who believe that even the viewing of a married woman's face can cause lust, or like Buddhists who fear any exposure to worldly desires. We, like Christ, need to walk across the temptations and among the other sinners of this world to serve the will of God. We need to understand the workings of evil. As long as we embrace the power of the Holy Spirit, goodness of God, and the truth of Christ, we can brush off what taints us, as one would clean dirt off the shoe. The following are therefore some matters that Christians should perhaps let each individual resolve with God.

- Spiritual harm due to physical relations between unmarried Christian men and women is dependent upon the level of love and selfish lust on each side.
- Christians exposed to images, literature, words, and sensations that may induce lust must individually decide what to avoid. Art or entertainment to one person can be spiritually harmful pornography to another.
- Christians acting in a manner that causes other people to lust must decide whether their actions violate love. Sometimes,

there is nothing that one can do or should do to deal with the spiritual weakness of others.

- Consenting activities between husband and wife in physical relations is a private matter. The couple must be attentive to their spiritual health.
- How Christians spend their wealth is a matter of individual insight as long as no one was harmed and no laws were broken in gaining wealth. Jesus told His apostles that they will have to carry a purse after His departure. One Christian can give the tithe as a law and be guilty of greed. Another Christian not giving tithe can still be spending money according to the Lord's wishes.
- The use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs is a personal matter as long as the substances are legal and one does not lose self control. However, physical harm to the body can lead to spiritual harm.
- How a Christian dresses is a personal matter even though the ideal is to dress modestly to let inner beauty be revealed. Intentionally dressing to deceive others of one's gender is clearly sinful.
- Christians who have killed to protect self, family, others, or their nation must individually seek forgiveness from the Lord, unless the Lord had already granted permission. Either way, they should feel sad about separating spirits from their physical life.
- Christians can worship the Lord in many ways, depending on their spiritual understanding and church traditions. One group can baptize by emersion while another by sprinkling water. One group can see communion as the physical body and blood of Christ, and another can see it as the affirmation of faith that links us to the body and blood of Christ. Different groups can also have different interpretations of the gospel.

- Veneration of saints that does not involve worship, use of images and items to encourage faith or communicate the Bible, and other practices that do not clearly diminish the allness of God is a personal matter. But, one's practices can mislead less spiritually mature people.

The list of disputable matters between Christians can be quite long especially in our modern world where variations in spiritual maturity can be great across Christian communities. Hopefully, my entries have provided some more insight on what may constitute disputable matters. The most important thing about these matters is that each Christian should act appropriately based on what they believe is sin. For instance, if a Christian believes that shaking hands is a sin because of a lack of understanding or that such touching leads to sinful thoughts, then that Christian should avoid shaking hands.

**Decision Tier 3 (Sins that Christians Should Pray About):** We are led to understand that there is a class of sins that will hinder our love for God and / or one another but will not necessarily break these bonds to cause a Christian to fall. However, Christians with the inclination to either forgive or expose sins must come to a decision about what these venial sins are, and how to respond to them. As such sins do not jeopardize salvation, I wish to propose that our response does not involve exposing people in the church. Instead, we should pray that God forgive these sins and encourage Christians in general to rise above them. This encouragement means that we still recognize venial sins even as we forgive them. Some examples of venial sins based on our understanding of spiritual characteristics are as follow:

- Pure physical relations between single men and women without love. Such activities are disrespectful of God's



design, but do not betray spiritual bonds because no bonds were formed.

- The Bible does not clearly address homosexual relations between women, but such actions are disrespectful of God's design. In the past, men had multiple wives and kings had harems. Lesbianism may have been less sinful under those circumstances than today when women are given the same spiritual authority as men.
- Those Christians who deceptively break secular laws of the state but harbors no ill will towards people and God are still sinful due to a denial of God's plan. Christians can, however, protest unjust laws and accept the state's punishment without sin.
- Christians who unintentionally misinterpret the Bible and / or the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit are sinful due to spiritual immaturity and are vulnerable to worldly temptations.
- Christians who cannot care for others commit the sin of omission. Christians who carelessly harming others commit the sin of sin of negligence. Love for others, which overcomes these sins, can be grown through discipleship.
- Christians whose love for God is not great enough to understand nor follow His will is sinful, but the love can increase through prayer.

If our love for God and one another is measured, then no Christian is without sin. As we begin to understand how much more we could love, but do not, clearly grace is the only way to God. God can forgive us as long as we do not give up on love. We can also reduce our sins by trying harder to follow the will of God. As we do so, He will shape His requirements to match our abilities. Though our rewards in Heaven will depend on how we have followed God, our love for God matters the most.

Finally, the community of Christians must pray about abortion, a common practice in our modern age. Abortion is most definitely a sin against God's design. But, does it terminate a life, and send a new spirit to Heaven? Exodus 21:22-23 states, "If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she has a miscarriage but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life." This single reference suggests that the termination of an unborn fetus should be not treated as a death, as historically most cultures did not have funeral services for miscarried pregnancies. It is only with modern medicine that we are able to see the developing body of a fetus in the mother's womb. However, we cannot see the status of the fetus' spirit. If the unborn spirit is recombined with the spirit of the mother through interconnected blood upon the termination of the fetus, then the act of abortion is not murder unless the fetus is alive when separated from the mother.

Whether abortion is murder or only a sin against God's will is important to how Christians should respond. If abortion is not murder, then Christians should perhaps encourage others to choose life and ask God to forgive those who are sinful. Abortion in the case of pregnancy resulting from rape and incest and severely handicapped fetuses may be more easily forgiven by God. Further, Christians should perhaps be more concerned about how non-Christians can become Christians instead of whether they are accepting abortion practices. If abortion is murder, however, then Christians must try to protect life under all circumstances.

**Decision Tier 4 (Sins that Christians Must be Addressed):** Few Christians can debate the fact that there are some sins that can bring spiritual death and other sins that can contribute to spiritual death. However, whether the gravest of these sins will bring irreversible spiritual death upon occurrence is between God and each person.

The responsibility of Christians is to help one another understand the spiritual damage caused by such sins, prevent such sins from affecting the whole church, and leave unrepentant sinners in God's hands. The community of Christians may not be able to determine which sins are unforgivable. Therefore with caution, Christians should accept all those who have repented. What is more difficult are those sins that some Christians see as harmless because they have a different understanding and disagree with the spiritual damages involved. Christians discussing these sins should not merely quote Scripture but explore why God's will is written so, and whether His will has changed overtime because of changes in Christian maturity. This exploration should include the following discussions:

- Adultery, including unjustified divorce and unceasing lust for married people, is a dangerous sin because it betrays the spiritual bond between men and women. In Heaven, when there are neither limitations of the body nor distinction of gender, spirits can bond with numerous spirits joyously. On earth, we must continue to protect one to one spiritual commitments and reject thoughts and actions that are disrespectful of the spirit.
- Homosexual relations between men and lust between men are dangerous sins, because both betray the spiritual bonds associated with the brotherhood of men as designed by God. This bond of brotherhood is disrupted by bodily desires. Thus, we can interpret the tenth commandment as saying that no man should desire even another man's body. Such relations are clearly prohibited in both the Old and New Testaments.
- Sexual relations without one party's consent (rape), between people with the spiritual bond of family (incest), and between people and animals which are without immortal spirits (bestiality) are dangerous sins, because they either disrespect

the bond between people, betray higher level bonds, or deny our humanity.

- Murder, violence, and unceasing anger are dangerous sins, because they betray the love between people. Murder is the most serious betrayal, but hate that endures to the point of one's death can also jeopardize salvation. There is so much unresolved hate even among Christians.
- Acts of malice, envy, deception, gossip, and slander are dangerous sins, because they also betray the love between people. While murder and violence are extension of anger, these thoughts and deeds are extensions of selfishness and lack of love. Whether we break the spiritual bonds ourselves or cause our victims to break the bonds, the bonds are still broken. Even if we betray one person, it will shift our spiritual attitude toward humanity if we do not repentant.
- Arrogance, boastfulness, and greed are dangerous sins, because they could break our bonds with God and God's plan. If such thoughts are left uncontrolled, one could deny the authority of God all together. However, God is patient and Christians fallen to such sins will be given opportunities to change.
- Embracing and spreading a false gospel is a rejection of God's teachings and a blatant betrayal of God. No Christian can teach a false gospel and still remain in the community of Christians. Misinterpretations of the Bible and the presentation of new understanding as passed to us by the Holy Spirit are not teaching false gospels. False gospels clearly and directly conflict with the words of the Holy Bible.
- Worshipping false gods and false representations of God (idolatry) are dangerous sins because such actions either deny God or the true nature of God the Father. Christians should never pray to any objects as a representation of God

the Father and His Son Christ, but using icons and crosses as reminders of faith or symbols of our commitment is a disputable matter.

I have intentionally kept the discussion of sin to one chapter to contrast the many Christians who have devoted all their energy to this debate. Christians cannot ignore sin, but if we become obsessed, then everything will look sinful to our eyes. Our spirits are filled with sin, but the Holy Spirit in us also fills us with hope. If we have to respond to some sins in the Body of Christ, let us respond gently and quickly so that we can return to focusing on love. If one Christian group chooses to expose and separate from sin less intensely than another, it does not mean that they have given into sin. However, they might become more vulnerable because of their tolerance. If one Christian group has a different understanding of sin than another, it does not mean that they have surrendered to sin. However, they might be more vulnerable because of their immaturity. What we should be most concerned about are those Christian groups that recognize dangerous sins but continue to embrace the sins because of their spiritual weaknesses.



# Chapter 6: Role of Men and Women in the Church

With the fifth divisive topic across the Christian churches, we begin to move away from deeply spiritual matters to issues involving the organization and conduct of the Body of Christ. The topics from this point on are going to be more driven by the effects of changing societies on Christians. Throughout most of human history and across most cultures, women have been placed in dependent positions to men. Men in turn have often abused their power over women, denying them the freedom to pursue their interests, right to select their spouses, and the love that they deserve. It was only in the past century that women began to free themselves from the abuse of men in some parts of the secular world. Unfortunately, this freedom was gained by the overturning of men's authority. Women's struggle against male dominance in select employment sectors and other worldly matters continues today with great intensity. Therefore, the discussion about the role of men and women within the church is a matter of great sensitivity and debate. Is the historical role of women in the churches a reflection of obsolete culture or Christian understanding of God's will and plan? This issue has ultimately led to the question of whether women can be ordained as priests, ministers and even bishops.

The presence of this debate among most of the branches of Christianity and within many denominations shows us again that the line of debate is drawn along two unique groups of spiritual characteristics. Even though many might not recognize this clear division, those who oppose the ordination of women, as shown in Figure 6.1, tend to base their arguments on a respect for traditions and a preservation of fundamental values. In contrast, those who support the ordination of women tend to base their arguments on

following the changes of mature modern societies and gaining a deeper understanding of Scripture, which calls all people to service.

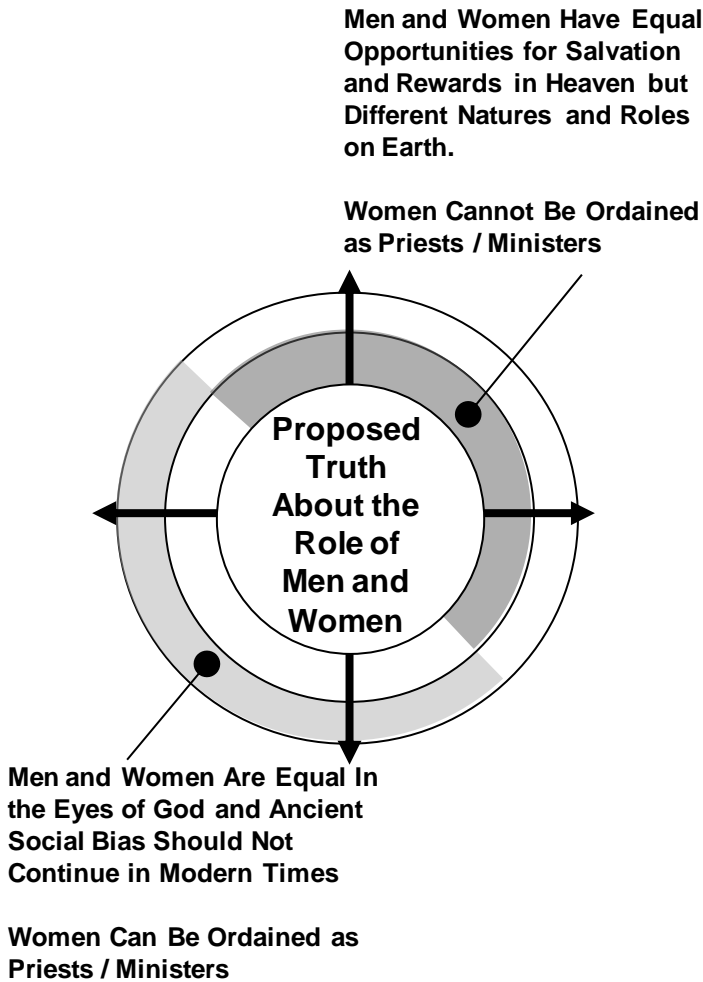


Figure 6.1: Spiritual Characteristics For and Against Ordaining Women

Comparing this division to the ranges of spiritual characteristics for the major branches of Christianity, we see that the entire range of the Orthodox churches falls on the opposing ordination side and only a few Catholics might be on the side that



favors women ordination. The Protestants, however, fall on both sides of the divide, and we can now see that many Protestant denominations have women within the clergy while others still would not accept women in such roles.

I believe that most Christians will agree with the concept of men and women having equal opportunities for salvation and rewards in Heaven. Yet, the division over the ordination of women is still a serious matter, because the theological positions are so clearly revealed. How can denominations with women clergy fully unite with those that absolutely will not accept women in such a role? Even within a single denomination such as the Anglican Church, diocese that would appoint women priests and even bishops and diocese that would not have reduced the unity of the denomination.

Moving from spiritual characteristics to theological positions, those who are opposed to the ordination of women have made the following points stemming from history.

**Preserving Traditions:**

- While there were women deaconesses in antiquities, women have never historically been allowed to become priests. This tradition needs to be upheld to sustain the proper order of the church.
- Pope John Paul II has ruled that he does not have the authority to approve ordination of women in his 1994 letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and the ruling of the Pope is by tradition no longer disputed.

**Sustaining Fundamental Values:**

- Jesus chose only male apostles and the ordination of men is therefore an imitation of Christ. Such is the interpreted will of God.
- The roles of men and women are complementary but different. Mary, mother of Jesus, was never called to apostleship, but her role was no less significant.

These points largely made by the Papacy of the Catholic Church are in similar ways reiterated by the Orthodox churches. However, the Catholic Biblical Commission studying this matter did conclude that women cannot be denied ordination based purely on Scripture. The preserving traditions argument appears to also resonate with some Protestant churches while other Protestant churches would argue that women are not spiritually designed to take on such roles.

The counterarguments made by those who are pursuing the acceptance of women up to the highest ranks within the clergy include the following points.

**Maturation of Modern Society:**

- The prohibition against women ordination is simply a male church hierarchy preserving its own structure when similar secular hierarchies have long given way to the equality of men and women.
- Women have served as the pastors of churches for several decades within denominations, such as Presbyterian Church USA, without a crisis of the church hierarchy.
- Many denominations are so short of clergy that they cannot be sustained without the ordination of women.

**A Clearer Understanding of Scripture:**

- The Bible recognizes the service of women in doing the Lord's work to include prophecy and spreading the gospel.
- Not allowing the ordination of women would essentially create two classes of baptism and divide the Body of Christ.

These points have been made by different Protestant groups and some Catholics, but more are beginning to consider the idea that women cannot lead within the church as simply an archaic concept. Like the concepts of burnt offerings, one in seven years for rest, and ritual cleaning, the scriptural guidance toward women should perhaps have been long retired.

**Acts 2:18** Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

**Act 21:9** He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

**Philippians 4:2-3** I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

If we recognize that the current theological positions are linked to spiritual and emotional inclinations, then resolving the debate regarding the role of Christian men and women must start anew with a scriptural interpretation separated from intellectual biases. The first scriptural fact is that spirits and bodies in God's coming kingdom have no distinction of race and gender. Thus, a person's race and gender in this world is only for growing the spirit. Races and nationalities reflect different branches of spiritual growth across the generations, and gender reflects two overarching states that God selectively provides individual spirits to match their needs. Our Lord who watches over every hair on our heads does not assign gender by random, nor does He favor one gender in His grace. Likewise our appearance, health, intelligence, social status and other qualities are all by design. Both genders are expected to follow God's will and work hard as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Body of Christ, there are apostles and there are disciples. All other titles and positions are simply jobs and responsibilities to serve God's plan. There is no prestige with Christian titles and positions, but respect for these titles and positions is required so that Christians can fulfill their responsibilities. There are no rewards that come with Christian titles and positions, but rewards will be given to those who have served the will of our Lord. Jobs and responsibilities can change from person to person, and titles and positions can be

changed overtime. The only thing important is whether changes are according to God's will. The consideration of gender, when appointing titles and positions in Christian churches, is then at the center of this exploration.

**Galatians 3:28** There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

**Romans 16:12** Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.

The spiritual relationship between men and women is the Biblical basis for gender, and the spiritual conditions of men and women are perhaps the basis for gender determination. Paul explained that the spiritual challenge for a man is to love his wife as Christ loves mankind and the spiritual challenge for a woman is to embrace the authority of her husband as he should embrace the will of God. All Paul is saying is that two thousand years ago, the Holy Spirit granted him an understanding that spirits that needed to grow obedience became women and spirits that needed to grow capacity to love became men. Four thousand years ago, God allowed men to merely take responsibility for their wives and women to merely accept men's authority. Paul's teaching of willing love and willing obedience for Christians is much more challenging. Could the spirits that are guided to being men and women today have yet different needs after thousands of years of growth – I believe so. However, the change in needs should follow the patterns of maturity that we have already witnessed.

While women and men can debate the state of their spirits and their relations today, they cannot challenge their historical roles at different periods in the Bible. Women cannot start to think that the Bible, the word of God, is a product of male dominance. To think that the ego of male authors may have tainted the purity of the Bible

is to deny that our Lord looked after every step in the formation and dissemination of the Bible.

**Ephesians 5:22-28** Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

To understand the present role of men and women in the church, we must explore the historical relationship between men and women in the church. Relationships in the church are also guided by Scripture, but neither Paul nor Peter declared in their writings that there are any absolute constraints or prohibitions on the behaviors of women disciples. Instead, they encouraged women to embrace order, stay humble, and avoid disgrace. Paul recognized that women could pray and prophesize in the church, thus affirming their role of discipleship as well as the power of the Holy Spirit in them. The guidance for women to cover their heads, dress simply, and remain silent is not a law that creates two classes of disciples, because Christians are not bound by laws.

Any female disciple could choose to speak and lead in the community of Christians two thousand years ago. All they needed to be aware of is not to have disrespect for order. Though women have always been discouraged from leading, it was only later in history that the institutional Christian church began to impose hard restrictions on women. The expectation that church leaders could only be men as suggested in Scripture was in turn made into a requirement by the institutional church. With the establishment of

the clergy class by the institutional Christian church, both men and women disciples not ordained into the class were often denied the opportunity to share what the Holy Spirit had led them to see in front of the community of Christian – a right granted by Paul. Before women demand titles and authority within the clergy class, maybe we should ponder whether the structure of the clergy itself, which also has changed overtime across denominations, is in accordance with Scripture.

**1 Corinthians 11:3-4** Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.

**1 Corinthians 14:33-35** For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

**1 Timothy 2:8-10** I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.

**1 Timothy 2:14-15** And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

**1 Timothy 3:10-12** They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.

**1 Corinthians 11:7-8** A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man;

**1 Peter 3:4-6** Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

I will leave the issues of the institutional church for the next chapter on church governance. For the remainder of this chapter, we will examine how women disciples can be freed from the traditions of covering their head, remaining in silence, and dressing simply in church. The abandonment of traditions in the church is not new, but it is good to understand the reasons. For example, in an age when God demanded His immature people to blindly trust His authority, burnt offerings were an affirmation of that trust. In an age where Christians have a better understanding of the will of God through the Holy Spirit, our labors are perhaps better spent in expressing our love for one another. Paul personally waived the tradition of Jewish dietary constraints and circumcision. However, it is unlikely that those laws were useless for the Jews. In an age of spiritual immaturity, consuming the blood of animals and specific types of animal could have allowed the wildness of the animal to affect the human spirit. When faith was weak and joining foreign tribes was a temptation, circumcision was a life-long reminder of one's roots and

faith. The power of the Holy Spirit and the commission to spread Christianity are elements that may have led Paul to waive such traditions.

Returning to the spiritual state of men and women, the scriptural comment about the vulnerability of women to temptation that stem from the days of Eve must hold today if God has not changed the criteria for gender determination. However, we can also ponder the possibility that the legacy of our ancestors gets more distributed over time. As God no longer punishes children for the sins of the parents, maybe God will no longer constrain women for the sins of Eve. The big question today is whether women have grown spiritually strong enough over the generations to overcome their gender specific vulnerabilities to worldly temptations? If so, then the Christian community should consider reducing efforts to shelter women from the temptations associated with authority, self-expression, and independence. Our decision on changing Christian traditions based on the spiritual maturity of women will be accepted in Heaven. Men, most certainly, have not risen above their gender specific spiritual vulnerabilities and weaknesses.

The way to determine the spiritual maturity of Christians is to study how they receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Women filled with the Holy Spirit will not demand their right to be equal with men. Instead, they will let their prophetic insights, clarity of judgment, humility and meekness make them equal if not better than men. They will also respect God's order, submitting their spirits in obedience so that God will lift the physical veil over their heads. And, women, with the help of the Holy Spirit, will be so filled with love for one another that no manner of dress or jewelry will reflect vanity and competitiveness. The changing of Christian traditions based on such a growth of spirits is a joyous event. Women called by the Lord can have authority because men have seen the power of the Holy Spirit in them and yield to their authority. They can speak



freely because all their words come from the power of the spirit and from their love.

