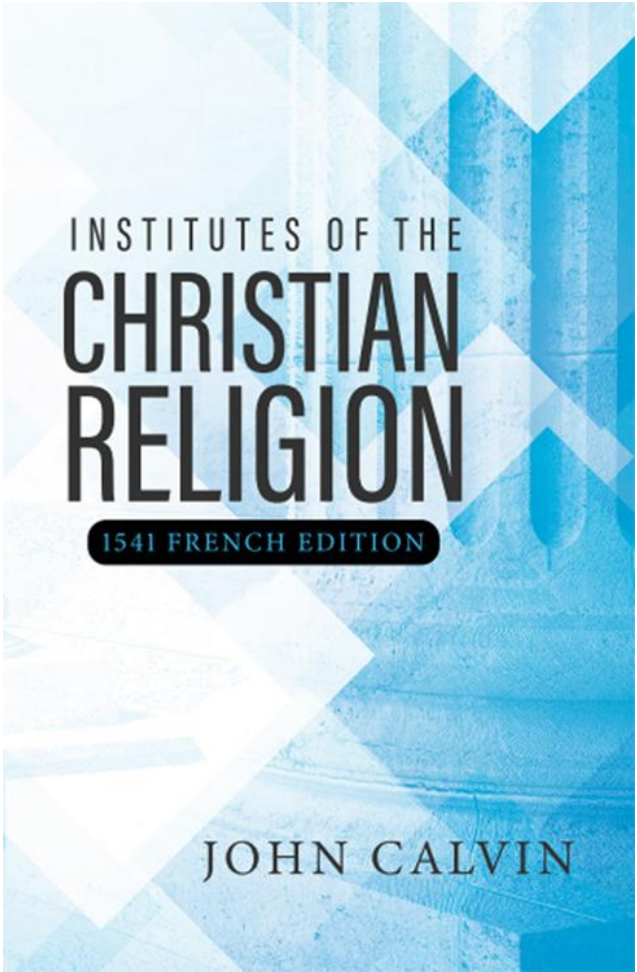


INSTITUTES OF THE
**CHRISTIAN
RELIGION**

1541 FRENCH EDITION

JOHN CALVIN



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Institutes of the Christian Religion

1541 French Edition

by John Calvin

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The Essence of This Tome

With an earnest desire to enhance the readers' enrichment through this volume, I embark upon the task of illuminating the practical value it holds for them. In so doing, the underlying purpose that should steer their engagement with these pages shall be unveiled.

Although the sacred scripture stands as an embodiment of immaculate teachings, impervious to augmentation, for our Lord has elected to unfurl the inexhaustible treasures of His wisdom therein; nevertheless, for those unversed in its profound application, the need for guidance and direction becomes apparent. They require a guiding light to navigate its expanse, preventing veering astray and wandering aimlessly. Instead, they must tread a resolute path, one that leads to the very destination the Holy Spirit beckons.

For this very reason, an imperative duty befalls those who have been bestowed with greater divine insight than their brethren. They are called to extend their helping hand to the unassuming, facilitating their journey and enabling them to extract the essence of God's teachings enshrined in His word. This noble endeavor finds its most potent expression in the written word, encompassing the core tenets that define Christian philosophy. An adept comprehension of these foundational principles equips one to glean immeasurable wisdom in God's classroom, surpassing the strides of those bereft of such illumination. Armed with the wisdom to arrange and harmonize scriptural passages, the adept pilgrim acquires a guiding principle to fathom the entirety of the divine discourse.

Recognizing the indispensability of nurturing those earnestly seeking salvation's doctrine, I, propelled by divine grace, have undertaken this labor, birthing this tome. Its inception was inscribed in Latin, a bridge transcending cultural confines, destined to resonate with discerning minds across nations. Subsequently, desiring to impart its enriching essence to our beloved French compatriots, I undertook its translation into our vernacular. Mindful of humility, I refrain from heaping excessive accolades upon this endeavor, lest it be misconstrued as a self-indulgent endeavor. Nonetheless, I solemnly assure that herein lies the master key, unlocking the portal for all

God's children to decipher the scripture's depths with discernment and truth.

Should Divine Providence extend unto me the opportunity for forthcoming commentaries, I shall embrace brevity, as the foundational aspects of Christianity have been judiciously treated within these pages. Prolonged digressions become redundant, as these matters have been expansively addressed. Given the verity that all genuine and virtuous teachings emanate from the Divine fount, I dare to express my reflections, acknowledging that this endeavor is more God's providence than my own. Thus, the anthem of praise resounds towards the Divine Creator, as the deserving beneficiary of credit. A fervent exhortation beckons all who hold the Lord's word in reverence to engage with these pages, imprinting them upon their memory with unwavering diligence. Such endeavor becomes the gateway, encapsulating Christian tenets and offering a vantage point to glean profound wisdom from both Old and New Testaments. Through this voyage, the earnest seeker shall experience the absence of deception in my discourse. Should one encounter hurdles in comprehension, despair must yield to persevering diligence, trusting that each passage will elucidate the other. Above all, let the reader seek solace in scripture to assess the veracity of the affirmations set forth.

A Dedication to Francis I

TO THE SUPREME AND MIGHTY,
MOST ILLUSTRIOUS RULER, FRANCIS,
THE KING MOST DEVOTED TO CHRIST IN FRANCE,
HIS NOBLE AND REVERED SOVEREIGN,

Peace and salvation in God be bestowed from John Calvin

At the inception of crafting this tome, O Noble King, my intentions were not inclined toward proffering it for your majesty's consideration. My sole purpose remained the nurturing of foundational principles, which could kindle a fervent ardor for God's presence within hearts attuned to His divine calling. My endeavors were primarily devoted to serving our French populace, discerning among them the hunger and thirst for a profound connection with Jesus Christ. A lamentable reality unveiled itself, revealing the paucity of those truly acquainted with Him. This book, as you will discern, is a manifestation of my noble intention, tailored to the simplest form of instruction.

Yet, as I gaze upon the unfolding follies of wicked individuals within your realm, I find that a dire absence of fertile ground for sound teachings has emerged. In light of this, it becomes essential for this work to bear dual significance: to serve as an instructional beacon for the souls I initially aspired to guide, and simultaneously, to stand as a testament of faith before your eminent throne. Within these pages, you shall glean insights into the very tenets that have ignited vehement animosity from those presently scourging your domain

with fire and sword. Permit me to unabashedly acknowledge that this compilation encapsulates the very essence of the doctrine they seek to castigate, a doctrine they deem deserving of confinement, exile, proscription, and even the relentless flames of destruction. I am acutely aware of the narratives that have inundated your ears and consciousness, endeavoring to breed detestation towards our cause. However, I implore your magnanimity and benevolence to discern that accusations alone do not constitute guilt in thought or deed. Merely hurling allegations is a deficient premise to strip innocence away. Truly, if accusations alone warranted condemnation, then the realm would be devoid of both virtue and rectitude.

I beseech your insight, most Honorable King, to acquaint yourself with the very cause that has been marred by confusion, bereft of legal decorum, driven by impassioned fervor rather than judicious temperance. Do not misconstrue my intent as a plea for personal exoneration or a plea for my homeland's embrace. While I cherish appropriate sentiments of attachment, my present state does not evoke profound sorrow upon its absence. My cause, however, transcends personal plight, resonating with the collective struggle of the faithful and, indeed, the very essence of Christ's mission. A mission now ensnared, trampled, and fragmented within your realm, veiled in the cloak of despair. This affliction, assuredly, is the handiwork of certain Pharisees, a product of their tyranny, not of your decree. The modus operandi of their design is unnecessary to expound upon here. Be that as it may, the light of Christ's truth finds itself eclipsed, not lost or shattered, ensconced in ignominy. The plight of the Church, afflicted by cruel demise, coerced into exile, shackled by threats and trepidation, confines its voice to hushed murmurs. Unabated, adversaries persist in undermining the foundations, furthering the devastation they initiated. Yet, none emerges to provide a counter to these raging tempests. Even those

inclined to stand by truth's side opine that "leniency is warranted for the naivety and ignorance of the common folk." Their words condescendingly equate God's immutable truth to "naivety and ignorance," reducing those whom our Lord has graced with heavenly wisdom to the status of "simpletons." Such is the reproach the gospel bears in the eyes of the world.

You, most Benevolent King, bear witness to the deluge of slander that besmirches this doctrine daily. Claims assert that it harbors an insidious agenda, envisioning the dismantling of order, the upheaval of peace, the annihilation of law, the erosion of authority and possessions—essentially, a radical inversion of the established norm. Yet, the veracity of these allegations remains questionable, as you only bear witness to a fraction of the vitriol. Among the populace, a cacophony of sinister rumors proliferates, and if these allegations held truth, then the doctrine and its adherents would undoubtedly warrant severe punishment. It's not surprising, therefore, that this doctrine faces universal animosity, fueled by such venomous lies. You understand why all segments of society unite to censure us and our teachings. Driven by zealous delusion, the tribunal that presides over this doctrine is predisposed to a preconceived judgment. They consider their task fulfilled as long as they refrain from condemning to death those either confessing guilt or being inculpated by conclusive evidence. But what crime are they held culpable for? The very crime of advocating this condemned doctrine, they say. But by what law has this doctrine been condemned? Herein lies the very essence of this defense: not to disown it, but to espouse it as truth. Yet, the freedom to articulate this defense is stifled.

Thus, most Respected King, it is not without reason that I beseech you to contemplate a cause that has hitherto been marred by chaos, bereft of legal structure, and tainted by fervent zeal rather than

judicial composure. Do not assume that I am striving solely for my personal vindication or petitioning for the return to my homeland. While my heart holds natural affections for the land of my birth, my present state does not evoke overwhelming sorrow upon its absence. I have undertaken a noble mission that transcends personal plight; it embodies the collective struggle of the faithful and resonates with the very essence of Christ's mission. A mission that now finds itself trampled and obscured within your realm, a victim of tyranny and Pharisaic dogma rather than your sovereign decree. The means employed to achieve this are unnecessary to elaborate upon here. Nevertheless, the light of Christ's truth persists, albeit concealed by the shroud of ignominy. The Church, bereft of its faithful, succumbs to cruel deaths, banishment, and the fetters of intimidation, relegating it to a state of muted submission. And yet, those who perpetuate such unrelenting chaos remain unperturbed, systematically dismantling the foundation they have already weakened. Alas, no champion emerges to counter these relentless tumults. Even those who feign solidarity with truth, as they profess that "the simplicity and ignorance of the common people deserve a measure of clemency," diminish God's unequivocal truth by attributing it to "simplemindedness and ignorance." Such is the derision cast upon the gospel by the world.

To you, most Compassionate King, falls the prerogative of not only lending an ear but also inclining your heart to a cause that resonates with righteous defense. Especially when it pertains to such profound matters: the preservation of God's glory, the sanctity of His truth, and the enduring legacy of Christ's kingdom. A monarch's true essence resides in acknowledging the sacred mandate to serve as God's instrument in governing the realm. Conversely, one who governs without the aspiration to magnify God's glory is no ruler, but rather, a marauder. A ruler unguided by the divine scepter, namely,

His holy word, should anticipate the ephemeral nature of prosperity in their reign. This sentiment, encapsulated in the proverb that "where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18), stands unshaken.

Let not the derision of our humble state deter you from this contemplation. We acknowledge with utmost clarity that we are the downtrodden and marginalized; before the divine gaze, we stand as wretched sinners, shunned and forsaken by humanity. We may even be likened to the refuse and castaways of the world—or worse. We stand devoid of any foundation upon which to boast before God, save for His mercy alone, by which we are salvaged devoid of any personal merit. In the eyes of others, our sole claim is to our frailty—a perceived blemish (2 Corinthians 10:13, 17; Titus 3:5; 2 Corinthians 11:30–31 and 12:5, 9). Yet our doctrine must remain steadfast, elevated, and unassailable above all worldly grandeur and might. For this doctrine is not our own, but the impartation of the living God and His Christ. The Father has anointed Christ as King "to rule from sea to sea and from the rivers to the ends of the earth" (Psalm 72:8). His dominion shall strike the earth, "breaking it to pieces like pottery with a rod of iron" (Psalm 2:9), as prophesied by the seers. The splendor of His reign is foretold, where the dominion of iron and steel and the luster of gold and silver shall be overthrown (Isaiah 11:4; Daniel 2:32ff). Our adversaries, however, vehemently contradict this truth, accusing us of distorting the very word of God—an unfounded and audacious claim. As you peruse our confession, your wisdom shall be your guide, revealing the baseless nature of this malicious accusation.

Yet, it is prudent to preface your journey through these words. St. Paul, in his pursuit of aligning every prophecy with the harmonious essence of faith, imparted an infallible rule for assessing scriptural

interpretations (Romans 12:6). When our doctrine is measured against this yardstick of faith, victory is unequivocally ours. For what could be more emblematic of faith than acknowledging our utter destitution of power or capability, that we might be attired by God? To recognize our voidness of goodness, that He might fill us? To recognize our bondage to sin, that He might liberate us? To acknowledge our spiritual blindness, that He might bestow sight? To recognize our feebleness, that He might provide support? To surrender our claims to glory, that He alone might be glorified in us [Matthew 11:4–5; Mark 8:22–23; Luke 7:22; John 5:1–9; John 9; Romans 6:18–22]? In proclaiming these truths and more, our adversaries vehemently decry the dissolution of a fictitious "light of nature," fabricated preparations, free will, meritorious deeds for eternal salvation, and acts of excess virtue. They are averse to attributing the entire praise and glory of all that is good, all power, righteousness, and wisdom, to God alone. Yet, history does not recount reproof of those who have imbibed excessively from the fount of pure waters. Rather, "those who have dug cisterns that cannot hold water" find themselves reprov'd (Jeremiah 2:13). Furthermore, what better embodiment of faith is there than to profess God as a gentle and benevolent Father, Christ as Brother and Propitiator? What more befitting than to anticipate every good and blessing from God, whose love for us extends to the point of delivering "His own Son for us" (Romans 8:32)? What more appropriate than resting in the unshakable assurance of salvation and eternal life, considering that the Father has bequeathed us Christ, in whom unfathomable treasures lie? Yet, our opponents resist, asserting that such assured confidence exudes arrogance and presumption. Just as we dare not arrogate anything for ourselves, we must attribute everything to God. Devoid of personal glory, we exclaim, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord" (2 Corinthians 10:17; Jeremiah 9:23–24).

What more remains to be said? Reflect, O Mighty King, upon the facets of our cause, and judge us as perverse as the most perverse, if it does not become evident that our suffering, mistreatment, and slander stem from our unwavering faith in the living God. We believe that "this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (1 Timothy 4:10; John 17:3). This hope has led some among us to imprisonment, others to flogging, reparations, banishment, or the cruelties of affliction. Some have been driven to flee, their lives marred by tribulations, deemed accursed and detested, afflicted and dehumanized.

Conversely, ponder the estate of our adversaries—the priesthood—whose influence galvanizes others against us. Observe the sentiments that guide them, even for a fleeting moment. They readily permit ignorance, neglect, and disdain toward the true faith that scripture imparts—a faith that should be embraced and cherished by all. They believe that the nature of one's faith in God and Christ is of little consequence, as long as implicit faith (as they term it) compels submission to the church's authority. They are unfazed if God's glory is besmirched by evident blasphemy, so long as no word is uttered against the church's hallowed authority. Why do they vehemently defend the Mass, purgatory, pilgrimages, and trivial matters, insisting that true piety is unattainable without explicit faith in these concepts? None of these notions are substantiated by God's word. Why, except that "their god is their stomach" (Philippians 3:19), and religion is their sustenance—a truth so absolute that should it be wrested from them, they fear ceasing to be Christians, nay, even humans. While some revel in abundance and others eke out a subsistence with crusts, they all feed from the same pot. Deprived of sustenance, it turns cold, verging upon freezing. Those who are most concerned with their appetites are fervent defenders of their faith.

In summary, their objectives are unified—either to safeguard their dominion or to sate their appetites. There is not one among them who exhibits the faintest trace of righteous zeal. They refuse to halt their vehement assault against our doctrine, denigrating it in every conceivable manner to breed contempt or suspicion. They label it as "novel" and recently crafted. They accuse it of being dubious and uncertain. They demand proof of its legitimacy through miracles. They query whether it is justifiable to oppose the consensus of early church fathers and ancient traditions. They charge us with schism for challenging the church, or with alleging that the church has lain dormant for extended periods, during which this doctrine was nonexistent. Ultimately, they contend that little argument is needed, for the doctrine's merit can be appraised through its fruits—specifically, the proliferation of sects, turmoil, sedition, and audacious wrongdoing. Indeed, they easily manipulate the defenseless, ignorant masses. However, were we also granted the opportunity to speak, I venture that their ardor—currently manifested in vehement opposition—would temper considerably.

Challenging the "New" Label:

First and foremost, when they brand our doctrine as "new," they unjustly assail the very word of God—an accusation that does not befit sacred scripture. While I concede that it might be considered novel by their measure, for them, even Christ Himself and His gospel remain novel. Yet, to one who acknowledges that the gospel preached by St. Paul—declaring Christ's death for our sins and resurrection for our justification—is time-honored, our teachings yield nothing novel (Romans 4:25).

Denouncing the "Unknown" Claim:

The sin of its concealed existence for a prolonged period lies squarely at the feet of human impiety. As Providence restores it to us through divine benevolence, it should be embraced once more with its former reverence.

Refuting the "Uncertain" Assertion:

The notion that they brand our doctrine as dubious and uncertain arises from the same base ignorance. Indeed, it aligns with our Lord's lamentation, as conveyed by the prophet Isaiah, that the ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's stall, but God's own people fail to recognize Him (Isaiah 1:3). However much they scoff at our doctrine's supposed uncertainty, were they required to stake their lives on their own teachings, their perspective might be starkly different. Our confidence stands in stark contrast; it remains unshaken in the face of death's terror and divine judgment (Romans 8:35ff).

Addressing the "Miracle" Demand:

Their request for miracles from us is unreasonable. We do not propagate a new gospel; rather, we uphold the gospel of truth confirmed by the miracles performed by Jesus Christ and His apostles. Their demand outpaces ours in this regard. They claim continuous miracles in support of their teachings. Yet, these so-called miracles are either frivolous or deceitful, undermining the spirit and breeding doubt where there should be tranquility. Still, even if these miracles were extraordinary and wondrous beyond measure, they hold no sway over God's truth. God's Name is to be revered always and everywhere, irrespective of miracles or the natural order. Those who accuse us would find more semblance of validity if scripture did not admonish us on the right use of miracles. St. Mark elucidates that the apostles' miracles were performed to

confirm their message (Mark 6:7–12). Likewise, St. Luke underscores that through miracles, our Lord bore witness to the word of His grace (Acts 2:22). The apostle's pronouncement corroborates this: the gospel's salvation was verified by miraculous signs and powers (Mark 16:20; Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2:4). When we hear that miracles serve as seals for affirming the gospel, shall we pervert them into instruments that undermine its authority? Miracles were designed to establish the truth (John 5:36), yet we are compelled to manipulate them to strengthen falsehoods?

Prioritizing Doctrine Over Miracles:

First and foremost, the teaching that precedes miracles must be comprehended. If the teaching is just, then it may indeed be bolstered by miracles (Deuteronomy 13:1ff). A noteworthy indicator of true teaching is its alignment with Christ's affirmation that it should not seek human glory but rather glorify God. Since Christ himself deems this a litmus test, miracles are misused if appropriated for any purpose other than magnifying God's Name. Remember that Satan wields his own miracles—though illusory rather than genuine power—that can beguile the naïve and unenlightened (2 Thessalonians 2:9ff). Magicians and enchanters have always been recognized for their miraculous feats. Gentile idolatry thrived on wondrous miracles. Nevertheless, these phenomena fail to validate the legitimacy of either magician or idolater superstition. Ages ago, the Donatists bewildered the populace through a similar display of miracles. To our opponents, we echo St. Augustine's response to the Donatists then: our Lord has forewarned us against such miracle-workers and all superstition. He prophesied that "false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). St. Paul cautioned that the reign of the Antichrist would be

accompanied by power, miracles, and deceitful wonders (2 Thessalonians 2:4, 9–10). Yet, they contend, "Our miracles are not wrought by idols, enchanters, or false prophets, but by the saints." As if we are ignorant of Satan's cunning, capable of disguising himself as "an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). The Egyptians once deified Jeremiah, buried in their land, sacrificing and bestowing honors akin to their gods. Did they not exploit God's holy prophet for their idolatry? Although venerating his tomb cured snake bites, such a dichotomy attests to God's righteous punishment, making a ruse effective for those who harbor no love for truth—leading them to "believe what is false" (2 Thessalonians 2:10–12). In this realm of miracles, we are not lacking. Our miracles are resolute and impervious to mockery. Conversely, the miracles claimed by our opponents are mere ploys of Satan, steering people away from honoring God to indulging in vanity (Deuteronomy 13:1ff).

Regarding the Authority of the Early Church Fathers:

Furthermore, they unjustly wield the early church fathers—those who wrote during the church's initial era—as if their writings lent support to their impiety. Should a contest arise between us and them concerning the authority of these fathers, victory would favor our stance. While many wise and commendable words were penned by these church fathers, they, like all humanity, made errors and deviated in certain instances. Nevertheless, our opponents, these obedient children, seem to exclusively revere the errors and missteps of these fathers. Conversely, what the fathers articulated well is either misconstrued or ignored, giving the appearance that their primary concern is sifting dung from gold. Subsequently, they launch vehement accusations against us, falsely portraying us as disdainful of the fathers and their adversaries! Yet, to reveal our profound regard for them, I could readily substantiate most of my statements

today with their own testimony, if that were the objective. However, we approach their writings with discernment and diligence, guided by St. Paul's words: "All things are ours, to serve us and not to rule over us, and we are all united to one Christ whom we must obey in everything without exception" (1 Corinthians 3:21–23).

Straying from this Order Yields Uncertainty:

Those who disregard this order are unlikely to find surety in faith. The esteemed individuals in question often remained unaware of many matters, frequently disagreed among themselves, and occasionally contradicted their own positions. Our adversaries cite Solomon's admonition, "Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set" (Proverbs 22:28), yet this context pertains not to upholding the same boundaries in fields but rather in adhering to the faith. Obedience to the faith must be such that it enables one to "forget your people and your father's house" (Psalm 45:10). In light of their fondness for allegory, shouldn't they regard the apostles as their spiritual fathers, the ones whose boundaries should not be crossed? This interpretation is aligned with the viewpoint of St. Jerome, whose words are echoed in their canons.

Audacious Departures from Fatherly Limits:

Moreover, if our adversaries genuinely aim to uphold the bounds as conceived by the fathers, why do they themselves audaciously transgress those boundaries when it suits them? One father proclaimed that God neither eats nor drinks, hence lacks use for plates or cups. Another asserted that Christian sacraments require neither gold nor silver, for gold does not please God. Yet our opponents trespass these limits, reveling in their ceremonies embellished with abundant gold, silver, marble, ivory, precious stones, and silk, presuming that God is best honored through excess

and opulence. One father, a Christian, boldly admitted to consuming meat during Lent when others abstained. Here again, our adversaries overstep the boundaries by excommunicating those who have tasted meat during Lent. A father affirmed that monks who did not engage in manual labor should be deemed as thieves. Another asserted that monks ought not to subsist on the possessions of others even if they diligently pursued meditation, prayer, and study. Our adversaries, however, transgress these boundaries by confining idle monks' appetites within structures they label cloisters, to be sustained by the resources of others. Another father decried the presence of images of Christ or saints in Christian temples. Yet our opponents disregard these limits, adorning every corner of their temples with statues. A different father recommended allowing the dead to rest after fulfilling their humane burial rights. Our adversaries, on the other hand, breach these bounds, demanding ceaseless concern for the departed. One father explicitly denied that the true body of Christ was present under the bread in the sacrament of the Supper, instead asserting that it merely signifies His body—a verbatim account. Our adversaries cross the line by asserting the corporeal enclosure of Christ's body within the Eucharist. A duo of fathers—one advocating complete refusal of participation in the Supper to those who consumed one element without the other, and another asserting that Christian people must not be denied the Lord's blood since they must shed their blood for confessing Him—articulated opposing views. Our adversaries obliterate these boundaries by mandating the very practices that one father condemned with excommunication and another with valid criticism. One father suggested that decisions concerning obscure matters should refrain from taking sides without clear, visible scriptural evidence. Our adversaries overlook this boundary, fabricating numerous statutes, canons, and magisterial rulings void of scriptural foundation. Another father condemned Montanus, among other heresies, for instituting fasting laws. Our

adversaries breach these limits by imposing explicit laws concerning fasting. A father contended that ministers of the church should not be forbidden from marrying, even asserting that the company of a lawfully wedded woman constitutes chastity. Fellow fathers corroborated this stance. Yet our adversaries venture beyond this boundary by decreeing celibacy for all priests. One father emphasized adherence to Christ alone, the One of whom the Heavenly Father declared, "Listen to Him." He stressed disregarding past deeds or words of others in favor of obeying only what Christ has commanded—the One who ranks above all. Here, our adversaries deviate from these guardrails themselves and allow others to do the same. In unison, the fathers abhorred and condemned the corruption of God's holy word through sophistical intricacies and its obfuscation by philosophical disputes and arguments. Do our opponents restrict themselves to these boundaries, or do they, throughout their lives, contribute solely to burying and shrouding scripture's simplicity under ceaseless debates and questions more perplexing than sophistry? If the fathers were resurrected and exposed to today's skirmishes labeled "speculative theology," their disapproval would be unequivocal. The extent of this discourse would stretch were I to detail how boldly they repudiate the fathers, whose dutiful children they aspire to be considered. To enumerate these statements would require months and years. Yet, their impertinence is so profound that they dare to censure us for transgressing the age-old limits.

In Regards to their Appeals to Tradition:

Their recourse to tradition holds little weight. To be compelled to yield to tradition would be a grievous transgression. Indeed, even if human judgment were upright, it should emulate the conduct of virtuous individuals. Regrettably, history has borne witness to the

contrary. The multitude's actions have often been granted the legitimacy of tradition, yet human lives have seldom adhered to the highest standards. Thus, collective vices have birthed public errors—essentially, a shared acceptance of wrongdoing that these resolute individuals now seek to legitimize as law. Those with discernment recognize that the world is virtually submerged in a deluge of malevolence, ravaged by a multitude of fatal maladies. It has descended into decay, forcing a choice between despairing over the human condition or rectifying these evils with extreme measures. Alas, the solution is rejected simply due to our accustomed familiarity with calamities. Even if human governance is plagued by public error, within God's realm, only His eternal truth should be acknowledged and followed. Compared to His truth, no long-standing custom, ancient tradition, or collective agreement holds any weight. This echoes the teachings of Isaiah to God's chosen ones: "Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy," conveying that they should refrain from aligning with popular conspiracies or succumbing to shared fear. Instead, they should sanctify the Lord of hosts and fear only Him (Isaiah 8:12–13). Thus, let our adversaries present as many historical and contemporary examples as they wish. If we hold the Lord of hosts in reverence, their attempts to intimidate us will falter. Even if ages have united in the same impiety, the Lord possesses the power to punish unto the third and fourth generations. Should the entire world conspire in wickedness, we are reminded by past experience of the ultimate fate of those who sin alongside the multitude. When God cleansed the world through a flood, preserving only Noah and his small family, it demonstrated that, through faith, Noah alone condemned the world (Genesis 7; Hebrews 11:7). To summarize, injurious tradition is but a communal plague. Those who perish within the multitude's ranks are no less affected than if they perished alone.

The Struggle Over the Church and Tradition:

Our adversaries do not hold us in a vice grip with their argument, forcing us to admit that the church has lain dormant for years or that we currently wage war against the church. Truly, the church of Christ has endured and will continue to exist as long as Christ reigns at the right hand of His Father. He sustains the church, fortifies it with His watchful care, and empowers it with His might. As He once promised, He will remain with His followers until the end of time (Matthew 28:20). We are not contending against this church. Together with all the faithful, we venerate and honor one God and one Lord, Christ (1 Corinthians 8:6), just as His servants have always done. However, our opponents gravely err when they recognize the church only when it is visibly manifest and attempt to confine it within specific boundaries, in which it does not truly reside.

The Root of Our Contention:

This is the crux of our dispute. Firstly, they persistently demand a church with a tangible, observable presence. Secondly, they establish this presence within the structure of the Roman church and the authority of the bishops. Conversely, we assert that the church can exist without visible manifestation, and its visibility should not be gauged by the external grandeur that they unwisely admire. Rather, it bears an entirely different hallmark: the unadulterated proclamation of God's Word and the correct administration of the sacraments. Their satisfaction hinges upon the church's perpetual visibility, but how often has it been distorted among the Jews, so that no visible semblance remained? How did the church appear when Elijah lamented that he was the sole remaining adherent (1 Kings 19:10)? After Christ's advent, how frequently has the church been concealed, devoid of apparent form? How often has it been ravaged

by wars, divisions, and heresies, such that it was not visibly evident anywhere at all? If our opponents lived during those eras, would they have believed in the existence of any church? However, God informed Elijah that "there are seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal" (1 Kings 19:18; Romans 11:4). We must never doubt that Jesus Christ has perpetually reigned on Earth since His ascension.

Amidst Profound Tribulations:

Amidst such dire afflictions, were the faithful to yearn for a specific, visible entity, they would likely lose all hope. Indeed, St. Hilary viewed this as a grave vice in his time, as people's misguided reverence for episcopal status prevented them from discerning the potential evils concealed beneath episcopal facades. He observed, "I warn you, beware of Antichrist. You have fixated too much on walls, seeking God's church in ornate structures and assuming that the unity of the faithful resides within them. Could it be that Antichrist will find his foothold there? To me, mountains, forests, lakes, prisons, and desolate places appear safer and more trustworthy. Hidden within these realms, prophets have uttered their prophecies." Presently, what do the world's adorned bishops symbolize other than a belief that those who govern the grandest cities are the finest? Let us discard such an unwise judgment. Instead, we should entrust judgment to the Lord, for He alone knows His own (2 Timothy 2:19), and He occasionally conceals His church from human sight. Admittedly, this constitutes a formidable divine punishment upon the Earth. However, if human impiety warrants such consequences, why resist divine justice? Generations ago, the Lord chastised human ingratitude in this manner. Since humanity spurned His truth and extinguished His light, He allowed them to be blinded, ensnared by great falsehoods, and submerged in profound darkness. Yet, amidst

these errors and obscurity, He preserved His faithful, scattered and concealed. It is no marvel, for He guarded them both in the midst of Babylon's confusion and within the inferno of a blazing furnace.

Regarding the Authority of the Early Church Fathers:

Furthermore, it is important to address the voices of the early church fathers that our counterparts wield as if they bolster their impious notions. In a hypothetical contest between us and them over the weight of the church fathers' authority, the scales of victory would certainly tip in our favor. While these church fathers composed numerous wise and commendable works, it cannot be denied that, like all humans, they were prone to errors and deviations in certain instances. Yet our adversaries, these earnest and dutiful individuals, seem to focus solely on the errors and missteps of the church fathers, while disregarding or distorting their commendable writings. This seems to be their sole endeavor: to gather refuse amidst the treasure. They then raise a clamor, accusing us of dishonoring the fathers and opposing them. However, I want to emphasize that our approach to their writings is characterized by discernment and diligence. We are guided by the precept imparted by St. Paul, who declared that "all things are ours to serve us, not to rule over us, and we are all united to one Christ whom we must obey in everything without exception" (1 Corinthians 3:21–23).

The Consequences of Ignoring this Order in Matters of Faith:

Those who choose to disregard this order find themselves bereft of certainty in matters of faith. It is crucial to recognize that the esteemed figures we are discussing were often unaware of much, and their views and opinions frequently diverged or contradicted each other. Our opponents often invoke the wisdom of Solomon, who cautioned against going beyond the bounds set by our forefathers

without due cause (Proverbs 22:28). However, in this context, we are not dealing with the confines of fields or mere adherence to tradition. Rather, obedience to faith should be so steadfast that it transcends familial and historical ties, in the same spirit as the Psalmist's words: "Forget your people and your father's house" (Psalm 45:10). Furthermore, considering their penchant for allegory, why do they not consider the apostles as their true spiritual forefathers, whose boundaries they should not transgress? This interpretation aligns with the insights of St. Jerome, whose words they themselves cite in their canons.

Additionally, if our counterparts insist on adhering to the boundaries set by the fathers as they perceive them, why do they consistently exceed these bounds whenever they find it convenient? One father wisely stated that God neither partakes of food nor drink, implying that such material offerings are unnecessary for Him. Another father emphasized that Christian sacraments do not necessitate opulence, asserting that offering God precious metals does not resonate with Him. Yet our adversaries habitually transgress these boundaries by indulging in lavish displays of gold, silver, marble, precious gems, and silk during their ceremonies, presuming that such extravagance is the only way to truly honor God. Another father, due to his Christian faith, felt emboldened to consume meat during Lent when others abstained. Our counterparts, however, surpass these limits by excommunicating those who choose to consume meat during this period. The fathers also maintained that monks who did not engage in manual labor should be regarded as thieves, and that monks should refrain from subsisting on the possessions of others even while dedicating themselves to meditation, prayer, and study. Our opponents, however, have crossed these boundaries by allowing monks to reside in cloisters, enjoying the sustenance provided by others. Another father expressed his aversion to seeing images of

Christ or saints within Christian sanctuaries. Yet our adversaries disregard this boundary, adorning every corner of their places of worship with statues. Similarly, another father advocated for leaving the deceased in peace after fulfilling the duty of burial. Our counterparts transgress these limits by advocating for ongoing intercession for the departed. One father notably proclaimed that the true body of Christ was not physically present under the bread in the sacrament of the Supper, but rather a mystery of His body. Our adversaries extend beyond reason, asserting that the body of Christ is spatially enclosed within the bread. Some fathers decreed that partaking in one element without the other should result in complete denial of participation in the Supper, while another father maintained that the Christian populace should not be deprived of the Lord's blood, as they must be willing to shed their own blood in confessing Him. Our adversaries overstep these boundaries by enforcing actions that one father condemned with excommunication and another justly reprovved. Moreover, one father cautioned against making decisions on obscure matters without clear scriptural affirmation. Yet our opponents seem to disregard this boundary, promulgating numerous constitutions, canons, and authoritative decrees devoid of scriptural foundation. Another father criticized Montanus for instituting fasting regulations, among other heresies. Our adversaries, however, exceed these limits by imposing fasting through explicit laws. One father held that ministers of the church should not be prohibited from marriage and that being in the company of a lawfully wedded woman is an expression of chastity. Other fathers concurred with this sentiment. Yet our counterparts have surpassed these boundaries by mandating celibacy for all priests. It was also a father who emphasized the importance of listening solely to Christ, the one of whom the heavenly Father declared, "Listen to Him." This teaching suggests disregarding the words and deeds of predecessors and adhering solely to Christ's

commandments, recognizing Him as the supreme authority. Our adversaries, however, transgress these boundaries by establishing a hierarchy superior to Christ, making themselves, rather than Christ, the ultimate authority. All these fathers, united in spirit, lamented and unanimously condemned the adulteration of God's sacred word through sophistical subtleties and the obscuration of scripture's simplicity through philosophical disputes and intricate arguments. Do our opponents uphold these boundaries when their lives are consumed by ceaseless quarrels and inquiries more intricate than sophistry? Their audacity knows no bounds, as they boldly accuse us of straying beyond the ancient confines.

Concerning the Influence of Tradition:

When it comes to appealing to tradition, we must remember that this alone does not hold sway. To be coerced into yielding to tradition would indeed be a grievous error. Even though noble conduct might appear as a worthy guide, history demonstrates that this is not always the case. There have been instances where conduct was far from righteous. The approval of certain actions by the majority does not automatically translate to virtuous living, for human lives have often strayed from the path of goodness. Hence, the collective vices of many have given rise to widespread error, a consensus on vice that these brave souls now wish to establish as law. Those with discernment can perceive that our world has been inundated by oceans of malevolence. The entire globe is plagued by numerous deadly ailments, resulting in widespread ruin. In such circumstances, one may either despair about humanity's predicament or employ radical measures to rectify these grave wrongs. However, the rejection of a remedy often stems from our familiarity with ongoing calamities. Even if public errors persist in human governance, God's eternal truth should remain paramount

within His realm. In comparison to His truth, ancient rules, time-honored traditions, and even the most intricate conspiracies hold no value. This sentiment echoes the words of Isaiah from bygone days: "Do not say conspiracy wherever the people said conspiracy." This admonition urges us not to align ourselves with popular conspiracies or share the world's fears. Instead, we should revere the Lord of hosts, and let Him be our sole source of fear (Isaiah 8:12–13). Let our adversaries present as many historical and current examples as they please! When we revere the Lord of hosts, fear cannot overpower us. Even if numerous generations have collectively embraced impiety, the Lord possesses the power to chastise to the third and fourth generation. In times when the entire world united in wickedness, God demonstrated the ultimate fate of those who joined in the multitude's sin. He washed away the world in the flood, sparing only Noah and his small family. Through his faith, Noah alone condemned the entire world (Genesis 7; Hebrews 11:7). In essence, misguided tradition equates to a public affliction where those who perish as part of the multitude suffer the same fate as if they had perished individually.

The Endurance of the Church and Its Foundation:

Our adversaries' argument fails to corner us into conceding that the church has perished or that we are in conflict with it. The church of Christ has existed and will continue to exist as long as Christ reigns at the right hand of His Father. He sustains the church and arms it with His protection, strengthening it with His might. He will undoubtedly fulfill His promise to be with His followers until the end of time (Matthew 28:20). We are not at odds with this church. In unity with all the faithful, we worship and honor the one God and the one Lord, Christ (1 Corinthians 8:6), as they have always been revered by His servants. Our adversaries, however, err in not

recognizing the church unless it is visibly present and attempting to confine it within certain boundaries where it does not truly reside.

The Essence of Tradition and the Church's Form:

This controversy hinges upon several points. Firstly, our opponents consistently demand a visibly discernible manifestation of the church. Secondly, they establish this manifestation within the confines of the Roman church and the episcopal office. In contrast, we assert that the church can exist without apparent visibility, and that its visibility should not be gauged by the external splendor that they regard with undue admiration. The church possesses an entirely different hallmark: the unadulterated proclamation of God's word and the faithful administration of the sacraments. Their satisfaction is contingent upon pointing out the church's visibility, but consider the times when the Jewish people so twisted the church that no visible trace remained. What was the form of the church when the prophet Elijah lamented that he alone remained (1 Kings 19:10)? How often, after Christ's advent, did the church remain hidden without apparent shape? How frequently did it suffer through wars, schisms, and heresies, rendering it invisible? If our counterparts had lived during these periods, would they have recognized the presence of the church? Yet Elijah was informed that seven thousand individuals had not bowed before Baal (1 Kings 19:18; Romans 11:4). We must also believe that Jesus Christ has always reigned on earth since His ascension.

Amidst great tribulations, would the faithful not be disheartened if they sought a specific visible entity? St. Hilary of Poitiers observed a grievous vice in his time, where reverence for the episcopal office led people to ignore the concealed afflictions that often lurked beneath the façade of bishops. He conveyed, "Guard yourselves from

Antichrist. You have focused too much on the walls, looking for God's church in splendid structures, believing that the unity of believers resides within them. Could we doubt that Antichrist might find his dwelling there? In my view, mountains, forests, lakes, prisons, and deserts are safer and more reliable. Hidden there, the prophets have prophesied." Presently, what do we honor in bishops bedecked with horns, if not the assumption that those who preside over major cities are the finest? Let us discard such misguided judgments! Rather, let us leave judgment to the Lord, for He alone knows His own (2 Timothy 2:19). He is even capable of removing the outward recognition of His church from human sight. I admit that this is a stern punishment from God upon the earth. Yet, if human impiety warrants this, why should we resist divine justice? Generations past witnessed God's chastisement on humanity, where ingratitude prompted Him to permit people, who rejected His truth and extinguished His light, to be deceived by profound falsehoods. Thus, they were engulfed in profound darkness. In these times, the true church lacked visible form. However, God preserved His own within these periods of error and darkness, despite their dispersion and concealment. This is not surprising, as He safeguarded them amidst the confusion of Babylon and the fiery furnace.

Addressing the Perspective on Church Form:

The inclination of our adversaries to evaluate the church's form based on superficial grandeur demands a brief response, for the depth of its danger cannot be overstated. "The Roman pope, holding the apostolic throne," they assert, "and the other bishops represent the church and should be considered the embodiment of the church. Hence, they cannot err." This prompts the question: Why is this so? Their response echoes, "Because they are the shepherds of the church, consecrated to God." Yet, Aaron and other leaders of the

Israelites were also shepherds; Aaron and his sons were already chosen as priests of God, and yet they erred when they fashioned the golden calf (Exodus 32:2–4). By this logic, did not the four hundred prophets who misled Ahab also represent the church? However, it was the solitary Micah, the disregarded one, who spoke the truth (1 Kings 22:6–28). The prophets who opposed Jeremiah, claiming that "the law shall not fail from the priests, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets," did they not bear the name of the church (Jeremiah 18:18)? Did not a similar appearance manifest in the assembly of priests, scholars, and devout individuals who "consulted together about putting Jesus Christ to death" (John 11:53)? Our adversaries may cling to external facades, labelling Christ and the prophets of the living God as schismatics, while exalting Satan's agents as vessels of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, if our adversaries are sincere in their assertions, let them honestly answer this: In which land or among which people do they believe the church resides since, by the definite decree of the Council of Basel, Pope Eugenius of Rome was deposed and Amadeus took his place? They would find it impossible to deny that, in terms of external splendor, the council was legitimate and commendable. It was not initiated by one pope, but by two. Eugenius was branded as schismatic, rebellious, and obstinate, along with the whole assembly of cardinals and bishops who conspired with him against the council. Yet, due to the support of certain princes, Eugenius retained his papal authority. The election of Amadeus, formally executed in accordance with the authority of the holy general council, came to naught—except that Amadeus was placated with a cardinal's hat, akin to calming a barking dog with a scrap of bread. It is from these rebellious and obstinate heretics that popes, cardinals, bishops, abbots, and priests have emerged ever since.

This is the juncture where our adversaries are held accountable. Where will they categorize the label "church"? Will they dismiss the council as lacking genuine universality, despite its outward majesty, solemn proclamation through two bulls, and leadership by the legate of the Holy Apostolic Seat? Will they acknowledge Eugenius as a schismatic, alongside the entire faction that consecrated him? They must redefine the church's form, or, following their own doctrine, we will deem them schismatics who, with full knowledge, consented to ordination by heretics. Even without prior instances illustrating that the church need not be confined to external grandeur, their actions suffice as evidence. Under the pretext of the church, they wield authority to instill fear in the world, despite being afflictions of the church itself. Not referring to their morals and the ignoble deeds that fill their lives, for they resemble Pharisees who demand to be heard but not followed. Yet, if you dedicate a moment to peruse our teachings, you will clearly discern that their doctrine, for which they seek recognition as the church, is a harsh Gehenna, a massacre of souls, a torch of destruction, and a tearing apart of the church.

Concerning Sects and Turmoil:

Lastly, it is erroneous for our adversaries to censure us for the tumults, disorders, and disputes arising from the propagation of our teachings. They fault our doctrine for the fruits it bears in certain individuals. However, the blame for these misfortunes, maliciously attributed to our teachings, lies with the malevolence of Satan. The hallmark of God's word is that it seldom progresses without Satan inciting opposition and launching minor assaults. A sure way to distinguish God's word from false teachings is that the latter are readily embraced by all and align with the world's sentiments. In the past, when darkness enshrouded everything, the ruler of the world delighted in playing with humanity as he pleased. Like a

Sardanapalus, he luxuriated in peace, resting in his dominion. Yet, when light emanated from above, dispelling the darkness and challenging his rule, he roused from idleness and took up arms. Initially, he mobilized human forces to suppress the emerging truth by sheer might. Failing this approach, he resorted to deceit. Through movements like the Anabaptists, he stirred sects and divergent beliefs, obscuring the truth and ultimately extinguishing it. To this day, he employs both strategies to undermine the truth. He endeavors to uproot this true seed by force and human agency, while simultaneously attempting to smother it with weeds, preventing growth and fruition. However, all his efforts will prove futile if we heed the guidance of our Lord, who long ago unveiled Satan's tactics, arming us with sufficient defenses against his schemes.

Regarding Accusations and Trials:

To address the remainder, contemplate the great distortion in laying blame upon God's word for the hostility and divisions ignited by the foolish and the misguided, or the sects devised by the cunning. Yet, this pattern is not unprecedented. They interrogated Elijah, insinuating that he was the cause of turmoil in Israel (1 Kings 18:17–18). Christ faced accusations of sedition from the Jews (Luke 23:2; John 19:12). The apostles were accused of inciting unrest among the masses (Acts 24:5ff). Similar to today, those who attribute the disturbances, upheavals, and quarrels to us are repeating history. Elijah's response must be our reply: We are not sowing errors or fomenting disorders; instead, they themselves are resisting God's power. While this rationale suffices to counter their rash claims, it is also crucial to quell the uncertainty of those who, at times, are disheartened by these scandals and waver in fear. Let these wavering souls take solace in the understanding that similar circumstances befell the apostles in their era. In their time, ignorance and

instability led them to misinterpret and distort what Paul had divinely written (2 Peter 3:16). Some, swayed by a disdain for God, interpreted the abundance of sin to mean that grace should increase (Romans 6:1). Upon hearing that the faithful were not under the law but under grace (Romans 6:15), they retorted, "We will sin, for we are not under the law but under grace." Some labeled these teachings as encouragement for wrongdoing (Romans 3:8). False prophets infiltrated to dismantle the churches established by Paul (1 Corinthians 1:11ff; 2 Corinthians 11:3ff; Galatians 1:6ff). "Certain people preached the gospel out of envy and rivalry, not sincerely, supposing they can stir up trouble for my imprisonment" (Philippians 1:15–18). The gospel found limited success in some places, as "each is concerned about their own well-being, not that of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 2:21). Others reverted like dogs to their vomit and pigs to mud (2 Peter 2:22). Some misused the freedom of the Spirit for carnal indulgence (2 Peter 2:22). Numerous false brethren infiltrated, paving the way for considerable danger among the faithful (2 Corinthians 11:4–5). Within the brethren themselves, various disputes arose (Acts 6:1, 11:2ff, 15:1ff).

What recourse did the apostles possess? Were they to ignore reality for a while or forsake the gospel entirely, recognizing its potential for conflict, perils, and scandals? In the face of such tribulations, they remembered that Christ is a stumbling stone and a rock of offense, appointed for both the downfall and elevation of many, a stumbling block against which they will clash (Isaiah 8:14–15; Romans 9:32–33; Luke 2:34; 1 Peter 2:8). Armed with this conviction, they steadfastly persisted, surmounting the hazards posed by tumults and scandals. Likewise, we find consolation in the same knowledge, as affirmed by St. Paul who attested that the gospel will forever be "the fragrance of death to death for those who are perishing, and the

fragrance of life to life for those who are being saved" (2 Corinthians 2:15–16).

Turning our focus to you, Most Magnanimous King, do not be disconcerted by the baseless allegations propagated by our adversaries in an attempt to instill fear. Their claims that this "new gospel" (as they label it) seeks only to kindle discord and harbors a desire to act malevolently without consequences, are unfounded. God is a harbinger of unity, not division; and the Son of God, who descended to dismantle the devil's schemes, is not an advocate of sin (1 Corinthians 14:33; Galatians 2:17; 1 John 3:8). As for us, we are unfairly accused of greed—though we have never given rise to such suspicions. The notion that we are plotting to overthrow kingdoms is plausible to them, despite no record of a single seditious utterance from us. Our life, during the time we dwelled under your reign, has been characterized by innocence and tranquility. Cast out from our homes, we persistently implore God for your prosperity and that of your realm. The notion that we seek free rein to engage in all manner of evil without repercussions is equally incredible. Although we may be criticized for various aspects of our conduct, there is nothing that warrants such a grave accusation. Furthermore, through God's grace, we have reaped the fruits of the gospel without detriment. Our lives stand as an example of chastity, generosity, compassion, temperance, patience, modesty, and all virtues to those who speak ill of us. Undoubtedly, the truth bears witness that our desire to hallow God's name is demonstrated through our life and death. Even those envious of our virtuous behavior are compelled to acknowledge the innocence and civic righteousness displayed by some among us, who met death for actions that should have been deemed commendable.

However, if there are individuals who incite unrest, masking their actions beneath the guise of the gospel—an occurrence that has not

yet manifested within your realm—or if there are those who seek to cloak their carnal indulgence with the mantle of the liberty bestowed upon us by the grace of God (and I am aware of such individuals), the laws and penalties prescribed by the legal system are in place to address their transgressions with appropriate severity. Nevertheless, it is imperative not to allow the gospel of God to be maligned due to the malevolent deeds of these wrongdoers!

Most Exalted and Benevolent King, herein lies the venomous malice of those who slander us, exposed through these words so that you may not lend undue credence to their assertions. I fear I may have extended this discourse beyond necessity; this preamble nearly assumes the dimensions of a full defense, although I did not intend to present a defense, but rather to soften your heart and implore you to lend an ear to our cause. Despite your current disposition—your heart estranged and inflamed against us—I am hopeful that we might regain your favor, if you would deign to read our confession with an open mind, devoid of anger. This confession, we hope, will serve as our defense before your Majesty. However, if the malicious rumors perpetuated by our adversaries obstruct your willingness to listen, leaving us devoid of the opportunity to present our defense, or if, conversely, the impetuous fanatics persist in cruelty through imprisonment, beatings, torment, mutilation, and immolation without your intervention to rectify matters, we shall undoubtedly be on the brink of perishing—much like sheep set for slaughter. Even in such circumstances, we shall hold onto our patience, awaiting the powerful hand of the Lord, which will assuredly manifest in due time, delivering the afflicted and chastising the scornful.

May the Lord, the Sovereign of Sovereigns, establish your throne in righteousness and your authority in fairness, O Most Potent and Radiant King.

From Basel, on the twenty-third day of August, 1535.

CHAPTER ONE

The Knowledge of God

The entirety of our wisdom, worthy of the name true and certain, is essentially comprised of two main facets: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. The former must not only illuminate our minds with the understanding that there exists a solitary God, to whom all must pay reverence and homage, but also that this very One stands as the wellspring of truth, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, judgment, mercy, might, and holiness. Thus, we are prompted to anticipate and entreat everything from Him, and furthermore, to acknowledge with gratitude and praise that all these blessings emanate from Him. The latter aspect, in revealing our frailties, miseries, futility, and covetousness, compels us to experience despondency and cultivate distrust and self-loathing. Consequently, this introspection arouses within us a yearning to seek God, as in Him resides all the goodness that eludes us and all the fullness that we lack.

The progression of influence between these two aspects is intricate to decipher. Since human existence is replete with sorrow, we cannot scrutinize our own state without being struck and penetrated by the awareness of our destitution, compelling us to cast our gaze heavenward and glean at least some inkling of God's nature. Thus, through acknowledging our insignificance, ignorance, futility, as well

as our waywardness and corruption, we discern the genuine expanse of greatness, wisdom, truth, righteousness, and purity residing within God. Ultimately, it is through our recognition of our own frailty that we are impelled to contemplate the divine virtues. The fervent desire for God cannot take root within us until we have thoroughly recognized the inadequacy of our own state. Indeed, who refrains from self-reliance? Who refuses to trust in oneself as long as (unaware of one's own nature) contentment lies in one's own capabilities and the perception of one's own adversity remains concealed? This explains why the pursuit of God is not solely propelled by self-awareness, but is also guided and actively led by the divine hand.

Conversely, it is a well-established fact that individuals seldom gain profound insight into their own nature unless they have first beheld the countenance of the Lord, subsequently turning their attention inward. Pride is deeply ingrained within us, leading us to believe that we are just, truthful, wise, and holy—unless irrefutable evidence exposes our unrighteousness, falsehood, folly, and impurity. This conviction does not fully materialize if we exclusively focus on ourselves, disregarding the Lord, who serves as the exclusive standard and yardstick for such judgment. Given our inherent inclination toward hypocrisy, we are content with a superficial semblance of righteousness rather than the genuine article. Moreover, in a world profoundly tainted, we tend to view something slightly less defiled as extraordinarily pure, provided it adheres to the confines of our thoroughly contaminated human nature. This is analogous to an eye that, fixated on darkness, perceives a pale white or even somewhat gray object as the whitest conceivable entity. To understand our distorted assessment of the capacities of the soul, we can turn to the analogy of physical sight. In broad daylight, when we observe the earth or our surroundings, our vision appears clear and

strong. However, should we direct our gaze to the sun, the very same faculty, hitherto adept at discerning earthly things, becomes bewildered and blinded by the intensity of the light. In such a scenario, our purportedly strong vision for earthly matters pales in comparison to the radiant sun. Analogously, the same dynamics are applicable to the measurement of our spiritual faculties. As long as our purview is confined to earthly affairs, we revel in our righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, adulating and commending ourselves. Thus, we approach a state bordering on the divine. Yet, upon turning our attention to the Lord, recognizing His flawless righteousness, wisdom, and omnipotence—the ultimate yardstick by which we must assess ourselves—what previously captivated us with an illusion of righteousness stands tainted by immense wickedness. Our previous perception of wisdom transpires as extreme folly, and our semblance of strength reveals itself as feeble fragility. This occurs when our own attributes, seemingly most impeccable, are juxtaposed with God's unblemished purity.

Behold the wellspring of religious reverence and dread, as Scripture frequently recounts, which enveloped the faithful whenever they sensed the presence of God. Those who stood unwavering and confident in the absence of the Lord were swiftly unsettled and overtaken by terror as soon as the Lord unveiled His glory, reducing them to the precipice of death's fear and almost obliterating them. From this, we glean that an individual is not adequately pierced by the awareness of their own frailty until they measure themselves against the majesty of God. This fear is exemplified in the Book of Judges and throughout the words of the prophets, rendering it a concept known among the congregation of God's people: "We shall die, for we have seen God" (Judg. 13:22; Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28 and elsewhere). It is for this reason that the narrative of Job primarily draws its force from the portrayal of God's wisdom, might, and

purity, intending to humble individuals through the illumination of their folly, vulnerability, and impurity. This approach is apt, for we observe how the more Abraham drew near to behold the splendor of the Lord, the more deeply he grasped his own insignificance as mere dust and earth; and Elijah, confronted with the presence of God, shrouded his countenance out of profound reverence and apprehension (Gen. 18:27; 1 Kg. 19:13). What recourse is there for an entity, comprised of decay and corruption, when even the Cherubim are compelled to veil their faces due to intense reverence and dread (Isa. 6:2)? This is succinctly articulated by the prophet Isaiah: "The sun will be ashamed and the moon confounded, when the Lord of hosts reigns" (Isa. 24:23), signifying that upon the elevation and manifestation of His brilliance, even the most resplendent luminaries appear dim in comparison. Nonetheless, regardless of the interplay between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self, it is fitting to commence with the knowledge of God and then proceed to the latter.

We must unequivocally acknowledge the presence of an innate inclination within the human spirit—a latent sense of the divine—so that no one can feign ignorance. The Lord has imparted to all individuals a measure of comprehension concerning His majesty. Thus, when people hear of the existence of God and His role as creator, their own conscience stands as a testament against them for failing to accord Him due honor and dedicating their lives to fulfilling His will. Indeed, should we seek an individual so oblivious to the concept of God, the most plausible setting for such a scenario would be among the most untutored populace, those residing in the most remote reaches, far removed from the domains of civilization and kindness. However, even among pagans, it is commonly conceded that no society, regardless of its level of refinement, nor any group, no matter how distant from the orbits of cultured living,

is devoid of a notion of divinity. Even among those appearing to resemble brute creatures in every other facet of existence, a vestige of religious awareness persists. Thus, this universal conception becomes ingrained in each spirit and etched onto every heart. In light of the fact that there has never existed, since the inception of the world, a realm, a city, or even a household that could dispense with a sense of religion, we witness a tacit admission that the impression of divinity has been imprinted upon the hearts of all humankind. Even idolatry offers evidence of this notion, revealing how individuals willingly humble themselves and elevate other creations at their own expense. In opting to venerate wood and stone over potentially denying the existence of God, the intensity of this imprint of divine majesty becomes apparent—it is indelibly inscribed within the human spirit, more resistant to erasure than the eradication of its inherent sensibilities. This imprint is only eradicated when an individual, humbling themselves in the face of divine majesty, intentionally debases themselves before the lowliest of earthly entities to revere God. Thus, to suggest, as some do, that religion was a construct fashioned long ago by a few cunning minds to subdue a gullible populace and inculcate morality, even though the proponents themselves were void of any comprehension of the divine, is erroneous. While I concede that some cunning and crafty individuals among the pagans fabricated various religious elements to inspire fear and induce scruples among the uninitiated masses, they would not have succeeded if the human spirit had not been initially captivated by the firm conviction that God exists. This very conviction serves as the wellspring of their inclination to embrace the tenets of religion.