A less joyous circumstance where Christian traditions can be changed is when men who have been given authority over the church have abused such authority and failed in their love for women. This circumstance does not give women the right to rebel against men to create chaos and disorder in the church. However, the community of Christians both men and women should come together to let the Holy Spirit help them determine how to change traditions in response to the weakness of men. No church organization, no matter how authoritarian, can deny the will of the community of Christians unless they are prepared to separate some from the Body of Christ and stand at risk of our Lord's judgment. Some ways in which authority can be abused are:

- 1) Denying women the opportunity to express what the Holy Spirit has led them to see
- 2) Not trying to care for women as God has cared for us
- 3) Denying women the rights of discipleship as a full member of the Body of Christ
- 4) Belittling or persecuting women based on the sin of Eve

If this abuse cannot be corrected after hundreds of years, then a change in traditions to allow women to lead in the church might be merited. The change might also be justified if there are simply not enough men able to respond to our Lord's calling to serve. In these final days when the harvest is so great and the threats are so many, perhaps all who can serve must be called to the frontlines, regardless of their gender.

If we accept the calling of women to lead in the church in troubled times, then great effort must be taken to protect them from the dangers of the world. Evil lurks in people's spirits and manifests in worldly matters. Helping people to overcome their sins and managing the church against the affairs of the world can draw the onslaught of evil forces. As a result, no women of the clergy should

be left without spiritual support from other members of the clergy and the prayers of her congregation. We must encourage women with great responsibilities to cling tight to the will of our Lord and to confess their sins so that they can free themselves from the temptations of conceit, insecurities, fears, and ambition.

Finally, the shameful circumstance in which Christian traditions regarding women can be changed is when such traditions are no longer effective. If women within the church have become inwardly defiant of traditions, then the outward practice of traditions is pointless. Traditions should not be preserved by force but only by willing acceptance. So, if women who can still benefit from traditions will not accept them, it is perhaps better to let women act how they please and gain the authority they lust for. We can in turn understand what challenges each individual by observing their actions, helping women to spiritually overcome the need to defeat man's authority and helping men to spiritually find enough love to yield to women.

Figure 6.2 shows how the ordination of women within the churches can be allowed under different circumstances. The decision process regarding why ordination is allowed should preserve the understanding of traditions even as we abandon them. This is a way to resolve the debate over the role of men and women. However, most denominations still face complex challenges regarding this divisive topic. The outcome may be a mixture of joyous and shameful events. I pray that all events in which women is bestowed authority are joyous. Therefore, I pray that all women will understand the purpose of traditions and that all men will act based on overwhelming love for women.

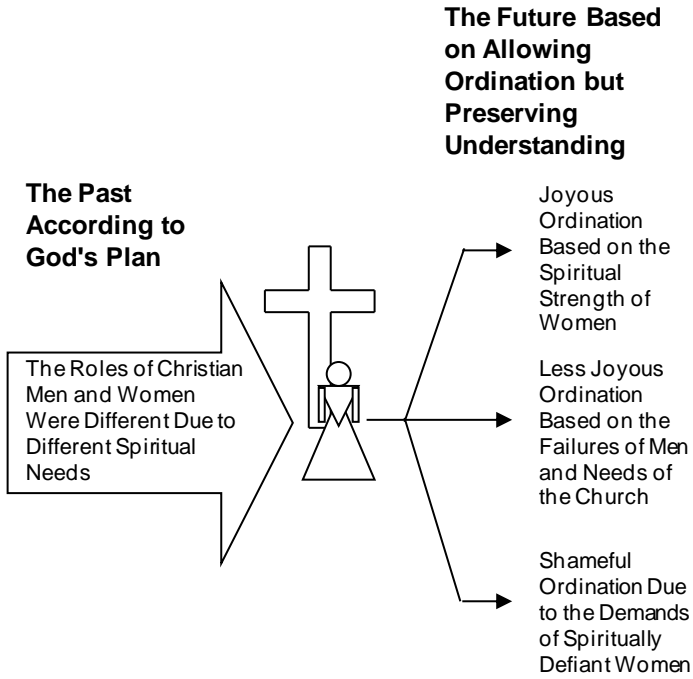


Figure 6.2: Moving the Role of Women into the Future



# Chapter 7: Governing the Churches of Christianity

The sixth divisive topic stems from the core of human society. Governance issues first emerged when a group of Christians gathered to worship without the physical presence of Jesus. Independent of the other issues dividing the churches of Christianity, conflicts over governance alone have led to many deaths and much pain. The formal study of church governance, known as “ecclesiology”, is a complex matter involving centuries of Christian scholarship, church formation, and church conflicts. However, the debate about which form of governance best matches the will of our Lord remains silent today, as many Christians deem it impossible to unify the churches of Christianity. Many wonder why bother with the hope of common governance if the issues from the past cannot even be resolved.

Let us remember that Christianity is about hope – hope that Christians will not give up on unity and hope that our Lord will lead the way. So, it is with hope that we proceed in trying to find a single path forward given the many forms of governance that currently exist. The governance of the Christian community to achieving order and unity in following the Word is in accordance with the will of our Lord. However, Christians are often products of their spiritual characteristics, and Christians with different spiritual characteristics have established competing forms of governance to perpetuate their disagreements. Alternatively, Christian spiritual characteristics can be shaped by governance structures adopted by their leaders and forced upon them. In such a case, Christians could be pulled into the ongoing disagreement of their leaders. Whether Christians are choosing forms of governance to match their spiritual needs or letting their spiritual characteristics be shifted by imposed

governance structures, the consequence is still a divided Christianity as shown in Figure 7.1.

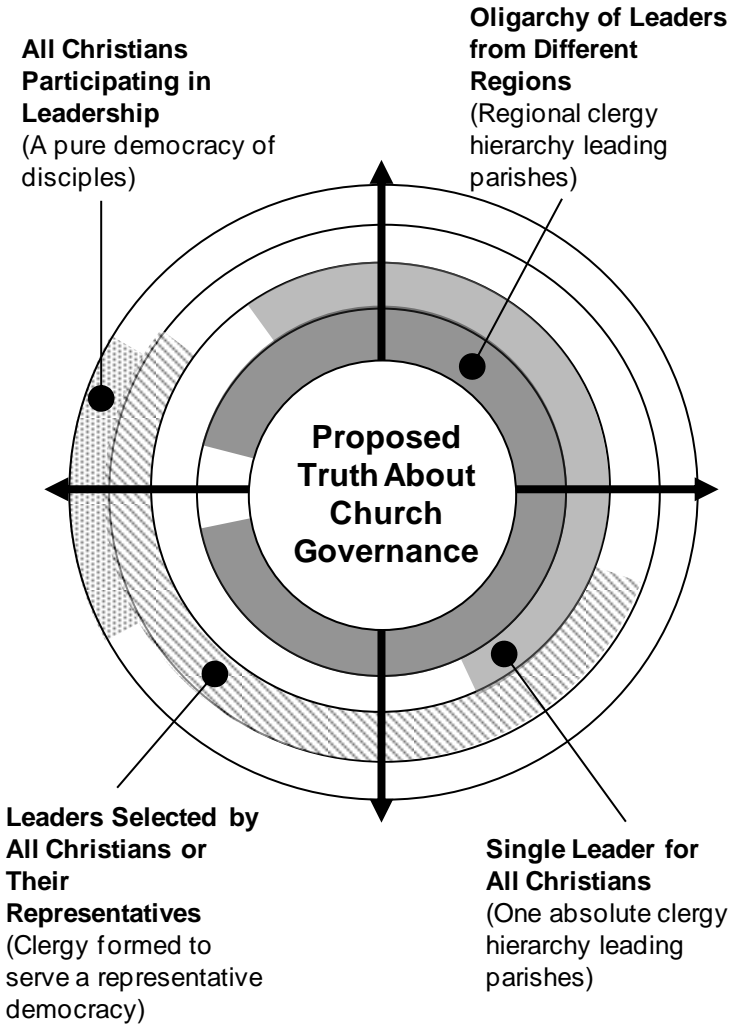


Figure 7.1: Spiritual Characteristics Support Different Christian Governance Types

The most popular form of Christian governance is still the concept of a leader for each region selected by an elite clergy class, to which select lay members can be indoctrinated. This structure

preserves regional characteristics in worship, maintains a stabilizing local hierarchy, enables collaboration between regions, allows for some check and balance between the highest leaders, and dilutes the sense of accountability within the total Body of Christ. All the Orthodox churches, some Protestant churches such as the Anglicans, and Catholics churches not directly governed by the Roman Catholics Papacy have institutionalized this governance concept - typically leading to an oligarchy composed of a council of bishops and / or patriarchs.

From the idea of regional leaders, the unity of regions under a single monarch and absolute hierarchy has the advantage of constraining variations in Christian understanding, perpetuating and proliferating desired practices, and hindering all but the most intense conflicts between regions. This unity was achieved by the Roman Catholic Church, but it failed to prevent the rise of Protestantism. Also, the misuse of power, which had repeatedly occurred in history, is a serious threat.

While there are many specific governance structures within the Protestant, Pentecostal, and independent churches, the general and most popular structure that opposes the authority of an elite Christian class is that of a representative democracy where the Christian congregation either directly selects the clergy members for service or indirectly selects clergy members through their appointed elders. This structure bridges the gap between lay and clergy, encourages discipleship and responsibility among all Christians, and retains the ability to recognize those more dedicated to God's service. However, this environment can promote politics within the churches, as some Christians fuel their ambitions with thoughts of becoming church leaders.

A few churches focusing on the power of discipleship have taken democracy to the point where any Christian can lead the group and all Christians participate in key decisions. This level of responsibility placed on Christians gives the Holy Spirit the greatest

number of avenues to guide Christian expression (embracing God granted free will) and challenges the limitations of the past. However, it can also promote the tyranny of the masses (dangers of a Christian mob), lose the legacy of understanding passed between leaders, and immobilize the church through disagreements.

Is the Christian debate about governance really centered on those who advocate for the authority of the clergy to guide and protect and those who advocate for the fuller participation of all Christians? Are absolute monarchs and pure democracies simply extreme positions on both sides? Or, is the Christian debate on governance simply about power - those who want to keep it, those who want to find ways to justify getting it, and those who cannot stand it? Fighting the evil of personal ambitions and jealousy in the church would be much harder than bridging divides in understanding. There are those obsessed with power in all Christian institutions and those who would tear down institutions for the sake of personal gain. I do not believe that the Body of Christ has gone so far off course. Thus, rather than addressing any plotting, deceiving, and politics that may be a part of church governments, I will focus on Christians trapped by their competing spiritual characteristics and institutional histories. These Christians should still genuinely want to find a common way forward. I will also discuss the mechanisms used by Christians for sustaining governance and the damages to Christian unity that may result.

This divisive topic may be more of a product of historical developments than previous topics because it is so closely dependent on the outcomes of institutional formation. Therefore, we must look more carefully into Christian history to study how Christians became trapped on different sides. Once we can find a way out of these traps by crossing institutional divides, maybe the divides in spiritual characteristics will no longer be a barrier.

At the beginning, the churches of Christianity first formed under the oversight of the apostles and the undeniable authority of



the Apostle Peter. In the apostolic era, the churches were united by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the apostles even though contact may have been limited. Further, the ability of the apostles to enforce their teachings may have been intentionally left unaddressed. There is no evidence of the apostles setting-up any kind of rule-of-law or order within the church. The Apostle Paul instead spoke against laws and offered much encouragement to independent churches – local groups of Christians free to govern themselves as congregations. Paul also spoke about five responsibilities for Christians: 1) apostles (one sent forth by God with orders), 2) prophets (one who reveals the future of God’s unfolding plan), 3) evangelists (one who brings people to the community of Christians), 4) pastors (one who leads a congregation), and 5) teachers (one who passes on the word of God). We can suggest that only the responsibility of being an apostle is also a separate class of Christians, because apostles are directly called by Jesus. All other Christians are disciples, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit may lead each disciple to assume one or more of the other four responsibilities. The main goal of these responsibilities is to build the Body of Christ, and there is no rule that constrains the responsibilities from being combined or reassigned based on the needs of the Body. A disciple should follow the guidance of our Lord in their responsibilities and not cling to them as symbols of power. Paul suggested that once the Body of Christ has been completely built up to reach a unity of faith, such responsibilities might no longer be necessary.

**Matthew 16:18** And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

**Ephesians 4:11-13** It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith

and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

If we see the last four responsibilities above not as church offices as some might propose, then the offices of the church as recognized by Scripture for governance are elders and deacons. These positions are selected by the congregation to guide and conduct the affairs of each church / congregation in this world. Thus, Paul provided teachings on how to select elders and deacons. In contrast, Paul did not tell us how to select prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers because those responsibilities are assigned by our Lord. Prophets are affirmed by the truth they speak. Evangelists are affirmed by the love they show for all the people of this world. Pastors are affirmed by their strength of faith in protecting the congregation. And, teachers are affirmed by their understanding of the Scripture. Positions and responsibilities in the church are not in conflict, as elders and deacons can be given such responsibilities as a part of their activities. The apostles, however, specifically chose not to handle money, and can thus be interpreted as having created the position deaconship.

**Titus 1:5-7** The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.

After the departure of the apostles, the congregational churches began to integrate and institutionalize into episcopal areas led by bishops. The position of bishop was the first church authority not directly recognized by the Scripture, but it was of clear need

once the integrating force of the apostolic age began to fade. Because of Peter's presence, Rome clearly had a need for a bishop to take over Peter's responsibilities in caring for the churches of Rome. There is still debate over who became the 2<sup>nd</sup> bishop of Rome. However, we do know that Rome had an authority who succeeded Peter. The early bishops took on a major role in interpreting Scripture and establishing creeds (statements of faith) after the first series of council meetings starting from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Then, the succeeding bishops of Rome extended the authority of their position through papal decrees, political control, and even military power. The position, which was initially termed the Vicar (lieutenant) of St. Peter, was renamed the Vicar of Christ. With this authority over the other bishops of the West, the Bishop of Rome further took on the title of pope (spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic Church). Bishops of major cities in the East also extended their authority to become patriarchs of their regions.

With the age of popes and patriarchs, the congregational (independent) structures of churches gave way to dioceses (district of churches) controlled by bishops or archbishops, subordinate parishes (central church of a location), and subordinate chapels (smaller churches / organizations associated with a parish). A dedicated class of disciples known as the clergy further emerged to support the monarchical control of the churches. Authorities and offices in the churches were no longer selected by the congregation but appointed by higher authorities extending all the way to the pope and patriarchs. Those disciples who have received the calling to take on the responsibilities of evangelists, pastors, and teachers must join the clergy by being trained and ordained into priesthood. Other disciples were then considered as lay members of the church with limited authority to teach and serve as deacons when so selected.

The institution of priesthood, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, must by necessity challenge the claim that people are still being called by our Lord to become apostles and prophets.

These two responsibilities would supercede the authority structure of the church hierarchy if cessation had not occurred. Cessation is, however, a debatable concept. On the matter of apostles, Jesus appointed Paul after His physical departure from this world. Jesus can still call new apostles if He so wishes. One reason why Jesus would not call any more apostles is if Paul was the replacement for the apostle lost to evil. The selection of Matthias to replace Judas was made by the other apostles by drawing lots, but the Scripture does not mention any direct calling by Jesus. Therefore, we can consider that Matthias had the position of apostle in the church, but not the spiritual responsibility of apostleship as appointed by Jesus. Based on this interpretation, the ranks of the apostles are complete.

The cessation of calling to be prophets is harder to justify, as Paul recognized that both men and women can prophesize. What we can say is that the ability to prophesize is a responsibility, not a position in the Christian churches. Prophets in the Old Testament were anointed because only a select few can receive insight from God. In contrast, Christians who can prophesize should recognize that the power comes from the Holy Spirit, not their own spiritual quality. As such, this power can increase or decrease as appropriate to serve the growth of the Body. The Roman Catholic Church in a way follows this distinction by continuing to recognize that people can witness miracles where prophetic insights are given. The events at Fatima in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century are an example of this situation.

The Protestant Reformation brought about two directions in church government. Some denominations, like the Anglican Church of England, kept the parish based structure of the Catholics but separated their dioceses from the authority of the Papacy. Instead of a supreme pontiff supported by a college of cardinals, councils of bishops were established to organize the Episcopal areas. Other denominations, such as the Presbyterians, rolled back church structure even further to the point of congregations being led by elders and managed by deacons. The Presbyterian congregations

kept a centralized governance structure based on bottom up selection processes. Congregations in a locality, such as a metropolitan area, are organized as presbyteries. Congregations and presbyteries across a region, such as multiple states, are organized as synods (councils). Other congregational churches were at times more independent than the Presbyterians. Some chose to have no affiliation with central governance, and some formed looser coalitions based on state conferences, national committees, and mission societies. Without the guidance of apostles, keeping congregations united has remained a challenge to this day. Many denominations are still in the process of uniting while others are in the process of dividing.

As we can see, the reality of Protestant churches is not nearly as simple as returning to the governance structure of the early Christians. Some denominations have tried to take the best from multiple governance structures. For example, the United Methodist Church has an Episcopal structure for leading all its churches, but sometimes uses a congregation structure in each church to manage its affairs. Most denominations have elected to retain the concept of clergy to some degree. Protestant ministers are trained to be pastors of congregations, preachers to new Christians, and chaplains to look after special groups. Further, they can be selected to become bishops or elected to be elders and deacons. However, ministers in the congregationally based Protestant denominations are generally viewed as employees of the congregation – selected by the elders to be the spiritual leader. Some congregations have elected to completely return to first century principles by allowing all disciples to take on the responsibilities of ministry, which include performing sacraments, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

The divide between the parish based and congregational based churches can also be seen through the nature of worship. Parish churches tend to hold high church services, which are solemn and wrapped in ritual to reflect the lineage and hierarchy of authority. Congregational churches often prefer to hold low church

services, which are informal and sometimes participatory by the congregation members. Charismatic and Pentecostal churches that extend back to the Quakers hold services that are unstructured, allowing people to praise as they are inspired by the Holy Spirit.

In recent years, a debate has emerged as to what constitutes a church. Is the congregation those who have been baptized by water and the Holy Spirit? Or, is the congregation those who have come in pursuit of faith? Christians emphasizing the fellowship of disciples have elected to continue limiting communion to those who have been baptized. In contrast, those who emphasize the ability of communion to draw non-Christians into the spiritual community of disciples have opened the sacrament to all. Jesus asked that communions be in remembrance of Him. Therefore, non-Christians who wish to partake of Christian communion should do so to honor Jesus and to respect the Christian faith. Whether non-Christians are actually receiving the blood and body of Christ, or simply consuming bread and wine depends on how their spirits are affected by the experience. Either way, Christians who accept the participation of non-Christians in communion must in turn accept them as a part of the congregation. In the case of the United Methodist Church, which does have open communion, it is perhaps best that there be an Episcopal based clergy structure to help an open congregation stay on the path of faith. Even so, the complexity of congregations in our modern times reveals that determining a single form of governance that is right for all will be extremely challenging, even if it is a structure that integrates multiple governance approaches.

Now we have a better feel for how the major forms of governance have become institutionalized in the Christian churches. However, Christian churches still struggle because Jesus is no longer physically with us as the head of the universal Christian Church. Also, new apostles have not been appointed nor recognized to guide the church. Christians today are left to our own relationships with

the Lord to determine how to be good stewards of the Body of Christ. To push past the constraints of institutions that divide Christianity, the following prescriptive actions are proposed.

**Prescriptive Action 1:** All Christian denominations should recognize that every Christian must be allowed to communicate their calling. A calling to responsibilities that supercedes the structure of governance must be examined carefully by the community of Christians. Ignoring or rejecting those appointed by our Lord can have very serious consequences for the church.

**Prescriptive Action 2:** All the denominations should recognize that the Kingdom of Heaven is an absolute hierarchy. This hierarchy is not one of control but one of spiritual unity where all freely rejoice in the supremacy of God the Father and the love of His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus chose one apostle to lead the church when He departed. Thus the leadership of the current Christian community by one God appointed apostle is still an ideal form of governance until Jesus' return. This leader should be the spiritual guide for all Christians and symbolize the unity of the Body of Christ. However, this leader should not exercise absolute power nor control a hierarchy of leaders that constrains the institution of the church from spiritual growth due to fears of heresy. We should honor the example set by the apostles. Based on Scripture, we know that 1) other Christians can disagree with an apostle (i.e. the disagreement and parting of ways between Paul and Barnabas), 2) the leader of the church did not exert absolute power (i.e. drawing lots was used to select a replacement for Judas), and 3) the apostles shed authority on worldly matters (i.e. others with the Holy Spirit selected to handle money). Pending the direct appointment of a leader by our Lord, a scriptural precedence for leadership selection when there is no unanimous agreement is to select all qualified Christians and draw lots after prayer. Placing the final decision in the hands of God shows our respect for Him while

dispelling the influence of ambition and politics in the Christian realm.

**Acts 6:3-4** Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

**Prescriptive Action 3:** Denominations should come to agreement on the position that oligarchy is the preferred form of church governance under one spiritual leader. A group of apostles were selected to spiritually oversee the church, and groups of elders were selected to lead the affairs of individual churches. Oligarchies allow Christian leaders to spiritually support one another, and add a level of check and balance in decision making when the guidance from the Holy Spirit is not clear. In both the cases of apostles, it is important to note that the original selection process was by top-down appointment, rather than a democratic selection from the Christian community. Representative democracy is a secular form of government that can be very dangerous when applied in the Christian realm. When Christians start to vote on their leaders, they may end up with leaders who appeal to the lowest common denominator of their spiritual weaknesses. Can leaders who are always compelled to say what the people want to hear provide much needed spiritual guidance? If democratic processes must be used in the course of church formation, we must make sure that all who vote have received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The selected should not have to pander to the desires of the people. The Scripture speaks of those who have received baptism by water, but have yet to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is a hard task to know the difference.



**Acts 8:16** because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

Since Christians cannot appoint apostles or prophets in the Body of Christ, the establishment of other church positions for providing spiritual guidance may be merited. Based on Paul's teachings, we can formalize the responsibility of evangelism into a type of position. The responsibilities of pastor and teacher, which are grouped together, can be another type of position. A third type of position for handling the operational affairs of the church is that of deacons. The apostles suggested the role of deacons by appointing others to manage financial activities. Historically, the position of elder within the church has been one of authority instead of responsibility. Pastors, teachers, and evangelists can also be appointed as elders, and deacons can become elders. In contrast, it is harder to combine the three positions based on responsibilities. Many pastors today have displayed a strong desire to evangelize, but protecting the church has to take priority over growing the church. Many missionaries abroad have wanted to be the pastor the flock they have gathered, but gathering more for the Body of Christ has to take priority.

Evangelists and pastors are often Christians who have received a personal calling by our Lord. All Christians who proclaim to have received this calling should be considered by the leadership of the Church. If their calling is true, then they should be allowed to serve at the level of their calling. The affirmation and appointment process to being evangelists and pastors may include the requirement to attend specialized or additional schooling prior to service. Alternatively, a period of mentorship may be established as they serve. Schooling or mentorship, however, should never become a hurdle for all to cross before they can even be considered for positions of spiritual leadership.