Furthermore, it would be amiss to assume that those who exploited religion as a façade to dupe the naive were entirely void of any awareness of the concept of God. Indeed, despite the existence of

some—and even more so in our times—who outright deny divinity, they cannot avoid the persistent stirrings within them, of which they are consciously evasive. Notably, there is no account of anyone displaying greater audacity or extremity in scorning God than the Roman Emperor Caius Caligula. And yet, whenever a manifestation of divine wrath surfaced, he trembled most wretchedly, involuntarily seized by a fear of God he consciously sought to spurn. This same pattern is readily observed among individuals akin to Caligula. Those most brazen in their derision of God are paradoxically the most susceptible to fear at the faintest rustling of a leaf. What could underlie this phenomenon except that the more they endeavor to distance themselves from divine majesty, the more their conscience is affronted by a punitive fear? They seek refuge in every conceivable nook to evade the presence of God, striving to erase His memory from their minds. Nonetheless, they remain inexorably ensnared. While the semblance of this memory might sometimes wane temporarily, it invariably resurfaces with heightened intensity, imposing itself more forcefully than before. Even if they gain brief respite from the torments of a troubled conscience, it scarcely differs from the slumber of inebriates or lunatics who, even in sleep, remain restlessly disturbed by visions and harrowing dreams. Thus, even the most wicked among us serves as a testament, corroborating the fact that the knowledge of God exerts a degree of influence within the hearts of all men.

We have heretofore observed that the knowledge of God should precipitate the sowing the seed of religious sentiments within our hearts. Initially, it prompts us to hold God in awe and veneration, and subsequently, it guides us to recognize that all goodness originates from Him, compelling us to render gratitude for such benevolence. How could the thought of God infiltrate your consciousness without immediately prompting the realization (given

your status as His creation) that by virtue of creation, you are subject to His dominion? That your existence should be consecrated to His service? That every thought, word, and deed should be imbued with devotion to Him? Consequently, it unequivocally follows that a life deviating from obedience to His sanctified will is profoundly tainted by wickedness. However, we fall into the pitfall of vanity and folly on both fronts. Instead of perpetually surrendering our lives in obeisance to Him, we frequently defy Him in our actions, striving to appease Him with scant "satisfactions." Rather than striving to please Him through a pure and innocent heart, we assemble futile rituals and empty gestures in a misguided attempt to appease Him. Instead of wholeheartedly entrusting our confidence in Him, we place our trust in ourselves or other mortal entities. Moreover, we find ourselves ensnared by a multitude of errors and depraved notions, rendering this initial glimpse of truth, which once illuminated the path to contemplation of God's majesty, obscured and extinguished. It no longer serves as a beacon guiding us toward profound understanding. Thus, only the first seed of knowledge endures, an indelible conviction that some form of divinity exists.

Yet, this seed has been corrupted to such an extent that it bears only poisoned fruit. Thus, we transgress primarily in two ways. The first involves individuals, in their quest to comprehend divine truth, failing to transcend their own nature. Instead, they gauge God's grandeur through the limitations of their senses. They do not apprehend Him as He reveals Himself, but rather, they fashion an image based on their presumptuous imagination. Consequently, they dig a perilous abyss wherein, once ensnared, they inevitably plummet toward damnation, regardless of the direction they attempt to take. No matter their subsequent efforts to serve God, they cannot hold Him in their debt, as they fail to honor Him and instead venerate their self-conceived images. This rebukes the convenient

pretext many wield to excuse their superstition, asserting that any form of religious sentiment—no matter how convoluted—is sufficient. They disregard the fact that genuine religion must align with what pleases God according to His eternal standards. Moreover, they fail to recognize that God remains immutable, unaltered by individual desires. This inconstancy leads to an array of futile delusions through which superstition seeks to appease God. By concentrating solely on practices to which God is indifferent, it disregards the ones He ordained and deems agreeable. Superstition either neglects these practices or openly repudiates them. Consequently, those who, in an effort to worship God, establish religions based on their own whims, merely venerate their own fantasies. They would not have dared to mock God in this manner had they not first conformed Him to their own fictions. This underscores why the apostle asserts that an uncertain and disorderly conception of God signifies ignorance of God. "When you knew not God," he proclaims, "you did service to them that by nature are not gods" (Gal. 4:8). In another passage, he notes that the Ephesians were "without God in the world" when they remained ignorant of Him (Eph. 2:12). This particular error remains salient whether one envisions a single deity or multiple gods. Regardless of the approach, individuals have strayed from the true God, invariably embracing repugnant idolatry. It is thus imperative to concur with Lactantius, who asserts that a genuine religion must be interwoven with truth.

The second error transpires when individuals are compelled, whether voluntarily or otherwise, to contemplate God. However, this contemplation does not stem from a reverence for His majesty; rather, it emerges from fear of His judgment—a dread that haunts them, rendering escape impossible and causing them to abhor it. Impiety aligns with the sentiment expressed by a pagan poet: "Fear was first introduced to the world as reverence for God." Those

alienated from God's righteousness would gladly envision His throne, established to administer justice for transgressions against His moral order, toppling over. In this desire, they wage war against a God whose existence is irrevocably linked to His judgment. They realize the futility of evading His omnipotent authority. Consequently, they fear it. In order to avoid appearing utterly disdainful of His majesty, they extend a semblance of religiosity, as a means of paying tribute. Simultaneously, they continue to saturate themselves with an assortment of vices, amassing sin upon sin until they decimate the sanctity of the Lord's commandments and desecrate His righteousness. Alternatively, this hypocritical fear fails to rein in their transgressions; rather, they bask complacently in their iniquity. Their actions demonstrate a preference for indulging the unrestrained impulses of their flesh rather than subduing them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This shadowy semblance of religiosity, which scarcely deserves that designation, must be briefly elucidated. Furthermore, the unique understanding of God—the insight uniquely breathed into the hearts of the devout—along with the resultant sentiment of piety, necessitate explication.

First and foremost, the heart of the faithful does not haphazardly fashion any arbitrary deity; rather, it beholds the sole true God. It does not attribute to Him whatever suits its fancy, but rather accepts Him as He has chosen to reveal Himself. In doing so, it exercises cautious vigilance, refraining from straying beyond His will due to presumptuous insolence. Armed with the knowledge of His divine intentions, the faithful heart recognizes His providential governance over all matters. It thus entrusts itself under His guidance, acknowledging Him as both Teacher and Guardian. Consequently, in times of need, it hastens to Him for succor, invoking His name and awaiting His aid. Instilled with conviction regarding His benevolence and goodwill, the faithful heart rests assured in His mercy, unfazed

by the notion that suitable remedy for all tribulations shall, through His mercy, be provided. Recognizing Him as both Lord and Father, the heart perceives a duty to consecrate itself to His commandments, revere His majesty, strive to advance His glory, and abide by His will. Witnessing Him as a just Judge destined to eventually chasten all transgressors, the heart persistently places His throne before its eyes. This act of vigilance curbs any inclination toward actions that might provoke His wrath. Nevertheless, the heart is not so overtaken by fear of God's judgment that it seeks to evade it, even if such an escape were plausible. Instead, it welcomes Him with equal warmth as the Corrector of the wicked and the Rewarder of the virtuous, recognizing that it is God's glory to both punish the wicked and bestow eternal life upon the faithful. This heart, moreover, refrains from sin not solely due to apprehension of divine retribution; it abstains because it loves and reveres God as a Father and fears Him as a Savior. Even in the absence of a concept of hell, it recoils from offending Him. Hence, pure and authentic religion emerges—an amalgamation of faith entwined with genuine fear of God. Under this umbrella of "fear," one finds both the adoration of His righteousness, as ordained by His law, and the reverence tendered to His majesty, offered wholeheartedly.

Now, if we are born with the purpose of attaining knowledge of God (and this knowledge remains ineffectual and barren unless it culminates in this understanding), it is evident that those who do not channel each thought and action of their lives toward this objective deviate from the intended order of their creation. Even the philosophers recognized this verity. Plato, on multiple occasions, expounded that the supreme good of the soul rests in attaining the likeness of God—a state reached through the true contemplation of God and complete transformation within Him. Gryllus, as chronicled by Plutarch, similarly astutely argued that the absence of religion

would not merely deprive people of any spiritual enhancement; it would render them, in certain respects, more miserable. Stripped of divine connection, they would be subjected to myriad afflictions, leading lives fraught with toil and devoid of repose. The sole element elevating them beyond mere beasts lies in their knowledge of God, which engenders hope for immortality.

The paramount purpose of a blessed life lies in the comprehension of God's name, a goal mandated by God Himself. To ensure no one is excluded from this pursuit, He unveils Himself unambiguously to all. Although He remains intrinsically unfathomable, He imprints within each of His creations distinct signs of His majesty. These signs beckon us to acknowledge Him, albeit in accordance with our limited capacity. These signs are so overt and evident that no excuses can justify ignorance—profound or feeble. While His fundamental essence eludes our grasp, His ever-visible powers manifest before our eyes, enabling us to recognize Him, and thus safeguard our salvation.

When you cast your gaze in any direction, no corner of the world remains untouched by a spark of His divine glory. The universe, in all its vastness and expansiveness, invariably overwhelms with the profusion of light it emits, akin to a radiant flood. The apostle, addressing the Hebrews, aptly dubs the earthly realm "the mirror of invisible things" (Heb. 11:3), for the world's arrangement mirrors the otherwise concealed divinity, serving as our means to observe God's invisible attributes. This notion also finds resonance in the psalms, which attribute to celestial beings a language understood by all nations (Ps. 19:4). Within these celestial beings, a conspicuous testimony to divinity exists, rendering God unmistakably evident even to the most ignorant and unrefined souls. The apostle Paul, expounding further, asserts that "what may be known of God is

manifest," clarifying that attributes like His eternal power and divine nature are discernible through the marvels of His creation (Rom. 1:19-20).

Endless evidence, whether in the celestial spheres or upon the earth, stands as a testament to His remarkable wisdom. These testimonies encompass not only the intricate marvels that demand comprehension in fields like astronomy, medicine, and physics, but also the plain and evident displays that even the most uninformed can witness. The latter, akin to an unassisted sight, unveils God's skill and artistry within His creations, eliciting awe and admiration for the Creator. While specific disciplines like the liberal arts may equip individuals to deeply explore divine wisdom, unfamiliarity with such fields does not hinder anyone from perceiving the remarkable intricacies in God's handiwork. Consider, for instance, the comprehensive knowledge required to probe the movements of celestial bodies, demarcate orbits, calculate distances, and discern distinctive features—a task that reveals God's providence. Consequently, the heart ascends in reverence to acknowledge His glory. Even those bereft of expertise in these disciplines are not blind to the superior wisdom woven into the arrangement of stars, as they shine in countless, harmonious constellations. Hence, it is certain that God's wisdom resonates universally. Similarly, one does not require scholarly erudition to detect the unity, proportion, beauty, and purpose inherent in the human body, as demonstrated by Galen's elucidation. Yet, even within the world's eyes, the human body boasts such intricacy that its Maker merits boundless admiration.

Furthermore, consider the myriad examples that beckon us to reflect on God's power. Can it be otherwise? Should we disregard the power that sustains the vastness of heaven and earth merely by His word?

He commands the heavens to tremble with thunder, to melt under the consuming fire He wields. Lightning dances in the skies, while tempests of diverse natures stir the world. Yet, in a heartbeat, tranquility is restored to the world, for His command is supreme. He upholds the sea aloft, in a manner that it cannot wreak havoc on the land despite its imposing elevation. Though its towering stance threatens great harm, the earth remains unharmed. Yet, at times, He strikes the earth with the force of fierce winds, only to calm the tempestuous waves in swift succession. This profound power prompts contemplation of His eternity, as the One from whom all things derive their inception must himself be eternal, drawing his existence from Himself.

Moreover, should you seek the cause that impelled Him to create all things in the past and sustain their existence thereafter, you will discern no other motive than His boundless goodness. This alone should suffice to kindle our love for Him. As the prophet avows, His mercy is lavished upon all creation, leaving no being untouched by its outpouring (Psalm 33:5).

Similarly, the same unmistakable signs of His power reverberate in His second category of works—those which transpire beyond the confines of nature's predictable course. In governing humanity, His providence orchestrates a symphony wherein the good bear witness to His righteousness in the guiding of their lives, while the wicked encounter His judgment. His retribution for transgressions remains unobscured, conspicuously visible to all. He emerges as the Mentor and Guardian of the innocent, causing the lives of the virtuous to flourish through His blessings. He tends to their needs, assuages their sorrows, and provides remedies for their afflictions, ensuring their salvation. Although He may temporally withhold punishment from the wicked and allow the righteous to suffer afflictions—

sometimes even at the hands of the wicked—His unwavering righteousness must not be discounted. Instead, we should perceive things differently, understanding that manifest wrath against a single sin underscores His detestation of all sins. Likewise, when He postpones the punishment for many, we ought to anticipate a subsequent judgment to which the penalty has been deferred.

Moreover, the abundant grounds He provides to reflect on His mercy! His unwavering kindness towards wretched sinners persists, drawing them back to Him through a mercy surpassing even that of a father, until their obstinacy yields to His benevolent bestowals.

Both His power and wisdom remain unveiled. His power is evident when the cruelty of the wicked, seemingly insurmountable in human eyes, crumbles in an instant. Human arrogance is overthrown, their weapons shattered, armies routed, and schemes dismantled by their own violence. Audacity, once soaring, is humbled. Conversely, the downtrodden rise from dust, the impoverished from the lowest depths, the afflicted from their anguish, and the hopeless are infused with new hope. The feeble triumph over the mighty. His second attribute, wisdom, orchestrates a world ordered according to His pleasure. This order baffles worldly wisdom and surprises the wise in their cunning, uniquely shaping the governance of the entire world.

There's no need for an exhaustive demonstration when such a wealth of witnesses illuminates and validates God's majesty. Even the handful of examples we've recounted stands as incontrovertible, recognizable throughout every corner we turn, readily within sight and grasp.

It's vital to note that the knowledge we pursue of God does not merely entail idle speculation. Instead, it must be useful and fruitful, impacting our lives once we truly apprehend it. God reveals Himself

through His works; experiencing the power within them and reaping their benefits should move us more deeply than theoretical imaginings of God suspended in air. Thus, the most righteous path to seek God and the highest order to follow entails contemplating His presence within the works that bring Him near and familiar. Rather than audaciously attempting to unravel the intricacies of His essence, we should worship it, allowing curiosity to rest. The apostle alludes to this when he conveys that "we do not have to search for Him far away, for He resides within each of us through His power" (Acts 17:27-28). Thus, David, after reflecting on God's works, acknowledges His ineffable exaltation and pledges to proclaim this exaltation. Consequently, our pursuit of God should compel us, holding our spirit in a state of awe that, in turn, enkindles a genuine perception of Him.

This knowledge should not solely inspire reverence and service toward God; it should also ignite our anticipation for the life beyond. As we perceive the marks of His mercy and severity as partial glimpses, we recognize them as but a foretaste of what will be fully unveiled on the appointed day. Simultaneously, as we witness the virtuous suffering afflictions, enduring insults, and confronting deception, while the wicked flourish untroubled, we discern another life in which wickedness shall meet its retribution, and righteousness shall find its reward. Moreover, as we see the faithful subjected to divine chastisement, we find solace in the resolution that the wicked shall not escape their due punishment. In every work of the Lord, but particularly within the vast array, His power and virtue are displayed like a vibrant canvas inviting the world to the knowledge of God, and through that, the embrace of supreme joy.

Despite the apparent clarity of these powers and virtues, we often fail to grasp their true direction, meaning, and intended purpose. Only

by delving into our inner selves can we comprehend how God reveals His life, wisdom, power, and virtue within us. It's in this self-reflection that His righteousness, goodness, and mercy towards us become evident. Though some illumination is granted through contemplation of God's works, which serve as a reflection of both Him and His eternal kingdom, our spirits, shrouded in earthly concerns, often remain blind to these glaring testimonies. Do we not, while surveying the expansive regions of earth or gazing heavenward, neglect the Creator and fixate on His creation?

In matters that deviate from nature's predictable course, how many dismiss these occurrences as mere twists of fate, leading people hither and thither? Do they not rather overlook God's providence guiding them with precision? And even when we're compelled to contemplate God's role in such events (a predicament that befalls us all), we swiftly revert to our carnal inclinations and cloud the pure truth of God with our frivolities. While variations may exist among us, each concocting a unique error, a common thread binds us: we forsake the one true God for the fabrications of our deceitful imaginations. It's not confined to the uneducated masses alone; even those distinguished in wisdom and teaching are ensnared. The entire line of philosophers stands as evidence of this madness and folly. Even Plato, who stands as a moderate and rational thinker, and one closest to religion, falters grievously in this aspect. His quest for a physical God is unworthy, ill-fitting the exalted divine majesty. What then can we expect from others when the foremost thinkers—tasked with enlightening the masses—have themselves been ensnared? Similarly, in instances where divine governance is palpably evident, many remain unmoved, viewing everything as a haphazard, fortune-driven affair. Such is our penchant for folly and error! And I speak not merely of the common folk but also of those esteemed in wisdom, whose excesses have soiled and contaminated God's truth.

Consequently, the multitude of lamps within the grand edifice of the world, intended to illuminate the glory of the Creator, appears in vain. Despite their radiance, they often fail to guide us on the proper path. These lamps may emit sparks, yet these flames are extinguished before they can fully ignite. This is why the apostle, while labeling the world "the image of things invisible," appends that "faith enables us to comprehend that it was formed by the word of God" (Hebrews 11:3). In essence, the invisible divinity is depicted through the form of the world, yet our unaided eyes cannot perceive this divinity unless illuminated by faith through God's internal revelation. Even St. Paul, while affirming that "what may be known about God is manifest in the creation of the world," does not imply an understanding accessible to human comprehension. Rather, he conveys that "this manifestation merely serves to render individuals without excuse" (Romans 1:19-20). Although he elsewhere asserts that "we need not seek God from afar, for He dwells within us" (Acts 17:27), he also emphasizes the significance of this nearness. He states, "In times past, God allowed people to pursue their own ways. Nevertheless, He never left Himself without witnesses. He dispensed benefits from heaven, bestowing rain, and yielding fruitfulness and sustenance. He filled people with nourishment and joy" (Acts 14:17).

While the multitude of witnesses to God's presence exists, gently beckoning us to know Him through His generosity, humanity remains ensnared in their ways, ensnared by their damnable folly. Though our inherent faculties struggle to attain a pure and wholesome understanding of God, the onus of ignorance falls upon us. All excuses for evasion are stripped away. We're not justified in claiming such ignorance that we are absolved from negligence and ingratitude. To assert that our ears fail to hear the truth—uttered loud and clear by mute creatures—or to proclaim our inability to witness that which creatures without sight proclaim, is a feeble and

unworthy defense. Similarly, to attribute our lack of knowledge to the feebleness of our spirit when all senseless creatures impart their teachings, reflects poorly on us. Thus, any excuses of having gone astray, as if lost, are justly invalidated. Despite the myriad offerings of creation that point the way, we all too readily divert from the path, distorting the seed of God's knowledge sown in our minds by nature's astounding craftsmanship. Our faculties, overwhelmed by the corrupting influence of the flesh, fail to bear fruit. While it's undeniable that our natural inclination is to dilute the purity of the knowledge of God, it's equally true that the testimony borne by creation's simplicity and bareness is insufficient to educate us. For the moment we grasp even a faint glimmer of divinity through contemplation of the world, we forsake the true God. In His place, we erect phantoms and figments born from our own imagination, attributing to them the righteousness, wisdom, goodness, and power of God. Moreover, we obscure His daily workings or misjudge them to such an extent that the praise and gratitude owed to Him for these marvels is stolen and denied.

As the Lord extends the brilliance of His majesty through His creations to all without exception, thus depriving human impiety of every conceivable defense, He simultaneously aids those whose hearts He wishes to illuminate for salvation. For their edification, He not only employs mute creatures, but He also parts His holy lips. He not only commands them to worship a deity but also reveals Himself as the very deity they must worship. He not only instructs them to know a God, but also presents Himself as the God in whom they must abide.

From the beginning, the Lord has observed this pattern in summoning His servants. Beyond the aforementioned methods of teaching, He employs His word, a more reliable and familiar sign to

know Him. Thus, Adam, Noah, Abraham, and the patriarchs acquired a correct understanding of God. They were illumined by His word, whether transmitted through visions and oracles or, passed down by their forebears, was delivered through successive generations. How they came into possession of divine words did not matter, as long as they comprehended that it originated from God. The Lord always ensured this, especially when accommodating the revelation of His word. To a select few, He revealed Himself, offering a clear manifestation of His presence and entrusting them with the treasure of salvific teaching, meant to be disseminated to future generations. Abraham, for instance, shared the covenant of eternal life with his descendants, laboring to preserve it for posterity. Consequently, from that point on, Abraham's lineage stood apart from other nations due to the distinctive grace of being incorporated into this community of the word.

When the Lord saw fit to establish a more distinct congregation, He formalized this same word more solemnly, commanding it to be inscribed as an official decree. Henceforth, the revelations or utterances of God's word, which had been traditionally passed down among the faithful, became permanently documented in writing. By this, the Lord served the welfare of those who would come after, providing them with special providence. Reflecting on the human tendency to forget God, the ease with which errors are embraced, and humanity's penchant for conjuring new religions and fallacies, it becomes clear why heavenly teachings had to be committed to writing. This safeguarded them from oblivion, error, or corruption wrought by human presumption.

Given that God effectively used His word to instruct those He deemed suitable, recognizing that His form and image, inscribed upon the structure of the world, proved insufficient, we must tread

this path if we aspire to contemplate His truth wholeheartedly. We must return to the word, wherein God is revealed vividly, depicted as if living through His works. This is only possible when we assess them according to the standard of eternal truth, rather than the distortions of our own judgments. Should we deviate from this word, our haste will lead us astray, for we will not be traversing the right path. It's essential to understand that the light of God, labeled as "inaccessible" by the apostle, functions like a labyrinth that leads us astray unless guided by the direction of the word. Therefore, it is wiser to limp along this path than to rush aimlessly outside it. Thus, David, after detailing how the heavens proclaim God's glory, how the firmament declares His handiwork, and how the orderly alternation of day and night manifests His glory, turns his focus to the recollection of His word. "The law of the Lord," he asserts, "is flawless, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, imparting wisdom to the humble; the precepts of the Lord are right, causing the heart to rejoice; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes" (Psalm 19:7-8). By this, he signifies that while teaching through creation is universal, instruction through the word is reserved specifically for the children of God.

Once it is acknowledged that the offered word is of divine origin, none—unless entirely devoid of both natural sensibility and humanity—would dare to depart from faith in it. However, since fresh oracles are not delivered daily from the heavens, and we possess only the Scriptures, wherein God has chosen to eternally preserve His truth, it becomes necessary to briefly demonstrate why this Scripture carries the same authority for the faithful as God's voice audibly issuing from His own mouth. While this topic merits thorough exploration and careful contemplation, readers may pardon me if I devote more attention to what the constraints of this

current discourse allow, rather than expounding on the grandeur this subject warrants.

Numerous individuals subscribe to the pernicious error that Scripture possesses no greater significance than what is attributed to it by the church's consensus—as if the eternal, inviolable truth of God rested on human preferences! Such a stance, tantamount to a grave affront to the Holy Spirit, is espoused by those who demand: "Who can authenticate that Scripture emanated from God? And who can guarantee its preservation in entirety to our era? Who can convince us that one book deserves obedience, while another can be discarded, unless the church supplies a definitive standard for all these matters?" Consequently, they assert that the church determines the reverence due to Scripture and dictates which books merit inclusion. By adopting this viewpoint, these individuals, aiming to establish unbridled dominion in the guise of the church, appear heedless of the absurdities they embrace. Their goal is to convince the unlearned that everything is at the church's discretion. However, were this true, what fate awaits those troubled consciences seeking assurance of eternal life? When these individuals discern that every promise of eternal life rests solely on human judgment, how can they overcome trembling and doubt? Conversely, how will unbelievers mock our faith? How suspicious will it seem to the world if they perceive Scripture as resting on human favor and caprice?

However, such deceivers can be swiftly countered with a solitary utterance from St. Paul, who testifies that "the church rests upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles." If the teaching of these prophets and apostles forms the bedrock of the church, then this teaching must be securely established for the church to even emerge. They cannot argue that, although the church has its origins there, it remains uncertain which books should be attributed to the prophets

and apostles without the church's judgment. For if the Christian church was founded from the outset on "the writings of the prophets and the preaching of the apostles" (Ephesians 2:20), wherever this teaching is encountered, it must have been validated prior to the church's existence. Hence, it is utter folly and falsehood to assert that the church wields the authority to pass judgment on Scripture in a manner that allows it to determine the level of certainty that Scripture may possess. Thus, when the church receives and endorses Scripture, it is not providing authentication to what was previously doubtful or uncertain. Rather, by fulfilling its duty, the church acknowledges Scripture as the truth of its Lord and pays it due reverence.

Regarding their query, "How can we be certain that Scripture is from God without resorting to the church's decree?" It's comparable to inquiring how we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sour from sweet. In fact, Scripture presents no less proof of its veracity than white or black objects do of their colors, or sweet and bitter things do of their flavors. Therefore, if we desire to nurture consciences so they aren't continually plagued by doubt, the authority of Scripture must be grounded in something loftier than human calculations, indications, or conjectures. It must be rooted in the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. Although Scripture's inherent value warrants reverence, it truly captivates us when sealed within our hearts by the Holy Spirit's power. Through His illumination, we don't believe in Scripture based on our own judgment or the judgment of others. Above all human assessment, we ascertain without doubt that God delivered it to us through human ministry, as if gazing upon God's essence within it. We don't seek proofs or probabilities on which our judgment may rest. Instead, we surrender our judgment and understanding to it, treating it as something elevated beyond the need for evaluation. Our approach differs from

those who casually accept something unknown, only to reject it once known. Our conviction is firmly grounded in the certainty that Scripture holds invincible truth. Furthermore, we are not like the ignorant, who readily surrender their minds to superstitions. We are motivated by the precise power of divinity, manifesting its strength. Thus, we are drawn and ignited to obey, knowingly and willingly, with greater efficacy than through human understanding or will. This persuasion requires no rationalization, yet it rests upon solid reasoning. Our spirits find a more certain and secure repose than any reason can offer. Finally, it is a sentiment that only heavenly revelations can arouse. I express nothing beyond what each believer experiences within, except that words inadequately convey the gravity of the subject.

Without this certainty, which transcends human judgment, any effort to prove Scripture's authority through reasons or through the church's consensus would be futile. Unless this foundation is firmly established first, Scripture's authority will remain perpetually uncertain. However, once we have embraced it with obedience and cast off all doubt, reasons that previously lacked power to implant certainty regarding its authority in our hearts become valuable allies. The authority of Scripture receives incomparable confirmation when we contemplate how God has meticulously arranged and distributed His wisdom within it. We observe how its teachings consistently manifest a heavenly nature, devoid of worldly taint, displaying a remarkable harmony throughout its parts. Such considerations grant authority to a written work. Furthermore, our hearts grow even more steadfast when we recognize that it's the majesty of its content—not the artistry of its words—that evokes our admiration. This outcome didn't come about haphazardly; rather, it was a result of God's providence, ensuring that the profound secrets of the heavenly kingdom were conveyed through words that can be easily overlooked

—words lacking in grandiloquence. This choice was deliberate to prevent critics from contending that the power of Scripture resides solely in its language.

Given that a simple, almost rustic simplicity commands greater reverence than all the eloquence of worldly rhetoricians, we can only conclude that Scripture contains a truth of such potency that it requires no embellishment of words. Thus, it's not without reason that the apostle demonstrates the Corinthians' faith "rests not on human wisdom but on the power of God." His preaching among them wasn't adorned with persuasive human rhetoric but was confirmed through the demonstrations of spirit and power (1 Corinthians 2:1, 4). Truth is unshakable in its self-sufficiency, capable of standing without external support. The specific power inherent in Scripture becomes evident when we consider that no human writings possess it, regardless of how polished they are or how embellished with techniques that may captivate us. Should we read Demosthenes or Cicero, Plato or Aristotle, or other luminaries of their ilk, it's true they may enthrall us, give pleasure, and even leave us breathless in awe. However, should we transition from their writings to reading the Holy Scripture, whether we wish it or not, the Scripture will penetrate us so profoundly that it will lodge itself deep within our hearts. In comparison, all the artistry of rhetoricians or philosophers becomes but smoke. This serves as clear evidence that Holy Scripture carries a divine quality, inspiring people in a manner that transcends all the allure of human craftsmanship.

However, the consensus of the church carries weight as well. We should not disregard the fact that, over the many ages since the publication of Scripture, an unwavering agreement to obey it has endured. Despite the devil's manifold attempts to suppress, overturn, and even erase it from human memory, Scripture has remained

steadfast and triumphant, much like the unyielding palm tree. Numerous philosophers and rhetoricians of superior intellect have employed their cunning against Scripture, yet all have been utterly unsuccessful. Earthly powers have rallied to dismantle Scripture's truth, only to see their efforts dissolve into mere smoke. In the face of such relentless attacks from every direction, how could Scripture have defended itself if it relied solely on human aid? This compels us to conclude that the holy Scripture we possess is indeed of divine origin, for it has persevered and advanced through the power of God, notwithstanding human wisdom and might. Furthermore, Scripture has not been embraced by a singular city or nation; rather, it has gained authority across the entire expanse of the earth, uniting diverse peoples who otherwise share no common ground.

This collective alignment of thought among such varied individuals, differing in ways of life and habits, should move us profoundly. It is evident that the power of God has orchestrated this unity. This reflection becomes even more compelling when we consider the wisdom and sanctity of those who have embraced Scripture. I do not refer to all, but to those whom our Lord has appointed as luminaries in His church, illuminating it with the radiance of their holiness. How firmly should we receive this teaching, which the blood of countless holy individuals has sealed and testified to? These martyrs did not find dying for this teaching an obstacle, once they embraced it. Why then do we not accept it with unwavering conviction, since it is accompanied by such a seal and affirmation? The blood of numerous witnesses is ample evidence for the authenticity of Scripture. Especially when we acknowledge that they did not court death as a consequence of delirium or frenzy (as sometimes befalls misguided souls), but rather through a zeal for God that was both resolute and tempered.

There exist several other conspicuous reasons that not only allow the majesty and value of Scripture to be clearly understood in the hearts of believers, but also fortify it against the malicious attacks of detractors. Nonetheless, these reasons alone are insufficient to firmly establish its certainty. The heavenly Father must shine forth His divinity within it, eradicating all doubt and inquiry, instilling it with profound reverence. Scripture will then serve as our ultimate guide to attaining knowledge of God's salvation, supported by the inner persuasion of the Holy Spirit. When we adhere to this paramount and supreme testimony, the human witnesses that corroborate it cease to be empty and become auxiliary aids, secondary tools to bolster our frailty.

Those who discard Scripture and concoct alternative paths to reach God are not merely misled by error; they are propelled by sheer lunacy. From their midst arise irrational imbeciles who brashly claim to possess the Spirit's teaching, scorning all instruction and deriding the simplicity of those who still follow the letter of Scripture, which they term as lifeless and deadly. Yet, I challenge these individuals to reveal the identity of this spirit that so deeply enthuses them, allowing them to disparage Scripture's wisdom as juvenile and beneath them. If they assert that it is the Spirit of Christ, their assertion borders on the ludicrous. They would concede that the apostles and the early faithful of the church were also inspired by the Spirit of Christ. None of them, however, instructed us to belittle the word of God; rather, their writings bear witness to our duty to revere it. Furthermore, let them answer this inquiry: Have they received a different spirit than the one promised by the Lord to His disciples? Even if their delusion were to escalate, I doubt they have strayed so far as to boast about that. But when the promise was made, what kind of Spirit did the Lord describe? A Spirit who "will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears" (John 16:13). The office

of the Holy Spirit, as promised to us, is not to forge new, previously unknown revelations or to introduce novel teachings that would divert us from the gospel after we have embraced it. His purpose is rather to affix His seal and confirmation to the teachings already imparted to us through the gospel.

Hence, it is clear that we must diligently listen and read Scripture if we seek to receive the fruit and benefit of God's Spirit. Conversely, should we encounter a spirit that diverges from the wisdom contained in God's word and presents us with different teachings, we ought to rightly suspect it as futile and deceptive. How could it be otherwise when "Satan masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14)? What authority can this spirit claim unless it possesses a definitive sign? Truthfully, it is quite discernible through the voice of the Lord, if these misguided individuals did not eagerly plunge themselves into confusion by seeking their own spirit instead of His. Yet they contend that it would be absurd for God's Spirit, to whom all things should be subject, to submit to Scripture. However, it is not a matter of shame that the Holy Spirit is consistently Himself, unchanging and constant, throughout His entirety. Certainly, if we reduce this to a certain standard—be it human or angelic or some other—we might argue that it demeans and subordinates Him. But when we compare Him to Himself and contemplate His essence, who can say that this in any way diminishes His glory? They object, "Yet this way He is being tested." I concede, indeed, it is a testing by which He willed His majesty to be confirmed for us. His revelation of Himself should suffice us fully. But to prevent the spirit of Satan from infiltrating His shadow, He desires to be recognized by us through His image, imprinted in Scripture. He is the Author of Scripture; He cannot deviate from or contradict Himself. Thus, He must forever remain as He once declared Himself to be within its pages. This neither detracts from

His dignity nor defames Him; it is, in fact, an honor to remain constant in His essence.

Regarding their reproach that we adhere excessively to the letter that brings death, they unwittingly expose themselves to God's retribution for their disregard of Scripture. It is clear that in this passage, St. Paul confronts those charlatans who elevate the bare law devoid of Christ, steering people away from the grace of the New Testament where the Lord pledged to inscribe His law on the hearts of the faithful. God's law becomes a lifeless text, causing harm to His disciples, when detached from Christ's grace and only resonates in their ears without touching their hearts. However, when the Spirit of God engraves the law vividly onto the will and imparts Jesus Christ to us, it transforms into the word of life. It converts souls and imparts wisdom to the humble. In the same passage, the apostle labels his preaching as "the ministry of the Spirit," indicating that the Spirit of God is so intertwined with His truth, expressed in Scripture, that His power manifests when the word is received with due reverence (2 Corinthians 3:6, 8).

This doesn't contradict what we discussed earlier about the word's certainty being scarcely established without the testimony of the Spirit. The Lord has harmoniously connected the assurance of His Spirit with that of His word, so that our understanding may receive the word in obedience, perceiving the Spirit's radiance within it. The Spirit serves as a luminance that allows our understanding to contemplate God's face in the word. This way, without fear of deceit or error, we embrace God's Spirit, recognizing Him in His image—the word. It is indeed so. God did not convey any word to His people that He intended to nullify with the advent of His Spirit. Rather, He sent His Spirit, through whose power He previously conveyed His word, to bring His work in the word to fruition, confirming it

efficaciously. In a similar manner, Christ illuminated the understanding of His disciples, not to make them wise in themselves by rejecting Scripture, but to help them comprehend it (Luke 24:27). Similarly, when urging the Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit, St. Paul doesn't lead them astray to idle speculations beyond the word. He logically adds that "they should not treat prophecies with contempt" (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21). Clearly, he implies that the light of the Spirit is extinguished when prophecies are scorned.

What defense will these presumptuous zealots offer? Those who do not deem any revelation valid unless they recklessly discard and belittle God's word, whimsically embracing every notion that crosses their minds? God's children should be receptive to a different kind of instruction. Recognizing their lack of truth's illumination without God's Spirit, they should understand that the word serves as an instrument through which the Lord imparts His Spirit's illumination to the faithful. They acknowledge no Spirit other than the one who resided with the apostles, speaking through them, guiding them, and leading them back to the word.

However, since we have already established that while the knowledge of God is amply displayed in the arrangement of the world and all creatures, it is even more familiarly communicated through His word, we must now explore whether God's self-presentation in Scripture resembles the image we previously witnessed in His creations. A comprehensive discussion of this matter would be extensive, but I shall provide a condensed overview. This summary aims to enlighten faithful hearts about what aspects of God they must primarily study in Scripture, directing them with assurance to their destination.

Firstly, the Lord reveals Himself as the God who, after creating the heavens and the earth, has lavished His grace and boundless benevolence upon humanity. He has continually nurtured, sustained, and supported the faithful through His special grace. He has made Himself known and revered by them. In parallel, the histories of every age, akin to paintings, depict the constancy of His goodness towards the faithful. They illustrate His providential care, His inclination to bestow goodness, His mighty assistance, fervent love, remarkable patience in tolerating their shortcomings, paternal mercy in punishment, and the unwavering fulfillment of His eternal promises. Conversely, these accounts portray the severity of His punishment upon sinners, when the flames of His wrath ignite after prolonged forbearance, and demonstrate His power to confound and disintegrate. This depiction resonates well with the universal order of the world.

Yet, within a certain passage, His distinctive essence is poignantly expressed, offering a vivid portrayal for us to contemplate distinctly. Moses' description encapsulates all that it is permissible for humanity to comprehend about God. He speaks thus: "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children" (Exodus 34:6–7). We should interpret that His eternity and inherent nature are heralded by the name initially ascribed to Him (repeated twice in Hebrew), signifying "the One who alone is." Subsequently, His attributes are enumerated, portraying Him not as He exists in Himself, but as He relates to us. This knowledge relies more on lived experience than idle speculation.

Moreover, the powers listed here parallel those that shine through the heavens and the earth: mercy, goodness, compassion, righteousness, judgment, and truth. His wisdom is encompassed by the Hebrew term ascribed to Him as the third title, implying "possessing these attributes within Himself." The prophets similarly use these titles to convey His sacred name distinctly. To avoid redundancy, a single psalm will suffice for now. In this psalm, all facets of His qualities are meticulously recounted. While nothing is omitted, every aspect can also be found in contemplation of the created world (Psalm 145). Hence, God offers Himself to be perceived as consistent with His self-revelation through His word.

In the book of Jeremiah, where He reveals His desire for us to apprehend Him, the description isn't as explicit, yet the essence remains the same: "Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth" (Jeremiah 9:24). Undoubtedly, there are three pivotal aspects we must grasp: His compassion, wherein lies the redemption of all; His judgment, which He continually enacts upon the wicked and reserves with more stringent measure for their ultimate dismay; His righteousness, which benevolently sustains His faithful. The prophet affirms that when we possess these insights, we have ample reason to magnify God. However, this understanding doesn't omit His might, truth, holiness, or goodness. For could an awareness of His righteousness, mercy, and judgment—essential as they are—exist without being anchored in His unwavering truth? How could we believe that He governs the earth with righteousness and judgment unless we comprehend His power and excellence? Whence does His mercy spring if not from His goodness? Lastly, if His ways encompass mercy, judgment, and righteousness, His holiness radiates through them. The knowledge of God conveyed through Scripture aligns with

the purpose reflected in His creation—primarily to kindle reverence for God, followed by reliance upon Him. This equips us to learn to serve and honor Him with purity of life, sincere obedience, and complete reliance on His benevolence. However, as God doesn't present Himself directly for close contemplation, except through His Christ, discernible only through the lens of faith, the remaining discussion about understanding God's knowledge may be more aptly addressed when we consider the topic of comprehending faith.

CHAPTER TWO

The Knowledge of Man and Free Will

It is with good reason that the ancient proverb consistently emphasizes the importance of self-awareness. While ignorance of matters concerning human life might be deemed unfortunate, ignorance of ourselves is even more undesirable. This lack of self-awareness often leads to self-deception and blindness, even as we navigate necessary decisions. The significance of this directive underscores our need to comprehend its essence accurately, a pitfall that some philosophers have stumbled into. Their call to self-knowledge has the potential to incline individuals towards self-importance and conceit, rather than facilitating introspection leading to humility. It's imperative that we grasp the true intent of this counsel to foster authentic understanding and right conduct.

It's human nature to prefer accolades and praise over confronting our flaws and shortcomings. The allure of sweet words and flattery

easily captivates our spirits. Thus, when our virtues are extolled, we are prone to embrace the flattering narrative. As a result, many have misconstrued the true essence of self-awareness. Due to our inherent bias and limited perspective, we readily adopt the notion that we possess nothing deserving of contempt. This erroneous assumption leads to the belief that one can lead a virtuous and contented life based solely on personal capability. Some may grant a token acknowledgment to God but apportion the majority of power, wisdom, and righteousness to themselves. Humanity's inclination towards self-flattery makes those who glorify human potential highly regarded. However, this doctrine of self-reliance is deceptive and ultimately self-destructive. Relying on one's own strength and understanding only results in frustration and failure. The confidence to initiate and strive towards goodness and virtue is a mere illusion, as the capability to truly comprehend and accomplish such ideals remains elusive.

Therefore, though it aligns with common belief that self-awareness is a significant aspect of wisdom, the depth of understanding varies greatly. While conventional wisdom may suggest that recognizing one's strengths and abilities is sufficient, a deeper examination according to God's judgment reveals a different reality. The more one scrutinizes oneself through the lens of divine assessment, the more evident one's inadequacies become. Rather than fostering confidence, this introspection induces humility, leading to the realization that human effort is insufficient for righteous living. Although there exists inherent nobility within human nature that propels us towards righteousness, this realization should not breed pride. Indeed, reflecting on our origins and intended purpose ought to inspire us to contemplate God's eternal kingdom. However, far from elevating our spirits, this contemplation should usher us into a posture of humility and patience. Why? Because when we ponder our

origin, we are reminded of our fall, and when we reflect on our purpose, we are confronted with our estrangement from it. This truth humbles us and compels us to mourn the loss of our dignity.

When we stress that a person must not entertain anything within themselves that might inflate their heart, we mean to say that there is no basis for arrogance. However, let us explore the concept of self-knowledge in this manner. Firstly, contemplate the purpose for which you were created and the unique blessings that God has bestowed upon you. By acknowledging this, you may be spurred to meditate on and prepare for the life to come, fostering a desire to serve God. Next, examine your possessions, or more aptly, your deficiencies. Through this recognition, you may be humbled, thoroughly confounded, as if stripped of all pretense. The initial reflection directs you towards comprehending your role and responsibility, while the subsequent introspection evaluates your capability to fulfill these duties. We shall elaborate on each aspect as we progress, addressing them in due order.

Before we explore the portrait of human frailty, it is crucial to understand the original state of humanity. This is necessary to counter any potential misunderstanding, as presenting human vices might inadvertently implicate God, the Author of nature. Impious individuals often exploit this premise to justify their depravity by attributing it to God. Even those who adopt a more measured tone tend to shift blame from themselves to nature, disregarding that by doing so, they inadvertently tarnish God's reputation. Our aim is to guard against such erroneous thinking. We need to explore the fallen state of humankind while preserving the purity of divine truth.

To this end, it is imperative that we clarify the creation of humanity. By doing so, we aim to refute the notion that our flaws originate from

God. Some erroneously place the image of God within humanity's dominion over creation, assuming that the act of ruling equates to godliness. However, Moses frequently reiterates that humanity was "created in the image of God" [Genesis 1:26–27; 5:3; 9:6]. This repetition underscores its profound significance. Paul's writings also shed light on this matter. He encourages believers to be renewed in their minds, being clothed in righteousness and holiness that mirror God's image [Ephesians 4:23–24]. Paul goes further, urging them to discard their former selves and embrace newness that reflects the image of God [Colossians 3:9–10]. Thus, the image of God signifies the alignment of our spirit with God's purity, achieved by ridding ourselves of earthly defilement.

When humanity was initially created, it bore the image and likeness of God, signifying participation in divine attributes such as wisdom, righteousness, power, holiness, and truth. Contrary to those who misconstrue this image as dominion over creation, its true essence relates to a spiritual resemblance to God. This image endowed humanity with divine graces and blessings, testifying to the Creator's generosity. United with God in communion, humanity possessed the potential for eternal life through the preservation of their original integrity. Regrettably, Adam's ingratitude led to his unworthiness of God's bestowed benefits. He tarnished the heavenly image he bore and, by succumbing to sin, severed his communion with God, thereby forfeiting access to all spiritual blessings.

In place of divine attributes, humanity was afflicted by dire consequences: ignorance, vanity, impurity, unrighteousness. These plagued Adam and, by extension, his descendants. Every individual born thereafter inherited this stain, which the early church fathers referred to as "original sin." This term signifies the corruption of human nature, which was initially created pure and good. This

concept was challenged by Pelagians who argued that sin was transmitted through imitation rather than heredity. The church fathers, including Augustine, contended against this view, emphasizing that the corruption of human nature was inherited from the moment of conception. This condition humbles us and prevents us from transferring blame to external factors. King David's acknowledgment that he was "born in iniquity" and conceived in sin underscores the universal condition of humanity [Psalm 51:5]. This blemish is not unique to David but reflects the state of all humanity. As such, our inherent corruption is undeniable, and even before birth, we stand before God tainted by sin [Job 14:4].

Let us firmly establish that Adam was not merely the progenitor of human nature, but its founder and root. Consequently, his fall into depravity marked the decline of the entire human race. The Apostle Paul elucidates this further when he contrasts Adam with Christ. He explains, "Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—so also, through the obedience of the one man many will be made righteous" [Romans 5:12, 15]. The Pelagian argument that sin spread through imitation of Adam's behavior is utterly baseless. Could the blessings of Christ's grace be reduced to mere examples for emulation? Such a proposition is blasphemous. If Christ's grace is rightfully understood as a transformative communication leading to life, then it follows that the same principle applies to Adam's sin, which affected humanity and was later rectified by Christ's grace.

We need not consider the intricate debate that plagued early church scholars concerning the origin of the soul and the transmission of original sin. Suffice it to say that God bestowed upon Adam the graces and virtues meant for human nature. Thus, when Adam forfeited these gifts, he did so not only for himself but for all of

humanity. Instead of fixating on the origin of the soul, focus on the truth that God endowed Adam with these gifts not exclusively for his benefit, but for the collective good of all his descendants. Consequently, when Adam lost these gifts, human nature lost them as well. Just as a decaying root begets decayed branches, passing on its infirmity, Adam's children inherited corruption from their father, transmitting this contamination to subsequent generations. Thus, Adam's initial corruption propagated incessantly from fathers to children, tainting each successive generation.

This perspective effectively rebuts the Pelagian argument that children born to faithful parents should be exempt from corruption, given their parents' purity. In truth, children inherit corruption through Adam's lineage, rather than the spiritual regeneration experienced by God's servants through the Holy Spirit. While God does sanctify the children of the faithful due to their parents' relationship with Him, this sanctification is a result of His grace rather than an innate virtue. It constitutes a spiritual blessing that does not negate the universal reality of original sin's curse.

To better comprehend this concept, let us define original sin. Although various definitions exist, one that aligns with the truth is as follows: original sin is an inherent corruption and perversion within our nature, inherited from our forebear, Adam. This corruption renders us guilty before God's righteous judgment and prompts within us the works termed "works of the flesh" in scripture. These are aptly referred to as "sin" by the Apostle Paul [Galatians 5:19–21].

Consider these two facets separately. Firstly, our corruption is so profound that we are justly deserving of condemnation before God, whose standards demand righteousness, innocence, and purity. Do not view this as an external debt resulting solely from another's fault.

It is not a situation where we bear responsibility for Adam's sin without deserving any punishment. When Scripture declares "in Adam all die" [1 Corinthians 15:22], it does not imply that we are guiltless, merely inheriting his guilt. Instead, it signifies that Adam's transgression implicated us in the disorder of sin, rendering us liable. However, do not misconstrue this as Adam's sin resulting in punishment for others without transmitting his sin. The truth is that Adam's sin resides within us and merits just punishment. Augustine, while sometimes attributing the sin to others to emphasize that we inherit it due to Adam's lineage, asserts confidently that this sin rightfully belongs to each of us. The Apostle Paul further underscores this by stating, "Death came to all people, because all sinned" [Romans 5:12], implying that all are entangled in original sin and marked by its stain. Thus, even infants share in this condemnation, not due to the sin of others, but on account of their own, as the seeds of wickedness lie hidden within them. Furthermore, their nature inherently inclines towards sin, rendering them displeasing and abhorrent to God.

Secondly, recognize that this corruption is ceaselessly active within us, manifesting as the "works of the flesh" listed earlier. It is akin to a furnace consistently emitting flames and sparks or a spring continually pouring forth water. While some define original sin as "the absence of original righteousness," this does not fully capture its nature. Our nature is not merely void of goodness, but fertile in various forms of evil, incapable of remaining idle. Those who term original sin as "concupiscence" are not entirely mistaken. However, it is important to emphasize that this concupiscence pervades all aspects of a person, from intellect to will, soul to body. In sum, humanity, in its natural state, is composed of concupiscence and corrupt desires.

Let us now address those who, rather than attributing their own sin to themselves, audaciously ascribe the cause of sin to God. They commit a grave error by viewing God's hand in their depravity, instead of contemplating His original work upon the untarnished nature of Adam. Our downfall originates from our fleshly sin, not from God, for it is our deviation from the pristine state of our creation that led to our ruin. It would be imprudent to counter this argument by asserting that God should have preempted Adam's sin for our salvation. Such a presumption lacks reverence and shall be addressed later, within the context of predestination. To avoid blaming God for our depravity, we must acknowledge that our ruin is due to the corruption of our nature, rather than attributing our evil to Him. While it is true that the plague of sin is inherent in our nature, we must differentiate between a wounded nature from its inception and subsequent corruption. We are certain that sin has wounded our nature, leading to no legitimate grievance except our own shortcomings, as Scripture aptly observes: "Lo, this only have I found: that God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes" [Ecclesiastes 7:29]. Therefore, it is crucial not to blame God for our fallen state, but to acknowledge that our ruin results from humanity's abandonment of the original grace bestowed upon us.

Though we affirm the inherent corruption of human nature, this corruption is not an innate quality of nature itself. We emphasize this distinction to elucidate that this corruption was acquired after creation, rather than an inherent feature present from the beginning. Nonetheless, we term it "natural" to counter the notion that it arises from each individual's exposure to bad examples or traditions. Rather, it envelops us from birth. The Apostle Paul affirms this when he labels humanity as "objects of wrath" [Ephesians 2:3]. Why, then, would God's noblest creation provoke His wrath? It is not humanity

itself but the corruption of humanity that incurs divine displeasure. Therefore, if it is valid to claim that humanity is naturally repugnant to God, it is equally fitting to assert that humanity is naturally inclined towards evil and vice. Just as St. Augustine comfortably terms the sin that prevails in our flesh when devoid of God's grace as "natural," we can disprove the Manicheans' erroneous concept of intrinsic human corruption, which falsely attributes creation to someone other than God to absolve Him of any association with evil's origin.

Having recognized how sin's dominion over Adam subjected all of humanity to servitude, we must now determine whether we remain devoid of any freedom under this captivity or whether we possess a degree of freedom and, if so, to what extent. To navigate this question, we must establish the goal towards which we are working. To ascertain this goal, we must weigh the dangers on either side. On one hand, if individuals are stripped of all good and informed that their personal ability to do good is lacking, they may easily become apathetic. On the other hand, granting them any degree of capability could inflate them with unfounded confidence, diverting honor from God. To avoid this paradox, we must adhere to this guideline: while acknowledging their inherent inability, individuals should be prompted to desire the goodness and freedom that elude them. This desire should urge them forward even more ardently than if they believed they possessed boundless power. The significance of this second point cannot be overstated, as it exposes human negligence and indolence.

As for the first point—revealing humanity's wretched condition—some individuals display more hesitation than is warranted. While it is essential not to diminish individuals by attributing to them less than they possess, it is equally crucial to dispel false vanity. If they

were wrong to exalt themselves when graced with divine blessings, how much more fitting it is for them to humble themselves now, having fallen from that state of excellence to one of extreme degradation. Reflect on this: when humanity was elevated to the pinnacle of honor, Scripture merely attributes to them the creation in God's image [Genesis 1:26–27]. This implies that their blessedness was not intrinsic, but stemmed from their participation in God. What remains for them now? Stripped of all glory, they should acknowledge God. In their state of destitution, they are now better positioned to acknowledge God's gentleness and generosity, which they failed to discern when basking in the riches of His grace. Since they failed to glorify Him through the acknowledgment of His blessings, let them now glorify Him through confession of their woeful state.

Furthermore, relinquishing all pretense of wisdom and power is as beneficial as it is necessary to uphold God's glory. Those who ascribe excessive power to humanity inadvertently blaspheme God. Encouraging individuals to rely on their own strength, which is as fragile as a reed that promptly snaps, leads them to eventual downfall. Indeed, comparing human strength to a reed is overly generous, as all human strength is but smoke. Thus, the repeated assertion by St. Augustine holds true: "Those who claim that we possess free will undermine it rather than establish it." It is imperative to establish this foundation, despite the apprehensions of some who find the notion of diminishing human power and exalting God's strength unsettling and perilous. Ultimately, we shall discern the value and significance of this principle, one that forms the bedrock of our faith.

To explore human faculties, we shall begin by discerning them in the simplest manner, without delving into the intricacies of

philosophical debates. Although Plato's assertion of five senses functioning as instruments for the common sense appears reasonable, we do not need to be encumbered by these intricate details. It is sufficient to comprehend that within the soul, three cognitive powers exist: reason, understanding, and imagination. Corresponding to these are three desires: will, anger, and concupiscence. However, we shall refrain from delving deeper into these matters due to the potential for confusion and limited practical applicability.

We may explore further distinctions, such as those proposed by Aristotle, who delineates parts of the soul guided by reason and even those that partake in reason. He also identifies three fundamental sources from which all human actions stem: senses, understanding, and desire. Yet, for the sake of comprehension accessible to all, let us employ a simpler language, devoid of philosophical complexity. Philosophers, when seeking simplicity, divide the soul into two facets: understanding and desire. They further bifurcate both categories, positing a contemplative understanding that remains detached from action and solely embraces contemplation. This they term "intelligence," as Cicero states. Practical understanding, in contrast, comprehends good and evil, guiding the will to embrace or shun these concepts, encompassing knowledge of righteous living. Their division of desire entails "concupiscence" and "will," using the term "will" to denote submission to reason and "concupiscence" to represent unrestrained flight from moderation. However, given our assertion that human reason is deficient, we diverge significantly from their standpoint.

Hence, we shall introduce a distinct perspective, emphasizing two segments within our soul: understanding and will. Understanding deliberates among proposed options, judging what is virtuous and

condemnable. Will, in contrast, elects and follows the judgments of the understanding, either pursuing the good or rejecting and shunning the condemned. Though we shall not dwell on Aristotle's nuanced argument regarding understanding's lack of inherent impetus, we can agree that understanding serves as a governor and captain of the soul. Will, in turn, aligns itself with understanding's preferences and desires nothing until understanding passes judgment. This alignment underscores Aristotle's assertion that "fleeing or desiring is the equivalent for the desire, as denying or approving is for the understanding." The guidance of understanding in directing the will correctly will be further explored. Our present aim is to demonstrate that the entire spectrum of human soul faculties can be distilled into these two components. Consequently, the senses also fall under the jurisdiction of understanding. Philosophers segregate senses into two factions: those inclined towards sensuality and others towards virtue and honor. Furthermore, we shall employ the more widely used term "will" in place of "desire."

Now let us contemplate the faculties within each facet. Philosophers unanimously posit that reason dwells within the soul, serving as a guiding light for understanding and a governing force for the will. They envision reason as a divine light that discerns between good and evil, equipped with the capacity to govern admirably. In contrast, the senses are enveloped in ignorance, incapable of contemplating profound matters, invariably bound to earthly concerns. As for desire, they believe that if it submits to reason instead of yielding to the senses, it is impelled towards the pursuit of the good and the honorable. By adhering to reason, desire can tread the righteous path. Conversely, if it succumbs to the senses, it becomes debased and corrupted, indulging in shameless conduct without restraint. Philosophers maintain that human understanding

harbors an intrinsic reason to guide virtuous living, contingent upon its preservation and the nurturing of innate virtue. They posit an inferior impetus—labeled as the senses—which, if not reined in, leads reason astray. They assert that reason has the power to gradually tame the senses until they diminish into insignificance. As for the will, philosophers place it as a mediator between reason and the senses—free to align with reason or surrender to the senses.

Experience compels them to admit that establishing reason's dominion within oneself is a formidable challenge. The initial impetus often emerges from sensuality, followed by deception through superficial notions of good. Uncontrolled desires then destabilize individuals, akin to Plato's depiction of "cords" pulling them in various directions. Cicero aptly remarks that nature ignites faint sparks of goodness in our spirits, easily tarnished by false beliefs and immoral behavior. Moreover, philosophers concede that once such ailments grip the soul, they wield immense power, difficult to restrain. They liken these conditions to runaway horses. "As a runaway horse," they describe, "kicks without restraint after escaping its master, so does the soul, casting off reason and surrendering to concupiscence, spiral into chaos." Philosophers maintain that virtues and vices alike are within our control. If the ability to do good or evil were not in our hands, refraining from such actions would also be beyond our power. Thus, if we possess the freedom to refrain, we also possess the freedom to act. Consequently, we exercise choice in all our deeds, both positive and negative. Some philosophers have even gone to the extreme of asserting that life itself originates from God, while the capacity to live virtuously stems from our own selves. In sum, philosophers assert that the reason within human understanding is sufficient to guide us and illuminate virtuous courses of action. The will, under reason's influence, faces

temptation from the senses to transgress, yet its freedom prevents it from yielding entirely to reason.

Turning to Christian church scholars, while acknowledging that sin weakens reason and the will is beset by diverse concupiscences, many have aligned themselves more closely with philosophers than perhaps necessary. Two reasons seem to influence early church fathers in this regard. Firstly, fearing ridicule from philosophers and the risk of undermining their teachings, they sought to retain a semblance of compatibility. Secondly, the flesh's inclination towards complacency might have led to disregard for good works. Thus, they endeavored to bridge the gap between scripture and philosophical thought to avoid causing offense.