Like apostles and prophets, evangelists and pastors should be positions within the total Christian community instead of with any specific church. How they choose to organize themselves as groups should perhaps be an internal matter. If pastors want to select bishops from among them to spiritually guide groups of churches, such is their choice. If evangelists want to form mission committees and heads, such is also their choice. Organizations of evangelists and pastors should be responsible for spiritual leadership when no apostle or prophet have been recognized. A part of this responsibility is the affirmation and appointment of those called to be the top leader / steward of the Christian Church. This process does not have to be as elaborate as the selection of Catholic popes. However, the focal point must be on the will of God as experienced by the entire group.

**Prescriptive Action 4:** Denominations should come together to resolve issues that affect the entire Body of Christ. Pure democracy is a dangerous form of governance as it harbors continuing disagreements. It is much better if Christians can come to unanimous understanding of God's will on complex matters. When Christians cannot resolve disagreements, we must decide on what percentage of concurrence in the community constitutes acceptance by the entire Body of Christ and thus acceptance in Heaven. Ensuring that only those baptized by the Holy Spirit participate in this decision is critical. However, even those filled with the Holy Spirit can disagree because of human weaknesses. In the past, God has allowed disagreeing Christians to follow different paths. If the unity of the Church is our objective, we must decide how each Christian can remain true to his / her spiritual understanding while the entire Christian community decides on common paths forward. Perhaps the solution is selective participation for Christians and Christian subgroups that wish to non-concur on a specific issue.

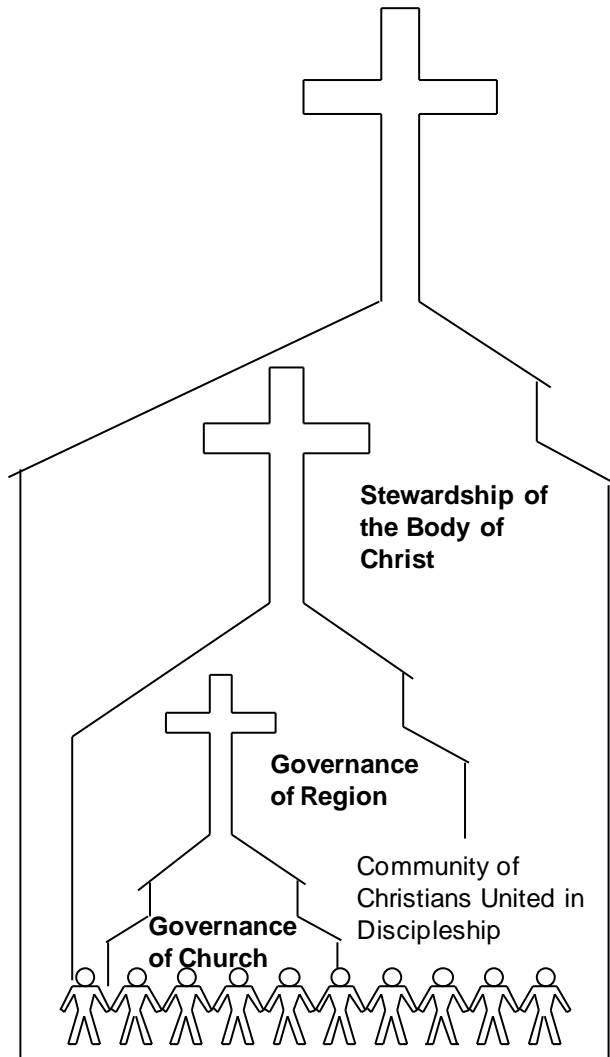


Figure 7.2: Governance Supporting Christian Unity Instead of Causing Divisions

The prescriptive actions I proposed inherently counter the rigidity of long established institutions in achieving a single governance approach as reflected in Figure 7.2. The approach must respond to the spiritual characteristics, needs, and callings of all Christians. The institutions will surely push back as preserving the

established way is the nature of institutions. However, if individual Christians embrace the idea of designing a governance structure for church unity and for the varying needs of Christians, I believe that the division caused by governance types can be resolved. Even as we overcome the power of institutions, we must further be weary about two remaining forces that could corrupt the endeavors of Christian leaders.

First, Christian leaders will be tempted to use laws and regulations as instruments for sustaining their authority and projecting power. God gave laws to the Jews to help shape their spirits through their actions. However, the Pharisees embraced laws to shield their sins through insincere actions. People facing spiritual challenges love laws and procedures, because they can embrace actions that look proper on the outside and not worry about the spiritual problems on the inside. Paul declared that laws bring death. However, this has not stopped the rise of laws within the church governance processes. Applying the power of law is simple, but Christian leaders must resist and limit its application even when churches yearn for the simplicity.

Second, Christian leaders will be tempted to use the power of charisma as an instrument for projecting their will and plans. Sometimes even without a leader's realization, a cult of personality begins to form where the congregation or parish will rather listen to the leader instead of studying the word of God. People will pander to the spiritual weaknesses of leaders so that the leaders will give them what they want but not necessarily what they spiritually need. The adoration of the people can be blinding. Thus, leaders with the best of initial intentions can rapidly drift away from the influence of the Holy Spirit and the will of God.

If Christian leaders can rise above institutions and resist the temptations that come with greater responsibilities, the Body of Christ may yet be one in the hardest of times. All it takes is for a few

leaders to take action, not just for their Christian flock, but for all Christians – for the future of Christianity.



# Chapter 8: Christian Ways to Follow the Great Commission

The seventh divisive topic stems from the primary task given by our Lord Jesus to all disciples. Before Jesus died on the cross so that God can offer salvation to mankind, the power of the Word was reserved for God's chosen people. The Jews, under the first covenant, were the only ones who could receive the teachings of Jesus before He was crucified.

**Matthew 10:5-6** These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

After Jesus' resurrection, Christians were told to spread the good news of salvation to all the nations of the world. The mission is to teach the truth of the Word, bear witness to the glory of God, validate the baptism by the Holy Spirit, and accept those who believe and are baptized into the Body of Christ. Some people in the world will not believe upon receiving the Word and would not be saved.

**Matthew 28:18 – 20** Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

**Mark 16:15-18** He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will

drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

**Luke 24:46-49** He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

**Act 1:4-8** He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

This task, which must be based on Jesus' commandments to love God and our fellow man, has been termed the "Great Commission". Few Christians will debate that the task has been given. What Christians do debate about is how the Great Commission should be followed, because the interpretations of Jesus' words are driven by different spiritual characteristics. There are many ways for Christians to satisfy the Great Commission. However, the primary ways have been shaped by either the theology of not wanting to proselytize or the theology wanting to boldly evangelize. It seems that a half of the Christian community feels that it is beyond their power to build the Body of Christ, but they still try to evangelize. The other half cannot wait to exert power to build the Body of Christ, but they do not like to be accused of proselytization.



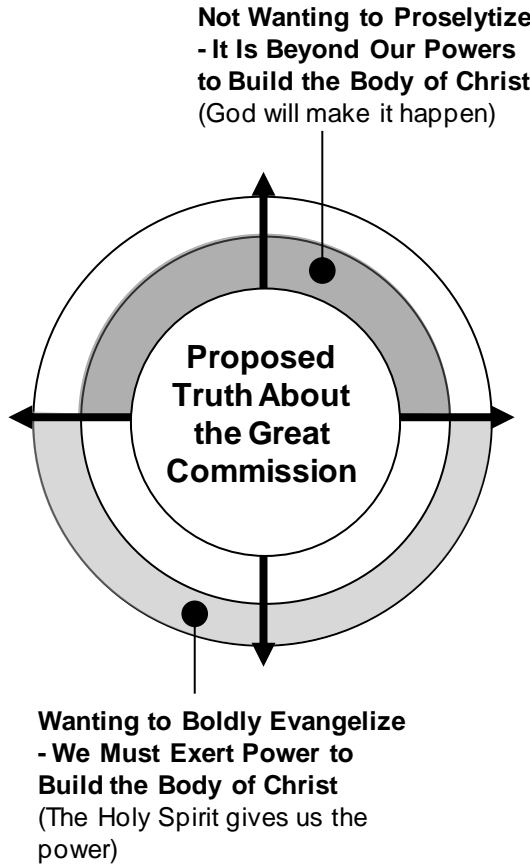


Figure 8.1: Spiritual Characteristics Dividing Response to the Great Commission

As Figure 8.1 shows, the spiritual characteristics on both sides of the debate further stretch from progressivism to fundamentalism to create diverse groups on each side of the divide. Because of this diversity, Christians who do not want to proselytize may not recognize that they are shaped by the same pole in spiritual characteristics. Equally, Christians who want to evangelize may not recognize that they are of another group shaped by the opposite pole. Of the major Christian denominations, the evangelical Protestant churches and the Orthodox churches appear to fall on opposite sides

of the divide even as both sides claim to follow the Great Commission. The strength of the poles has been so intense on this particular topic that it has separated the mainline Protestant churches as well as the Catholic churches. Even within a single church, some Protestants or Catholics wish to actively spread the word of God while others argue for more restraint because of the potential negative consequences.

The theological positions of those Christians who do not wish to proselytize (to induce someone to convert to one's faith - Merriam-Webster online) includes:

1. Progressive View that the best way to bring people to the Body of Christ is through the demonstration of Christian love
2. Fundamentalist View that only the few select people will be saved, and that the rest of humanity is not in the Book of Life
3. Traditionalist View that the presence of a stable Christian community, like a rock, is all we can humbly achieve and that rest is by the will of God

The progressive view against proselytization points out that for centuries Christians have violently persecuted Jews who would not accept the Word, and Christians have harmed other Christians based on the accusation of heresy. Further, missionary efforts to establish new churches in foreign lands were often tainted with colonialism policies. Native cultures were destroyed, foreign people were educated for European subjugation, and Christians were pulled in territorial disputes. Neither the Protestants nor the Catholics were blameless in these affairs. Even in modern times, many have argued that forceful preaching where it is not welcomed and the aggressive accusation of sinners have pushed people away from Christianity. Also, the distribution of food and other humanitarian aid by

Christian missionaries to lure the nonbelievers yields a sense of inadequacy or shame in non-Christian cultures. Christians must be careful to not appear arrogant, self-righteous, and self-serving in following the Great Commission.

The fundamentalist view against proselytization is supported by the scriptural affirmation that some will be condemned for not believing. They believe that as long as people have a chance to receive the Word, we should not worry too much about the rest of God's plan. The Bible is now available in the majority of the world, and most people have heard about Jesus. If people will not read the Bible, there is only so much that Christians can do. They think that, by making their churches accessible, people whose names are in the Book of Life will be led by God to the church. Unlike Progressives, who might allow everyone into the church, Fundamentalists may seek to investigate and validate the spiritual nature of people through professing statements of faith to protect the church from negative influences.

The traditionalist view against proselytization is supported by the argument that all power and authority belong to God. Therefore, it is too presumptuous of us to consider that we can build the Body of Christ through our plans. God's plan to bless the world through the descendants of Abraham has long been declared and reaffirmed. They believe that the gospel is meant for all nations and God will lead them to the gospel. Christians just need to profess their faith through rituals and traditions, and trust in God.

**Genesis 12:3** I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

**Colossians 1:23** if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

**Romans 16:25-26** Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—

The theological positions of those Christians who wish to boldly evangelize (The winning or revival of personal commitments to Christ - Merriam -Webster online) includes:

1. Progressive View that with the right sensitivity and caring for the spiritual needs of non-Christians, missionary endeavors across the world should still be undertaken
2. Fundamentalist View that since the mission trips of Paul, spreading the good news of Jesus has been at the core of Christian responsibilities
3. Evangelistic View that witnessing the majesty of Jesus Christ to the world is a calling for all Christians

The progressive view for evangelism is supported by the fact that many churches across the world were started through the sacrifices and even martyrdom of caring Christians. Christian missionaries cared for the people and the cultures that they were trying to help – often learning foreign ways to live among the suffering. If they combined humanitarian aid with the preaching of the Word, it was only because these missionaries cared both for the body and the spirit. Christians cannot cease spreading the good news to those, across the world and within our own society, who have not embraced Jesus' love.

The fundamentalist view for evangelism is supported by the many early Christians who followed the example set by the Apostle Paul and transformed ancient Rome into a Christian empire. Without commitment to the Great Commission under horrendous persecution, Christianity would not be the worldwide religion it is today. After the collapse of Rome, Christian monks traveled across the chaotic lands of Europe to revive the faith of people in crisis. The first wave of missionaries into Europe came from Ireland. Then missionaries came from Anglo-Saxon England in the eighth century. The Franciscan Order of traveling friars would later preach the gospel across many lands in the thirteenth century, with some monks reaching as far as China in 1250. Winning people over for Christ is therefore of highest importance.

The evangelical view for evangelism is about the recognition of the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus specifically instructed disciples to wait for the descent of the Holy Spirit, for it is the Holy Spirit that brings the calling from God and converts our spiritual nature. Throughout Christian history, the power of the Holy Spirit has manifested itself among the Jesus' disciples in many ways. Today, it is the Holy Spirit that continues to guide us to follow God's will. Based on this position, one can conclude that evangelical Christians must help all the churches receive the Holy Spirit more fully and spread the word to non-Christians. The full meaning of evangelism is far more than proselytization, for we are working not by our powers but by the powers of God. Our ways are inspired by God, and He leads us to the ones we are to evangelize. We recognize that sometimes we are led to give people chances that they will reject, but such is also the plan of God. We should not worry about counting the number of people we have converted, because only God knows when seeds will germinate.

Our endeavor to find a single path forward for all Christians must begin with this question: Is the division caused by our inability to understand the purpose of the Great Commission or lack of love

for others? To achieve a better understanding of God's plan, we need to know when to proselytize and when not to in order to best express our love for people and our concern for their salvation. It is a lack of love for people over the past centuries that has caused Christians to do so much harm in the course of missioning for God. In contrast, it is also love that has enabled some Christians to save many people in the course of missioning for God. It is a lack of love for people that has caused Christians to abandon people to their fates. In contrast, it is also love that has led Christians to motivate others through great deeds rather than forceful words. Many Christians blinded by their spiritual characteristics have acted against love by following false callings, rejecting responsibilities, and acting in a lukewarm manner. But, other Christians who do want to love may simply have trouble understanding the needs of others. Whether we have to awaken the love in us or steer our existing love, the Great Commission is not only for non-Christians' salvation but also for Christians' spiritual growth.

As a Christian who has struggled with evangelistic approaches for many years, I am probably the last person who should propose how to love others in carrying out the Great Commission. Further, I have no idea how to awaken the love in Christians who do not care about the people that they are trying save, or who do not care about delivering the good news altogether. I do know, as stated in Scripture, that all people will receive the Word in this life or after death. Thus, receiving the Word in life is according to God's complex plan, which includes purposes as identified in Figure 8.2.

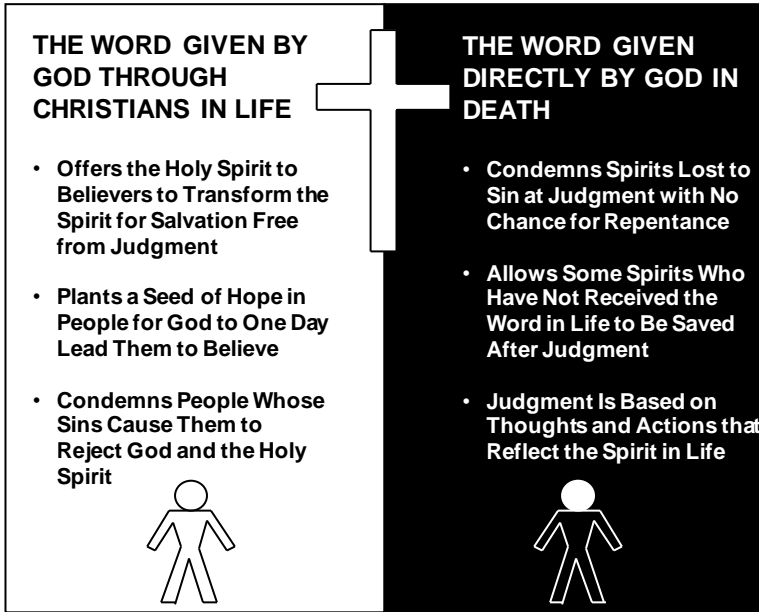


Figure 8.2: Some Potential Consequences of When People Receive the Word

In God’s plan, I pray that I am used as an evangelist to people who will benefit from my bold presentations. I pray also that I am given the insight to temper my message when my presentations might cause others to turn away from God. However, non-Christians who initially reject my presentation might still carry the seed of the Word for God to lead them one day to salvation. On mission trips, I pray that God will guide me in the right direction so that people will receive the Word when they need it the most. I will, in love, focus on bringing people to a true understanding of the Word. If proselytization fits within this framework of loving those who we are trying save, then I will proselytize. I will try to not proselytize based on a sense of Christian superiority, blind obedience to scriptural interpretations, and eagerness to condemn others. Much is at stake because only the baptism of the Holy Spirit in life can free

people from God's judgment. However, this baptism also brings to people the burden of discipleship.

There are no rules to spreading the Word, but there is a time and place to proselytize and a time and place to wait. God may use some of us to be instruments of condemnation. For example, Christian martyrs may end up condemning their persecutors. However, we should still ask God to use us as instruments for supporting salvation. No Christian should desire the glory of martyrdom nor cling to life in the face of God's plan. One day, Christians will be led to persecution, because evil in this world cannot be left unopposed. We must accept persecutions when the time comes and pray for God to forgive our persecutors while helping them repent and see the truth.

We Christians have become so accustomed to division that we can no longer recognize that topics such as this are actually opportunities for collaboration. Christians who see the possible adverse consequences of proselytization may be the perfect advisors to passionate Christians called to boldly evangelize. Our differences can be used to help one another understand specific guidance from our Lord. The key is for all to focus on a common mission. Together, one group of Christians can push the team forward as other Christians pull the team away from damaging paths.



# Chapter 9: Responsibilities of Christians with Political Power

The eighth divisive topic emerged with the worldly authority gained by Christian churches after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Being its own territorial monarch and influencing the decisions of Christian kings across Europe, the Papacy of the Roman Catholic Church found itself wrestling with political questions such as:

- When can Christians wage justified war?
- How should Christians coexist with non-Christians?
- How should Christians use social, political, and economic instruments to deal with heretical behaviors in society?

No Christian can say that the Roman Catholic Church has made all the right political decisions in the past fifteen hundred years. However, when Christians were more united under the Roman church, at least the divisive nature of worldly forces had less influence on the churches of Christianity. The worldly forces eventually caused the fragmentation of Christianity. As a result, the political authority gained by Christians on all sides became a fuel for every Christian disagreement and every conflict between the churches. This fuel would eventually trickle down to involve every Christian in democratic societies, giving each Christian the ability to express their religious view through the voting process. Each Christian elected into public office then gains some authority to take political action.

The worldly forces influencing those with political power tend to be centered on the poles of conservatism and liberalism. Unfortunately, we have already suggested that Christians are not free from such forces. Christians may be able to consciously or subconsciously resist the influence of conservatism and liberalism when dealing with other divisive topics, but these forces tend to

dominate when it comes to exerting political power. Therefore, when Christians are debating divisive topics in democratic societies, we must carefully separate our true attitudes about the topics from the fact that we can suddenly bring political force into play to win arguments. We Christians must always ask, what is the right thing to do if neither side can use laws and penalties to establish their way of Christianity? This should always be our starting position on any issue. Yet, if Christians do have political power, how can we relinquish it to non-Christians? To wield power based on Christian love, free from worldly forces that are not aligned with Christian truths, requires great spiritual insight.

The force of conservatism draws from people's innate desire to preserve the normal behaviors of society (right or wrong), learn from the mistakes of the past, change only in a slow manner, and live within one's means. These attitudes have always existed in our society, and they are among many Christians. In democratic societies, people, to include Christians, who want to constrain the rate and degree of change have organized under the ideology of *Classic Conservatism*. Those who want to specifically constrain the growth of government spending in opposition to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century socialistic policies have been further term *Fiscal Conservatives*. In contrast, those who wish to preserve traditional values have organized under the ideology of *Social Conservatism*. Social conservative groups are widely varied, because values change over time and by demographics. Therefore, politically we can think of Christian social conservatism as a movement. This movement in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has been overshadowed by those who want to combine nationalism with religious traditions. To *Neo Conservatives*, the idea of an unchanging God, unwavering nation, and unfaltering society is the clear political ideology responding to the fears and worries of a world confronted by rising evil forces.

The force of liberalism draws from people's desires for equality, freedom, human rights, compassion, and passion in living.

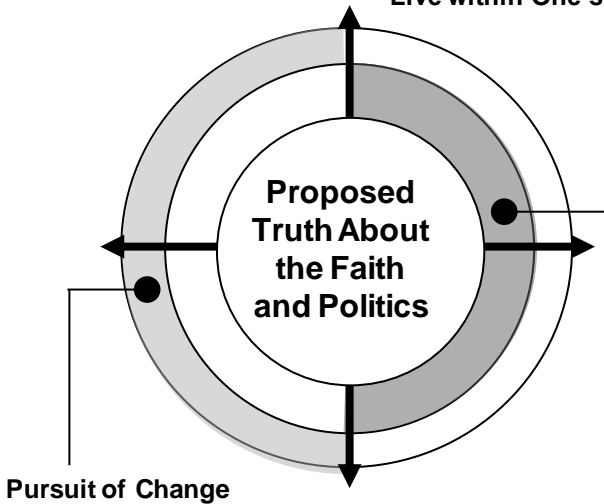
These desires remained suppressed until the yolk of authoritarian rule was lifted during the Age of Enlightenment. Thus, liberalism is inherently against tyranny as well as the constraints of tradition from all sources. It relies heavily on rationality and a sense of caring. In democratic societies, people who want to argue for the absolute importance of freedom have organized into modern *Libertarian* type parties. In contrast, people who are more willing to compromise freedom for other liberal values have organized into various *Social Liberal* groups. Since liberals are not fond of authority, such groups are more often driven by the arguments of a sometimes self-justified intellectual elite. This intellectual elite in the *Neo-Liberal* groups of the United States has favored strong interventionist policies particularly emphasizing the plight of the poor, environment preservation, and wealth distribution. Intellectual groups in other parts of the world have taken different postures in opposing established authorities. For example, liberals in South America and Southern Europe are quite opposed to the traditions of the Catholic Church, and liberals in other parts of Europe actually try to counter both conservative and socialist forces. In Russia, where there was a tradition of socialist tyranny, liberals actually adopted positions that would be quite conservative elsewhere.