However, their emphasis appears to be on the latter reason. St. Chrysostom, for instance, asserts, "God has given us free choice to decide between good and evil, without imposing constraint. He awaits our willing approach, rather than coercing us." He reiterates, "The wicked can become virtuous if they choose, and the virtuous can decline into wickedness. God grants us free choice in our nature, refraining from imposition while providing remedies that we can utilize." Likewise, he upholds that just as we require God's grace for any good deed, we must also contribute from our side. St. Jerome's perspective aligns with Chrysostom's, asserting, "We must initiate, and God shall complete; we offer our efforts, and God supplements our deficiencies." While these statements appear to endow humans with greater power than warranted, this approach seems intended to awaken human diligence. Whether they were justified in this stance will soon become clear. Notably, Greek fathers, especially St. Chrysostom, might have exceeded the proper bounds in exalting human capability. Nonetheless, nearly all early church fathers, except St. Augustine, exhibit inconsistency or express hesitation and

obscurity on this matter. Their writings lack a definitive consensus, and thus, we will avoid delving into each individual's viewpoint. Instead, we shall touch upon these perspectives sporadically, in accordance with our discussion's progression.

Subsequent authors, emerging after the church fathers, endeavored to establish intricate defenses for human capabilities. Unfortunately, their progression led to a gradual deterioration, culminating in the widespread belief that only sensuality was marred in people, while reason remained largely unscathed and freely wielded its intentions. The term "free will" perpetually echoed among the Latins, and the Greeks employed an even more audacious expression signifying personal power.

Given that the notion of "free will" has profoundly permeated the populace, even reaching the uninformed masses, the majority of those who sought intellectual prestige acknowledge a certain ignorance regarding the extent of this freedom. Let us, therefore, begin by comprehending the essence of the term, and subsequently draw from the unadulterated teachings of scripture to discern humanity's potential to commit good or evil.

Despite the widespread use of the term "free will" across the world, few have taken the time to elucidate its meaning. It appears that in his time, Origen provided a definition that garnered widespread acceptance: "the faculty of reason to distinguish between good and evil, coupled with the will's ability to choose either." St. Augustine concurs with this definition, describing it as "the ability of reason and will to choose good in the presence of God's grace, and evil in its absence." St. Bernard, in his quest for precision, resorts to a more obscure description, naming it "consent" due to the freedom of will and the discernment of reason, qualities both immutable. Anselm's

definition offers little clarity, defining it as the "power to uphold righteousness for its own sake." The "Sentences" master and scholastic theologians gravitate towards Augustine's definition, finding it more accessible and inclusive of the essential role played by God's grace. However, they add nuances in the hope of improving or at least elucidating existing definitions. Initially, they ascribe the term "will" to reason, which distinguishes between good and evil. Adding the descriptor "free" to "will," they emphasize its aptitude to incline towards either. Given that freedom naturally accompanies the will, St. Thomas Aquinas suggests a suitable definition: "free will is the power to choose, residing between understanding and will, yet leaning more towards the latter."

Our understanding of free choice's potency lies in reason and will. Yet, it remains imperative to ascertain the scope of its influence. Commonly, matters external to the kingdom of God are attributed to human discernment and choice, while true righteousness derives from divine grace and the transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit. This understanding finds resonance in the book "The Calling of the Gentiles," which posits three categories of willingness: sensory, animal, and spiritual. The first two are considered free, while the third is the result of the Holy Spirit's workings. The validity of this notion warrants closer examination, and for now, we shall focus on providing an overview of others' opinions. This perspective elucidates why discussions of free will often pivot towards spiritual obedience rather than dwelling on external physical actions. While the primary inquiry is centered on spiritual obedience, it is unwise to ignore the broader context. We shall undoubtedly establish the significance of this in due course.

Moreover, theologians have advanced a threefold division of freedom within theological schools. These categories entail freedom from

necessity, freedom from sin, and freedom from suffering. According to this framework, the first form of freedom is so inherently ingrained in human nature that it cannot be relinquished. They concede that the latter two forms of freedom are forfeited through sin. This distinction is amenable, yet it must not be conflated with the confusion between "necessity" and "constraint," a topic that will be clarified at an appropriate juncture. The consensus supports the notion that human ability to perform good hinges on God's grace, particularly the special grace of regeneration bestowed exclusively upon the elect. However, it remains unclear whether human ability to perform good is utterly eradicated or whether a residue, feeble and minute, persists—incapable of any action without divine grace, yet functional in tandem with it. Attempting to resolve this ambiguity, the "Sentences" master proposes the need for a twofold grace to equip individuals for virtuous conduct. He labels one "working," fueling an effective desire for good; the other he terms "cooperating," supporting the will's virtuous inclination. However, I am wary of this division, as it implies that the grace of God instills an effective desire for the good. This suggests that, by one's inherent nature, a partial inclination towards the good exists, though non-efficacious. St. Bernard seems to align with this notion, asserting that "every good will is the work of God, yet a person, prompted by personal impetus, may still desire a good will." The "Sentences" master appears to misconstrue St. Augustine's stance while attempting to parallel his viewpoint.

Furthermore, a query concerning the second aspect troubles me due to the erroneous perceptions it has engendered. The scholastics contend that the reason for cooperating with God's grace is to either reject the initial grace offered—rendering it futile—or to confirm it through obedience. This viewpoint is echoed even by the author of "The Calling of the Gentiles," who maintains that those endowed

with rational judgment can either distance themselves from grace or embrace it. Thus, it is deemed virtuous when they do not shun it, granting them merit for committing to an action that could have been avoided if they chose, although they could not have accomplished it without the cooperation of God's grace.

I have elucidated these points in passing to underscore my divergence from scholastic theologians. Their teachings possess more integrity than those of subsequent sophists, yet we still diverge on various matters, given their departure from their predecessors' purity. However, through this distinction, we can better understand their rationale for attributing free choice to humanity. Ultimately, the "Sentences" master underscores that "a person is deemed to possess free will not because they can perform good as readily as evil, but because they are unbound by constraint. This freedom remains unaltered even if we are wicked and ensnared by sin, only capable of choosing evil." We thus witness their admission that free will does not stem from an individual's equal capability to choose good and evil, but from the act of choosing driven by their will, devoid of compulsion. While this sentiment holds true, it is worth pondering the audacity of attaching such a lofty title to something of relatively modest stature.

Oh, the allure of such a freedom! To claim that a person is not coerced into servitude by sin, but rather, is bound voluntarily by sin's chains! Truly, I find these semantic debates that agitate the Church quite distasteful. Yet, it is my belief that we should steer clear of any language containing traces of absurdity, particularly if it carries the risk of misconceptions. When people are attributed with the label of "free will," how many fail to immediately assume that an individual commands both their judgment and will, capable of turning in either direction through sheer personal prowess? However, the potential

danger could be averted if individuals are educated about the true meaning of "free will." Alas, I must express that given our proclivity to gravitate towards falsehood and deceit, we may seize upon a single word as an opportunity for sin rather than be enlightened by lengthy explanations. The peril entailed by this language is evident through our collective experience. After its introduction, the term was embraced in a manner that diverted attention from the early fathers' teachings, allowing people to embrace it as a source of pride.

Moreover, if we are swayed by the authority of the fathers—given their repeated use of the term "will"—their actual sentiments about it become evident through its application. St. Augustine, in particular, does not hesitate to characterize the will as "bound." Although he does, in certain instances, argue against those who negate the existence of free choice, he is clear about his stance when he remarks: "Let no one dare to deny free will in a way that excuses sin." Yet, he concedes that "the human will is not free without the aid of God's Spirit, as it succumbs to wicked desires." He also acknowledges that "after the will was conquered by the vice into which it fell, our nature lost its freedom." He reiterates that "free choice is captive and powerless to perform good." In light of this, is it not possible that he intends to provoke thought when he seems to jest about free choice, implying that it does exist in people, but not to absolve guilt? Is this not a pointed critique of the term itself, mocking its connotation of freedom? Therefore, while I might not quarrel significantly with someone employing this term in a sane context, I must emphasize that the use of this term is fraught with danger. Rather, it would greatly benefit the Church if we refrained from employing it. If someone seeks my advice, I would counsel them to abstain from its usage.

It might seem that I've set myself against a tide by acknowledging the ambivalence among all the ecclesiastical doctors, barring St. Augustine, when addressing this matter. Some may construe this admission as an effort to dismiss opposing views. However, my intention is straightforward—to offer readers an honest appraisal, guiding them to understand the actualities. My aim is to prevent them from ascribing undue significance to these doctors' teachings. Alas, readers would remain ensnared in uncertainty, as these fathers often vacillate. They occasionally strip human capabilities, urging reliance solely on God's grace, while at other times they attribute certain capacities to individuals, or at least give the appearance of doing so.

Nevertheless, it is not arduous to reveal through their utterances that, notwithstanding the ambiguity in their words, they do not hold human capabilities in high esteem, or, at the very least, hold them in meager regard, attributing the glory of good works entirely to the Holy Spirit. What else does St. Cyprian's oft-cited assertion, frequently referenced by St. Augustine, signify? "We must not boast about anything, for there is nothing good that is truly ours." This sentiment humbles a person entirely, compelling them to seek everything from God. Eucherius, the former bishop of Lyons, echoes a similar sentiment: "Christ is the tree of life, and whoever reaches out their hand to partake shall live. The tree of knowledge of good and evil is free choice, and whoever consumes its fruit shall perish." St. Chrysostom similarly proclaims that human nature is not merely tainted by sin but is wholly steeped in it. If nothing good resides within us and we are entirely consumed by sin, with no room to assess the value of free choice, how then can one apportion the credit for virtuous deeds between God and themselves? Although I could present numerous parallel citations from other fathers, to avoid any insinuation of bias, I refrain from a more exhaustive list. However, I

confidently assert that even though the fathers occasionally veer towards excessive praise of free choice, their ultimate intent is to divert individuals from placing undue faith in their own abilities, compelling them to recognize that their true strength lies solely in God. Now, let us straightforwardly explore the essence of human nature.

I am compelled to reiterate the theme introduced at the outset of this chapter: one attains true self-awareness when they are humbled and shaken by the realization of their own wretchedness, destitution, vulnerability, and dishonor. A person will not diminish themselves excessively if they acknowledge the necessity of seeking from God what they lack within. Contrarily, they must refrain from attributing any modicum of goodness beyond what is appropriate, lest they succumb to vain confidence, committing the sacrilege of usurping God's glory. Indeed, whenever the passion to claim something inherently ours arises, that is, something within us surpassing God, we must recognize this impulse as the counsel of the very entity that led our first ancestors astray—to desire to be like God, possessing knowledge of good and evil. When a word exalts a person within themselves, it is imperative that we shun it, unless we are willing to take counsel from our adversary.

How gratifying it is to contemplate that we possess such intrinsic power, allowing us to find contentment within ourselves. Yet, the scriptural admonitions are far too numerous to be disregarded, serving as guiding lights to prevent us from falling into vain assurance. Consider such verses as: “Cursed is the one who trusts in human strength and relies on the flesh” (Jeremiah 17:5). Also, “The Lord does not delight in the strength of the horse, nor is He pleased by the legs of a strong man; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, who hope in His mercy” (Psalm 147:10–11). Furthermore,

“He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (Isaiah 40:29). And again, “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31). All these passages converge on the essential point that no confidence should ever be placed in our own strength if we desire God's aid—He who resists the proud and grants grace to the humble. Moreover, let us not forget the promises laid out for us: “I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants” (Isaiah 44:3). And, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you without money, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost” (Isaiah 55:1); along with similar assurances, testifying that God's blessings are reserved exclusively for those who stand humbled and destitute, acutely aware of their spiritual impoverishment. Equally significant are other assurances like the one in Isaiah: “The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory” (Isaiah 60:19).

Undoubtedly, the Lord does not seek to strip His servants of the light of the sun and the moon. However, His intention is to manifest His own glory in His servants, leading them to eschew undue reliance on worldly grandeur. This saying of St. Chrysostom has long resonated with me, asserting that “the cornerstone of our wisdom is humility.” An even more profound declaration is found in the words of St. Augustine: “Just as Demosthenes, the Greek orator, when questioned about the first principle of eloquence, repeatedly responded 'pronunciation,' similarly, when asked about the fundamental principles of the Christian faith, I respond 'humility,' and this answer remains constant throughout.” St. Augustine's

notion of "humility" doesn't entail merely restraining oneself from pride when possessing power. Rather, it signifies acknowledging one's inherent humility, recognizing that our sole refuge lies in humbling ourselves before God. As he eloquently states elsewhere: "Let no one deceive themselves. By our nature, we are all devilish. Whatever good we possess, it comes from God. For what can we claim as our own except sin? If we desire to claim something as our own, let us take possession of sin, for righteousness emanates from God." And also: "How dare we place such unwarranted faith in our own strength? It is wounded, defeated, shattered, and ruined. It necessitates sincere confession, not false defense."

Therefore, let us refrain from disputing with God over our supposed rights, acting as if we have been unjustly stripped of our own. Just as our humility leads to God's exaltation, so does our acknowledgment of our lowliness constantly attract His mercy as a remedy. While I do not propose that individuals should renounce their rightful claims to God and distort their perceptions to negate their potential—if any—in order to artificially cultivate humility, I simply advocate relinquishing any infatuation with self and the allure of prominence. Such desires often blind individuals to their true nature, causing them to view themselves through the lens of Scripture.

To guide our discussion along the path we charted, where we distinguished the human soul into understanding and will, we must first consider the strengths of the understanding. To assert that it is so utterly blinded that it retains no vestige of knowledge concerning the world contradicts not only the teachings of God's Word but also common human experience. We observe the human spirit yearning to seek truth, a disposition that would not manifest itself without prior exposure to glimpses of truth. Thus, a faint glimmer of enlightenment resides within the human spirit, evidenced by its

inherent affinity for truth. The contrast emerges when considering animals devoid of reason, which dismiss this pursuit, emphasizing their inherent spiritual obtuseness. However, this desire for truth, in its nascent form before active engagement, succumbs to futility due to ignorance. The human understanding, in its quest for truth, becomes wayward, akin to a blind individual stumbling through darkness, colliding with various elements until they are entirely lost. Similarly, in the pursuit of truth, the human understanding reveals its ineptitude and inability to navigate effectively. Often, it fails to discern what merits investigation, directing its curiosity towards frivolous pursuits of no real consequence. In contrast, essential matters are either scorned or cursorily brushed aside, yielding no significant progress. Seldom does it genuinely dedicate its effort to these crucial matters. Despite the laments of numerous pagan scholars regarding this corruption, they themselves remain ensnared within it. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes, meticulously enumerates various pursuits that people find pleasurable and believe to be wise, only to ultimately declare them "vanity and striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 12:8).

Nonetheless, when the human understanding engages in certain studies, its endeavors are not entirely in vain, especially when directed towards worldly matters. Its sensitivity is evidenced by the fact that it occasionally grasps fragments of higher truths, even if its pursuit is somewhat haphazard. However, the ability of the human understanding to fathom higher truths pales in comparison to its comprehension of more mundane matters. When it endeavors to transcend earthly concerns, it invariably acknowledges its limitations. Nevertheless, in order to grasp the extent of its capabilities in both realms, a nuanced differentiation is necessary.

This distinction pertains to the comprehension of terrestrial and celestial matters. I designate as "terrestrial" those subjects unrelated to God and His kingdom, as well as to the authentic righteousness and immortality of the hereafter. These topics pertain solely to present life, confined within its boundaries. On the other hand, "celestial matters" encompass the principles of genuine righteousness and the enigmatic realities of the heavenly realm. The former category encompasses political doctrines, efficient household management, technical crafts, philosophy, and all that falls under the umbrella of "liberal arts." Meanwhile, the knowledge of God, His divine will, and the principles that govern righteous living constitutes the latter, celestial category.

As we consider the realm of worldly matters, particularly the political domain, it becomes evident that due to their inherent social nature, individuals possess an innate inclination to foster and uphold society. Thus, universal notions of honor and civil order are imprinted within the collective consciousness of humanity. This integral understanding is the very source of the recognition that human communities, as well as individuals, necessitate the establishment of laws. This understanding is firmly rooted in human cognition. This convergence leads to the consensus that both groups and individuals must abide by laws, since within each resides an inherent blueprint for order, originating from nature itself. This is precisely why societies and individuals alike have perpetually embraced the necessity of laws—a phenomenon emerging from an innate seed planted by nature, unaffected by external influences or a need for a guiding figure. It's true that conflicts and divisions arise swiftly when certain individuals yearn for the annulment of all laws, the inversion of societal norms, and the abolition of righteousness itself. In their pursuit, they aim to govern themselves according to personal impulses, akin to outlaws and marauders. Conversely,

others—commonly encountered—contest not the concept in its entirety, maintaining a foundational conception of justice, from which their opposition stems. Those who contend do not reject the very idea; their differences lie in the assessment of which laws are superior. This divergence underscores the vulnerability of human understanding, which, although convinced of its correct course, often stumbles and falters. Nonetheless, it remains a fundamental truth that the essence of political order is ingrained within all individuals. This serves as undeniable evidence that the light of reason is universally inherent when it comes to the governance of present existence.

Turning our focus to the realm of manual and liberal arts, the proficiency demonstrated in acquiring such skills attests to the potency of human understanding in this sphere. Though not everyone may be adept in mastering all these arts, the fact that no art exists that someone cannot learn at least in part is proof enough of the innate human aptitude. Furthermore, the acquisition and refinement of these arts extend beyond mere proficiency in learning. Frequently, practitioners introduce novel concepts or enhance existing ones through their creative pursuits. While Plato's contention that this perception is merely a recollection of knowledge the soul possessed before being confined to the corporeal vessel may not hold, reason still obliges us to acknowledge the presence of these foundations within human cognition. These examples underscore the universal concepts of reason naturally embedded within every individual. Despite its universality, this concept is so personalized that each person must recognize it as a divine grace bestowed by God. By illustrating this through the mirror of afflicted individuals and those who have been driven to madness, God aptly portrays the excellence that the human soul would enjoy if not for His illuminating light. This light, inherent within all, stands as a

testament to God's generous benevolence bestowed upon every individual.

While it is true that only a select few possess the ability to invent arts, determine their methods of instruction, establish an order for teaching, attain a thorough understanding of their intricacies, and attain proficiency, these factors do not definitively showcase human ingenuity by nature. Nonetheless, since these attributes are not exclusive to the virtuous, they can indeed be counted among natural gifts. As a result, when we encounter the profound truths illuminated in the works of pagan writers, it should inform our perception that, though humanity's nature is tainted and its integrity compromised, God's numerous blessings still adorn it. Recognizing God's Spirit as the ultimate source of truth prevents us from disregarding truth wherever it may manifest. To spurn the Spirit's gifts is to scorn and demean Him. Therefore, when we peruse the writings of ancient legal scholars and witness their sagacious understanding in establishing equitable social structures, can we doubt their wisdom? Do we dare claim that philosophers erred in meticulously dissecting the secrets of nature and articulating them with eloquence? Should we assert that those who taught us the art of reasoned debate lacked understanding? Is it plausible to consider the inventors of medicine as mere fools? As for other disciplines—can we dismiss them as folly? On the contrary, we cannot engage with books on these subjects without awe, as we are compelled to acknowledge the wisdom they contain.

Hence, it is imperative to attribute any excellence or merit to the grace of God. To do otherwise would be an act of profound ingratitude—a sentiment not shared by pagan poets who openly acknowledge philosophy, law, medicine, and other forms of knowledge as gifts from God. Considering that these individuals,

bereft of any divine assistance beyond nature, exhibited such ingenious insight into worldly matters, these examples should remind us of the extent to which our Lord has blessed human nature, even after it was stripped of its primeval purity. It is vital, however, to recognize that all such gifts are bestowed by God's Spirit, distributed according to His divine will for the collective welfare of humankind. If it was necessary for the Spirit of God to grant specialized knowledge and skill to those who constructed the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 31:1–6, 35:30–35), it is entirely reasonable to affirm that the knowledge pertaining to the most fundamental aspects of human life is also transmitted to us through the agency of God's Spirit.

In the face of skepticism that questions the relevance of God's Spirit for the wicked, those alienated from Him, it is essential to clarify the matter. The argument, though well-intentioned, remains incomplete. When it is affirmed that the Spirit resides solely within the faithful, it is pertinent to remember that this pertains to the Spirit of sanctification—He through whom we are consecrated to God as His sacred abode. Nevertheless, the ceaseless influence, motion, and vitality of God's Spirit pervades all creatures, embracing each according to its nature, as it was endowed during the act of creation. In the scenario where the wicked and unbelieving inadvertently facilitate the comprehension of physics, dialectics, and other disciplines, it is incumbent upon us to utilize such resources. To disregard the gracious offerings of God would be an act of negligence, inviting retribution for our lack of appreciation. Yet let it be known that this power to comprehend, coupled with the understanding it begets, is rendered inconsequential before God when devoid of a foundation in truth. The words of St. Augustine hold true in this regard—an assertion acknowledged even by the master of the Sentences himself: "Just as the graces bestowed upon

humanity beyond its nature were withdrawn post-fall, so were the natural graces, though untainted in origin, tainted in nature." This corruption, not in their origin but in their recipients, is a consequence of human contamination, rendering these graces impure and undeserving of praise.

Now, let us unravel the facets of human reason in its pursuit of the kingdom of God, as well as its capacity to apprehend spiritual wisdom encompassing three main aspects: knowledge of God, understanding His will, and aligning our lives in accordance with His divine plan.

Addressing the first two aspects, particularly the latter, it becomes evident that those most adept in intellect can be blinder than the very blind they aim to enlighten. This is not to deny the presence of well-formulated discourses about God in the works of philosophers. However, a glaring inconsistency plagues these treatises, revealing a disarray of thoughts and imaginations void of certainty. It is undeniable that God extended them a modicum of insight into His divinity, sparing them the excuse of ignorance for their impiety. Occasionally, He impelled them to articulate statements that could be employed against them. Yet their comprehension remained skewed and unable to steer them toward the truth, missing the mark of genuine understanding. An apt analogy is that of a person in a field during nighttime thunderstorms. Illuminated by lightning, they briefly discern their surroundings, but the transient brilliance fails to guide their way due to the impending darkness. The fleeting luminosity leaves them stumbling and lost before they can gauge their path, ultimately thwarted by the encroaching obscurity. Moreover, the infrequency of truths amid the pages of philosophers' works is overshadowed by a multitude of erroneous beliefs.

Addressing the second aspect, the deficiency in understanding is most conspicuous, as they have never glimpsed a semblance of certainty concerning God's will. This ignorance plunges the human intellect into disarray, inducing a maddening confusion. Consequently, human reason is ill-equipped to approach the truth of comprehending the identity of the one true God and His intentions toward us. However, it is the insidious nature of human presumption that, intoxicated by wicked arrogance, casts doubt on the assertion that reason is incapable of comprehending divine matters. A more reliable means of proving this claim lies in the testimonies of Scripture rather than intricate reasoning. St. John adeptly exemplifies this approach when he emphasizes that "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:4–5). Through these words, he underscores that while human souls are mildly illuminated by the light of God, they remain devoid of understanding concerning God's essence. Why is this the case? For the knowledge of God, their spiritual faculties are steeped in darkness. Consequently, they remain perpetually shrouded in obscurity. This fact is echoed in the designation of "darkness" for humanity by the Holy Spirit. This term serves to strip them of every shred of spiritual understanding.

Thus, it is apt when St. John avers that the faithful who receive Christ are "born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). This underscores that the flesh is ill-equipped to fathom the profound wisdom of God and His divine attributes, except through the illumination provided by the Holy Spirit. This notion is further reinforced by Christ's acknowledgment to St. Peter that his understanding of Him emerged from a spiritual revelation from God the Father (Matthew 16:17). Adhering to the premise that all the gifts imparted by the Spirit of regeneration to the

chosen are absent in our nature, the stability of this argument is beyond reproach. Accordingly, the faithful declare, "For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9). St. Paul corroborates this, asserting, "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). Similarly, John the Baptist, observing the ignorance of his disciples, declares that "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven" (John 3:27). Here, the term "given" implies a spiritual revelation rather than a conventional understanding of nature—a fact underscored by his lamentation that his extensive preaching about Christ had failed to impart divine understanding to his disciples. Thus, the term "given" pertains to a spiritual revelation and not a common grasp of nature. Moses, accusing the people of forgetfulness, simultaneously notes their incapacity to understand the mysteries of God without the bestowal of grace. He declares, "Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear" (Deuteronomy 29:2–4). Moses' assertion can be likened to referring to them as dim-witted when considering the works of God.

In His wisdom, the Lord extends a promise through His prophet to the Israelites, vouchsafing that He shall bestow understanding upon them—knowledge by which they shall come to know Him (Jeremiah 24:7). This assurance resounds with the truth that the human intellect cannot attain spiritual wisdom without the illumination of God Himself. The words of St. Paul echo with even greater clarity, as he contends that "the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Who is this "natural man"? It signifies one who relies solely on the light of natural reasoning. Thus, it becomes evident that spiritual matters elude natural comprehension. Why is this the case? It is not solely

due to neglect, but because even the most diligent effort proves incapable of yielding such knowledge. St. Paul clarifies that such understanding necessitates a spiritual discernment. This underscores that these truths, concealed from human intellect, require the revelation of the Spirit to bring them to light. According to this principle, all wisdom of God remains bewildering madness to humanity until illuminated by divine grace. St. Paul himself transcended the boundaries of sight, hearing, and human understanding, gaining insights into the mysteries God prepared for His servants. He attested that human wisdom acts as a veil, hindering a clear contemplation of God (2 Corinthians 3:13–18; 4:3; 12:1–4). This admonishment suffices. The apostle proclaims that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness" and as God ordained it, let it remain so. Can we then bestow upon this earthly wisdom the profound discernment to penetrate divine mysteries and unearth the secrets of His kingdom? Such a delusion must be cast aside.

Now, let us direct our focus towards the third facet—the knowledge of righteous conduct, of true virtue. The human intellect appears to exhibit greater acumen in this realm than in the aforementioned matters. The apostle affirms that even those without the law possess within themselves an innate moral law, inscribed on their hearts. Their consciences serve as witnesses to their actions, either accusing or defending them before the tribunal of God's judgment (Romans 2:14–15). Thus, even the Gentiles, whose souls bear the imprint of God's righteousness, are not entirely bereft of the means to discern proper conduct. Conventional wisdom asserts that natural law, as described by the apostle, equips individuals with sufficient guidance for virtuous living. Yet, a thorough contemplation of the purpose behind this law of nature elucidates its limitations in leading us to the pinnacle of reason and truth. A careful reading of St. Paul's words will shed light on this aspect. He declares earlier that "as many as

have sinned in the law will be judged by the law, and as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law" (Romans 2:12). To address the seeming disparity of ignorant individuals meeting instant perdition, he adds that "their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them" (Romans 2:15). The ultimate objective of the natural law is to render individuals inexcusable. Hence, we may aptly define it as a moral conscience that differentiates between right and wrong, sufficiently preventing ignorance from serving as a pretext. Conscience convicts individuals through its internal testimony, stripping them of excuses. Human inclination often skews towards self-flattery, fostering an eagerness to avert the acknowledgment of one's transgressions. Plato contended that ignorance alone incites sin—an assertion that would hold merit if human hypocrisy could prevent divine judgment from pursuing a guilty conscience.

However, since the sinner, in falling from the capacity to distinguish between good and evil embedded within, cannot avert moments of clarity, he is repeatedly compelled to confront the truth. It is therefore misguided to claim that sin arises solely from ignorance. This notion aligns with Themistius, another philosopher, who posits that human intellect rarely deceives itself in general reflections, reserving deception for specific considerations pertaining to the self. Instances abound: when queried about the morality of murder in the abstract, none would deny its wickedness. However, an individual contemplating the demise of their foe may perceive it as virtuous. Similarly, an adulterer may censure promiscuity generally while rationalizing their own actions. This ignorance arises when, after formulating a sound universal judgment, the individual becomes entangled in the matter at hand, forgetting the precedent established when it was considered independently. St. Augustine expounds upon this matter adeptly in his commentary on Psalm 57:1. Nevertheless,

Themistius' perspective is not universally applicable. There are instances when the gravity of the crime closely impinges on the sinner's conscience, driving them not by self-deception under the illusion of goodness, but with full awareness and volition toward evil. Such sentiments yield statements found in pagan writings, such as "I know what is better and commendable, yet I persist in pursuing what is worse." To dispel any ambiguity on this topic, Aristotle presents a clear distinction between "incontinence" and "intemperance." He elucidates, "Incontinence robs an individual of specific discernment between good and evil due to disordered desires, leading them to justify their own sin despite condemning it universally. When clarity eventually emerges, penitence compels them to acknowledge their wrongdoing. Intemperance, a more perilous ailment, arises when an individual knowingly commits wrong, persistently pursuing their wicked inclinations."

Upon recognizing the universal capacity of individuals to discern between good and evil, we must not hastily assume its complete health and wholeness. While their understanding is endowed with the capability to distinguish good from evil—sufficient to preclude the plea of ignorance—it need not encompass every detail. Rather, it is necessary that they possess enough knowledge to resist equivocation, for their conscience shall convict them. However, delving into the understanding of righteousness as defined by God's perfect law exposes its inherent blindness. It fails to comprehend the primary tenets of the commandments within the first table—such as placing trust in God, extolling His might and righteousness, invoking His name, and observing His Sabbath. Has any human intellect ever—not to mention comprehended—conceived that the genuine worship and service of God encompass these elements? Even when the wicked strive to honor God, they perpetually revert to their misguided notions, persistently rejecting the spiritual worship that

alone pleases Him. Should we laud an understanding incapable of receiving righteous admonitions? Our understanding, in this respect, mirrors such deficiency; its insensitivity is undeniable.

Turning to the directives of the second table—the realm of human and civic life—we find a marginally heightened understanding, given their proximity to daily existence. Nevertheless, human comprehension occasionally falters, even in these areas. Even among loftier minds, embracing excellence deemed too demanding remains a challenge, tempting them to contrive rationalizations against its pursuit. The human intellect can only assess this challenge as a heart weighed down by bearing such exacting virtue—refuting it seems virtuous and valiant. Contrarily, God commands His followers to uphold the patience condemned by the world. Alas, our understanding is marred in this regard, incapable of identifying its own wicked inclinations. The carnal individual remains oblivious to their inner malaise, and their innate light flickers out before the path of escape is discerned. The philosophers often consider only the outward manifestations of heart's desires as unrestrained, dismissing the more covert, insidious cravings.

Thus, just as we reproached Plato for attributing all sin to ignorance, we must similarly reject the notion that deliberate wickedness underlies all transgressions. Our experiences reveal that we often sin with honorable intentions. The web of ignorance, error, impediments, and perplexity that ensnares our reasoning and understanding renders them ill-equipped for providing certainty in life. St. Paul aptly exposes the limitations of these faculties, stating that "of ourselves, we are not sufficient to think of anything as being from ourselves" (2 Corinthians 3:5). This encompasses not only volition and emotion but extends to the very realm of thought, determining what is morally commendable.

One might question, "Is our activity, wisdom, knowledge, and earnest endeavors so profoundly corrupted that we cannot even contemplate or reflect on what is good in the eyes of God?" Though this proposition seems daunting, it aligns with the Holy Spirit's perspective, for He perceives human thoughts as mere vanity. He asserts that "every intent of the thoughts of [man's] heart is only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5; 8:21). If all human musings, aspirations, deliberations, and contrivances inherently bear wickedness, how can we fathom devising actions pleasing to God, who esteems nothing but righteousness and holiness? Thus, irrespective of its direction, human reasoning is ensnared in futility. David, recognizing this deficiency within himself, implores God to grant him understanding to rightly grasp His precepts (Psalm 119:34). His plea implies that his own understanding falls short. St. Augustine's discernment into the shortcomings of human reasoning regarding divine matters leads him to confess that the illumination of the Holy Spirit is as indispensable to understanding as the sun's radiance is to sight. He further emphasizes that the eyes of our understanding remain shut until our Lord opens them.

Moving on to the will—a repository of freedom, if indeed it exists—we shall examine its nature. We've seen that choice is more aligned with the will than the understanding. Pertaining to the matter of freedom, let us not hastily conclude that the philosophers' claim, commonly accepted, is indicative of inherent goodness in the human will. When they assert that all entities naturally incline toward the good, we must discern that the power of free choice should not be conflated with inclinations arising from nature's bent, but rather from deliberate reflection. The scholastic theologians concur, asserting that free choice involves reason's consideration of both options. This signifies that the object of desire must be suitable for choice, and deliberation must precede the act of choosing.

Considering the natural human longing for the good, we realize that it is akin to the appetites of brute beasts. These creatures desire whatever serves their well-being, pursuing whatever seems good to their senses. This natural inclination lacks discernment regarding what reason, in accordance with the excellence of our immortal nature, dictates. Consequently, it fails to consider it with true understanding, yielding to instinct akin to the behavior of beasts. This inclination, when roused, is unrelated to free choice. True free choice mandates a discernment of the good through right reason, knowing what is chosen and selecting it with purpose.

To dispel confusion, we must recognize two potential misinterpretations. In this context, "appetite" does not signify a specific movement of the will but rather a natural inclination. Furthermore, the term "good" does not denote righteousness or virtue but encompasses all creatures' yearning for comfort within the bounds of their nature. This natural desire does not validate the existence of human freedom, just as the tendency of unconscious entities to fulfill their nature does not denote freedom. Let us then proceed to further inquiries. Does the human will stand so deeply tainted that it only produces evil, or is there an aspect of it unblemished, giving rise to virtuous desires?

Some contend that the ability to effectively will is granted through God's initial grace, implying the existence of a faculty within the soul to aspire toward the good. However, this faculty is deemed feeble, unable to develop a steadfast desire that propels one towards exertion. This notion aligns with the perspective commonly embraced by scholastics, influenced by early church fathers like Origen. When examining human nature in its pristine state, they refer to St. Paul's words in the seventh chapter of Romans: "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not

practice; but what I hate, that I do" (Romans 7:15). In this manner, they interpret St. Paul's discourse. Yet, they misconstrue the context, as St. Paul addresses the Christian struggle. He briefly touches upon it in his letter to the Galatians, highlighting the continuous battle between the Spirit and the flesh experienced by believers (Galatians 5:17). Notably, the faithful possess the Spirit not inherently, but through spiritual rebirth.

St. Paul's discourse pertains to the regenerated, evident when he attributes the absence of good within himself to his flesh, emphasizing that sin resides within him rather than his core being. He emphasizes this point by stating, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find" (Romans 7:18). Clearly, he speaks of those reborn through God's Spirit, who earnestly strive for goodness. The subsequent passage reinforces this perspective, declaring, "For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind" (Romans 7:22–23). Such internal strife is exclusive to those regenerated by God's Spirit, who bear remnants of their flesh. St. Augustine, while initially applying this passage to human nature, later conceded its inaccuracy and incongruity. Should we acknowledge even the minutest inclination towards good without divine grace, how shall we address the apostle who denies our capacity to conceive any good thoughts? How shall we respond to the Lord's declaration, as conveyed through Moses, that "the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21)? Their misunderstanding of one passage has led them astray; thus, we must not rest content with their misconception. Instead, we should heed the words of Christ, who proclaims, "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34). As all humans are sinners by nature, they are consequently enslaved to sin. Thus, if the entirety of humanity is

shackled by the chains of sin, it follows that the will—the core of their being—is likewise bound and restricted.

Moreover, no portrayal encapsulates an individual better than the titles ascribed to them in Scripture. Examining these titles, we uncover the depth of human frailty. As Scripture avers, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6), unveiling humanity's wretched state. The apostle attests, "For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:6–7). The flesh is so corrupted that it harbors hostility towards God, incapable of embracing divine righteousness. It produces only grounds for death. If human nature solely comprises flesh, how can we expect to draw any goodness from it? Some may argue that these attributes solely pertain to the sensual person, not the higher faculties of the soul. Such a notion is promptly refuted by the words of Christ and the apostle. Christ emphasizes that people, being "flesh," must experience rebirth (John 3:6–7). This rebirth is not confined to one aspect; it signifies complete renewal. The comparison between the Spirit and the flesh, employed by both Christ and the apostle, leaves no middle ground. Therefore, every facet not characterized by spirituality aligns with fleshliness. Regeneration alone grants us a measure of the Spirit.

Thus, all that we inherit from nature is flesh. I shall not exhaustively enumerate David's and the prophets' portrayals of human futility. Yet, the profound declaration in the Psalms endures: "Surely men of low degree are a vapor, men of high degree are a lie; if they are weighed on the scales, they are altogether lighter than vapor" (Psalm 62:9). This resounding indictment unveils the inadequacy of human thought. All notions emerging from it are deemed foolish, vain, misguided, and tainted. Likewise, Jeremiah admonishes that "The

heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). Permit me to focus on a single reference that mirrors the entire portrait of our nature—an unequivocal mirror that reflects the undeniable truth. St. Paul aims not merely to reprimand, urging transformation in behavior. Instead, he seeks to teach that all are ensnared in such wretchedness that deliverance necessitates divine mercy. This can only be established by demonstrating our inherent ruin. St. Paul thus employs these testimonies to unveil human nature's utter depravity. Let us unequivocally acknowledge that St. Paul's depiction is not restricted to societal corruption but signifies intrinsic corruption. Otherwise, his argument would lose its foundation. The purpose is to underscore our dependence on divine mercy, as every individual stands lost and ruined in themselves. I shall refrain from elaborating on how these testimonies align with St. Paul's intent, for I consider these words to be his own rather than mere citations from the prophets.

Initially, the stripping away occurs in the realm of righteousness—integrity and purity are cast aside. Subsequently, understanding falters, as a consequence of which humanity collectively turns away from God. Such a turn is emblematic of the highest form of wisdom—seeking the Divine. The fruits of faithlessness follow suit: decay pervades, rot takes hold, and goodness becomes scarce. A deeper plunge reveals the very vices that those consumed by unrighteousness propagate throughout their being. Lastly, the testimony stands that all mankind lacks the awe of God—a vital compass guiding our path. If these are the endowments inherited by the human race, then to expect inherent goodness within our nature is an empty pursuit. I acknowledge that not every sin is openly manifested in each individual; however, none can refute that the seeds of such transgressions reside within all. Comparable to a body harboring an impending illness, regardless of its invisibility or

absence of pain, it cannot be deemed healthy. Similarly, a soul tainted by such filth cannot be deemed healthy—though, of course, the analogy falls short. While bodily ailments allow the persistence of life, the soul, immersed in the pit of iniquity, not only bears defectiveness but is devoid of goodness.

A question akin to the preceding inquiry emerges. Throughout history, certain individuals, led by nature, have fostered virtue throughout their lives. Though their morals might be imperfect, their aspirations for nobility underscore some semblance of purity within their nature. The full value of such virtue before God shall be elucidated when discussing the worth of deeds. Yet, for the present, we must address the matter at hand. These instances signify that we must not entirely regard human nature as inherently deficient. Through its guidance, some have not merely committed excellent deeds but have also displayed honor throughout their lives.

It is paramount to acknowledge that within the universal corruption we have delineated, God's grace occupies a space—not to rectify nature's corruption, but to bridle and constrain it. Were God to permit unbridled indulgence in passion, all would bear witness to the manifold vices that St. Paul condemns in human nature. For how could anyone extricate themselves from the human race? Such separation would be essential to exempt oneself from St. Paul's indictment of all humanity—the assertion that their feet rush to shed blood, their hands partake in extortion and homicide, their bellies resembling open graves, tongues deceitful, and lips venomous. Works rendered futile, wicked, rotten, and deadly; hearts devoid of God; wickedness dwelling within; eyes set to ambush; hearts haughty, prone to insults and harm. In essence, each member poised for evil (Romans 3:9–18). If each soul harbors these monstrous vices, as vehemently expressed by the apostle, the unrestrained pursuit of

human passions would result in unparalleled chaos—no ferocious beast can rival human passion's propensity for disorder, nor is there a river more rapid, vehement, or prone to flood. The Lord purifies such maladies in His chosen ones, as we shall elaborate further. In those deemed reprobate, these maladies are merely restrained, akin to a bridle curbing their overflow, ensuring the world's preservation. Consequently, some are constrained by shame, others by the fear of laws, preventing them from yielding to numerous evils, although their wicked desires may remain thinly veiled. Some perceive an honorable life as advantageous, thus embracing it to a certain extent. Others extend their endeavor to showcase exceptional virtue, exercising a majesty that subdues the common populace. Through His providence, the Lord checks the corruption within our nature without fully cleansing it.

A query may arise, asserting the inadequacy of this resolution. It implies a binary—either Catiline transforms akin to Camillus, or Camillus stands as proof that nature, when channeled suitably, retains some measure of goodness. While the virtues present in Camillus are undoubtedly God's gifts and merit praise, their significance concerning the inherent goodness of Camillus' nature must be scrutinized. For this, a return to the heart is essential, arguing that if an individual exhibits such heart-driven integrity, then human nature must indeed possess the capacity for fostering good. However, what if the heart is tainted, hostile, and ignorant of the pursuit of righteousness? Even if Camillus were to be considered a natural person, his heart would undoubtedly bear the stain of corruption. What potential for goodness can we attribute to human nature when the pinnacle of integrity showcases an inclination towards corruption? Hence, since a person is not deemed virtuous if cloaked in vices masked as virtues, we cannot ascribe to human will the power to desire the good when entrenched in corruption.

Therefore, the simplest and most assured conclusion lies in asserting that such virtues do not emanate from nature but represent distinct graces bestowed by the Lord. He grants them even to the wicked, according to His will and measure. Consequently, it is common in our discourse to refer to individuals as either inherently good or inherently bad, endowed with a good or bad nature, while acknowledging their inclusion within the universal realm of human corruption. This practice reflects the unique grace that God imparts individually, bestowing upon some that which He withholds from others.

The will, ensnared in the bonds of sin and subjected to slavery, is rendered incapable of inclining towards goodness, much less aspiring towards it. This movement marks the inception of our return to God—a conversion that Scripture attributes entirely to the grace of the Holy Spirit. Just as Jeremiah implores the Lord to "restore him if He wills restoration" (Jeremiah 31:18), the spiritual liberation of the faithful is depicted in the same chapter. The prophet underscores their deliverance from the grasp of a stronger adversary, symbolizing the sinner's captivity under Satan's yoke during periods of divine abandonment. Yet, the will persists within humanity, an innate yearning inclined towards sin. When plunged into this condition, individuals were not stripped of their will, but of a virtuous one. Hence, the assertion by St. Bernard that the will resides in all people holds true; however, desiring the good signifies an advancement, while pursuing evil becomes our culpability. The act of willing belongs to an individual, desiring evil is characteristic of a corrupted nature, and aspiring to good emanates from grace.

Expressing that the will is bereft of freedom and inevitably drawn towards evil might perplex some, but this mode of expression holds merit. It is not illogical; indeed, early church theologians employed

this perspective. Some are perturbed due to an inability to discern between necessity and constraint. Yet, if asked whether God's inherent goodness is necessary or constrained, or whether the devil's inherent wickedness is necessary or constrained, what would they answer? Without doubt, God's goodness is so intertwined with His divinity that being good is as inherent to Him as being God. Following his fall, the devil's estrangement from all good is so profound that he can only perpetrate evil. If any should blaspheme, contending that God's goodness merits lesser praise since He is compelled to sustain it, the response is straightforward. His intrinsic goodness prevents Him from engaging in evil, a trait emanating from His boundless goodness, not coercion. The necessity of doing good does not encumber God's free will; similarly, the devil, though unable to act otherwise, remains engaged in voluntary sin. Thus, to argue that sin is not voluntary in humans due to the necessity of sinning is untenable. St. Augustine consistently expounded this necessity, unswayed even when Celestius attempted to vilify this doctrine. In this context, Augustine affirmed, "By human free will, people fell into sin; yet the corruption ensuing from this fall into sin transformed freedom into necessity." A distinction must be observed: corrupted by the fall, individuals sin voluntarily, not against their own hearts, nor under compulsion. They sin with a predisposition, not external coercion; their nature is so corroded that they are inclined, propelled, and led solely towards evil. Hence, it is evident that they are bound to sin by necessity.

Now, it is time to consider the remedy of God's grace—the means by which our fallen nature is reformed. The Lord supplements our deficiencies through His assistance. By observing His actions within us, we gain insight into our own impoverishment. When the apostle reassures the Philippians that he is "confident that the One who initiated a virtuous work in them will bring it to completion"

(Philippians 1:6), this "initiation of a virtuous work" undoubtedly refers to the inception of their conversion—when their wills were redirected towards God. Herein lies how the Lord commences His work within us: infusing love, desire, and zeal for righteousness into our hearts. To speak more aptly, He inclines, molds, and guides our hearts towards righteousness. This work is fulfilled by confirming our perseverance.

To preclude potential objections asserting that the good is initiated in us due to divine aid supplementing our inherently weak will, the Holy Spirit clarifies elsewhere the capacity of our will in isolation. He declares, "I will give you a new heart, I will create a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart and replace it with a heart of flesh. I will instill My Spirit within you, guiding you to abide by My commandments" (Ezekiel 36:26–27). Who, then, can maintain that the inherent weakness of the human will is strengthened to the point of zealously choosing the good when it is evident that the will necessitates a complete transformation? If a stone can be molded when squeezed, assuming it is malleable enough, to shape it as desired, then I do not contest that the human heart may harbor some capacity and inclination to obey God, provided its inherent frailty is reinforced. However, if through this metaphor, our Lord seeks to illustrate the impossibility of extracting any good from our hearts without rendering them entirely distinct, then let us not share in the praise attributed solely to Him. If, when the Lord converts us to goodness, it equates to transforming a stone into flesh, then surely all contributions arising from our own choice are nullified, and all that follows thereafter originates from God.

There might be those who acknowledge, "Human will turns towards righteousness and uprightness only through God's power; it has inherently turned away from these attributes. Yet, through

preparation by God, the will also engages." St. Augustine expounds that "grace precedes every virtuous action, and in doing good, the will is guided by grace rather than vice versa; the will follows and does not lead." However, I perceive that the prophet's words yield two outcomes: firstly, the Lord reforms—or rather, dismantles—our corrupt choices; then, He imparts a benevolent will from Himself. Thus, since our choices are anticipated by grace, I concede that they could be deemed as servants. Yet, in their transformation, this is the work of God. Thus, it is inappropriate to attribute to humans that they, through their will, obey prevenient grace. Therefore, St. Chrysostom's assertion that "grace is ineffective without the will, just as the will is ineffective without grace" is not fitting. As for St. Augustine, when he dubbed human will the servant of grace, his intention was not to allot partial praise to the will for good deeds. Instead, he sought to refute the misguided teaching of Pelagius, who made human merit the prime cause of salvation. Thus, St. Augustine demonstrated that grace supersedes all merits, leaving aside the subsequent effect of grace within us—a topic he addresses thoroughly elsewhere. When he repeatedly states, "The Lord precedes the unwilling so they may be willing; He aids the willing so their willingness does not falter," he attributes authorship of all goodness to Him.

Arriving at the crux of the matter, let us consolidate our understanding and validate it through scriptural evidence. Subsequently, to preclude unwarranted accusations of distorting scripture, we shall demonstrate that this truth we uphold is also in accordance with the teachings of the venerable Augustine. Rather than exhaustively presenting every scriptural testimony that bolsters our perspective, I propose selecting those that can pave the way for comprehending others. Nonetheless, it would not be remiss to establish my accord with this esteemed individual, rightly revered by

the church. Given the premise of God's people's conversion being twofold—namely, the removal of stony hearts and the bestowal of fleshy hearts—He unequivocally attests to the necessity of obliterating any vestige of our own will to lead us towards goodness. Simultaneously, He introduces elements in place of those eradicated, originating from grace. This theme recurs, not solely in one place but throughout Scripture. Jeremiah testifies, "I will give them a heart and a way, that they may fear Me with all their lives," and further, "I will instill My reverence in their hearts to prevent them from turning away from Me" (Jeremiah 32:39-40). Ezekiel echoes a similar sentiment, proclaiming, "I will grant them an undivided heart, and place a new spirit within them; I will remove their heart of stone and grant them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). No other statement could more effectively divest us of the praise for any good or virtuous intention within our wills and attribute it entirely to God than referring to our transformation as the creation of a fresh spirit and heart.

The unassailable conclusion remains that without His intervention, nothing good can emanate from our wills. The Lord Jesus has offered abundant evidence of His grace, sparing us the difficulty of recognizing its presence. He declares, "I am the vine; you are the branches. My Father is the gardener. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. Without Me, you can achieve nothing" (John 15:1, 4–5). Since we do not bear fruit independently any more than a severed branch can thrive without the vine's nourishment, how can we question the fitness of our nature to perform good deeds? This assertion, "Without Him, you can achieve nothing," is unequivocal. He does not insinuate our frailty in a manner implying inadequacy, but rather reduces us to nothingness, negating any semblance of potency. To elaborate, if grafted into Christ, we yield

fruit akin to a branch deriving its vitality from earthly moisture, heavenly dew, and solar warmth. It becomes apparent that no residue of our own agency remains if we are to uphold God's honor in its entirety. Hence, the apostle assigns Him all glory, asserting, "It is God who works in you both to will and to perform His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). Willingness is integral to the inception of virtuous deeds, and subsequent execution is the second part. Both are orchestrated by God. Therefore, any attribution of merit to oneself, be it in the act of willing or in the act of executing, constitutes a theft from God. Even if we assert that God aids our feeble will, a semblance of autonomy is retained. However, stating that God initiates the will underscores that every element of goodness within it originates from beyond us. Yet, due to the weight of our sinful nature, the pure will is hampered and crushed. Consequently, our Lord endows us with constancy and the power to actualize it, surmounting all obstacles. Indeed, the apostle's proclamation that "there is only one God who works all things in all people" (1 Corinthians 12:6) could not be true unless God initiated and perfected every virtuous endeavor within us. Grace ignites the will to embrace the good, stirs the inclination to desire it, and propels the pursuit of it—qualities that endure until fruition. Ultimately, the individual aspires to the good and perseveres in its pursuit until its culmination.

Contrary to long-standing notions, God does not simply stir our will, allowing us the choice to either obey His prompting or resist it. Instead, He moves it with such undeniable efficacy that obedience becomes inevitable. We must not adopt the interpretation often attributed to Chrysostom, who proclaimed, "God draws only those who wish to be drawn." This suggests that God extends His hand to us, awaiting our desire for His assistance. While it holds true that humanity's initial state allowed for a leaning toward either side,

Adam's example revealed the inadequacy and misery of free choice unless God wills within us, orchestrating every facet. Therefore, the limited scope in which some imagine God's grace is distributed, diminishes the grandeur of His grace and taints it with ingratitude. For the apostle does not solely offer the possibility of righteous choice; he proclaims that God actively shapes and creates within us the ability to choose (Philippians 2:13). This implies that God, through His Spirit, steers, transforms, and governs our hearts as His sacred domain. Christ's assertion, "Everyone who has learned from My Father comes to Me" (John 6:45), can only be understood in the context that God's grace possesses the inherent power to bring His work to fruition, as St. Augustine contends. It is not apportioned to each as per the adage, "it is not denied to anyone who does what lies in him." This privilege pertains exclusively to the elect, regenerated by the Spirit of God, guided and governed by Him.

Let not doubt fester that perseverance is a divine gift. Nevertheless, a flawed belief exists in some hearts, that it is meted out in accordance with one's merit—indicating gratitude for initial grace. This fallacy arises from the notion that our power to accept or reject God's grace presents itself when offered. Yet, this erroneous perspective can be readily debunked. The error is twofold. Firstly, they contend that by properly employing God's initial grace, they deserve further grace as a reward. Secondly, they assert that grace does not operate alone within us; rather, it collaborates with our efforts. On the former point, we acknowledge that as God multiplies His graces upon His servants, He augments them further due to their pleasing devotion to the initial work He instigates. This perspective resonates with sayings such as, "For whoever has will be given more" (Matthew 13:12), and "Since you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities" (Luke 19:17). However, caution must be exercised on two fronts: we must not attribute to humans the merit

of appropriately utilizing God's grace, nor assert that graces bestowed upon the faithful are rewards for proficiently employing the initial grace. To suggest that everything flows from God's gratuitous goodness is imperative. Certainly, the faithful may anticipate blessings when they employ God's graces effectively, leading to the daily addition of new and greater blessings. Yet, I contend that God's goodness initiates the apt use of His gifts, and His benevolence bestows rewards.

The assertion that we subsequently cooperate with God after granting space to the initial grace warrants examination. If it signifies that, once empowered by God to embrace righteousness, we willingly follow the trajectory of His grace, I concur. Undoubtedly, God's grace instills the disposition to obey wherever it manifests. But whence does this emanate if not from God's constant nurturing and fortification of the obedience He initially engendered? Conversely, if it suggests that humans can collaborate with God's grace autonomously, it's a pernicious fallacy. They may then argue, "What did the apostle mean by this: 'But I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me'" (1 Corinthians 15:10)? Ascribing himself preeminence may seem boastful; however, by attributing the labor to the grace of God, he nullifies self-aggrandizement. Some, blinded by this straw, stumble—though possessing stature, they fall. Yet, Paul's intent is clear in the Greek text, though obscured in the common translation, debunking the misunderstanding.

Let us now turn to the words of St. Augustine, silencing the accusations of the modern Pelagians—the sophists of the Sorbonne—who, akin to their forebearer Pelagius, unjustly challenge us by suggesting that the early church fathers are in opposition. This mirrors Pelagius' past efforts to cast doubt upon St. Augustine's

teachings. Throughout his work titled "On Rebuke and Grace," St. Augustine addresses this topic, and I shall offer a succinct selection of his words to elucidate his perspective. He writes, "Adam had the ability if he wished, but lacked the will to use it; for us, both the will and the power are bestowed upon us. The initial freedom entailed the power to abstain from sin; the present state is far superior, rendering us incapable of sinning." The Sorbonne adherents attribute this notion to a future life of perfection, which is a derisive notion. St. Augustine promptly refutes this by asserting that the will of the faithful is guided by the Holy Spirit, enabling them to do good because they desire it, and they desire it because God fashioned their will. In his words, "Their will remains, albeit weak, enabling them to do good with God's assistance if they choose. Without this divine intervention, their frail will would succumb to the onslaught of temptations, preventing perseverance. Thus, God aids the feeble human will, directing it to steadfastness, ensuring it cannot waver, and governing it to prevent deviation. Despite its frailty, the will remains steadfast." St. Augustine further contemplates how our hearts ought to follow God's urging when He beckons, asserting, "God draws people according to their volition, not through coercion. However, it is the will He has shaped within them."

With these words of St. Augustine, the pivotal issue of our discourse stands vindicated. Divine grace is not a mere choice between acceptance or rejection, shaped by individual whim. Instead, it is the sole force that stirs our hearts to follow God's call, evoking both choice and volition. Consequently, all subsequent virtuous deeds bear its fruit, and grace is not received by the living unless it molds their hearts into obedience. For this reason, the same saint declares in another instance, "Only God's grace accomplishes every virtuous deed within us." In certain contexts, he posits that grace does not obliterate the will but rather transforms it from malevolence to

benevolence, enabling it to cooperate with grace and act with virtuous intent. Addressing Boniface, he asserts, "We recognize that God's grace is not extended to all, and when it is bestowed, it is not due to merits but is an expression of God's gratuitous kindness. Conversely, its denial stems from divine justice." In the same letter, he strongly repudiates the view that the second grace rewards merit, asserting that those who do not reject the initial grace merit the second. He compels Pelagius to acknowledge that "we require grace for every action, and it is not bestowed as a reward for merit; rather, it is recognized as pure grace."

Swiftly dispelling this matter is found in St. Augustine's "On Rebuke and Grace," in the eighth chapter. Firstly, he expounds that the human will does not acquire grace through freedom, but rather it attains freedom through God's grace. Secondly, he asserts that this grace solidifies the will in virtue, enabling it to love and persevere. Thirdly, he proclaims that the will is fortified with invincible strength to resist evil. Fourthly, he emphasizes that when governed by grace, the will is unwavering, whereas abandonment by grace leads to immediate faltering. St. Augustine affirms, "Through God's merciful grace, the will is transformed towards virtue and persists therein." He also states, "When the human will is guided to good and confirmed therein, this emanates solely from God's will, not from any merit." Thus, a distinct freedom of choice remains, as St. Augustine underscores in another instance, where turning to and persevering in God is solely through His grace. In this manner, all the actions of the will are ultimately manifestations of grace.

This divine grace, at times referred to as "deliverance," emancipates us from the shackles of sin. On other occasions, it's termed our "restoration," through which we leave behind our former selves and return to the divine image. It is also known as "regeneration,"

granting us renewal as new creations. Additionally, it's likened to "resurrection," signifying our death to self and subsequent resurrection by divine power. Yet, it's essential to recognize that this deliverance remains incomplete, a remnant of us lingering under sin's influence. The restoration is not absolute, traces of earthly tendencies persist. Our renewal isn't absolute either; remnants of our old selves endure. Within the confines of our corporeal prison, the residue of our flesh curbs our freedom. Thus, the faithful soul, post-regeneration, becomes a battleground of two forces eternally at odds. Governed by God's Spirit, the soul longs for immortality, propelling it towards righteousness, purity, and holiness. It fixates solely on the blessed realm and aspires to God's presence. However, entangled in earthly vices and impeded by wicked passions, it fails to grasp genuine desirability and ultimate blessedness. Sin leads it astray from God and righteousness.