I have suggested that Christians obsessed with political power or just with political participation can end up with spiritual characteristics, as shown in Figure 9.1, that are more worldly than Christian. This means that fundamentalist Christians will become more conservative, driven by fear of negative consequences and relying less on faith. In contrast, progressive Christians will become more liberal, driven by passions and intellect and relying less on love. On each side, there are active and passive participants with a range of spiritual characteristics. However, the central issue for Christians is that neither conservative nor liberal postures should be Christian postures. How do we reveal to other Christians the fallacy of these worldly forces and the subtle trap of secularism?

### Constraints on Change

#### Desire to:

- **Preserve the Normal Behaviors of Society**
- **Learn from the Mistakes of the Past**
- **Change Only in a Slow Stable Manner**
- **Live within One's Means**



#### Desire for:

- **Equality**
- **Freedom and Human Rights**
- **Passions of Life**
- **Compassion**

Figure 9.1: Spiritual Characteristics Involved in Division Over Faith and Politics

The fallacy of Christian conservatism is that Christianity is about sudden transformation in spirit, mind, and body as enabled by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is also about using the power of the Holy Spirit to gain an ever deeper insight into God's plan.

Therefore, Christians must embrace change as our spiritual growth continues in the Body of Christ. We should focus on whether changes are in the right direction by considering new interpretations of Scripture, rational arguments by others, sources of expanded knowledge, and spiritual insights from fellow Christians. With faith that triumphs over fear, we can see the complexities of God's unfolding plan. God may sometimes permit bad things to happen so that positive changes can result. God, who cares about spiritual salvation, may allow people to struggle with their behaviors, make mistakes, and even sin greatly so that their eventual repentance is real and their spiritual embrace of the Word complete.

**Galatians 3:10-14** - All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Knowing that free will is a cherished gift from God, Christians trying to use political power to constrain change should heed the possibility that they may be interfering with spiritual growth. We are told by Scripture that laws bring spiritual death, because they force behaviors but still let evil hide within. Since Christians are freed from God's laws as proclaimed by Paul, we must think hard about what secular laws we want to endorse or enforce. Christianity is about understanding God's will. We must therefore think hard about how much spiritual growth is hindered by traditions and a refusal to explore God's unfolding plan. We cannot trap the world in spiritual stagnation for fear of spiritual digression.

The worst situation in Christian conservatism is that we use traditions and secular laws to preserve an incomplete or immature understanding of Scripture. However, even when what we are trying to preserve is true, the use of political power in the world and in the churches can be against God's will. We need to help the world and other Christians understand the truth via love, example, and teachings. This is not saying that Christians should avoid using their political influence to control change and oppose evil forces. I am only suggesting that Christians should not yield to secular conservative forces.

The fallacy of Christian liberalism is that Christianity is about life in the context of enabling spiritual salvation, free will (not necessarily freedom), and equality only in our opportunity for salvation. Christians should always respect life, for it enables our spirits to struggle and embrace the Word. We must argue for life and understand that quality of life cannot take priority over spiritual needs. In thinking about the quality of life and human rights, it is very easy to fall prey to rational arrogance. In arrogance, some Christians might accept that the right of women to choose their lifestyle outweighs the course of new or emerging life already set in motion. Also in arrogance, Christians might accept all manners of spiritual corruption, such as accepting anti-Christian ideology, to gain worldly acceptance, rationalizing that God would understand.

Christian liberals caught up in the enlightenment concept of freedom might in contrast sacrifice life for something that is not important for our spiritual needs. Free will to choose one's spiritual path is a freedom that no society can take away from us. Other freedoms, such as to learn, play, rest, and act, are gifts by God to some Christians through a free society to support spiritual growth. God may also grant such freedoms to test non-Christians in order to help them rise above sin and find their way to the Word. Alternatively, God may take freedom away to stop people from sinning, help people grow spiritually through endurance, and to test

and condemn the oppressors. Finally, God granted us different physical and mental qualities as well as social status to match the needs of our spirits. Paul specifically taught us to not question our status nor demand equality. Some may have less so that their endurance strengthens their spirits. Some may suffer so that their journey is an inspiration to others. And, some may be punished to push them and others away from sin. No Christian, however, should want others to suffer or be punished, as our love must be guided by the Holy Spirit.

**Romans 9:20-21** But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

Knowing that the world unfolds by God's plan, Christians eager to change the world need to make sure that they are not blinded by their own intellectual arrogance. Losing the spirit, while clinging to the passions of life, is tragic. The salvation of the spirit, as taught by Jesus, is worth more than any physical element of life. Losing life in the quest for worldly freedoms is also tragic unless it is by God's will. And, demanding equality is a matter that people should take up with God. If Christian liberals want to use political power to rebalance the world by their sense of what is right or wrong, then they might as well ask God to make every person of one height, weight, intelligence, and charisma. Taxes for more social benefits can reduce people's suffering, but it cannot remove the discontent of the less wealthy. Plastic surgery can alter appearance, but it cannot resolve the insecurities of the less attractive. Education can increase capability, but it cannot bestow the gift of intelligence. This is not saying that Christians should not use their political influence to advocate change and oppose evil forces. Christians should simply not yield to secular liberal forces.

Christian liberals should instead be greatly concerned about the curtailing of freedoms for rational ideals, because the freedoms that are lost may impact Christians the most. In a world of increasing liberalism, we may find that it is the Christian freedom to publicly spread the truth of God that is blocked by threats of lost employment, social isolation, and disgrace. The ideology of religious tolerance will eventually demand conformity to secular standards. Can Christians embrace a liberal world where morality is situational, all religions are proclaimed as ways to God, and the Bible is but a fallible human text?

When it comes to conservatism and liberalism, Christians should simply just say no. Additionally, the Scripture teaches Christians to not worry about the affairs of the world when they do not affect the spirit. If the world wants more of our money, then let the world have it, for money cannot buy us salvation. Instead, trust that God has allowed the secular rulers to remain in power in accordance to His plan. In the darkest days of Roman, Christians did not launch rebellions, nor did they deny their faith. Instead, they submitted to the whims of tyranny and died proclaiming their faith so that Christians from all the generations can be strengthened by their demonstration of faith. The troubles of the world tempt us to act incorrectly. But, we cannot let the world drag us to its level. Under tyranny, Christians can still gather and worship in secrecy, protect others who are in danger, aid the suffering, and share their wealth. Under secularism, Christians can still find the people that God has called to the Word, remain faithful when surrounded by temptations, and boldly proclaim the truth. I know it is hard when your friends and neighbors have surrendered to the religion of secularism and greed. However, if the secular world wants to take our jobs, reputation, and social status, maybe we should perhaps let go of such things. What is sadder, losing your job or not receiving the support of your Christian community? What is worse, having the world think that you are a crackpot or having the Christian



community reject your new Holy Spirited granted insights? What is more tragic, not having acquaintances or not having Christian friends? If Christians were to reconsider their priorities, perhaps the affairs of the world are not as important as the affairs of the church.

**Matthew 22:19 - 21** - Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

**Romans 13:1-3** - Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.

In modern democratic societies, where political choice and political power are made available to the citizenry, does rejecting political participation mean turning power over to secular forces? Each Christian must make this decision through prayer and personal consideration of God's will. I can only suggest that, beyond rejecting conservative and liberal forces, if political participation damages the spirit, then Christians should perhaps avoid politics. The reason why Christians might want to engage in political participation is when there is an overlap between the affairs of the spirit and the affairs of the world, as shown in Figure 9.2. Christian politics, if so allowed by our Lord, should focus on protecting the affairs of the spirit from worldly forces. It should be about preserving life, relieving of suffering, and supporting of spiritual choices.

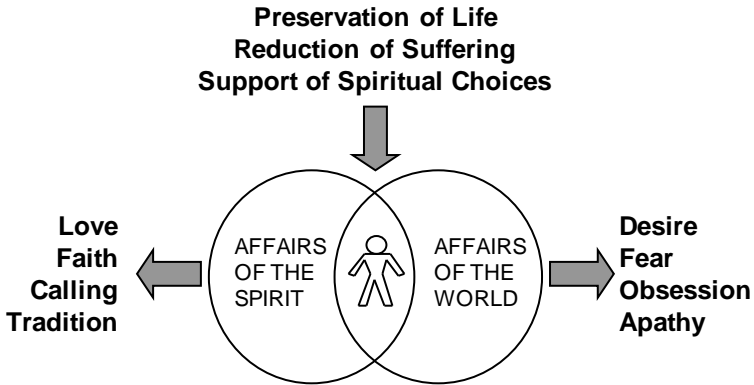


Figure 9.2: The Focus of Christian Political Participation

The reason why Christians might wish to advocate using political force to preserve life is that we should, out of love, want all people to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and spiritually grow toward God in the world as long as appropriate. Not knowing God’s plan for each person, we should fight for all human life. For example, we can fight against corporations that sell dangerous products to reduce cost. This fight also can be against criminals and oppressive states across the world that would take life. The decision to use military force to protect life, however, must be done with prayer and understanding of God’s will. The enemy lives we take might need more time on earth than the lives we save - the meek and persecuted who will more likely enter into Heaven. Finally, the fight for life can be against the poor choices of individuals, such as addictions that will lead to self-destruction, types of abortions where new life is terminated, and reckless behaviors that could cause accidents. As we are often unsure about whether people have truly made bad decisions, Christians should perhaps refrain from political power until life is definitely at risk.

The reason why Christians might wish to advocate using political force to reduce suffering is that we should, out of love, want all people to have physical comforts so that they can focus on

spiritual growth. Not knowing whether some suffering is designed by God to promote spiritual growth, we should act with compassion but avoid believing that we can eliminate all suffering in the world. Jesus could have cured all the sickness in the world, but that would have been against God's will. Our political response arising from compassion should perhaps focus on the ones proclaimed in Scripture, such as widows and orphans, the sick and the lame, and the hungry and unsheltered. However, helping the suffering is more than just giving money and other social benefits. The real challenge for Christians who understand the linkage between the physical and the spiritual is to figure out ways in which political decisions can attend to both. Orphans need loving homes instead of better equipped orphanages. Perhaps the lame needs caring friendship more than easy community access. And, the hungry needs consistent food supplies rather than one fancy meal. If politics cannot deal with these realities, then perhaps politics is not what Christians should be focusing on.

Finally, to protect the affairs of the spirit, Christians might consider using political force to reduce the persecution of Christian churches, remove constraints on Christian teachings, and block secular forces that steer people away from choosing Christ. Political outcomes can prevent evil powers in the world from interfering with spiritual growth, enabling people to see the difference between Christian and worldly values. Many Christians today are prohibited from forming churches in different parts of the world. Yet, Christians with political power remain passive in order to win approval of secular groups. Some heroic Christians today are imprisoned, tortured, or even killed in foreign lands for publically proclaiming the Word. Yet, Christians with political power can only manage ineffectual protests, if they do anything at all. The secular world is no doubt competing with Christianity for the spirits of humanity. Now, the situation has digressed to the point where non-Christians must overcome many obstacles just to be able to explore

Christian teachings. Non-Christians in other religious societies are often taught that Christianity and secular corruptions are connected. Non-Christians in secular societies are often taught that life is by the randomness of evolution, tolerance of all religions is correct, the observations of science is the only way to understand the universe, and nationalism should supercede Christianity. Ironically, even opposing views are both against Christianity. While I am not advocating the conservative approach of opposing rising liberalism by placing Christian values in laws, I question whether laws sponsored by Christian leaders can at least level the playing field. Can laws give Christian expression a chance before secular institutions indoctrinate our young? Can laws allow youths from non-Christian regions the opportunity to explore Christianity?

Walking a political path, while resisting the forces of conservatism and liberalism, is hard. I also understand that those hurt in life are more likely to be politically active. They are unusually vulnerable to the polarizing forces that cause division. In this matter, I am less concerned with the division of the Christian churches than with Christians on both sides being pulled into the affairs of the world. A united Christianity can better withstand worldly forces, because Christians can pull one another away from harmful activities. This mutual protection would not be just for Christians obsessed with liberal and conservative postures. Those fallen victim to greed, deceit, arrogance, hatred, selfishness, disillusionment, and foolishness due to the political power they hold can also be rescued. I have often noticed that people can quickly lose touch with reality as a result of self-rationalization and due to poor advisors once they hold political office. Therefore, I would, for the sake of spiritual salvation, recommend that Christians refrain from deep political involvement except on matters critical to the affairs of the spirit until we have united the churches of Christianity. I would also recommend that Christians do everything possible to prevent

political views and priorities from entering our churches. This is especially important as we try to resolve all the other divisive topics.



# Chapter 10: Impact of Competing Christian Institutions

The ninth divisive topic stems from competing types of institutions that have emerged from the churches of Christianity. Formal institutions emerged as a result of structures, procedures, and rules established by the leadership of a Christian group to perpetuate the group across generations. Informal institutions emerged as a result of people from a Christian group spontaneously embracing a set of standard practices and behaviors. Regardless of how individual institutions emerged, all institutions exert force on the Christians who belong to them and on the Christian community as a whole. Further, all institutions are associated with a Christian group.

Between the churches of Christianity, the most basic groups are those associated with spiritual characteristics responding to the four worldly forces (Apathy, Fear, Obsession, and Desire). Thus, the institutions emerging from these groups must be quite dominant. We have discussed how spiritual characteristics can amplify theological disagreements. Now, we will explore how spiritual characteristics alone can create barriers within the Body of Christ because of dominant institutions. The four types of dominant Christian institutions associated with the directions of worldly forces, as shown in Figure 10.1, are all seeking the commitment of Christians in our modern times.

These four types of institutions and their powers within the Christian realm are defined through the ranges of spiritual characteristics that sustain them. The spiritual characteristics that favor a non-changing Christianity promote institutions with extensive hierarchies to enforce the status quo. The growing force

from institutions based on organization legitimizes traditions, grants titles and status to Christians, and feeds the momentum of apathy.

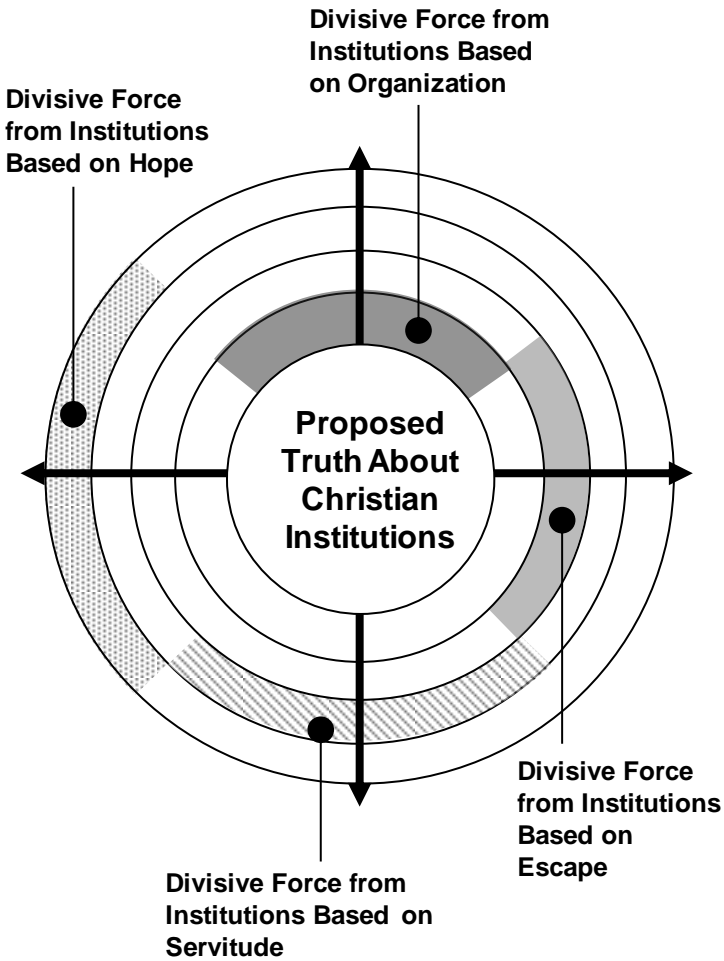


Figure 10.1: Ranges of Spiritual Characteristics Associated Competing Institutions

The spiritual characteristics that favor fundamentalism promote institutions that grant Christians freedom from fears even at the expense of truth. Hundreds of years ago, the force from institutions based on escape could have been what motivated the



selling of indulgences and relics. Today, with the fear of the End Times growing, institutions that promise Christians escape from the tribulation have drawn many supporters.

The spiritual characteristics that favor evangelism promote institutions that teach obedience of Scripture, self-sacrifice, and self-debasement. The resulting force from institutions based on servitude then fuels the feeling of guilt regarding sins and the growth of false ideas regarding God's calling. The simplicity of surrendering oneself to the teachings of Christian leaders is very appealing given the temptations of our society. However, Christians need to make sure that the teaching of servitude captures the fullness of God's will.

Finally, the spiritual characteristics that favor progressivism promote institutions that grant forgiveness to all, even at the expense of truth. Hundreds of years ago, institutions that allowed non-Christians to partake in communion would have been considered heretical. Today, with the dominance of love over understanding, institutions that promise hope for all have formally altered the definition of being a Christian.

Why do institutions form and how are institutions able to endure? Surely scholars have official answers. My feeling is that all institutions start with passionate followers who want to perpetuate their way and guard against the potential disruption of new ideology. If the passion is true, then an institution might serve the will of God. If institutions are based on spiritual characteristics, however, they could solidify divisions to the point where discussion between churches is not even possible. Institutions do this by codifying procedures without understanding, encouraging participation through rewards, and stabilizing its membership by glorifying conformity. Based on the ranges of spiritual characteristics for the four types of institutions and their impact on Christians, we see that some Christian branches and denominations may span multiple types of institutions. For example, some evangelical churches may be governed by the force from institutions based on escape, and other

evangelical churches may be governed by the force of servitude. Some progressive denominations, such as the Episcopal churches, may be governed by the force from institutions based on organization, and other denominations by the force of hope. Catholics tend to be either drawn to the massive church organization or to the many mechanisms for escape.

To find ways to break Christians free from the bondage of institutions, we must study how each force from institutions traps people. How does an institution prevent people from questioning the establishment? How does an institution exploit people's spiritual weaknesses?

### **How Force from Institutions Based on Organization Traps Christians**

The theological disagreements over forms of church governance have already been explored in Chapter 7. Now, we will question how the forces due to the ways churches are organized can compel Christians to avoid interacting with those outside the church, resist changing the structure of the church, and reject deeper insights of God's will. There are several common mechanisms, regardless of the specific characteristics of the organization and its governance approach that sustains this force from institutions. These mechanisms, as shown in Figure 10.2, must be understood in order to overcome the barriers to change.

Mechanism 1 (Placement and Stratification of all Christian Members): The most important way to instill comfort among Christians is to make sure that every Christian has and knows his / her place in the organization. This requires a very clear definition of organizational levels and positions within each level. The delineations should have no overlaps and ambiguities. Further, the structure must be comprehensive so that every member is incorporated and has a vision of himself / herself as a part of a

whole. While a hierarchy is the easiest way to implement this mechanism, other structural configurations can also be used as long as the above conditions are satisfied. It is quite disappointing to see how many Christians will lower their desire to grow spiritually and change once they feel they belong to a static organization.

Mechanism 2 (Defined Relationships between all Christian Members): Another way to preserve static properties in an organization is to define precisely the relationships between Christians placed in various positions. As more Christian interactions are reduced to standard greetings and procedures, the risks of Christians questioning the organization and conflicting with one another to destabilize the organization is lowered. For example, if pastors always provided the same set of advice to different situations, then church members will either follow or ignore the advice without much thought or debate. If deacons have checklists for working together, then they will not have to try to be innovative and creative. If all Christians gathered according to set protocols and prayers, then they will have the comfort of perceived fellowship without having to really know one another.

Mechanism 3 (Ways to Reinforce the Placements and Relationships): Once the organizational structure of positions and relationships is established, rituals, rewards, and events can reinforce the structure. Elaborate rituals that glorify the Christian organization with all its members will reinforce the idea of belonging. Rewarding specific Christians at all levels for their participation in the organization also serves as a reminder to all that preserving the organization is critical. Finally, the organization is simply enforced by activities / events that involve the total community because familiarity continuously reminds people of the group.

Mechanism 4 (Defined Paths for Change if Required): No organization can completely avoid change, because people pass on due to age and some of the young wants to grow into positions of responsibility. To control this unavoidable pattern of change, organizations can establish very set paths for ascension. These paths generally include a course of set education, period of behavior validation, specific promotion steps, and defined new positions. In many organizations, those in higher positions directly mentor others to follow in the path they have taken to ensure that the organization remains stable generation after generation.

Mechanism 5 (Clear Ways for People to Enter the Organization): Some Christian organizations have remained purely exclusive over the years. They tend to compete poorly with other forces from institutions and have shrunken dramatically in modern times. Therefore, even Christian organizations that want to remain static must by necessity have a method for people to enter as new Christian members. The scriptural condition for people to become Christians is to simply repent and accept the baptism of the Holy Spirit. However, the conditions for entry into a structured organization may require substantially more qualifications, indoctrination, placement, and participation responsibilities. Qualifications may include new candidates being of the same ethnicity, gender, or national background as others in the organization. Indoctrination may include a substantial interview process followed by training. Placement may be at the basic lay level. Finally, participation responsibilities generally include attending Sunday service, but may also include Bible studies and special events.

Mechanism 6 (Clear Consequences for Christians Who Threaten the Stability): Unless organizations have perfect members, there will have to be ways to enforce the structure of the organization beyond

Christian teachings. Acceptable behaviors based on Scripture can still destabilize the organization. New understanding of Scripture and new guidance from God through the Holy Spirit are particularly dangerous to Christian organizations that do not want to change. Therefore, Christians exhibiting such behaviors regardless of their role and responsibilities as assigned by God must be prevented from affecting the organization. If the organization is well formed, this prevention can be by simply ignoring Christians of improper behaviors and isolating them from others. If the organization becomes vulnerable to improper behaviors, then punishment of all involved to stop the impact might be required. In modern times, such punishment may be the loss of status, reeducation requirements, periods of probation, and shame in front of others. If such punishments are ineffective, then expulsion from the organization may be used as the ultimate way of keeping the organization static. Expulsion due to nonconformity is very different than excommunication due to unrepentance of egregious sins.