This perpetual strife remains a fixture in the faithful individual's life, where the Spirit elevates while the flesh tempts. The Spirit guides the soul towards righteousness, yet the flesh seduces towards sin. It steers towards God, but the flesh tugs backwards. It scorns the world, while the flesh yearns for worldly pleasures. This isn't an abstract concept, detached from our lived experiences; rather, it's a practical reality known to those who are children of God. The conflict between the flesh and the Spirit resembles a duel within the faithful soul. It's a battle wherein the Spirit emerges victorious. The flesh may attempt to undermine the Spirit's work, yet it merely hinders, slows, weakens, or bends, never completely overpowering or quenching the Spirit's vigor.

Such adversities kindle an intense ardor within God's servant, spurring a fervent longing for Him, and nurturing an insatiable desire for His presence. The faithful soul yearns for God with utmost

yearning and affections. Despite these tribulations, the regenerate person must persist, directed by God's Spirit, and filled with the aspiration to overcome the obstacles posed by the flesh. St. Paul's affirmation that if we are God's children, we ought to follow the Spirit's guidance, underscores this battle. He signals that the Spirit must ultimately triumph.

The distinction between the natural and the regenerated becomes evident. The natural person may be prodded by conscience against apathy in vice, but they remain content within these vices, embracing them wholeheartedly. They relish their pleasures, indulging them freely, apprehending only the impending punishment for sin. On the other hand, the regenerated individual, their hearts aligned with righteous laws, despises the sins committed due to human frailty. They abhor such sins, refusing consent. Instead, they find solace in God's law, perceiving greater sweetness in it than worldly pleasures. Their conscience and emotions both oppose evil deeds, leading to an internal struggle.

Certain Anabaptists indulge in fantastical notions, seeking excess rather than spiritual renewal among the faithful. To them, the return of God's children to a state of innocence eliminates the need to restrain the flesh's desires. Instead, they advocate an exclusive allegiance to the Spirit's guidance, convinced that it precludes error. Such ideas are unfathomable, a distortion of reason. However, their propagation exposes their presumption. This monstrous philosophy insinuates the removal of the distinction between virtue and vice, honor and disgrace, righteousness and unrighteousness. Such distinctions, they argue, stem from the old Adam's curse, eradicated by Christ. According to them, no difference exists between fornication and chastity, ignorance and wisdom, truth and falsehood, fairness and extortion. This philosophy trivializes rightful concerns,

urging followers to wholeheartedly adhere to the Spirit's guidance without qualms. It's a notion bewildering to behold. Yet, it gains traction among those blinded by concupiscence, having lost their rational faculties. But I implore you, what kind of Christ are they proposing? What sort of Spirit do they envision?

Consider this, for we know one Christ and His Spirit, as proclaimed by the prophets and the gospel. Yet such notions find no place in the realm of these matters. The Spirit portrayed in the Scriptures does not encourage the vices of murder, fornication, drunkenness, pride, contention, excessive desires, or deceit. Rather, the Spirit authors love, chastity, sobriety, peace, moderation, and truth. This Spirit is no whimsical, erratic force, fluttering aimlessly between good and evil. Instead, He's brimming with wisdom and discernment, distinguishing right from wrong. He does not provoke towards unrestrained indulgence but rather teaches us to embrace goodness and shun the undesirable. Let us not labor needlessly to rebuff these bewildering delusions. The Spirit residing within Christians isn't a fantastical concoction of their imagination, nor is it borrowed from others. It's an embodiment of the sanctification promised to us. It purifies, cleansing impurity and filth, guiding us towards obedience to God's righteousness. Yet, it's essential to acknowledge that much weakness endures within us, confined within these mortal frames.

Given this, as we remain a considerable distance from perfection, our journey requires daily advancement. We grapple with numerous vices, and it's our duty to wrestle against them. Hence, vigilance becomes paramount, a guard against our flesh's potential betrayal. Let us not rest, presuming we are immune to danger. If we dare think ourselves holier than St. Paul, who wrestled with the thorns of Satan, striving for strength through weakness, we deceive ourselves

(2 Cor. 12:7, 9). His words bear witness to the struggle between the Spirit and the flesh, a conflict we've discussed (Rom. 7:15ff).

Our argument now stands fortified, proving the captivity beneath sin's yoke, rendering us incapable of choosing good or pursuing it naturally. The distinction between constraint and necessity has been clarified, exposing that even when one sins necessarily, it remains a product of personal choice. However, when it is said that one serves the devil, it implies alignment with devilish pleasure. We must then elucidate this. Moreover, we must address a common quandary—whether God plays a role in wicked deeds, considering that Scripture often refers to His power being present there.

Regarding the first point, St. Augustine likens the human will to a horse, controlled by its rider's direction. God and the devil, in contrast, are portrayed as riders. God guides orderly, like a skilled horseman. The devil, akin to a reckless rider, leads astray, causing stumbling, rebellion, and disobedience. While the natural person's will is subject to the devil's influence, it doesn't imply forcible obedience, like a slave. Rather, deceived by devilish tactics, it succumbs to the devil's sway. Those not graced by the Lord's governance yield to Satan. St. Paul attests to this, speaking of the devil's rule over the wicked and disobedient (Eph. 2:2). The wicked's blindness and subsequent wrongdoings are termed the devil's work. Yet, the cause lies within the wicked's will—the source of evil, the foundation of sin.

Turning to God's role, the example of the Chaldeans' harm to Job offers clarity. We witness the originators of this evil; thieves who murder and steal. They bear responsibility for their sins. Job recognizes it as God's work, acknowledging his loss of possessions at the hands of the Chaldeans. Can the same action be attributed to

God, the devil, and people? Can we reconcile this without exonerating the devil or implicating God in evil? Indeed, if we contemplate intent and method. God's purpose was to test Job's patience through adversity; Satan aimed to plunge him into despair; the Chaldeans sought wealth through theft. The manner of execution displays significant variance. God entrusts Job to Satan for affliction; Satan directs the Chaldeans ordained by God to carry out the act. Satan, with his insidious prodding, incites the already wicked Chaldeans to commit this malevolent act. The Chaldeans, succumbing to evil, stain their souls and bodies.

Indeed, it is fitting to acknowledge that Satan exercises his dominion over the reprobate, within whom the realm of corruption prevails. One might also acknowledge a form of divine involvement, as Satan, an instrument of God's wrath, spurs them according to His will and decree, executing His judgments. I do not refer here to God's universal sustenance and the granting of abilities to creatures. Instead, I address His specific actions manifest in each instance. Thus, it's not incongruous to attribute the same action to God, the devil, and humans. Nonetheless, distinctions in intent and means preserve the integrity of God's righteousness while highlighting the disorder inherent in the wickedness of the devil and humanity.

Early church scholars occasionally hesitated to reveal this truth, fearing it might provide the wicked with grounds to malign or speak irreverently about God's work. While I commend this caution, Scripture's clarity on the matter dispels any apprehension. Even St. Augustine occasionally voiced reservations, suggesting that the blindness and hardening of the wicked weren't due to God's action, but rather His foreknowledge. However, this nuanced stance clashes with numerous scriptural references. Similarly, the notion that God permits evil without sending it crumbles under scrutiny. Frequently,

Scripture asserts that God blinds, hardens, turns, and directs the hearts of the wicked. Attributing these to mere foreknowledge or permission does not suffice. We must, therefore, explore two ways of understanding this.

Firstly, when God's light departs, leaving darkness and blindness, similarly, His Spirit's absence hardens hearts like stone. Without His guidance, our paths lead astray. Thus, He is deemed responsible for blinding, hardening, and driving those from whom He withdraws the ability to perceive, obey, and perform good.

Secondly, to fulfill His judgments through the devil, God directs the plans of the wicked, influencing their wills and fortifying their strength according to His pleasure. In understanding the first manner, we grasp passages like Job's: "He takes away the tongue from those who speak well and counsel from the old and wise" (Job 12:20). Similarly, St. Paul states: "God sends them the effect of deception so that they may believe a lie" (2 Thess. 2:11). Isaiah queries God's role in hardening hearts, indicating the Lord's involvement in their disposition (Isa. 63:17). Nonetheless, these passages don't detail God's workings but rather His abandonment of individuals. Other passages, however, probe deeper, as in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, where God says He will harden Pharaoh's heart (Exod. 4:21; 7:3), and subsequently confirms and strengthens it (Exod. 10:1). Yet, this hardening is not solely a result of God's absence but rather a deliberate action, involving Satan in its implementation. This dual action further surfaces in the story of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, where the inhabitants of the land displayed hostility. Moses attributes their hostility to the Lord's influence (Deut. 2:30), and the prophet credits the Lord for turning their hearts against His people (Ps. 105:25).

It's clear they did not fall solely due to a lack of God's counsel. When God confirms and directs their actions, it becomes evident that He influences them in some manner. Additionally, when God seeks to punish His people's transgressions through the wicked, He uses them as instruments, demonstrating His power through their actions. Thus, He often declares that He will use unbelievers to chastise Israel (Isa. 5:26; 7:18), comparing them to fishing nets (Ezek. 12:13; 17:20) and hammers (Jer. 50:23). He also likens Sennacherib, a wicked figure, to an axe, illustrating God's role in directing him for His purpose (Isa. 10:15).

St. Augustine's distinction further elucidates matters: the wicked's sinful acts originate from themselves, while God's intervention shapes the specific actions they commit. While it may seem that God and the devil coalesce in these actions, the devil and the wicked's actions emerge from a place of wickedness. The distinction underscores God's utilization of the wicked for His righteous purposes while emphasizing His power to direct their actions. Thus, the devil and the wicked bear the weight of the wickedness they conceive within their corrupt spirits.

Nonetheless, actions neither inherently good nor evil remain to be discussed, actions pertinent to earthly rather than spiritual life. Some assert that we possess free choice in such matters, likely to avoid unnecessary debate rather than to assert this belief firmly. While I concede that those aware of their inability to justify themselves comprehend what salvation requires, it's crucial not to overlook the special grace required to choose and desire what is beneficial and reject that which harms us.

Without a doubt, God's providence extends not only to the execution of necessary events but also to the inclination of human wills toward

the same purpose. Though external events might appear to be under human will and power when viewed through our senses, many testimonies affirm that the Lord governs human hearts even in these matters. Thus, we ought to acknowledge that human power is subject to the unique influence of God's divine direction. Who compelled the Egyptians to lend the people of Israel their most precious belongings (Exod. 11:2–3)? Such actions would not have arisen independently! This signifies that their hearts were guided more by God than their own inclinations. Who diverted Absalom's heart from heeding Ahithophel's counsel, which was generally accepted like gospel truth (2 Sam. 17:14)? Who swayed Rehoboam to heed the advice of the young men (1 Kings 12:15)?

Doubtless, one might argue that these are isolated instances from which a general principle cannot be inferred. However, these cases sufficiently demonstrate that whenever God intends to manifest His providence, even in external matters, He bends human wills according to His good pleasure. Our choice is not entirely free, for God's rule over it remains regardless of our consent. Daily experience compels us to consider that our hearts are more influenced by God's prompting than our own choice and freedom. Frequently, we lack reason and comprehension in matters that are reasonably comprehensible, yet exhibit courage in the face of uncertainty and danger. How does this occur unless God is at work in both situations? I comprehend Solomon's words in this manner: "The Lord made the ear hear and the eye see" (Prov. 20:12). I believe he addresses not creation here, but the special grace God bestows upon people daily. Solomon also observes that God holds kings' hearts in His hand like a stream of water, guiding them wherever He pleases (Prov. 21:1). Evidently, this doesn't apply to all individuals equally. If any will were exempt from subjugation, it would be that of the king, whose will governs the rest. Therefore, if the king's will is influenced

by God, ours certainly isn't exempt. St. Augustine aptly remarks, "Scripture, carefully examined, demonstrates that not only are people's good wills, which God implants in their hearts and directs towards good works and eternal life, under His control, but so are all choices pertaining to the present life. These choices lie so much within His dominion that He guides them to benefit neighbors or to harm them as punishment when He so desires. All of this occurs through His secret yet just judgment."

It's imperative to remember that one must not evaluate free choice based on how events unfold, as some unenlightened individuals do. They contend that human will is bound because events often don't align with the desires of the most powerful rulers, preventing them from achieving their objectives. This discussion on power and freedom should focus on the inner realm rather than external circumstances. When we address free choice, we don't debate whether it is lawful for individuals to carry out their deliberations unhindered. Instead, we inquire whether individuals possess the free will to discern good from evil in their judgments, to choose one and reject the other. Similarly, we explore whether they possess the freedom in their will to desire, seek, and pursue the good, and to shun and avoid evil. If such freedom exists, then whether imprisoned or reigning, a person remains truly free.

This discussion would be sufficient to address the bondage of the human soul. However, proponents of a false notion of freedom counter our arguments with their opposing views. First, they present illogical claims to vilify our stance, portraying it as contrary to common sense. Subsequently, they employ scriptural references to challenge us. We shall now address their objections in order.

They argue, "If sin is necessitated, it ceases to be sin; if it's voluntary, one can evade it." This argument was famously employed by Pelagius against St. Augustine. Yet, I refrain from dismissing their reasoning due to Augustine's authority. Instead, I seek to refute it. I reject the notion that sin is absolved of its sinful nature when necessitated. I also reject the idea that one can evade sin if it is voluntary. Those who wish to use this pretext to argue against God, claiming they couldn't act otherwise, will find that God swiftly answers: "Your downfall, Israel, comes from yourself; in Me alone lies your salvation" (Hos. 13:9). What is the root of this perceived lack of power, if not the corruption of human nature? And what precipitated this corruption, if not humanity's departure from their Creator? If all are guilty of this fall, they cannot absolve themselves of evil by invoking necessity. This necessity merely provides justification for their damnation. The second part of their argument, which posits that all voluntary actions are born of complete freedom, doesn't hold true. As we've established earlier, numerous voluntary actions are made without genuine freedom of choice.

The following argument arises: if vices and virtues do not emanate from free choice, it becomes improper to reward or punish individuals. Though this notion originates from Aristotle, I acknowledge that St. Chrysostom and St. Jerome also touch upon this topic. St. Jerome openly admits that this line of thought was favored by the Pelagians. They attributed these words to them: "If the grace of God works within us, it's that grace which should be rewarded, not us, who are not working." As for God's retribution for transgressions, I respond that we justly merit such punishments due to our responsibility for sin. It matters not whether we sin through free or bound judgment, as long as it arises from voluntary passion. Especially since one is deemed a sinner due to the bondage of sin. Regarding the reward for virtuous deeds, how nonsensical it is to

confess that it is bestowed upon us by God's benevolence rather than being wages earned through our merits. St. Augustine frequently reiterates this sentiment: "God crowns not our merits, but His gifts. The reward bestowed upon us isn't so named because it's owed to our merits, but because it is rendered in compensation for the graces previously granted." Concerning the notion that merits can only stem from a person's own capacity for good works, this notion is misplaced. The Apostle refutes this erroneous notion; he states that blessedness and the eternal glory we anticipate arise from the Lord's mercy, election, calling, and justification. He declares: "Those whom God has chosen, He has called; those whom He has called, He has justified; those whom He has justified, He has glorified" (Rom. 8:30).

So why then are the faithful rewarded? As per the Apostle's explanation, it's due to the Lord's mercy, not their own deeds. Therefore, let this unfounded apprehension dissipate, which asserts that merit vanishes without upholding free choice. It's absurd to flee from a notion that scripture guides us towards. St. Paul cautions: "If you have received everything, why boast as though you have not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). His intent is clear—to eradicate the notion of free choice and diminish all merits. Nevertheless, God, abounding in benevolence, rewards the graces He's bestowed upon us as if they were virtues stemming from us.

Another objection surfaces, seemingly attributed to St. Chrysostom: "If choosing good and evil wasn't within our power, everyone would either be virtuous or wicked, for they share the same nature." This sentiment aligns with the assertion from the book "On the Calling of the Gentiles," often attributed to St. Ambrose. It posits that no one would stray from faith if God's grace didn't render human will mutable. I'm taken aback by how these esteemed figures have been

led astray. How could Chrysostom overlook the factor of God's election that differentiates among individuals? It's crucial to acknowledge that God's choice sets people apart. We needn't hesitate to confess what St. Paul affirms with certainty: "All are corrupt and given over to wickedness." Yet, concurrently, we concur with him that God's mercy aids some so that not all remain in corruption. Since we all suffer from the same ailment, only those for whom God deems a remedy necessary can escape. Those forsaken by God's just judgment remain in their depravity until consumed. The reason why some persist while others falter derives from the same source. Perseverance itself is God's gift, not bestowed indiscriminately but granted to whom He pleases. To inquire about the rationale behind this discrepancy, why some persist while others waver, is to encounter the simple answer: those enduring are upheld by God's might to prevent their demise, while the latter lack this strength, serving as an example of human fickleness.

Furthermore, another argument arises: "Exhortations and admonitions are in vain, and reprimands are futile if sinners lack the ability to obey them." When these objections confronted St. Augustine, he was compelled to write a book titled "On Rebuke and Grace." Though he addressed the matter comprehensively, he ultimately encapsulates it as follows: "O man, recognize your duties from what's commanded, realize your shortcomings from what you're reprimanded for not doing, and acknowledge from whom to seek what you require when you pray to God." We're not alone in advocating this stance; Christ and His apostles share it. Therefore, our opponents should tread carefully when opposing such formidable adversaries. Even though Christ affirms that "without Him, we can do nothing" (John 15:5), He continues to reprove those outside Him for wrongdoing and exhorts each individual to virtuous deeds. St. Paul, sharply reproaching the Corinthians for their lack of

charity, subsequently petitions God to grant them love. He attests to the Romans that righteousness is not within a person's will or effort but arises from God's mercy. Yet, he persistently admonishes, exhorts, and reforms them. Why, then, do these objectors not plead with the Lord: "Do not exert Your efforts in vain, seeking from humans what only You can bestow, and reprimanding them for their failings due to the absence of Your grace?" Are they not admonishing St. Paul to pardon those who lack the power to will or accomplish good, except through God's mercy, which eludes them when they falter? However, this folly is baseless, as God's teaching is founded on sound reasoning and thorough contemplation.

Indeed, St. Paul indicates that teaching, exhortations, and reprimands alone have limited power to transform the heart. He asserts that "the one who plants is nothing, and the one who waters is nothing, but all effectiveness comes from the Lord, who gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:7). "Then what purpose do exhortations serve?" one might ask. If these exhortations are disregarded by a stubborn heart, they stand as witnesses against that individual, serving as evidence during divine judgment. Even a troubled conscience is stirred and compelled in this life; though it may mock these exhortations, it cannot condemn them. If someone argues, "What recourse does the unfortunate sinner have when the required disposition of heart to obey is denied to them?" I reply: How can they equivocate when they are solely responsible for their hard-heartedness? Therefore, even though the wicked wish God's precepts and warnings were illusions (if that were possible), they're compelled by the efficacy of these teachings and admonitions, regardless of their inclination. The primary utility of precepts and warnings should be regarded as valuable for the faithful. Although the Lord accomplishes everything through His Spirit, He employs the instrument of His word to effect His work within them, using it as a

potent tool. When it's established, as it should be, that the power of the righteous resides in God's grace, someone might inquire: "Why are they encouraged to fulfill their duty instead of being solely guided by the Holy Spirit? Why are they impelled by exhortations, when they cannot move faster than the Spirit propels them? Why are they corrected when they stumble, considering they necessarily faltered due to the frailty of their flesh?" The answer is this: Who are you to impose laws upon God? If God wishes to prepare us through exhortation to receive the grace needed to heed His exhortation, what grounds do you have to reprove or critique this order and manner? Even if exhortations solely serve to incriminate the faithful of their sins, they should not be dismissed as worthless. These exhortations possess great value in kindling love for righteousness within the heart and cultivating a distaste for sin. As the Holy Spirit utilizes this external instrument for the salvation of individuals, who would dare dismiss these exhortations as superfluous?

Should anyone seek a clearer response, I shall succinctly provide the conclusion. God operates within us twofold: inwardly through His Spirit, and outwardly through His Word. Through His Spirit, illuminating the intellect and cultivating hearts with love for righteousness and innocence, He rejuvenates individuals into new beings. Through His Word, He stirs and motivates people to yearn for and seek this renewal. In both ways, His mighty hand is evident, as He deems appropriate. Even when He directs His Word to the wicked and disheartened, though it might not lead them to reform, it serves a purpose. Presently, it presses on their consciences, and on the day of judgment, they shall possess fewer excuses.

Endeavoring to overcome us with a multitude of texts if they cannot surpass us in quality, these individuals diligently gather numerous scriptural testimonies. It's akin to a commander assembling a host

unprepared for battle, seeking to intimidate the adversary. They make a grand display before being set in action; yet, when combat ensues, they scatter at the first challenge. Thus, dismantling these objections, which are mere spectacle and vanity, shall prove straightforward. These objections can be categorized, and once categorized, a comprehensive response will satisfactorily address numerous instances. There's no need to individually address each one. Constructing an extensive chain of God's precepts, they gauge human capability. They reason: "Either God jests when commanding virtues like holiness, piety, obedience, chastity, love, and kindness, or He merely requires what's within our power." However, these amassed precepts fall into three categories: some encourage turning towards God, others promote adherence to the law, and some encourage perseverance in received grace.

Let us address these categories collectively before delving into specifics. I concede that the practice of measuring human capabilities by divine commands has historical precedence, seemingly reasonable at first glance. Nevertheless, this perspective originates from profound ignorance. Those aiming to disprove the feasibility of these commandments if human adherence is impossible present a feeble argument. They claim that otherwise, the law would be given in vain. Yet, St. Paul addresses this matter directly. I ask, what do these statements signify? "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20). "Through the law we become conscious of our sin" (Romans 3:20). The law engenders sin; it multiplies transgressions (Romans 7:8). These passages do not suggest that the law must be proportionate to our abilities to avoid being futile. St. Paul uses these passages to demonstrate that God commands what exceeds our capacity to reveal our inherent powerlessness.

If Scripture solely affirmed the law as the standard for life, measuring our actions, I would readily concur. Yet, since Scripture expounds multiple uses for itself, we should adhere to this interpretation rather than personal conjecture. While the law prescribes our obligations, it simultaneously emphasizes that the ability to obey emanates from God's grace. Thus, it teaches us to seek grace through prayer. The presence of promises alongside commandments underscores our reliance on God's assistance. These promises reveal that our power originates solely from His grace, unequivocally underscoring not only our insufficiency but our complete incapacity to fulfill the law. Let us not linger on the proportion between our strength and God's commandments, as if God tailored the righteousness He imparted according to our limitations. Instead, let the promises remind us of our inadequacy, highlighting our constant need for His grace.

They inquire, "To whom did God direct His law? Do you mean to suggest it was to inanimate objects like wood and stones?" I answer, none contend such a notion, as the wicked are neither wood nor stones. Upon encountering God's law, they, conscious of their concupiscence's defiance against God, bear guilt in their consciences. Likewise, when the faithful are alerted to their fragility, they seek refuge in God's grace. What of the words of St. Augustine: "God commands what we cannot achieve so that we recognize what we should seek from Him." And, "Precepts are incredibly useful if they honor God's grace." And, "Faith obtains what the law commands." "God demands faith from us and doesn't find what He seeks unless He's already placed it within us." "May God grant what He commands and command what He wills."

Our argument gains clarity when examining these three categories of commandments. Throughout His law and prophetic writings, the

Lord frequently urges us to turn to Him. However, the prophets respond from a different angle: "Turn me back, O Lord, and I shall be turned. For after You have turned me, I repented" (Jeremiah 31:18). He commands the circumcision of hearts (Jeremiah 4:4), yet Moses testifies that He personally performs this circumcision (Deuteronomy 30:6). Repeatedly, He enjoins people to obtain new hearts, while testifying that He alone renews the heart (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33). Thus, what shall those who quote God's precepts to extol human ability, constraining God's grace that enables command fulfillment, assert now?

The second category involves straightforward precepts: to honor God, follow His will, observe His commandments, and heed His teachings. Countless testimonies highlight that all righteousness, holiness, piety, and purity are gratuitous gifts from God.

The third category presents itself in St. Paul and St. Barnabas' exhortation to remain steadfast in God's grace (Acts 13:43). Elsewhere, St. Paul underscores the source of this strength, admonishing: "Finally, be strong in the Lord" (Ephesians 6:10). He also cautions against grieving the Holy Spirit, in whom we're sealed for the day of redemption (Ephesians 4:30). Yet, what he commands elsewhere, he implores of the Lord through prayer, acknowledging its lack within human power. He beseeches the Lord to make the Thessalonians worthy of His calling and to fulfill His good intentions in them (2 Thessalonians 1:11). Certain individuals, fervently adhering to their misguided beliefs, challenge these testimonies. They argue that these testimonies do not negate the possibility of uniting human effort with God's grace to alleviate our weaknesses. They present passages from the prophets where God seemingly divides the responsibility for conversion between Himself and us, as seen in, "Return to Me, and I will return to you" (Zechariah 1:3;

Malachi 3:7). We've previously addressed the help provided by God, and revisiting this matter within this context would be redundant. The focus here is to reveal the futility of attributing to individuals the ability to fulfill the law merely because God mandates obedience. It is evident that God's grace is indispensable to accomplish His commands, and it is promised for this very purpose. As for the previously mentioned passage, it doesn't substantiate their misconception. God's "returning" does not denote the grace renewing our hearts for righteous living; rather, it signifies His benevolence and love, expressing prosperity and confirming that, by returning to a righteous life, we draw near to Him, who embodies righteousness. Therefore, it is misguided to distort this passage to contend that our conversion is divided between God and us. This issue requires a more in-depth examination, which we shall undertake in the chapter addressing the law.

The second cluster of arguments bears resemblance to the first. They bring forth promises that seemingly imply God's accord with our will. These passages include: "Seek righteousness, not wickedness, and you shall live" (Amos 5:14); "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword" (Isaiah 1:19–20); "If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, to me you should return" (Jeremiah 4:1); "If you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments... you shall be blessed in the city and blessed in the field" (Deuteronomy 28:1; Leviticus 26:3), and others akin to these. Their argument suggests that God would jest if these were referred to our will without being achievable. Their point carries an air of courteous compassion. One could deduce: "It would be unjust for God to suggest that our position in His grace depends solely on us to receive all goodness from Him when we lack the power to do so. Presenting unattainable blessings in this manner would render His

promises nonsensical." In essence, one might claim that God's promises lack credibility if they hinge on an impossibility. Concerning promises linked to unattainable conditions, their treatment shall come later, revealing that despite impossibility, no absurdity exists.

In the context at hand, I reject the notion that the Lord displays cruelty or inhumanity by urging us to merit His graces and blessings, knowing we lack the capacity to do so. The promises extend to both the faithful and the errant, benefiting both parties. As the Lord's precepts prod and stir the consciences of the wicked, preventing them from dismissing His judgment carelessly, promises to them underline their unworthiness of His benevolence. Is it not fitting for God to reward those who honor Him and chastise those who belittle His majesty? Thus, God rightfully presents these conditions to the wicked, captivated by sin's yoke. When they forsake their sinful ways, He promises to bestow blessings. Even if this were the sole rationale, God acts to illustrate that the wicked must be excluded from the blessings destined for His servants. Moreover, in inciting His faithful to earnestly seek His grace, it is unsurprising if He employs the same approach in His promises as previously demonstrated in His commandments. While His precepts inform us of His will, exposing our imperfections, and urging us to implore His Spirit to guide us, these promises, through their gentleness, kindle love for His commands. The more our hearts embrace righteousness, the more fervent our pursuit of God's grace. Thus, through the cited declarations, God neither attributes to us the ability to accomplish what He states nor derides our frailty. Rather, these declarations benefit His servants and remove excuses from the wicked.

Their third group of arguments possesses some parallels to the previous ones. They present passages where God conveys to the

people of Israel that their circumstances rely solely on their choices. For instance, He stated: "The Amalekites and Canaanites are right in front of you, and you will die by their swords since you've turned away from the Lord" (Numbers 14:43). Also, "Because I called and you did not answer, I will destroy you just as I did Shiloh" (Jeremiah 7:13–14). Furthermore, "This people has not obeyed the voice of their God or received discipline. Truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips" (Jeremiah 7:28–29). Lastly, "You have done worse than your fathers, each one of you following his stubborn, evil will, refusing to obey Me. So I will hurl you out of this land into a land that you do not know" (Jeremiah 16:12–13). They ask: "How are these accusations relevant to those who could respond, 'We desired prosperity and feared adversity. The reason we did not obey the Lord or heed His voice to evade misfortune and attain blessings is our captivity in sin. It's unjust for God to accuse us of the misfortunes we suffer, misfortunes beyond our control!'" Setting aside this trivial and baseless excuse of necessity, can they absolve themselves of wrongdoing? If they admit their failings, God's assertion that their lack of prosperity results from their perversity is not without cause. Allow me to question further: can they deny that their corrupt will is the source of their transgressions? If they acknowledge this internal origin of evil, why do they seek external causes, attempting to deflect responsibility, pretending to be innocent of their own destruction?