Mechanism 7 (Ability to Reform Damaged Organizations): Finally, when an organization is unsuccessful at maintaining stability and the status quo, there might still be ways to restore the organization back to the previous structure or another stable structure. For example, what if a group of Christians leaves the organization? What if young members are choosing not to be a part of the organization? What if the organization is harmed by financial loss, physical loss (death or illness) of members or leaders, or damages to facilities? In such cases, rapid change and adaptation may be necessary if only to restore static structures. Controlled rapid change is facilitated by identifying lines of quick ascension into leadership positions, plans to use remaining assets, and designs for alternative back up facilities.

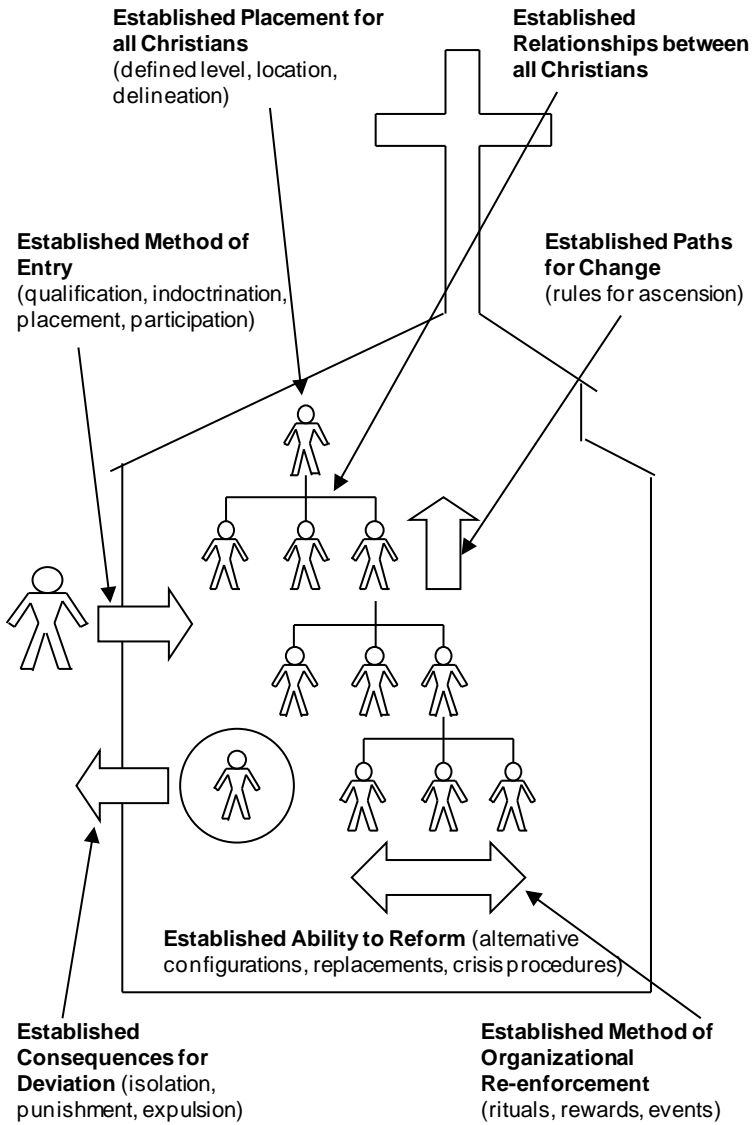


Figure 10.2: Mechanisms for Institutions Based on Organization

The mechanisms for achieving and sustaining static organizations as summarized in Figure 10.2 are quite scary in how effectively they can trap Christians. Even scarier is the idea that such mechanisms can be self-formed in the growth of organizations.

Organizational leaders might not realize that their actions are contributing to the rise and dominance of these mechanisms. Christians in such organizations might not realize that they are under such a systematic structure of control. This study of such mechanisms does not advocate rebellion or anarchy. However, I do hope that Christians who feel comfortable following the routines of worship week after week will start to think about their condition.

### **How the Force from Institutions Based on Escape Traps Christians**

Christians throughout history have been plagued by fears, and the best way to suppress their fears has been the hope of our Lord Jesus' rapid return – the second coming. During the persecution by Rome, when the days of tribulation as described in the Book of Revelation appeared to be at hand, many Christians hoped for the return of Jesus. During the turmoil of the Dark Ages, when select Christians retreated to the monasteries, many again hoped for the return of Jesus. This anticipation would periodically intensify throughout history as the worldly situation became bad. With the uncertainty and threats of our modern times, the intensity of hope appears to be peaking more often. The concept of rapture, particularly rapture prior to the tribulation of the End Times, emerged as a part of institutions based on hoping for escape from this world.

The notion that Jesus would come and lift the Body of Christ into Heaven is not well discussed in historic Christian scholarship. In fact, the concept of rapture did not solidify until the writings of John Nelson Darby in 1827. Rapture then remained an obscure topic stemming from a dispensationalist interpretation of Scripture within end-time (eschatology) scholarship. Many Christian scholars oppose the dispensationalist view where God unfolds His plan according to specific periods of rewarding and punishing man. Further, the Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformed Churches largely do not recognize or teach the concept of rapture because of poor Biblical

traceability. The concept of rapture, nevertheless, resurfaced in 1957 in the writings of John Wolvoord from Dallas Theological Seminary.

The concept of rapture would, in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, expand from a scholarly topic to the institutional force that responds to a world facing the fears of nuclear annihilation, global pandemics, rising terrorism, asteroid collisions, super volcanoes, mega tsunamis, and a host of other potential disasters. In the 1970s, Hal Lindsey presented to the general Christian population the idea that the world is facing Armageddon and that Christians will be rescued by Jesus in rapture prior to the horrors of the tribulation. It was hard being a Christian and not feel that we were nearing the brink of apocalyptic events as the second millennium came to an end. In perfect timing, the fictional writings of Tim LeHaye then brought to life the image of a world in tribulation after Christians had been rescued by Jesus. This exciting set of novels gathered the fears of Christians and resolved it through one solidified vision of joy for all who accept pre-tribulation rapture. The resulting institutional force of escape instantly allowed Christians not to worry about the coming tribulation and ignore their missionary responsibilities during such hard times. The ease in which Christians can accept the idea of simply leaving non-Christians, even loved ones, behind to face unimaginable horrors demonstrates a numbness that affirms the power of institution.

What if the concept of pre-tribulation rapture is wrong? What if the current interpretations of tribulation events are mere fiction? Then the institutional force of escape will have trapped Christians in a state of physical and spiritual unpreparedness when the true End Times approach. If the tribulation occurs in the near future, unprepared Christians will suffer greatly and risk losing their faith. Even if some Christians survive with their faith intact, they may not be able to assume the responsibility our Lord has assigned. As Christians already trapped by the notion of escape will no longer ponder their preparedness for the tribulation, the burden of



reawakening Christians to their responsibilities must fall upon those who still believe in unity.

According to Scripture, our Lord Jesus will return, and Christians who are alive will rise up into the sky to join Him. This can be interpreted as a form of rapture, and this will occur after the martyrs have been raised to life. There is no additional scriptural indication that Jesus would rescue the living Christians prior to coming to begin His millennial reign. Instead, the Scripture suggests that the raising of the martyrs, the rapture of the living, and the triumphant defeat of the beasts is one continuous sequence of events.

**Matthew 24:30-31** "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

**1 Thessalonians 4: 15-17** According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

**Revelation 20:4-5** I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection.

The Scripture suggests that the living Christians at the time of rapture will be instantly transformed along with the risen dead. However, the fact that God will pour out the power of the Holy Spirit onto Christians, young and old, during the last days strongly suggest that He will have missions for us as the world is shaken by events. This idea of mission is contrary to the concept of being suddenly taken away.

**1 Corinthians 15:51-54** Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

**Acts 2:17** In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

The Scripture supports the concept of rapture, but place great doubt on the concept of pre-tribulation rapture. Therefore, the force from institutions based on escape depends heavily on the argument that God would never let the Body of Christ suffer, and tribulation is an expression of God's punishment. This argument falls apart when we can see that punishment follows death. The tribulation is God's plan to shake the world and give people one last chance to accept the Word on their own. Afterward, the Word will be forcibly given to the surviving nations, which will be ruled by those of the first resurrection. If the world is to be given one last chance during the Tribulation, who must boldly present the Word? This is a Christian responsibility. We should want to be a part of the tribulation to save as many as possible. This responsibility, which requires great faith and courage, is betrayed by the institutions based on escape. In fear,

it is too easy to forget about love, thinking that God would anoint another group of Christians to takeover our responsibilities.

### **How Force from Institutions Based on Servitude Traps Christians**

The heart of Christian discipleship is about following the Word and serving God's plan. Disciples over the centuries have sacrificed everything to stay true to their faith and to deliver the good news of Jesus to a rebellious world. If service is a big part of being Christian, how can the commitment to service become a negative force coming from institutions?

Christians, for hundreds of years, have been trapped by the force from institutions based on organization, which only allowed the clergy to pursue the full extent of Christian service. Christians began to free themselves from constraining organizations through knowledge distributed by the printed Bible, freedom gained by the Protestant Reformation, and energy fueled by the theology of new Christian scholars, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. For centuries there after, new insights emerged and new dominations formed within the Protestant realm. Among the new insights is the idea of perpetual commitment to mission and spiritual renewal.

Anything that is perpetuated, even the call for evangelism, raises the threat of institutionalization. Instead of individual Christians discovering their relationship with the Lord on their own, those called to evangelize will often choose the easier path of being told what evangelism requires. They will remain on this path when the message is unclear and their understanding of evangelism is incomplete. When the lives of evangelical Christians have been reduced down to simple rules of service, Christians are again trapped by institutions. Many authors have tried to solidify the strength of these institutions. Some of them may want to compete with other Christian institutions. Others may want institutions based on servitude to be a barrier against external temptations that are pulling

Christians away from evangelism. The most successful of these authors in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century is probably Rick Warren, the senior pastor of California's Saddleback Church.

How does one institutionalize evangelism by eliminating all the complexity? There are some common mechanisms that we can identify from current literature. Even the authors themselves might not fully understand that their arguments fit into a systematic approach for creating institution. The power of these mechanisms is that they are grounded in scriptural teachings. However, the teachings are taken out of context so that the critical complexity of living a Christian life is often hidden or lost. The nature of the mechanisms and their inconsistencies with Christian understanding are discussed below.

Mechanism 1 (Focus on the Supremacy of God): We should focus on God, but the focus of God is on us - every hair on our head. Therefore, we must always remember how special we are in God's plan. This awareness requires us to continuously struggle with the complexity of spiritual relationship. Christians who do not wish to deal with such complexity can easily be trapped by this mechanism, which suppresses the imperative to understand our personal mission for God so that people can have a simpler path with simpler rules.

Mechanism 2 (Do not Question the Bible and the Ways of God): The ways of God are so complex that they are beyond mortal man's ability to grasp. However, God has given us the Bible to help us understand more of His will. Further, God has given us the Holy Spirit so that we can understand how to serve His will. Christians as God's children merely have to ask for answers and God will give. What father does not want his children to understand his ways? We ask ministers, other Christians, and even some non-Christians of proclaimed wisdom, but we seldom pose tough questions directly and respectfully to God. Acknowledging our ignorance of God's

ways is simple, but the simplicity traps us. We Christians should have faith and ask God in faith about things we do not understand in the Bible and in the world. God will surely answer our questions. Understanding, however, carries a great burden.

Mechanism 3 (Accept Temptation as Human Weakness and Resist It): People are spiritually weak and vulnerable to sins, which must be resisted as a part of discipleship. However, the goal of Christians should be to rise above the temptations so that we can see all things in this world as fitting into God's plan. We must live the scriptural teaching of seeing things as pure, because our inner selves are pure. It is far better to not be tempted than to have to overcome temptation. Accepting the sinful state of our spirits is simple, but the perpetual struggle with temptation can be a trap. To not face temptation requires a deep understanding of God's ways in this world. By understanding how our spirits become vulnerable, we can change the quality of our spirits to eliminate the vulnerability instead of merely resisting sinful actions and thoughts.

Mechanism 4 (Do not Try to Assume Great Roles but be Humble): Christians must resist arrogance and selfishness. However, true humility is to follow God's will, not our own. If God's will is for us to do great things in His service, then not responding to God's calling cannot be considered humility. I fear that the problem within Christian communities is that many Christians are not accepting God's calling to do great things. Some Christians pursue high positions for self-glory, while other Christians responding to God's calling are accused of being arrogant. It is easier for Christians to remain at a stagnant level and justify it as humility. However, the demand for humility can trap Christians in spiritual immaturity.

Mechanism 5 (Evangelism Is a Christian Duty): We have already explored the importance of the Great Commission as a direct

command by Jesus. However, the desire to evangelize must come from the heart, for we must love the people who we are trying to evangelize. Evangelism as a duty is easy because we can argue for spiritual rebirth and walk away. Alternatively, evangelism as an expression of love is complex because we have to figure out how to approach people based on their characteristics. Some will respond better to gentle persuasion while others will respond to the fear of our Lord. Some are motivated by our Christian behaviors while others by our understanding. All this complexity would be ignored if evangelizing is viewed as duty.

Mechanism 6 (Christians Are Saved So Just Try): We have already explored the meaning of salvation where our Lord will not let go of Christians as long as we remain in faith. This assurance of salvation has caused many Christians to take on a relaxed / lukewarm view of discipleship. Approaching discipleship with the attitude of simply trying hard is an easy path that is better than not trying at all. However, the path is incredibly dangerous for those who do not realize that they: 1) have yet to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, 2) are expected by our Lord to do more, or 3) will jeopardize their faith in the Lord. The journey to true repentance and receiving the Holy Spirit is complex – requiring deep scriptural studies, prayer, and self-examination. Some Christians are given great resources, such as wealth, power, and understanding, as well as the expectation to do more. Then, there are Christians who will gradually try less and less until they stop trying altogether – sitting at home with the false assurance of salvation.

The Jews thought that they were God’s servants for thousands of years, but they failed in their faith two thousand years ago. The institutions based on servitude endure to trap people again and again in misunderstanding.

## **How Force from Institutions Based on Hope Traps Christians**

Hope is so critical to Christian pursuits that it is only behind love and faith in priority. With all the sin and injustice in this world, hope helps Christians see through the sadness to God's plan. Our hope, however, must be led by the Holy Spirit and guided by the Holy Bible. Otherwise, it can easily fall prey to false prophets and foolish teachers seeking to create institutions that are against the will of God. The following are just some ways in which hope within the Christian community can form for good causes and then evolve into institutions that trap Christians.

Hope for all Sinners: Within the Christian community, the love for our neighbors can become so great that we start to hope that God can accept everyone into salvation and ignore evil all together. Institutions based on this hope have formed, to teach a Christianity that embraces all people and avoids specific discussions of sins. Unfortunately, such institutions can become overwhelmed by sin so that even the love between people cannot help the community get closer to God. To overcome this institution based on hope, Christians must recognize that there is a difference between hope for all and salvation of all. There is also a difference between not judging sins and tolerating sins. Also, there is a difference between forgiveness of the repentant and being blind to the unrepentant.

Hope for Relief from Suffering: Christians might be called to suffer in order to strengthen their spirits, reveal the power of God, or inspire others to endure. But, there are false prophets who would promise an easy solution to suffering through misdirected hope. Some might offer the gift of healing when they have not been given such Holy Spirit power. Yet, the sick and lame will still flock to them. Some might use the overwhelming emotions of group worship to numb people from their ailments. And, some might use their charisma and eloquence to make individuals believe in false futures

where suffering will disappear. These institutions based on hope not only trap Christians in lies, but also ward people away from Christians with true gifts for easing suffering. Some can offer genuine spiritual and physical support, and others can help people understand the reasons for their suffering. As the false prophets teach a misguided Christianity, those trapped by their lies might fall into spiritual jeopardy in addition to their suffering.

Hope for Prosperity: When people are in poverty, they dream of prosperity. However, even when people have plenty, they still desire more. Christians yielding to their nature of desperation or greed can easily be convinced that God will grant prosperity on their terms instead of according to God's plan. They think about luxuries as long as they can meet Christian requirements, and there are leaders who would quickly exploit this desire. Such leaders might enforce institutions where giving to the church will garner God's financial blessings. They will say that God wants us to celebrate wealth as in the days of King Solomon. Mighty modern temples of worship might be built to solidify the view that God indeed grants prosperity to His people. However, what institutions built on the hope for prosperity will not teach is that Christian prosperity is a great burden, because wealth must be used to serve the will of God. We must always ask God how much we should spend to feed the hungry, sponsor missionaries, protect the weak, and build churches in distant lands. God may want some of us to give far more than the tithe, and God may expect nothing from the poor. However, Christians must always want to give and care about how the giving will impact the lives of others. God may indeed want some beautiful churches to be built. However, Christians need to make sure that we are not building to serve our own vanity and need for identity.

Hope for the End of Sorrow: Christians facing grief due to the loss of a loved one, failure of a relationship, or ending of a dream are



uniquely vulnerable to institutions that offer hope for ending of their sorrows. Instead of letting people grieve and offering comfort to the grieving, the institutional solution is often to teach people to accept all things as the will of God and be numb to the world. When people die, Christians in such institutions rejoice for their ascension and ignore the spiritual bonds that have been broken with the people left behind. Unfortunately, spiritual numbness is not a solution to the gradual healing of a spirit after loss. When relationships fail, Christians often accept without self-examination of how spiritual bonds have been betrayed by human weaknesses. Ignoring spiritual issues will only allow those issues to be carried into the next relationship. When dreams fall a part, Christians often stop dreaming to find contentment in living a mundane Christian life. Yet, having the wrong dreams initially does not mean that there are no right dreams – Christian dreams of working for the glory of God. Because of our love for people, we Christians often want to find the easiest way to end their sorrows. However, we must make sure that the easiest way is not the wrong way – the institutional way.

Hope for Friendship: Our modern society is so large and complex that even Christians in the church can become lonely. We Christians can attend service together, pray in groups, and go to people's homes for Bible study. However, we can still be strangers to one another, because the differences in our spiritual characteristics hinder deep bonds of friendship. Christian loneliness can lead to institutions that offer a false sense of friendship for conformance. For the price of losing or suppressing our spiritual identity, lonely Christians can suddenly feel as if they belong. They have social events, joyous celebrations, and mutual support in times of needs. However, they cannot question institutional teachings and institutional processes. Often times, conformance is enforced by peer pressure, but the greatest force for conformance is the fear of being exiled from their circle of friends. Christians trapped in such

institutions need to question whether true friends would reject them just for trying to better understand the will of God.

Hope for the Coming of Jesus: Finally, even our hope for Jesus' return can be captured by institutions. As Christians rally around this common hope in troubled times, institutions could form with emphasis on either separating Christians from world events, obsessive preparation for the End Times, or careless abandonment of responsibilities. These institutions are slightly different than institutions focused on rapture. Shaped by falsely placed hope, some Christians are taught to let the world spiral into the grips of evil. Others are taught to focus on the End Times at the expense of living a Christian life with the responsibility to love. Yet, others are allowed to live selfishly for the moment with the assurance of Jesus' imminent return. In all these institutions, the behaviors of our fellow Christians overwhelmed by hope can blind us to our Christian lives today. Even if Jesus were to return tomorrow, thousands of people who will die today still need to receive the good news, millions of people who are suffering today still need help, and billions of Christians who are in disagreement today still need to find a way to face our Lord united.

Now that we understand the power of the four types of institutional forces dividing Christianity, overcoming them requires some degree of planning. Institutions cannot be simply collapsed, because other institutions tend fill the void. Even if all the institutions collapse together, Christians will more likely be pulled into chaos instead of unity. Now that we have explored nine divisive topics, we must ask ourselves whether an institution based on truth can be established in anticipation for the institution of Heaven. Such an institution will not be influenced by the worldly forces that have affected other Christian institutions. Further, such an institution must advance rather than hinder the maturation of the Body of Christ. The

mechanism for this institution to replace other institutions is its ability to unite Christians. In unity, we have the answers to our fears and hopes.



# Chapter 11: The Power Given by God to Christians

The tenth and last divisive topic we will explore in this volume stretches from the beginning of Christian history to impact how Christians will respond to future events. Since Jesus' return to Heaven, there are two ways in which God's power has been given to Christians. The first way is a direct projection of Jesus' presence from Heaven into this world, resulting in the projection of God's power into this world. The Apostle Paul and his traveling companions experienced this on the road to Damascus when they heard the physical voice of Jesus calling Paul to be a Christian. When objects touched the Apostle Paul, he became a direct conduit of God's power so that the objects can cause people to be healed and evil spirits to be driven out.

The witnessing of God's power in the physical world is very different than the second way of receiving God's power within us through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can grant powers to: 1) do the right thing (wisdom), 2) understand the will of God, 3) spiritually hang-on to God (faith), 4) heal the sick and lame, 5) prophesize, 6) distinguish between (seeing the quality of) spirits, 7) speak in tongues, and 8) interpret tongues. Further, the Scripture allows for other miraculous powers that have been seen in the past, as well as powers that we cannot even imagine. Such powers, however, are given by the Holy Spirit selectively as needed for building the Body of Christ.

**Acts 9:3-8** As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what

you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing.

**Acts 19:11-12** God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

**1 Corinthians 12:7-11** Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

The debate over the manifestation of God's power as mentioned above has centered on the frequency and the ways in which power is given. Evidence of such powers is generally based on personal accounts that can be challenged. Therefore, as with other debates, the influence of spiritual characteristics took hold. On the spiritual reference frame, the two divisions combine to create four quadrants of Christian belief, as shown in Figure 11.1.

The debate over the frequency of God's power being given to Christians today is driven by competing progressive and fundamentalist views. The progressives generally view the world as having changed from the Biblical days when miracles shaped the course of humanity. The fundamentalists generally view today's church as still being able to return to the purity of the first century Christian church where miracles were plentiful. The debate over the dominant way God's power is granted to Christians today is driven by competing traditionalist and evangelical views. The traditionalists generally view sinful man as being more of a passive recipient of

God's miracles which grow faith. The evangelicals generally view Christians as God's instruments, which include being vessels for miracles.

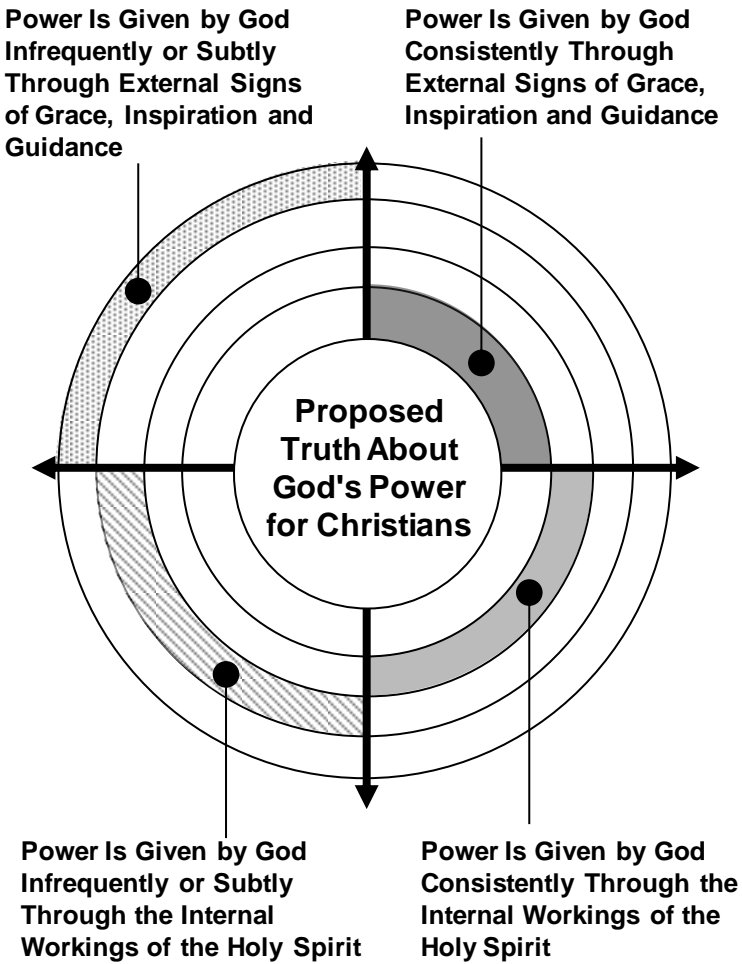


Figure 11.1: Spiritual Characteristics Causing Varying Perspectives of God's Power

These two debates on frequency and method have integrated in the course of formation to create the proposed spiritual and theological positions. These positions, with their associated ranges

of spiritual characteristics, are not directly aligned with the forces dividing Christians. This is perhaps one reason why all sides have merely argued about matters of degree regarding the ways and frequency in which power is given instead of who is right or wrong. This may also be why there has not been a real solidification of groups.

Clearly, many Catholics and Orthodox Christians believe in a Christian realm rich in external miracles from God. Many conservative Protestants believe in the richness of the power of the Holy Spirit. Many Anglicans see God's intervention in key life moments as subtle miracles. And, many progressive Christians believe that our activities each day are empowered by the Holy Spirit. Just because Christians are no longer fiercely discussing their different views does not mean that there exist Christian agreement. The vulnerability of Christians to abusing God's powers led Paul to remind us that God's powers must be used to manifest our love for God and our neighbors. We should not be jealous of one another's powers, nor should we deny them. Since Paul is no longer here as the arbiter of Christian division, we must come to a common understanding of how God's power is given to Christians even though the power may be given differently to Christians of different spiritual characteristics. We cannot assume that any one quadrant or a group of Christians is superior. Indeed, there may be some level of false observations on all sides. Some observed miracles may be explainable as natural phenomena, and some perceived effects of the Holy Spirit may be wishful imagination.

**1 Corinthians 13:1-8** If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is



not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

**Romans 12:6-8** We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

**Ephesians 4:11-12** It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

An objective exploration of each quadrant's observations and perceptions is appropriate in achieving a common understanding:

### **Observations of Power Given by God Consistently through External Signs**

Based on the understanding that the power of Jesus can be projected into the world, one of the most consistently reoccurring miracles witnessed by Christians is that of the Eucharist literally transubstantiating into the body and blood of Christ. The first well documented observation of bread taking on flesh like qualities and wine taking on blood like qualities occurred in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Then, various levels of observable transubstantiation would periodically occur among those who believe in this miracle to this day. Some Eucharist miracles might be trickery by parish leaders. On the other hand, Jesus could be responding to the less mature spiritual needs of Christians who cannot see the body of Christ as the

Word and the blood of Christ as the power of the Spirit. Maybe Christians of great faith who want communion to be a genuine physical ritual will get their wish. Yet, the genuine consumption of flesh and blood would be cannibalistic. No transubstantiation has been scientifically measured during the act of occurrence. But, some Eucharist contents have been tested as actual human flesh and blood after proclaimed transubstantiation have occurred.

The many visions of Jesus and manifestations of Jesus' wounds on people of great faith are equally hard to measure miracles. The formation of stigmata wounds was first documented on Saint Francis of Assisi in 1224. The vision of Jesus on objects dates back to His burial shroud. Yet, neither Jesus images nor stigmata are well defended by Scripture, and their frequent occurrence during times of trouble leads one to question how many of the observations were really true.

Based on the understanding that Christians can be conduits for God's power, the observation that relics (items belonging to a saint like Paul) can increase the effectiveness of prayer has continued throughout Christian history. How many of these observations were due to the power in the relics verses the increased faith of people holding the relic is unclear. As with other observations, there will be some number of events attributable to hope and imagination. A more measurable type of miracle involving saints is the apparent transformation of their bodies into a non-decomposing state after death. These "incorruptible" bodies are like mummies, but there were no recorded attempts at mummification. Still, there are documented cases of natural mummification involving the bodies of non-Christians due to unique environmental conditions that would lead us to further question the miracle of incorruptibility.

Finally, more controversial than the power of relics are professed visions of Mary (Marian Apparitions) starting from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The closest scriptural support for this miracle is the

witnessing of the heavenly presence of Moses and Elijah with the transfigured Jesus. However, apart of from the power of Jesus calling spirits back, there has been no other reference of human spirits returning from Heaven or projecting their presence from Heaven. Archangels are granted the ability to execute God's will on earth. However, we have to question whether saints are used by God in such a manner as well. Also, is Mary, whose spirit touched the spirit of Jesus, more powerful than other saints.

**Matthew 17:1-3** After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

The most famous Marion Apparition was perhaps that of Our Lady Fatima in 1917. At the event, three prophecies were passed to young Portuguese children. Then, a miracle where the sun moved and changed colors appeared before thousands of local witnesses. Many of the witnesses within a 40 kilometer radius saw different patterns of sun movement, even though there were not scientific measurements of solar changes on that day. Nevertheless, this event during the horrible period of World War I has been accepted by the Catholic Church as an official miracle. Other Marion Apparitions include weeping statues of "Blessed Virgin Mary" which may be watery or bloodlike in appearance.

The sheer number of Christians over the centuries who witnessed external miracles causes us to wonder whether some portion of these events are truly miracles. If the Catholic and Orthodox Churches are correct in their declarations, then God would be essentially responding to Christians with spiritual states that could not fully receive the power of the Holy Spirit. When Christians believe that they might be going to purgatory, witnessing external miracles could help them live better lives that enable

salvation after judgment at the second resurrection. There is very limited scriptural validation for these miracles. Further, we must be very careful in attributing miracles to God and Jesus, because there are also evil forces at work trying to trick us. All miracles must be tested to see whether they benefit Christians who believe in them. Does a miracle protect Christians from physical and spiritual harm? Does it allow Christians to gain a deeper understanding of God's will?

### **Observations of Power Given by God Infrequently or Subtly through External Signs**

Christians in the opposing quadrant of spiritual characteristics tend to consider the observed miracles of the Dark Ages as more often the superstitious imagination of fearful Christians. They believe that modern Christians should not want to see supernatural events even if they do occur. First, such miracles are unnecessary in a Christian community that continuously studies the Bible and grows closer to God. Second, the lack of scientific evidence and reliable witnesses to such miracles makes their acceptance by free thinking Christians difficult. Third, many Protestants consider the activities of the Catholic and Orthodox Christians in response to observed miracles as bordering on idolatry.

The test for idolatry, as based on the third commandment, is whether Christians bow down to worship images of anything in Heaven, on earth, or beneath the waters. If a transubstantiated Eucharist has caused Christians to worship that Eucharist, then that is idolatry. Such a miracle is either imagined or God's power is being misunderstood. If a relic causes Christians to pray to the relic, then that is idolatry and the relic is being misused. And, if the visions and statues of Mary are causing Christians to bow down, then that is idolatry. A true apparition of Mary should tell people to arise and worship only the one true God.

**Exodus 20:4** "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand {generations} of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Christians in this second quadrant might have the right perspective on what is true or they might lack faith to see supernatural events. Either way, skeptical Christians still have a need to see the power of God in subtle ways. For them, God's power can be seen when people, especially Christians and children, are saved from improbable situations. God's hands can also be seen when disasters change course, when people's lives are diverted towards salvation, and when churches survive against great persecution. Can a child who is the only survivor in a plane crash be a miracle? Can a plague that suddenly ceases be a miracle? We know that a miracle is witnessed whenever a person of great sin repents and accepts Jesus. We know that every church that grows in non-Christian lands is a miracle.

Since the whole world changes according to God's plan, every event in our lives is a part of the miracle of God's creation. Beyond this fact, Christians must be very careful in interpreting an event as a special act of God centered on them. An improbable event is just an improbable event unless it specifically benefits the Body of Christ. When the saving of a life or the surprise halt to a disaster causes people to regain their faith, embrace the Word, and reject sin, then a miracle has occurred. Otherwise, we are merely witnessing the complexity of God's plan without understanding all the ramifications.

## **Observations of Power Given by God Consistently Through the Holy Spirit**

Our analysis now shifts from the spiritual characteristics that seek external miracles to the spiritual characteristics that pursue the power of God through the Holy Spirit. People in the quadrant that believes in an outpouring of God's power often see the resulting human powers as a demonstration of Christian faith. This is especially true among the charismatic churches. The human powers granted by the Holy Spirit are clearly affirmed by Scripture. Therefore, charismatic Christians believe that such powers should still be abundantly given to Christians with the faith and willingness to pursue them.

While Paul did not explain the gifts of the Holy Spirit he identified, we can provide some descriptions based on the Christian experience. These descriptions, as shown below, reveal that Paul listed the powers in order of priority in building the Body of Christ. In this order, the more visible and noticeable gifts are actually of lower priority because they are used only to help individual less mature Christians. For example, tongues provide a quick assurance of faith, but insight into the deeper meaning of the Word is a far more important gift. The interpretation of tongues is even less important because it is primarily focused just on the speaker of tongues. Being able to raise the dead or walk on water may be "miraculous" powers, which requires tremendous faith to receive. Yet surprisingly, receiving the wisdom to do God's will and be a key part of His complex unfolding plan is even more important.

Priority 1 (Message of wisdom): The power to sense the complexity of God's order and to make decisions in accordance with God's will. Includes the ability to hear the voice of God.

Priority 2 (Message of knowledge): The power to understand God's teachings and to wrestle with worldly knowledge to serve God's

will. Includes the ability to interpret the meaning of Biblical prophecies and Jesus' parables.

Priority 3 (Faith): The power to resist the temptations of this world caused by evil. The Holy Spirit enables the faithful to hang on tight to God. Includes the ability to talk to God.

Priority 4 (Healing): The power to restore the body of others so that their faith and the faith of witnesses are strengthened. Includes the ability to drive out demons.

Priority 5 (Miraculous powers): The power to perform acts, such as raising the dead, blocking spirits from leaving a body immediately after death, and walking on water, that will help the spiritually weak to believe. But, it is still better for Christians to believe without seeing.

**Acts 9:40-41** Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive.

**Acts 20: 9-10** Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!"

**Matthew 14:28-31** "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

Priority 6 (Prophecy): The power to discover additional understanding of future events to complement Biblical prophecies. Includes personal prophecies that respond to the sometimes immature desires of individual Christians to see their future.

Priority 7 (Distinguishing between spirits): The power to see the spiritual characteristics and qualities of others. Includes the ability to help others in spiritual growth.

Priority 8 (Speaking in tongues): A power that strengthens the faith of the recipient. Should not be used to divide Christians based on who has received the power Holy Spirit and who has not.

Priority 9 (Interpretation of tongues): The power to help those who speak in tongues to stay true to the power of the Holy Spirit, as tongues can be influenced by dark forces. Also increases the faith of the speakers through understanding.

The concern associated with Christian churches focused on receiving the powers of the Holy Spirit is that people pursue lower priority powers for personal gratification, not for the growth of Christianity. People all want to speak in tongues because it is easy to acquire and to display. In some churches, the ability to speak in tongues has become a discriminator between Christians, despite Paul's warning that Christians should not be arrogant nor be jealous of one another's gifts. Unfortunately, very few want to understand the deeper meaning of Scripture and be burdened with that understanding. Many Christians have worried about being called to give all their wealth to the poor or become a missionary in Africa. Thus, many are content with the powers they do have and lose sight of the fact that God wants to give more to those with the ability to



receive more. Equally, God takes away from those who do not use their gifts with love for growing the Body of Christ.

**Matthew 13:10-13** The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables:

Among those Christians with the commitment to pursue greater gifts from the Holy Spirit, many do not understand the burden of what they seek. For most powers, the only way to reduce the burden is to be able to understand the will of God. If a Christian is given the power to heal, but not the understanding of who to heal, then that Christian must heal as many as he or she can for that is the proper expression of love. Therefore, it is best to ask for faith, knowledge, and wisdom above all things and let God decide what other powers He will grant us to help us fulfill our missions for the Body of Christ.

The manifestation of powers from the Holy Spirit has occurred among select Christians throughout history. Some prophets have been well tested and accepted by the Catholic Church, and there have been documented cases of successful exorcisms where the faith of priests was able to free people from demons. The big question with Christians who see an outpouring from the Holy Spirit is "why now?" Could many Christians be feeling the yearning of their own spirits for God rather than actual powers from the Holy Spirit? Yearning can cause people to see things. The pressure from a community of believers can suppress much doubt. Alternatively, could Christian faith have really grown over the decades due to advanced scholarship and hard testing by a world filled with temptations? Many charismatic Christians' belief that the world is

rapidly approaching the End Times may be a factor that is helping their spirits to receive powers not available to other Christians.

### **Observations of Power Given by God Infrequently or Subtly Through the Holy Spirit**

For Christians in the opposing quadrant of spiritual characteristics who pursue personal relationships with Christ without an outpouring of Holy Spirit powers, the claims of charismatic Christians must be suspicious. These Christians yearn for the powers of the Holy Spirit, but to them the Holy Spirit must work very differently than during the first century of Christianity. Studying Scripture with such views leads one to see that faith, knowledge, and wisdom are indeed what is important in protecting and growing the church in the complexity of modern times. There is no need for showy powers if we have the three most important powers. Faith can be seen as Christians struggle everyday in a complex world. Knowledge can be seen with the outpouring of Christian scholarship. Wisdom can be seen as Christians take on expanded leadership roles.

The concern with this quadrant of thought is whether Christian intellectual pursuits are blocking them from spiritually opening up to receive more power from the Holy Spirit. The ability of such Christians to surrender their spirits into the cradle of the Holy Spirit may become diminished as they research the Bible by academic meanings, take personal responsibility for saving the suffering, and become increasingly involved with the organization of the church. The fear of surrendering to the Holy Spirit is valid because there are dangers involved. If a Christian's sinful spirit is controlled by his or her rational will to resist evil, then lowering the mental defenses in pursuit of the Holy Spirit may allow darker forces to intervene. This is why Christians who try to set their spirits free to speak in tongues should have their tongues interpreted to make sure that the words are truly from the Holy Spirit. Fortune

tellers and shamans tap into evil spirits all the time, and Christians must be cautious to not tap into an evil spirit by accident.

As the spirits of Christians become more complex through knowledge and dealing with worldly matters, the purity required to surrender to the Holy Spirit becomes harder to retain. Maybe Christians with simpler views can receive more from Holy Spirit, or maybe such Christians have already lost their perspective on what is important. Either way, the progressive Christians must follow their own path. If the progressives want to love the people of this world, then they must love ever deeply and unselfishly so that the love pushes away spiritual sin. Paul taught us that all the powers granted by the Holy Spirit must be used with love for love endures. In the case of progressive Christians, love will have to be the path to greater powers from the Holy Spirit.

**1 Corinthians 13:4 – 8** Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

Without adequate love, Christians might think that their struggles are reflections of faith when they are actually consequences of spiritual arrogance. Christians might also think that new scholarship is advancing scriptural knowledge when it is distorting the truth. And, confusion in leadership might be mistaken for wisdom just because the confusion is presented in a confident manner. So, as some Christians need love to receive powers from the Holy Spirit, the first thing they should do with power is to understand how to love through the spirit and how to express love. This cycle of spiritual growth is how Christians can increase their capacity for the Holy Spirit. Until the capacity has been greatly increased, the Holy Spirit will not work as powerfully as it did during the first century.

### **Integrating the Four Positions on Receiving Power from God**

To fully understand how power is given by God to Christians, we need to explore how God's power was first revealed to the Jews prior to Christianity. Biblical history shows that God revealed His power intensely for short periods and allowed humanity to progress on its own for long periods in between. This cycle matches Jesus' parable about a man who visits his fig tree every year for three years to see if it bore fruit. If humanity is the fig tree, God unleashed the great flood on His first visit to prune the branches of humanity. Then, He guided Noah's descendants until they were allowed to grow by themselves in Egypt. On the second visit, God intervened with many powerful events to free and guide the primary branch of humanity – the chosen people of Israel. His guidance to the Israelites came through the Ark of the Covenant and the prophets until the Israelites were allowed to grow by themselves in their own land. On the third visit, God could have cut down the tree, a metaphor for destroying the world. However, He instead gave the world His Son who brought the fertilizer of truth and love as embodied in the Holy Spirit.

**Luke 13:6-9** Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' " 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' "

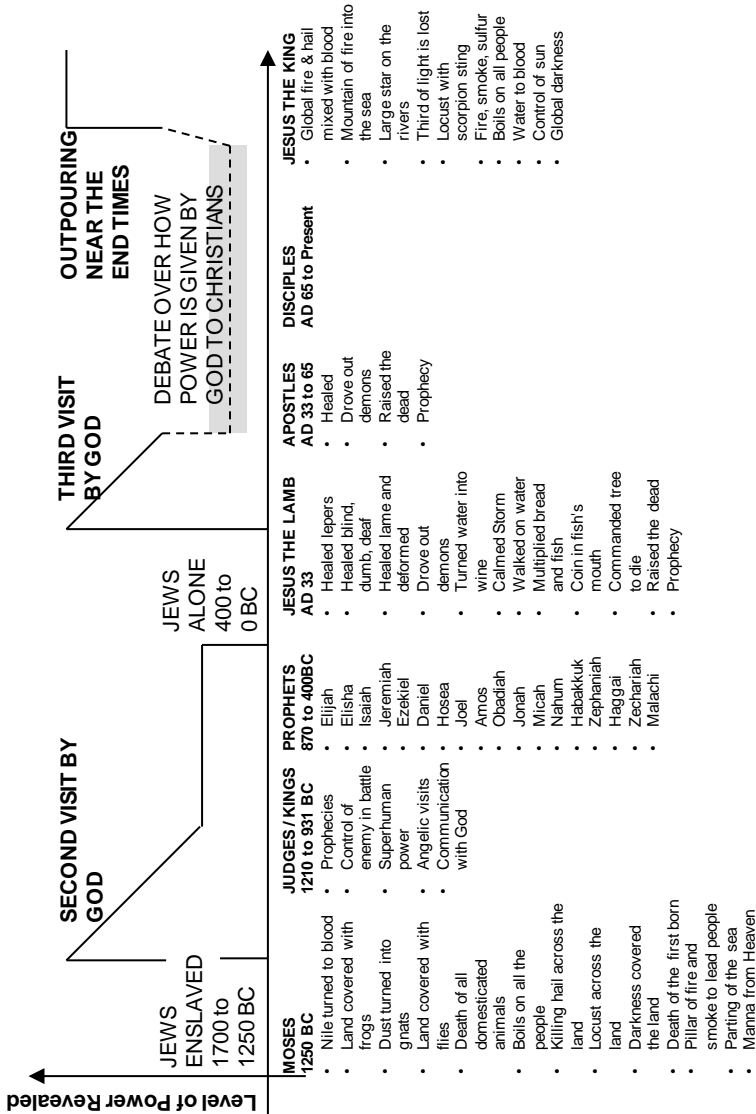


Figure 11.2: Power from God Revealed Across History

There is no doubt that the fertilizer was given in force with the coming of Jesus and through the works of the apostles. The debate over how God's power is given to Christians therefore centers on how the fertilizer has been given since the departure of the

apostles. Based on the pattern of the parable as shown in Figure 11.2, God has stepped back during this period to let the fertilizer take effect. Therefore, while God still controls the events of this world, we should not expect to see pillars of fire and other miracles directly from God until the End Times. In contrast, Jesus promised Christians that when two pray together, He will be there and God will respond. Further, the power of God will be poured out more abundantly onto Christians as we approach the End Times.

**Matthew 18:19-20** "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

**Acts 2:17** In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

In trying to integrate the Christian positions on power given by God based on historical understanding, we have to first recognize that there was a decline in the manifestation of power after the departure of the apostles. Though external miracles and the gifts of healing, prophecies, and tongues may have continued after the departure of the apostles, who since have had the faith of Peter and understanding of Paul? Who since the apostles were giving the wisdom to know exactly what to do to fulfill God's plan? If Christians truly comprehend the power given to the apostles, then we will see that what we are disagreeing about is quite minor compared to what has been missing for a very long time.

There are two Bible verses from Paul that address the debate about the consistent or infrequent giving of God's power to Christians. In the first verse, Paul warns us that some powers in this world can come from false apostles masquerading as Christians. Therefore, all observed Christian miracles and displays of Holy

Spirit gifts must be scrutinized for trickery. Even for miracles and spiritual gifts that have been authenticated as being inexplicable through natural occurrences, the sources of power must be carefully examined for the influence of evil. If the effects of miracles oppose God's plan and if the people receiving Holy Spirit gifts are not preaching the gospel, then the power cannot be coming from God. Christians with a high degree of skepticism, who see miracles as infrequent and the Holy Spirit as working in subtle ways, can help other Christians who are eager to receive miracles and spiritual gifts examine what they have witnessed. This would require Christians of different spiritual characteristics to appreciate one another and be willing to work together to discover the truth. This collaboration requires Christians eager to believe to accept doubtful Christians who always want to question. Christians who want to question must in turn respect those eager to believe. There are many dubious powers at work in today's world.

**2 Corinthians 11:13-15** For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

The second verse from Paul, in contrast, teaches us that we must still be willing to accept miracles and spiritual gifts that we cannot explain. Paul speaks about a man who was caught up to Heaven, but he declared that he did not know whether the man was taken just in spirit or body as well as spirit. Despite Paul's lack of understanding of what exactly happened, he was not jealous of the man caught up to Heaven and was comfortable boasting about such an event. Some Christians today may not understand the miracles and spiritual gifts experienced by others. While a degree of questioning and investigation is called for, the potential for unexplainable events to be genuine manifestations of God's power

must be recognized. If one has never experienced a vision of prophesy or the ability to speak in tongues, one can still boast of others who have. The ability to discern false prophets does not mean that we have to continuously live in doubt. There are many gifts given by God today, even though none may be as powerful as those given to the apostles.

**2 Corinthians 12: 2 -5** I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.

Now, let us try to resolve the other debate about the balance between external miracles and spiritual gifts. I feel that God’s power given externally through miracles and internally through the Holy Spirit are both aligned with the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is the fertilizer given to humanity over the past two thousand years. Therefore, we have to question whether all witnessing of powers given by God, even external miracles, have been through the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit can affect the faithful in incomprehensible ways. The Holy Spirit can link a Christian so closely to the suffering of Christ that Christ’s wounds start to appear in stigmata. The Holy Spirit can lead Christians to see waking visions like the prophets of the past. Because such visions would be by spiritual sight verses physical sight, it may contain many puzzling images. In the case of the Fatima miracle, visions among the faithful would explain why people saw the sun change in different ways and why the changes were not measured by astronomers. If so, then the vision of Mary would not be an apparition. The spirits of the children might have been pulled by the Holy Spirit to touch the spirit



of Mary in Heaven. The idea that the spirit of Mary has not returned to Earth to serve God would greatly help to resolve the divide between Catholics and Protestants.

Holy Spirit given visions may also explain some observations involving the changing Eucharists, crying statues, and sightings of Jesus. As Jesus will not return until the apocalypse, Jesus' presence when two or more Christians pray could be explained as a presence within Christians through the Holy Spirit. This presence is different than the power of Jesus stretching down from Heaven to people such as Saul. In unique situations where intense faith is displayed, it is even possible that Holy Spirit given powers would allow for miraculous things, such as the actual changing of the Eucharist into flesh and blood. In such an explanation, transubstantiations would be a result of Christians unknowingly wielding tremendous spiritual power, not God's validation that Christians are actually consuming physical flesh and real blood during communion. As Jesus turned water into wine, groups of Christians can turn water into blood. However, this blood would not necessarily be the blood of Jesus nor represent the true meaning of the Eucharist. If all this is true, then there is no debate over how power is given because external miracles in our times would simply be powers from the Holy Spirit that Christians do not fully understand. And, external miracles directly from God will return in terrifying ways as the End Times approaches.

Even when Christians actively pursue God's miracles, they may not always realize how much the delivery of those miracles depends on their spiritual capability to embrace the Holy Spirit. When Catholic priests are performing exorcisms by invoking the authority of Jesus, the power to drive out demons may come from the Holy Spirit through them and into the body of the possessed. Therefore, priests lacking faith might have difficulties driving out demons even though the invocation is the same and the authority of Jesus is undiminished. When Catholic and Orthodox Christians use

relics to pray for miracles, the relics may simply be spiritual crutches that increase their faith and ability to receive the Holy Spirit. So, a relic without the prayers of Christians might have no inherent powers. In turn, Christians who are mature in faith should not need relics. While the Scriptures do suggest that Paul was a conduit for God's power which transformed items that touched him, there is no scriptural reference that supports the idea that items from departed saints would have inherent powers beyond the faith of Christians who use them.

Alternatively, Christians who are actively seeking gifts from the Holy Spirit may not understand how much the appropriate use of such gifts depends on their spiritual ability to understand the will of God. So many Christians pursue the gift of tongues without realizing the spiritual vulnerability associated with tongues when the practicing Christians have impure thoughts. Some Christians pursue physical invulnerability to snake venom without realizing that the required faith is probably similar to that causing stigmata wounds. Even when some Christians try to heal others, do they always understand the reasons for illness or disability? Some physical problems are due to hard testing by God. Other sufferings are meant to encourage people and reveal the power of God. Finally, some disabilities are caused by demonic possession. Only by understanding God's will and the reasons for physical problems can Christians know how to heal and when to heal.

Without understanding, attempts at driving out demons are dangerous not only for the possessed but also for Christians dabbling with a Holy Spirit enabled power. Disciples are warned that some demons, particularly the ones that can possess children, can only be driven out through faith and deep prayer for God to intervene. If Christians are too arrogant about their own powers, their prayers may fail and problems can result when confronting demons.

**Mark 16:17-19** And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.

**Luke 13:11-13** and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

**Mark 9:17, 18 ... 28, 29** A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." .... After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

I end this chapter with the observation that Christians can easily gain a little power from God. However, understanding how to use it in accordance with God's will is extremely hard. Therefore, I obsess not about speaking in tongues even though I could, and pray often about the gifts of wisdom and knowledge for which I am ever lacking. Equally, receiving the aid of those with powers is easy. However, discriminating between Christians with Holy Spirit powers trying to serve God and false disciples using ill-gotten powers can sometimes be extremely hard. Many false preachers sound good in our modern times, as there are many suffering people searching for relief of any kind.

I wish to propose that the entire Christian community, with once competing spiritual characteristics, must be brought together in

collaboration if we are to navigate through the very hard testing of true and false powers in our times. With great threats to the Christian churches today, I fear that we Christians cannot simply stay away from powers that we do not understand. The unity of the Christian churches may depend completely on the gift of insights given to Christians. The defeat of false prophets will most definitely depend on wisdom given by God. So, let us gather and pray about the appropriate gifts from the Holy Spirit, recognize them when they appear, and use them with help from other Christians. Finally, let us pull fellow Christians away from the dangers of misusing God given power or evoking evil powers. It is appropriate for Christians to question as long as they do not lose faith. It is appropriate for Christians to have different powers as long as all the powers work together for the Body of Christ. It is even appropriate for different Christian groups to have different levels of power, but having less power does not make one less a Christian. The only thing that defines a Christian is love for the Lord and love for mankind.

# Chapter 12: The Imperative for Christian Churches to Unite

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I hope that the proposed solutions to the ten highly divisive topics in Christianity have convinced you that Christian unity without compromising our faith is possible. However, we have to be willing to change spiritually, mentally, and physically. This last chapter is thus dedicated to the idea of change. It is hard for us to change, even for the good of the Christian community. On the other hand, adverse changes caused by the world may already be happening. Which way will Christian churches move is the key question for the future. In the end, I hope that you will all see that it is critical and urgent for Christians to unite now.

I may have unwittingly offended some with my bluntness in discussing why we Christians should change and how we could do so. For this, I will apologize and beseech you to understand that such observations are merely for us to think about the future and not for us to judge the past. I, too, recognize that I must change. Further, I will plead guilty to falling short on wisdom, knowledge, and understanding of God's will in many ways. If you see any merit in the proposed solutions, then let us walk the next mile of planning together.

## **The Challenges in Moving Christians to Unite the Churches**

When we examined all the groupings of spiritual characteristics that are causing division, it was quickly apparent that any single Christian or church can belong to several groups depending on how many topics are embraced. For one topic, a Christian may be constrained from spiritually shifting to the right because of the boundaries of the group. For another topic, a Christian may be constrained from spiritually shifting to the left. If we feel

passionately about many topics, then the combined effect of being governed by multiple ranges in spiritual characteristics may be that our spiritual characteristics cannot shift at all. Even when we try to move toward the center on one topic, our positions on other topics will pull us back from the center. Even when we have some affinity toward the spiritual characteristics of others, the constraints prevent us from embracing change or flexibility.

Now, let us imagine that all the Christians and churches are individually trapped at a specific position across the reference frame so that even those of us slightly apart from one another cannot unite because of the many topics that each is passionate about. The inability for Christians to unite the churches becomes quite clear. This barrier against unity may be too hard to confront at the leadership level among denominations. Trying to change large blocks of individually trapped churches may either lead to no avail or the fragmenting of existing group, as discovered by several Protestant denominations. Unity may also be too hard to achieve one topic or issue at a time, because the disagreements can interfere with one another. For example, Christians debating about theological topics where one side uses new insights from the Holy Spirit may also end up disagreeing about how the Holy Spirit works. Christians debating about institutional structures may also end up disagreeing about the role of men and women in Christianity. And, Christians debating about the best way to conduct the Great Commission may also end up disagreeing about faith and politics. The topics are interlinked.

Based on the above observations, I wish to propose that moving Christians and Christian churches to unite the Body of Christ must start one person at a time. Further, all the key topics of disagreement should be resolved together so that all Christians and churches can be pulled to the center in totality. Encouraging individual Christians to change requires us to better understand the nature of the Christian spirit that governs the mind and body.

Unfortunately, the Christian spirit can also be governed by the sins of thoughts and actions. This manuscript is based on the concept that spirits form characteristics in response to worldly forces. Yet, each spirit also has the innate qualities of purity, strength, and maturity that determine how the person arrives at a spiritual characteristic and can move to different spiritual characteristics.

The quality of purity helps the person to remain with the Word when surrounded by worldly forces. Thus, purity determines whether a Christian is more faithful than fearful, more loving than lustful, more traditional than apathetic, or more called than obsessed.

The quality of spiritual strength helps one fight against various worldly forces. This strength enables a Christian to retain a spiritual characteristic when pushed by the world. This strength also enables a Christian to change his or her spiritual characteristic even when forces oppose change.

Finally, the quality of spiritual maturity helps the person to see his or her intended state in accordance with God's plan. This maturity propels a Christian to change by giving him or her reasons to change. It can guide Christians with spiritual strength to withstand the corruptions of the world to gain more purity. Maturity can also guide Christians with spiritual purity to ask our Lord for more spiritual strength.

When these spiritual qualities are viewed in the context of Christian disunity, we see that Christians across the entire landscape of spiritual characteristics and disagreements must all wrestle with some level of spiritual immaturity. This immaturity hinders our ability to see how to change and how to unite based on a common understanding of God's truth. Uncertain about the path forward and trapped in different groups and enclaves, each Christian must then confront one of the following conditions that govern our ability to change.

Condition 1: A Christian is not spiritually pure enough to resist the worldly forces (temptations) that are pushing against his or her church, and not strong enough to find a way back to a Christian position. As a result, the spiritual characteristic of such a Christian is actually far more lost to the world than it appears. But, the apathy, fears, obsessions, and/or desires are often disguised by a veil of Christian dedication.

Condition 2: A Christian is spiritually pure enough to remain in the position of a particular Christian church, but not strong enough to shape the position of that church. As a result, these Christians will want to cling to the established arguments and refuse to acknowledge opposing views. But, such a Christian can change when the church leads him or her to change. As a result, he or she is vulnerable to the corruptions and confusions that have penetrated the church.

Condition 3: A Christian is spiritually strong enough to shape the position of his or her church, but is also not pure enough to resist the temptations that are tainting his or her church. Even a few of these Christians, who have given into the worldly temptations, can lead the church in a dangerous direction, especially if there are many weak Christians in the church.

Condition 4: A Christian is spiritually strong enough to shape the position of his or her church and is pure enough to resist temptations that are pushing against his or her church. These Christians can fight the corruptions that have penetrated the church to keep the church at its stated position. But without adequate maturity, they cannot move the church beyond its stated position.

The conditions of Christians lacking maturity, as described, reveal how hard it is to change the churches of Christianity, and how



easy it is for churches to slip toward worldly temptations. Some of us may be struggling between conditions as our spiritual strength and purity oscillate. Many of us are walking the fine line between coping with and yielding to worldly temptations. And, all of us have fallen short in our understanding of God's plan. The focus of this entire manuscript is therefore to aid Christians in increasing spiritual maturity by exploring divisive topics without intellectual or spiritual bias. Unfortunately, weak Christians consumed by temptations may not want to listen, and strong Christians consumed by temptations may not want to change. Therefore, my hope largely lies with the strong and committed Christians of Condition 4 to embrace the proposal for unity, and the weak but committed Christians of Condition 3 to follow the established course for change.

The challenge in convincing strong and committed Christians to change is that they are the fiercest defenders of current church positions. Their understanding or lack of understanding has caused the separation of spiritual characteristics in the course of protecting the churches from worldly forces. Their endeavors further escalate theological debates. If there are Christians yearning to grow their love, tradition, faith, and calling, then we have a starting point for dialogue. If the dialogue can convince even a few that disunity is contributing to more and more Christians slipping into spiritual downfall, then maybe we have a starting point for change. Even valiant defenders of the current Christian enclaves can change.

My other hope is that new Christians and soon to be Christians pursuing an understanding of the Word and striving to grow their spiritual purity, strength, and maturity will give Christian unity a chance. Competing with Christian enclaves for the commitment of new and future Christians is without doubt very daunting. Established institutions and theologies have a certain appeal whether or not they have a clear understanding of God's truth. But sadly, this task may be more realizable as enclaves start to collapse. Do I pray that enclaves led by spiritually strong and

committed Christians will guide the struggle for unity? Most definitely. Will I now try to compete with Christian enclaves for the commitment of new and future Christians? Yes, especially if the enclaves are in trouble, because the future of Christianity is my concern.

### **The Collapsing of Christian Enclaves Due to Adverse Changes**

We started this discussion with the observation that the world has pushed Christians into many enclaves. Then, our study of divisive topics showed us that the enclaves are separated by disagreements sustained both by conflicting theologies and misaligned spiritual characteristics. Now, we will explore how the enclaves are collapsing due to the unceasing onslaught of worldly forces. The situation is so critical that the integration of the enclaves may be the only way forward. Some progressive Protestant denominations that once proudly grew along their individual paths are already starting to unite out of necessity. While such localized unity may still be based on tolerance of differences, it is a further indicator of Christians' struggles.

The decline in Christianity started when the balance shifted from Christians overcoming worldly forces through love, tradition, faith, and calling to Christians being pulled by the forces of desires, apathy, fears, and obsessions. We all struggle against these forces, and the institutional resistance against these forces has pushed Christians into enclaves. Now, some enclaves are starting to decline. We can forever debate which enclaves are declining faster, but that is not important. Those enclaves that still believe they are thriving should look at the rest of Christianity. Unless they do not care about other Christians, they cannot be truly thriving when so many are under siege. If they look deeper into themselves, they might also realize that the effects of worldly forces are still penetrating their churches despite the growth in membership and prosperity.

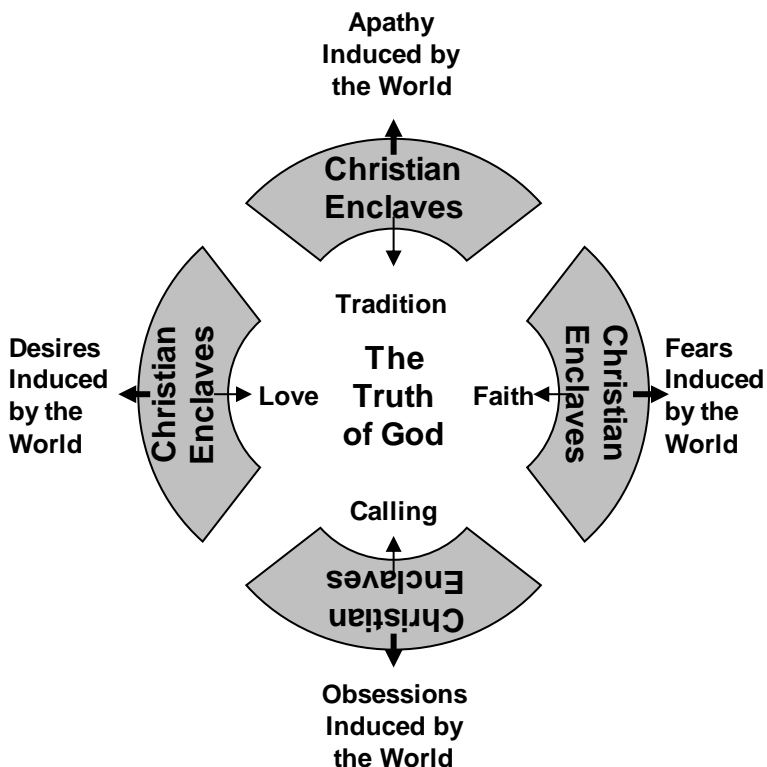


Figure 12.1: The Failing Struggle of Enclaves Against Worldly Forces

As Figure 12.1 shows, enclaves are being penetrated by worldly forces because each remains vulnerable to the specific worldly force that it is trying to resist. An enclave embracing fundamentalism is consciously or subconsciously struggling with its fears. If fears induced by the world overcome the faith within the enclave, then the number of spiritually weak Christians consumed by fears will increase. The ability of Christians who want to lead based on fears will also increase. Likewise, enclaves embracing evangelism may have their calling suppressed by obsessions induced by the world. Enclaves embracing progressivism may have their love overwhelmed by worldly desires. And, enclaves resistant to change may have their respect for traditions superceded by apathy.

As the worldly forces of apathy and desires destroy group cohesion, spiritually weak Christians, apathetic about the church or desirous of worldly matters, will start to leave enclaves. The exodus might further be joined by churchgoers who have not yet received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In contrast, the worldly forces of fears and obsessions tend to promote group cohesion for the wrong reasons. Enclaves catering to fears might attract Christians looking for a place where their fears are allowed to rule them. Enclaves catering to obsessions might draw Christians looking for a place where their obsessions are allowed to consume them.

As a result, one half of the Christian churches is facing a physical decline of their membership, and the other half of the Christian churches is facing a spiritual decline of their membership, as shown in Figure 12.2. In places such as Europe, where apathy and desires are abundant, the churches of Christianity have weakened so much by a loss of membership or membership participation that most cannot even be considered enclaves. Instead, they are now more like remaining life rafts in a sea of secularism. The decline of the European Christian enclaves may be quickly joined by the Christian enclaves of the American North East. There, apathy and secular desires have also been growing rapidly, especially in the major cities. If this path continues, Christianity in Europe and parts of America may become no more than a remnant of the past, like the once Christian lands of Egypt and western Middle East.

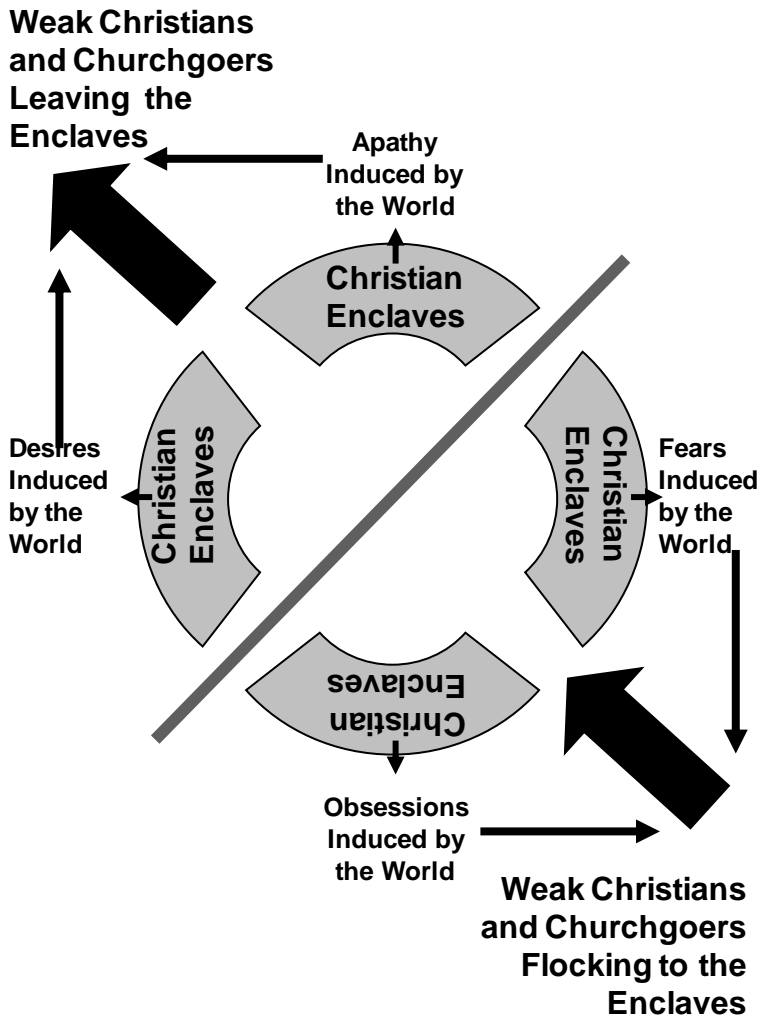


Figure 12.2: Migration of Weak Christians and Churchgoers as Enclaves Decline

In places such as the American South, where fears of change is abundant, and the American West, where obsession has been a trait extending from the early settlers, the churches of Christianity are bursting with membership and wealth. Though many are still struggling against worldly forces, some of the mega churches have already yielded to leaders preaching Christians to fear those who do

not conform to their views. They also try to convert people to Christianity by any means. Social pressure, discrimination in public organizations, enactment of new laws, and terror tactics have all been employed in the name of Christ when they actually stem from obsessions. If affected churches do not change, they may start to collapse the same way fearful and obsessive enclaves of medieval Europe collapsed long ago. The sad process of final collapse in Christian enclaves will be discussed soon.

Meanwhile, are strong and committed Christians witnessing the troubles within enclaves also vulnerable to worldly forces due to spiritual immaturity? I am afraid that this might be true in many cases as shown in Figure 12.3. When committed Christians see the effects of apathy and fear upon weak Christians and churchgoers, they often attempt to isolate such people from the rest of the church. One form of isolation is to create hierarchies in the church that act as barriers. After the clergy, elders, deacons, and team leaders have been identified for a church, sometimes the remaining Christians can hardly feel like they belong. After all, every Christian that appears dedicated is pulled up to another level. Another form of isolation is compartmentalizing the enclave. For example, when multiple churches belong to an enclave, one church may view another church as being more worldly, and thus decide not to associate. What committed Christians may not be able to see is that their tendency to isolate is also a reflection of how apathy and fear have affected them. Apathy pushes for isolation so that the issue will not have to be addressed any further, and fear pushes for isolation because it is the quickest way to separate oneself from the corruption of weak Christians.

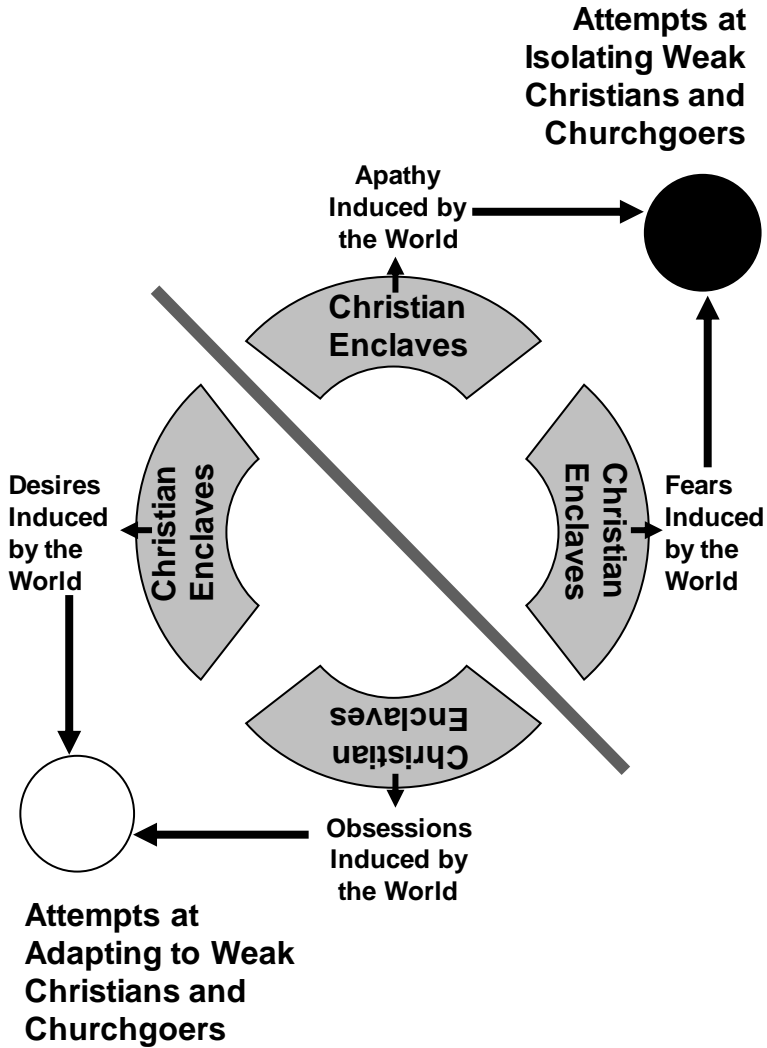


Figure 12.3: Behaviors of Committed Christians Reacting to Worldly Forces

Alternatively, when committed Christians see the effects of desires and obsessions on weak Christians and churchgoers, they often attempt to adjust the church to manage desires and obsessions. One form of management is to establish rules for when and how desires and obsessions are acceptable and perhaps even preferable. A

rule might be that Christians can desire and accumulate great wealth as a blessing from God, if we first give the tithe to the church. Another rule might be that Christians can obsess about power and authority as long as it can be used to serve the church. Committed Christians can also adapt the church through selective denial. Even as more and more weak Christians become overwhelmed by the world, committed Christians can just focus on the total activities of the church and pretend that nothing adverse is happening. This denial is more effective if a large number of church activities are established to mask non-Christian activities. If a Christian is leading Bible studies, helping the poor, and preaching the gospel, then maybe no one will care whether he or she is desirous or obsessive about wealth and power. What committed Christians may not be able to see is that their attempt at management is also a reflection of they being affected by desires and obsessions. Setting rules to allow for some desires is still giving into desires. Selective denial of reality can be subconscious obsessions about the ideal Christian state.

By now, some may question why I have not focused on the many other forms of worldly temptations which have seeped into the Christian enclaves. This is because I have focused on the main vulnerabilities of the Christian churches. Surely, every Christian has to confront a vast array of temptations. We will get angry, jealous, proud, and deceitful at times. However, I do believe that the Holy Spirit and our faith will cleanse us of such momentary weaknesses as long as we keep our repentant heart.

The Christian churches become more vulnerable when the enclaves have collapsed or are on the verge of collapse. Churches stop being a part of enclaves when they lose their ability to shield Christians from worldly forces. As a result, Christians and whole Christian groups are adrift in the world. Some Christians will still remain faithful, loving, and respectful of traditions. A few will be guided by clear callings. But, most Christians will struggle privately with all manners of spiritual failings until the concept of Christian



spiritual characteristics has no meaning. Instead, we need to shift to talking about non-Christian spiritual characteristics.

The collapse of enclaves could be insidious. We could be attending a church without realizing that it is no longer a Christian community that provides us with spiritual support. We praise together, socialized together, and even marry one another. Yet when we are in spiritual trouble, we struggle alone. When we are overwhelmed by the world, there is no place to seek comfort. When we sin, there is no one to guide us back to the ways of God. All may appear fine for many years, but we are actually lost in the world.

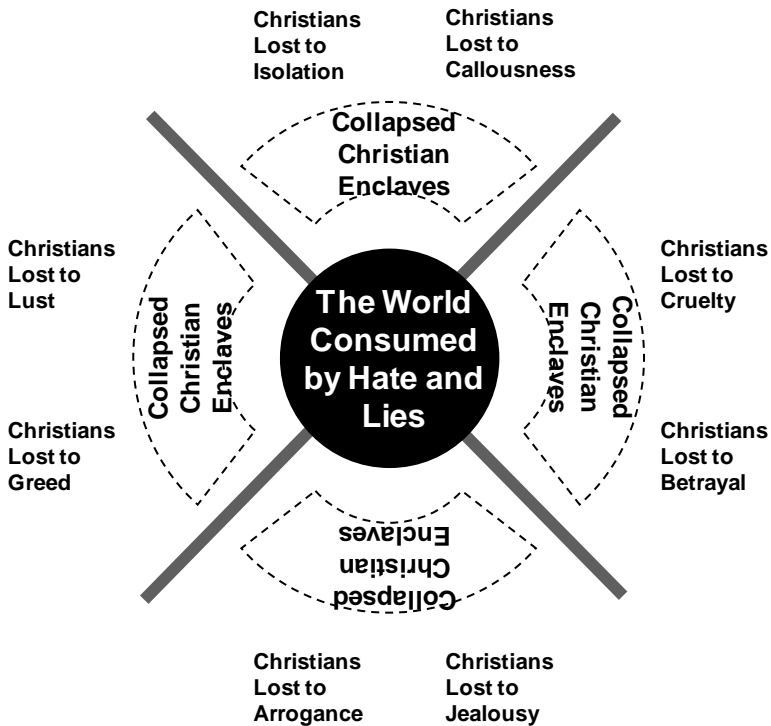


Figure 12.4: Lost of Christians to Worldly Spiritual Characteristics

As Figure 12.4 shows, Christians cast into the world without the spiritual protection of enclaves or some other vestige of Christian community may be lost to worldly forces that are another step darker

than apathy, fears, obsessions, and desires. The collapse of Christian enclaves replaces the Word, which pulls Christians back to traditions, faith, calling, and love, with hate and lies that come from the world. Hate and lies stem from the center of evil and directly oppose the forces of good. Hate tears apart the fabric of creation, and lies oppose the unification of creation around our Lord. The plan of our Lord will manifest, but Christians without the protection of enclaves can easily be lost to hate and lies.

Once Christians are adrift in the world, ones who were affected by apathy may sink deeper into the non-Christian spiritual characteristics of rejection and callousness. Such lost Christians might reject Christianity all together in favor of living lives of emptiness. This emptiness can be filled with the lies of secularism or false religions. Or, this emptiness and the resulting spiritual pains might cause lost Christians to reject the world, leading to self abuse and tragedy. Other lost Christians might not care about who they hurt in the course of living. Businessmen might not care about how their inferior products harm people. Soldiers might not care what happens when they kill. Political leaders might not care about the consequences of their actions. To make themselves feel better about this decent into darkness, Christians consumed by callousness might even start to hate the people that they did not care about. Hate can cause businessmen to see consumers as cattle, soldiers to see enemies not as people, and leaders to see citizens as mere pawns of the state.

Adrift Christians who were affected by fears may sink deeper into the non-Christian spiritual characteristics of cruelty and betrayal. They might be willing to inflict all manner of pain to deal with people who they think might harm them or things they value. As the inquisitions of the Middle Ages showed, there is almost no limit to the cruelty of lost Christians, especially if the cruelty is executed in God's name. Other lost Christians might be willing to betray others and themselves to deal with situations that they think

might harm them or things they value. To protect their lives, lost Christians might be willing to support the evil deeds of leaders. To protect their livelihood, lost Christians might be willing to participate in the bad decisions of bosses. And to protect their way of life, lost Christians might be willing to swear allegiance to the ways of false religions and ideologies. To make themselves feel better about this decent into darkness, Christians lost to betrayal might even start to hate the truth that they are betraying. Hating truth can help them rationalize why evil leaders are just, bad bosses are acceptable, and false religions are reasonable.

Adrift Christians who were affected by obsessions may sink deeper into the non-Christian spiritual characteristics of pride and jealousy. Such Christians might be willing to think that they are the only ones chosen by God, and that all other people are damned. In the last several decades, cults and other perversions of Christianity have resulted from arrogance and the lies that fuel the arrogance. Some cult leaders have even proclaimed themselves the second incarnation of Jesus Christ. Pride can be so consuming that even well established churches will believe that everyone beyond their church is worthless. I think church pride can cause elders to battle with pastors for power, and pride can lead Christians to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit for selfish gains. However, we must be careful in not accusing people with genuine calling by God as being prideful. Christians lost to jealousy will surely make this accusation. For, jealousy wants to either possess or destroy the things one does not have. Lost Christians may become jealous of the status of others in the church, secular pleasures, and even gifts from the Holy Spirit. This jealousy can easily turn into hate toward other Christians, Christianity, and even our Lord Himself.

Finally, adrift Christians who were affected by desires may sink deeper into the non-Christian spiritual characteristics of lust and greed. Such Christians might be willing to let desires for physical pleasures grow into lust so that spiritual commitments to God, other

Christians, and beloved ones are lost. Lust for sexual pleasures can destroy the bonds of marriage. Yet, one consumed by lust might believe the lie that one can build new bonds of love after betraying his or her spouse. Lust for the euphoria of power can destroy Christian organizations. Yet, those consumed by lust might believe the lie that they can rebuild Christian organizations once in power. Lust for material pleasures can destroy the bonds with God. Yet, those consumed by lust might believe the lie that they can return to God's ways once they have taken sometime to indulge themselves. Days of indulgence can easily turn into years.

Alternatively, Christians might desire control more than pleasures. That hunger for control can grow into greed. Greed for the control of money has caused many to forsake all spiritual commitments. Many billionaires work long hours not for the pleasures that money can buy, but for the control of money. The thirst for public recognition has caused many leaders and celebrities to forsake personal calling. Even some Christian leaders have devoted all their attention to staying in the limelight – working for every applause rather than for God. Greed also does not have to be rational. Some lost Christians may want to own all the jellybeans in the world, but this funny greed may not be so funny if it consumes the spirit.

Once Christian values and priorities have been abandoned for worldly ways, the lost Christians are no longer just vulnerable to forces associated with their enclaves. They can fall victim to all manners of spiritual corruption when their love, faith, calling, and respect for traditions have been wiped away. One can be apathetic about all the right things and be obsessive about all the wrong things. One can desire all the dangerous things and fear all the unimportant things. Therefore, the collapse of Christian enclaves is a truly horrific event for the Body of Christ, but it has not occurred yet. Though some enclaves have collapsed, the churches of Christianity are still struggling against the world. All is far from lost.

However, there are great dangers ahead because the current enclave approach cannot last. Even new Christian enclaves that are trying to grow in non-Christian lands face limitations, because they cannot receive the full strength of the Body of Christ.

I will thus conclude our journey by tapping into Scripture and drawing inspirations from the Holy Spirit to see how God might want us to navigate through the coming years. I have spent many pages advocating for Christian unity. Now, I will try to see how this unity might come.

### **The Future of Christianity**

Many Christians believe that the apocalypse (end of the age) is coming soon. Centuries of unfolding events that matched prophecies have all converged to our times. So, could the leaves be changing colors as foretold by our Lord Jesus? Are the great horrors of the tribulation imminent?

I have not been given the wisdom to see exactly when the End Times will arrive, but I may have some insights on why it will arrive. Yes, the world has become very corrupted with hate, deceit, greed, pride, and all the other sins as discussed. And yes, the world is now so complex and so interconnected that there are an infinite number of places for evil to hide and to reach each individual. However, few sins are the inventions of modern times. Therefore, if the apocalypse did not occur at the most corrupt period of the Roman Empire, why should Christians expect Jesus would return now?

We know the end of the age is near because Christianity has been spread to the far corners of the world in accordance with the Great Commission. Although not everyone in the world understands the meaning of Jesus' love, most people have heard of Jesus and can get access to a Bible if they try. There are secret Christian enclaves for courageous disciples to gather even in the most anti-Christian places. In places where the political environment has changed to

allow Christian missionary activities, thousands of new Christians are baptized each day. Is this enough to call the Great Commission a success, or is this all that we can do while the established enclaves of Christianity are starting to decline? Our Lord will decide. Meanwhile, we must focus on averting the decline of Christianity in once Christian lands.

If the adverse changes in Christianity cannot be halted, then another reason for the end being near is that our Lord will not allow the enclaves of Christianity to collapse. Is this a failing of Christians, or is there insurmountable evil in this world? Either way, I do feel that this may be a key reason why Jesus has to return soon to present the truth of God in full force. The Christian churches can unite to block the decline of Christianity, protect Christians from threats to salvation, and restore the path of spiritual growth. This unity might then delay the tribulation and the return of Jesus. We should pray for this to be so. For, it is better for non-Christians to discover the Word on their own, and Christians to grow through their spiritual relationship with God and the Holy Spirit.

**John 20:29** Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

What if the path of adverse changes leading to complete collapse of the Christian enclaves cannot be averted? Then, we should turn to the events described in the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation is largely devoted to explaining how God will shake the world step-by-step to try to spiritually awaken people who have turned to worshiping demons (promoters of false religions), idolatry (including the ideology of secularism), murders (many through unjust wars), magic (pursuit of powers not from God), sexual immorality (actions that harm the bonds of love between man and woman), and stealing (taking something one does not rightfully own). The book also describes briefly how some people will gather

to serve God's plan. This gathering starts right after the opening of the sixth seal on the Lamb's scroll, which is actually not the start of the tribulation but a final wake-up call for the world. The shaking of the world that does not kill many will cause everyone (kings, the rich, the poor, and the slaves) to recognize the power of the Almighty God.

**Revelation 6:16-17** They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

The recognition of God is the foundation for marking those who would be God's frontline troops / servants in growing the Body of Christ during the tribulation. Pre-tribulation rapture believers see these troops as being future Jewish converts to the Word because the Christians have already been taken up into Heaven.

**Revelation 7:3-4** "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

However, if the churches of Christianity are still on earth struggling with individual forms of collapse, then the mark of God can be placed on anyone who has awakened to the Word. Paul proclaimed that all true disciples of Jesus Christ are descendants of Abraham and thus of the tribes of Israel. Today's modern Jews can only call themselves descendents of Abraham based on centuries of legalistically tracking their bloodlines. However, the complete and accurate tracking of bloodlines has long been lost, and no Jewish person today can correctly name which one of the twelve tribes of Israel he or she belongs to. Instead, the blood of Abraham has been spread to the far corners of the world through multiple migrations of

Israelites and thousands of years of intermarriage. While the Jews have never tracked the bloodlines of those in their ranks who stopped practicing Judaism, had off-springs with non-Jewish women, or converted to Christianity, the blood of Abraham nevertheless flowed everywhere. If bloodline is not a factor, then a spiritual claim to the tribes of Israel by today's Christians may be more valid than the incomplete legalistic claim made by today's Jews.

**Romans 4:16** Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

**Galatians 3:29** If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

The potential for the army of Jesus to be filled with reawakened Christians during the tribulation revives my hope for Christian unity. This path to unity will not avert the coming tribulation. However, it will allow Christians to gather many into the Body of Christ even as the world rejects God's authority. If only 144,000 Christians from the branches and denominations of Christianity could unite during the period of peace before the opening of the seventh seal, this army would be large enough to lead the churches of Christianity as the trumpets are blown and the first horror of the tribulation begins. By the time of the second horror, John describes two lampstands as being instruments for forcing the world to listen to the truth of God. At the start of the Book of Revelation, John speaks of Jesus as walking between seven lampstands representing the seven ancient churches. Therefore, we can think of the two lampstands during the tribulation as the two united churches of Christianity. One church might consist of the united Catholic, Orthodox, and perhaps even Anglican churches.



Another church might consist of the united Protestant, Pentecostal, and perhaps even independent churches. These two churches will be led or guided by two Christian leaders working together, similar to Moses and Elijah who stood by the church of Israel and then with Jesus.

**Revelation 11:1-6** I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

**Zechariah 4:2 ...14** He asked me, "What do you see?" I answered, "I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights. Also there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left."  
... Again I asked him, "What are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil?" He replied, "Do you not know what these are?" "No, my lord," I said. So he said, "These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth."

If this comes about, then not all the Christians from the current churches of Christianity will unite to serve God's plan. Some Christians and churchgoers will sadly submit to the beasts, and find themselves in the temple courtyards not to be counted. I, however, believe that the army of 144,000 can unite many Christians to form the two lampstands. One mechanism for unity might be for suffering Christians and future Christians, stung by locusts from the abyss for

five months, to see that the 144,000 are not harmed. Then, these Christians will understand that the 144,000 are truly God's servants.

Once the lampstands are ready and the temple numbers are adequate, this massive force can oppose the world led by the beasts to bare witness to the truth of God for three and one half years. The powers of the witnesses, as described in John's spiritual vision, should manifest in a manner that supports the mission of presenting God's truth without causing distractions. Those lost to the beasts will witness miraculous powers and still not believe. But, some non-Christians and confused Christians will hopefully hear the message and repent.

The first of the witnesses' powers is the ability to devour anyone who wants to harm the people of God with fire from their mouths. In the near future, where the enemies of Christian witnesses can be all across the world, physical fire from the mouth can only travel so far and reach a limited number of threats. However, spiritual fire from the mouth, through words from the Holy Spirit, can travel across the world. The fire of the right words can drive out demons, expose criminal behaviors, cause people to see the horrors of evil, turn enemies against one another, and crush lost spirits. This fire can burn deeper than any fire of man. Yet to the unaware, words from the Holy Spirit are mere words.

The second power is the ability to shut up the sky so that it will not rain when the witnesses are presenting their message. Does physical rain negatively impact the presentation of the Word, and how long must the rain be shut up before anyone would care? Many regions of the world are already use to weeks or months of draught. Instead, if the witnesses can block the rain of radio waves from satellites, television stations, and cell phone towers, then the impact would be immediate and immense. With all those distractions gone, everyone will have to start listening to the pleas for people to turn to God and not sin. People will complain about this disruption.

However, most people will probably continue on with their worldly activities once the rain is allowed to return.

The third power is the ability to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague. Turning physical water into physical blood is an impressive power if we are standing up to the pharaoh of Egypt. Yet, it would be a distraction to the witnesses' message. Instead, the world is now filled with lakes of information flowing into one another through rivers formed by the world-wide-web. Filling these lakes with the blood of Christ, as embodied in the living Word, will contribute greatly to the mission of the witnesses. Imagine millions of blogs, websites and servers spreading the truth of God across the world. If the army of Christ can further spread truth about worldly matters, then perhaps countless types of plagues can indeed ensue. By the time of the tribulation, truth about finances can cause corrupt banks to collapse, truth about products can cause deceptive businesses to fail, and truth about people cause evil leaders to fall. The plagues caused by truth will not physically harm people, but they can make life difficult. Many will say that it is better to live under lies and deception. Thus, the world will rejoice when the witnesses are killed by the beasts, because the information highways will be free from Christian disruptions. Gifts of lies and deceit, such as false advertisements, illegal financial transactions, and unethical directions, can again start to flow.

The two churches of the tribulation will have to be organized very differently in order to conduct their missions in a world of turmoil. The key to this organization is how Christians will be unified. Therefore, the divisive topics that we have explored will have to be resolved by Christians sooner or later. Once organized, Christians sent out into the world during the tribulation will need symbols for their mission, and uniforms that are durable enough to withstand harsh environments. Wearing clothing made from sack cloth satisfies both these needs. As a result, the army of Christ may

literally look like an army with sturdy and unglamorous uniforms. However, I am not sure that Christians will have to actually wear sacks.

Only God knows how big this army will be. But, I do pray that there will eventually be millions upon millions of witnesses traveling to every land to plea for people to embrace the Word. I also pray that when the mission of the witnesses is done, there will not be many people who are still ruled by the beasts. Many witnesses from the two churches will be killed in the course of their mission. The two lead witnesses will be killed in the great city where our Lord was crucified. Yet, we also know that some Christians will live by God's plan to rise up into the sky upon the return of Jesus. No Christian should doubt that Jesus will return, and that the ultimate future of Christians is to reign with Jesus until Heaven and earth unite.

My friends, as you can see, I believe that Christian unity is important no matter what the future holds. If we can delay the tribulation, unity now will be the key to strengthening the Christian community for promoting the delay. If we cannot delay the tribulation, then unity under trials is the only way for Christians to become witnesses in serving God's plan. I may be wrong about many things, but I am not wrong about the criticality of Christian unity as well as the threats facing Christians if we do not unite. Therefore, please join me in the plea for Christians on all sides of divisive topics to reach out their hands and hearts in attempt to dialogue. The first dialogue can be for all of us to pray together in the name of Jesus. Then, there is much to discuss and much to do.

I end this manuscript by rejoicing in the future of Christianity, for I see the churches united – not by the force of Jesus' return, but by the struggles and sacrifices of Christians preparing for Jesus' return. It is this united church that will help Jesus rule the entire world for one thousand years.

# References

**Bible Quotes:** There are 325 verses directly quoted from the New Internal Version (NIV) of the Holy Bible in this book. The NIV text may be quoted in any form (written, visual, electronic or audio), up to and inclusive of five hundred (500) verses without express written permission of the publisher, providing the verses do not amount to a complete book of the Bible nor do the verses quoted account for twenty-five percent (25%) or more of the total text of the work in which they are quoted. This book is compliant with all the conditions set forth above.

**Comparative Reading:** This book presents new Christian concepts that seek to resolve conflicting theological positions within Christianity. Some of these positions can be better understood with further reading as identified below.

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