Should it indeed hold true that sinners, through their own iniquity, are stripped of God's blessings and subjected to His retribution, then it follows that these accusations rightly find their place. By such reproaches, should they persist in their wickedness, they might learn to attribute their misery to their transgressions rather than leveling blame at God's alleged severity. If not entirely hardened, and should they foster a teachable spirit within, may they recognize the blemish of their sins as the root cause of their adversity. Thus, moved by

displeasure and disdain for their transgressions, they could retrace their steps onto the path of goodness. This would entail acknowledging God's rebuke as truthful and reliable. The faithful can glean from Daniel's prayer that such dialogues effectively served this purpose (Daniel 9:4ff). The first beneficial outcome can be witnessed among the Jews. Compliant with God's command, Jeremiah revealed to them the source of their distress (Jeremiah 7:13). However, let us remember that nothing occurs without God's prior declaration. His foretelling of conveying His message, which they would disregard, and summoning them, which they would ignore, holds true (Jeremiah 7:27–28). A counterargument might arise: "What purpose lies in addressing the deaf?" The purpose is to ensure that, despite their delusion, they realize the veracity. It is heinous sacrilege to fault God for calamities originating within them. By employing these three approaches, the ceaseless array of testimonies the opponents of God's grace gather from the commandments, promises, and admonishments to sinners becomes manageable. These adversaries, striving to establish the concept of free will within humanity—a concept unattainable—can be countered through these conclusions.

Yet, these individuals assert a testimony from Moses' law that seems to contradict our earlier deduction. After promulgating the law, Moses affirmed before the people, "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off... But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deuteronomy 30:11, 14). If these words were aimed solely at the commandments, I acknowledge it would pose a challenge to counter. While one could argue that these words pertain to the ability to comprehend the commandments rather than execute them, reservations persist. However, we possess a sound interpreter who eradicates all ambiguity—namely, St. Paul. He expounds that Moses referred to the teachings of the gospel (Romans 10:6–8).

Should an obstinate individual claim that St. Paul distorted the passage's natural meaning to align it with the gospel (an assertion unworthy of tolerance), we can defend the apostle's exposition. If Moses exclusively referred to commandments, he would deceive the people with false confidence. What could they do other than bring about their own demise if they attempted to adhere to the law using their own strength, deeming it facile? In the context of human nature's inherent frailty and our susceptibility to falter, where do we find the capacity to uphold the law? It becomes increasingly evident that Moses understood these words in light of the covenant of mercy he established through the law. Pondering the salvation offered through the gospel, Moses visualized an alternative to the rigorous, arduous, even unattainable conditions the law imposed. St. Paul, therefore, employs this testimony to underscore God's merciful offering, rendering this testament inadequate to substantiate the notion of human free will.

Additional passages are often cited, illustrating instances when God temporarily withholds His grace to assess the direction individuals choose. For example, Hosea declares: "I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face" (Hosea 5:15). They contend, "It would be absurd for the Lord to contemplate humanity's course of action unless their hearts possessed the capacity to incline, propelled by their own volition." Such a notion overlooks the fact that through His prophets, God frequently declares that He will cast out His people and forsake them until they rectify their ways. Let us scrutinize the argument they wish to present. Should they assert that people, abandoned by God, can rectify themselves, all of scripture contradicts them. Should they concede that God's grace is essential for a person's conversion, these passages fail to serve their purpose against us. However, they may maintain that they accept the necessity of grace in conjunction with

human capacity. Their proof, however, is not derived from these passages or their equivalents. These passages address two distinctly separate matters: temporarily withdrawing divine grace to observe their subsequent actions, and supporting human weakness to bolster its limited strength.

In response to their inquiry, "What do such modes of expression signify?" Let me elucidate: they hold as much weight as if God conveyed, "Given that this obstinate populace remains unresponsive to my counsel, exhortations, and reproofs, I shall momentarily withdraw. During my silence, I shall allow affliction to befall them. Thus, I shall discern whether, after enduring prolonged tribulation, they will recall me and earnestly seek my presence." Understand that when it is said God "withdraws," it denotes the removal of His divine word. When it is stated that He "observes" their actions during His absence, it signifies that He afflicts them without manifesting His presence. This twofold approach serves to humble us. Left unchecked, His chastisements and penalties would lead to our utter destruction instead of rectification, were it not for His Spirit rendering us receptive to instruction. Thus, the inference that a person possesses the ability to turn to God, based on the notion that God, offended by our stubborn hearts, withholds His word through which He communicates His presence, and watches our actions in His absence, is unfounded. These actions solely aim to reveal that our capacity is nonexistent.

Another argument arises from the common parlance employed not only by individuals but also within scripture. Good deeds are referred to as "ours," and we are said to "do good," just as we "do evil." They contend, "If sins are correctly attributed to us as originating from us, the same reasoning mandates that we be credited for good deeds. It is illogical to claim that, since we cannot accomplish them through

our own agency, we act as lifeless stones manipulated by God's influence in our endeavors." Consequently, they conclude, "While God's grace remains the principal force, such forms of speech suggest that we possess inherent capacity for goodness." Confronted solely with the initial objection—namely, that good deeds are attributed to us—I would respond thus: daily sustenance, the bread we beseech God to bestow upon us, we term as "ours" (Matthew 6:11; Luke 11:3). This term can be interpreted only to imply that what is unearned becomes ours through God's boundless benevolence. Hence, they must either censure our Lord for employing such phrases or relinquish their surprise at labeling good works as "ours," despite our minimal contribution solely facilitated by God's generosity.

However, their subsequent argument warrants more consideration. They contend, "Scripture frequently affirms that the faithful serve God, uphold His righteousness, adhere to His law, and dedicate themselves to goodness. As these actions are inherent responsibilities of human intellect and will, how can we attribute such qualities to both God's Spirit and ourselves, unless there exists a connection between our capacity and God's grace?" To effectively counter these arguments, we must accurately comprehend the manner in which God operates within His servants. Primarily, their chosen metaphor lacks applicability. Who could entertain the notion that humans are propelled by God in the same manner one hurls a stone? This sentiment fails to align with our doctrine. We assert the existence of a natural human capability to approve, reject, desire, abstain, endeavor, and resist—namely, to approve futility, reject authentic goodness, desire malevolence, abstain from desiring good, strive to embrace sin, and resist righteousness. To what extent is the Lord implicated in these actions? Should He utilize human waywardness as an instrument of His wrath, He molds and guides it according to His will, manipulating a wicked hand to execute His

righteous and benevolent works. Thus, should we regard a wicked individual who serves God in this capacity, despite intending to indulge in wickedness, as analogous to a motionless stone? The disparities between these concepts are undeniable.

Our contemplation then shifts to the virtuous individuals, who merit deeper examination. When the Lord aspires to establish His realm within them, He restrains and governs their volition to prevent it from yielding to unruly impulses. This contravenes their inherent inclinations. Simultaneously, He molds their volition, channels and steers it according to the compass of His righteousness, prompting a yearning for sanctity and purity. Ultimately, He reinforces and fortifies their volition through the potency of His Spirit, ensuring steadfastness and resilience. This intricate process demonstrates that God's grace functions akin to a guide and a bridle for the human will, steering and governing it. To govern the will necessitates correction, reform, and rejuvenation. This conveys that the inception of our rebirth involves the eradication of our natural inclinations. Furthermore, rectifying the will necessitates guiding, inciting, directing, and sustaining it. Therefore, we assert that all deeds emanating from the will originate exclusively from Him. Yet, we do not negate the wisdom conveyed by St. Augustine: "God's grace does not obliterate our will but rather restores it." These sentiments harmonize perfectly. To affirm that the human will is restored implies that it is recalibrated, shifted towards the compass of righteousness after its inherent iniquity is rectified. It is then that it is directed toward goodness and purity. This restoration spawns a new will within the individual, as the inherent will is so profoundly tainted that complete renewal becomes imperative. Concluding, we find no hindrance to asserting that the works wrought by God's Spirit within us are the same works that we enact, despite not actively cooperating with His grace using our inherent strength. The

rationale is twofold. Firstly, all that God performs within us, He desires to be inherently ours, albeit with the understanding that it is not a result of our doing. Secondly, our inherent intellect, volition, and determination are guided towards goodness and utilized for noble purposes, a trait inherited from our natural disposition.

Other contentions they draw from diverse sources may not perturb those of discerning judgment, particularly if the previously provided solutions to these quandaries are well-remembered. They reference a passage from Genesis: "Your desire will be under you, and you will rule over it" (Genesis 4:7), interpreting it in relation to sin. They propose that God promised Cain the authority to subdue sin within his heart, provided he exhibited the will to conquer it. Conversely, we might assert that this assertion more fittingly applies to Abel. In this context, God seeks to reprimand the hatred that Cain harbored for his brother—a sentiment fueled by two factors. Initially, Cain deluded himself into aspiring for a loftier station before God than his brother, disregarding that God esteems only righteousness and integrity. Subsequently, he manifested ingratitude for the blessings bestowed by God, to the extent that he bore animosity towards his brother—a brother entrusted to his care. However, for the sake of impartiality and to avoid the appearance of evading opposing interpretations, let us concede that God refers to sin. In that case, the premise remains unchanged: God's address constitutes an exhortation to Cain, delineating his duty rather than his capacity, even if he finds it unattainable. They further fortify their standpoint with the apostle's declaration that "salvation is not in the hand of the one who wills or the one who runs but in God's mercy" (Romans 9:16). Hence, they deduce the existence of a human will and endeavor in conjunction with God's mercy. Yet, were they to thoughtfully contemplate the context of this passage, their facile application of its concepts would subside. I acknowledge their

possible reliance on Origen and St. Jerome to validate their interpretation. Nevertheless, the focus should be on comprehending St. Paul's intended message: that salvation exclusively emanates from God's mercy. Destruction and chaos await those bypassed by His election. This notion finds illustration through the story of Pharaoh, a symbol of the rejected (Romans 9:17). St. Paul also underscores the unwavering and gratuitous election of the faithful using Moses' testimony, "I will have compassion on the one whom I have received in mercy." Consequently, he concludes that salvation hinges not on human volition or effort, but solely on God's mercy (Romans 9:15ff). Any attempt to construe these words as indicative of inherent human capacity is flawed and foolish. Therefore, we must dismiss this illogical sophistry.

The rationale behind declaring, "Salvation is not in the hand of the one willing or running," in order to advocate the presence of a will and activity, lacks coherence. St. Paul's assertion is more straightforward: salvation is not achieved through human will or effort, but solely through the realm of mercy (Romans 9:16). This principle mirrors St. Paul's sentiment in a different passage, where he asserts, "God's kindness and love toward humanity manifested not through deeds of righteousness which we pursued, but through His boundless mercy" (Titus 3:4-5). Were I to argue that we indeed perform good deeds based on this premise, negating St. Paul's statement that God's grace does not emerge from deeds of righteousness, they would undoubtedly dismiss my contention. Their current argument parallels this approach. Thus, they must carefully contemplate their assertions, refraining from reliance on such baseless reasoning.

Subsequently, they invoke the testimony of Ecclesiasticus, an author whose authority is contested. However, even if we concede this point,

its inclusion offers no validation for their argument. Ecclesiasticus contends that "after his creation, man was left to his own will. God imparted commandments, and by obeying them, man would safeguard himself. Life and death, good and evil, were presented, allowing man to choose as he pleased" (Ecclesiasticus 15:14ff). According to this account, humanity possessed the ability to select either life or death at its inception. What if we postulate that this capacity was subsequently lost? I am not interested in contradicting Solomon, who affirms that "humans were created virtuous from the outset and subsequently succumbed to iniquity" (Ecclesiastes 7:29). Consequently, as humanity deviated from its original state and strayed from God, its inherent goodness deteriorated alongside all other virtues. Any references to humanity's primordial creation should not be applied to its current state, marred by imperfection and corruption. Hence, I counter both our adversaries and Ecclesiasticus, whoever the author may be, in the following manner: should you intend to instruct individuals to seek within themselves the capacity for salvation, your authority is insufficient to undermine the Word of God, which undeniably contradicts your premise. Should your purpose be solely to rebuke the flesh's blasphemy—given its inclination to attribute its vices to God, thereby absolving itself—by showcasing humanity's virtuous origin and its subsequent downfall, I am inclined to accept this notion. However, we must mutually agree that humanity, in its current state, has been stripped of the adornments and graces initially bestowed by God.

One recurring point of contention our adversaries present is the parable of the compassionate Samaritan, where a man left half-dead on the road serves as a metaphor for the human condition (Luke 10:30-35). Admittedly, it's a common interpretation that this man symbolizes humanity's plight. From this, they deduce a particular argument: humanity wasn't utterly incapacitated by sin and the

devil, as indicated by the man's partial vitality. Their assertion claims that within the depths of our struggle, some semblance of understanding and will remains intact. However, should I choose to disregard their allegorical approach, what course of action could they possibly pursue? It's undeniable that the early Church fathers adhered to a literal and straightforward interpretation of this passage. Allegorical interpretations ought to be accepted only insofar as they derive from Scripture itself, and even then, they hold no weight in establishing doctrinal truths. Furthermore, we possess ample reasons to refute their contentions. Scripture itself dismisses the notion of a half-life for humanity, asserting instead that in matters concerning genuine and eternal felicity, we are utterly lifeless. St. Paul, when discussing our redemption, doesn't attest to healing us from partial death; rather, he proclaims our resurrection from death itself (Ephesians 2:5). He summons not those who are partially alive to embrace Christ's grace, but those who are deceased and interred. This aligns with the Lord's declaration: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). Do they not find it disconcerting to pit their allegorical interpretations, no matter how illuminating, against an array of abundant and unequivocal testimonies?

Yet, even if we were to entertain their allegory as valid, what conclusion could they conceivably draw against us? Their argument posits that humanity is partially alive, thus implying the preservation of some form of vitality. I concede that the human soul possesses the capacity for understanding, although this comprehension might not reach the celestial wisdom of God. Judgment regarding good and evil resides within us, and an inkling of awareness concerning God's existence may exist, albeit without attaining accurate knowledge. Nevertheless, what substantial impact do these observations exert?

Regrettably, they fall short of nullifying the sagacious words of St. Augustine: "The gratuitous gifts essential to salvation were forfeited after humanity's fall; the inherent qualities incapable of leading to salvation were tainted and besmirched." Consequently, St. Augustine's assertion remains impervious: the human intellect is so profoundly alienated from God's righteousness that it can fathom, conceive, or apprehend nothing beyond wickedness, sin, and corruption. Similarly, the human heart is irreparably tainted by sin, rendering it the progenitor of all things corrupt. Even if certain actions may appear virtuous, the intellect invariably remains entangled in hypocrisy and vanity, and the heart persistently indulges in malevolence.

CHAPTER THREE

The Revelation of God's Law

In our exploration of the essentials for attaining true knowledge of God, we have unveiled that comprehending His greatness inevitably leads to the realization of His unique majesty, deserving of the utmost reverence. In our examination of self-awareness, we've highlighted the central aspect of recognizing our own limitations, shedding delusions of our own prowess, and humbling ourselves in the presence of our imperfections. Such knowledge of God and self finds its embodiment within God's law. Here, the Lord, first establishing His authority to command, guides us in honoring His divine essence and illustrates the nature and locus of this reverence. Subsequently, through the ordination of righteous conduct, He holds us accountable not only for our inherent frailty but also for our moral transgressions. In this examination, the intrinsic corruption and perversity of our nature stand exposed, diametrically opposed to the very righteousness prescribed by God. Moreover, our limited capacities prove inadequate in attaining the perfect standard of God's righteousness. Hence, our progression in this discourse leads us to an exploration of God's law.

Yet, the intricate facets of this law find preliminary revelation within the inward law, a concept previously elucidated wherein the heart of every individual bears an inscribed code [Romans 2:14-15]. Conscience, that internal arbiter, prevents slumber of the soul, constantly imparting testimony and guidance regarding our obligations to God. It distinguishes between good and evil,

reproaching us when we falter in our duties. Alas, humanity, ensnared in the shadows of ignorance, struggles to glean more than a modest understanding through this innate law, often remote from achieving genuine comprehension. Furthermore, pride and ambition obscure vision, shrouding self-love, rendering self-reflection and acknowledgment of our wretchedness an arduous endeavor. Therefore, acknowledging the raw state of our spirits and the hubris that taints our perceptions, the Lord has bequeathed His law in written form. This documented manifestation serves to provide resolute clarity where the natural law's enigma persists. It also acts as a potent antidote to complacency, kindling fervor within our spirit and invigorating memory with vibrant resonance.

The luminous wisdom of God's law unveils itself with ease. As the Creator, God occupies the position of Lord and Father, rightfully deserving our glory, reverence, love, and fear. Consequently, the realm of unchecked indulgence in the dictates of our desires is restricted. Instead, we are called to anchor our reliance exclusively upon God and align our will with His. Moreover, the law reinforces the truth that righteousness and integrity find favor in His sight, while sin remains abhorrent. To avert the peril of ingratitude toward our Creator, a life dedicated to righteousness becomes imperative, coupled with ceaseless effort to embody it. Proper reverence for God manifests only when we subordinate our desires to His will. By honoring righteousness, holiness, and purity, our homage to the Divine is aptly expressed. Excuses rooted in our perceived inadequacies and self-imposed limitations hold no merit. God's glory should not be gauged by our capabilities; irrespective of our limitations, He remains unchanging in His disposition – the champion of righteousness, the foe of sin. Consequently, regardless of our abilities, we are morally obligated to comply with God's just

commandments. The limitations within us are attributed to our inherent vices; they stem from within and are imputed unto us.

Once the lessons of the law have profoundly impacted our understanding, we must then turn our gaze inward. This introspective journey yields two essential revelations. Firstly, juxtaposing the law's righteousness with our life exposes the chasm between our actions and God's will. Our unworthiness is magnified, rendering us undeserving of our place among God's creation and, even more so, the title of His children. Secondly, reflecting on our feeble capabilities not only reveals their inadequacy in upholding the law but also underscores their utter uselessness. Consequently, trust in our own strength dissipates, replaced by anxious trepidation. The conscience grapples with the weight of sin, inevitably invoking God's judgment, which, in turn, fosters fear of impending death. Additionally, a feeble conscience, convicted by its inherent frailty, becomes prone to sinking into despair concerning its own capacities. Collectively, these experiences culminate in a profound sense of humility and self-abasement. The haunting specter of eternal death looms as a consequence of our unrighteousness, prompting us to turn solely to God's mercy as the exclusive avenue for salvation. Acknowledging our incapability to repay our debt to the law and despairing of self-sufficiency, we find ourselves reaching out and seeking assistance from an external source.

Yet, the Lord's intention extends beyond mere instruction regarding reverence for His righteousness. He supplements His teachings with promises and admonitions, thereby consecrating our hearts to ardently love righteousness and abhor sin. Recognizing humanity's limited capacity to grasp the allure and virtue of righteousness, God, in His benevolence, offers incentives to kindle our devotion. He unveils His intention to reward virtue, ensuring that adherence to

His commands is not futile. Moreover, beyond illustrating His abhorrence for unrighteousness, He proclaims the inevitable retribution for it, underlining His commitment to punishing the disregard of His majesty.

To stir us into action, God's law employs a comprehensive approach, offering both present blessings and eternal rewards to those who uphold His commandments. Simultaneously, transgressors face the specter of bodily afflictions and the dread of eternal death. The promise "The one who does these things shall live through them" (Leviticus 18:5) and its corresponding threat "The soul that sins will die" (Ezekiel 18:4) unmistakably pertain to the realm of everlasting life or death. Whenever God's benevolence or wrath is referenced, everlasting life and eternal destruction are implied. The law enumerates an extensive catalogue of current blessings and curses, revealing God's steadfast purity, which brooks no tolerance for sin. Meanwhile, the law's promises showcase His profound affection for righteousness, as it remains unrewarded by Him. This juxtaposition showcases divine kindness, as God's requests stem from the fulfillment of our intrinsic obligations, prompting Him to forgo His entitlement to reward our obedience – an obedience that isn't a result of our free will and therefore unearned. The efficacy of these promises for our transformation shall be unveiled shortly.

It is imperative to grasp and internalize the message embedded within the promises and admonitions of the law. Through these, righteousness is illuminated with unparalleled clarity, accentuating the magnitude of its favor in the eyes of God. Conversely, the punishments enumerated serve to magnify the abhorrence of unrighteousness, a stern reminder that the sweetness of sin should not blind the sinner to the impending judgment of God.

As the Lord endeavors to present the blueprint of perfect righteousness, it becomes evident that nothing pleases Him more than obedience. This notion warrants heightened attention, given the audacity of human understanding to concoct new rituals and services to curry favor and acquire grace. Throughout history, this distorted pursuit of religion has manifested, fueled by our inherent disposition. Even in contemporary times, humanity's inclination remains to establish avenues for righteousness independent of God's word. In response, the commandments of the law often occupy a lower echelon among actions deemed virtuous, with countless human-made regulations occupying a lofty position. Moses aimed to temper this misguided zeal by instructing the people to adhere solely to God's commands, prohibiting any addition or subtraction (Deuteronomy 12:28). Prior to this, Moses, recognizing that Israel's wisdom and distinction lay in receiving judgments, righteous acts, and rituals from the Lord, admonished them to diligently guard the wisdom imparted to them (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). Evidently, the Lord foresaw the propensity of Israel to deviate from His prescribed path, leading Him to emphasize that the entirety of righteousness finds its expression in His word. Nevertheless, the Israelites flouted this injunction, succumbing to the allure of self-devised practices.

A similar predicament befalls us. We are likewise bound by this divine word. The Lord intended to establish within His law an enduring framework for perfect righteousness. Yet, driven by an insatiable desire, we persistently fabricate new acts of virtue, layering them upon one another. The antidote to this inclination lies in recognizing that the law's primary purpose is to instill perfect righteousness by aligning us with the divine will. The futile pursuit of new works to gain God's grace is rendered obsolete. God's rightful service hinges solely on obedience. Conversely, pursuing extraneous good deeds is a lamentable distortion of authentic righteousness. The

law's elucidation enables us to approach its role and purpose with clarity and efficacy.

Before delving into each section, comprehending the overarching principles is crucial. The law governs not only external decorum but also internal and spiritual righteousness. Alas, the latter dimension is scarcely acknowledged, as people often overlook the nature of the Lawgiver Himself. The essence of the law derives significance from the nature of the One who ordained it. Consider this analogy: if a human king were to prohibit fornication, murder, and theft through royal decree, only those who act upon these desires would be subject to penalties. The limitations of the mortal legislator's edict concern external decorum; the breach of the law occurs when the prohibited acts are committed. In contrast, God, who discerns the heart's innermost workings and values purity over mere outward compliance, prohibits not only the acts themselves but also the desires that give birth to them. His prohibition of fornication, murder, and theft extends to encompass carnal inclinations, hatred, covetousness, deceit, and similar vices. Given God's spiritual nature, His law addresses both body and soul. In His eyes, wrath and hatred mirror murder within the soul, covetousness parallels theft, and disordered affection simulates fornication.

Perhaps one might raise a question: "Human laws also concern people's reason and will, not merely arbitrary occurrences." I concede this point, yet human laws address expressed will in action. They evaluate the intention behind each deed but do not explore concealed thoughts. Consequently, one who refrains from external transgressions adheres to the law's dictates. On the contrary, God's law targets our souls; to uphold it, we must primarily scrutinize our souls. Frequently, individuals go to great lengths to conform their eyes, feet, hands, and other bodily parts to the law's commandments,

while their hearts remain obstinate against obedience. Deceptive appearances satisfy the onlooker, but before God, the heart remains defiant. People heed "You shall not murder," "You shall not commit adultery," and "You shall not steal," avoiding overt acts of killing, inappropriate relationships, and theft. This is commendable. However, beneath the surface, their hearts simmer with hatred, lust, and covetousness, gnawing at their neighbor's possessions. The essence of the law eludes them, stemming from their disregard of the Lawgiver Himself. This obliviousness leads them to mold righteousness according to their understanding. Paul vehemently opposes this viewpoint, asserting that "the law is spiritual" (Romans 7:14). Herein lies the notion that the law mandates obedience not just of the soul, understanding, and will, but also requires angelic purity, untainted by carnal blemishes, exuding a spiritual essence.

This interpretation of the law does not emanate from our innovation but rather aligns with Christ's teaching. To counteract the Pharisees' notion that mere abstinence from external infractions constituted righteousness, Christ addresses this fallacy. He equates a lustful look with adultery and deems hatred towards one's brother as akin to murder (Matthew 5:22ff, 28ff). Christ applies these principles to reveal that anger merits judgment, murmuring entails reprimand, and inflicting harm leads to Gehenna's fiery torment. Some erroneously perceive Christ as a supplement to Moses, advancing a gospel law to compensate for perceived deficiencies in Mosaic law. This misconception fosters the belief that the gospel law surpasses the former law in perfection. Such beliefs misinterpret Moses' precepts, as will be evidenced by his very words when we later summarize them. This misinterpretation undermines the patriarchs' sanctity, and diverts us from the everlasting foundation of righteousness ordained by God. This fallacy is easily rectified, for those who embrace it overlook that Christ's role was not to augment

the law, but to restore it to its unadulterated form. By expunging the Pharisees' distortions and falsehoods, Christ reintroduced the authentic essence of the law.

Additionally, it's vital to acknowledge that God's precepts encompass more than their explicit language conveys. However, this principle must be applied judiciously to avoid rendering the law's authority inconsequential or fomenting uncertainty. Some individuals exploit such latitude to undermine the law's credibility, deeming it unreliable or unattainable in its understanding. Therefore, a discerning approach is essential to ascertain the intended message with certainty and clarity. Achieving this entails harmonizing our interpretation with the Lawgiver's natural intent, rather than superimposing our personal notions. In each precept, the principle that one part signifies the entirety is prevalent, rendering a literal interpretation ludicrous. It is universally acknowledged that the true elucidation of the law exceeds the literal expression. Yet, determining the extent of this extension remains uncertain, demanding a definitive measure. To this end, a constructive approach involves exploring the underlying rationale behind each precept—identifying its purpose and objective. For instance, the fifth precept, rooted in honoring those divinely designated for reverence, succinctly signifies God's pleasure in honoring individuals bestowed with preeminence and His repulsion towards their contempt or defiance. Similarly, the first precept's objective is to afford exclusive honor to God, epitomizing God's delight in authentic devotion and contrasting with His abhorrence of impiety.

In each precept, the underlying purpose should be scrutinized, and from that vantage point, infer the conduct that pleases or displeases God. From the precept's explicit language, construct arguments addressing the converse scenarios: what pleases God versus what

displeases Him, what He commands versus what He prohibits. This concise exposition merely skims the surface; a more comprehensive understanding will emerge as we elaborate on each precept. Thus, it suffices to introduce this approach, confident that its practical application will elucidate its efficacy.

We have previously established that when good is commanded, evil's opposite is thereby forbidden—a point universally accepted. Likewise, it is commonly acknowledged that the condemnation of vices entails the recommendation of virtues. However, we venture further, unraveling a dimension less commonly grasped—when the contrary of evil is prescribed, it goes beyond mere avoidance of that evil. To elucidate, consider this example: the precept "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13) merely suggests refraining from violence and malevolent desires to harm. Yet, we must explore this more deeply, recognizing the duty to preserve our neighbor's life through every feasible means. To validate this perspective, let us explore the Lord's prohibition of harming or insulting our neighbor. By proscribing harm, God exalts the value of life, thereby imparting the duties of love necessary for life's sustenance. This concept clarifies how the precept's purpose dictates its command or prohibition.

One might wonder why the Lord chose partial indications instead of explicit clarity in expressing His will. Numerous reasons may explain this choice, yet one resonates profoundly with me. Human nature persistently cloaks or obfuscates sin's reprehensibility with specious excuses, unless the sin is glaringly evident. To combat this deception, the Lord provides extreme and disordered examples of various sins, inducing a heightened aversion towards them. Often, our assessment of vice falters when it is veiled; thus, the Lord endeavors to counteract this perception, enabling us to categorize faults for enhanced repugnance. Take, for instance, hatred or anger, which

seem less reprehensible in isolation. However, when the Lord interdicts them under the label "homicide," their gravity amplifies, as they bear the appellation of a grave crime. Guided by divine judgment, we are better equipped to gauge the severity of sins that may have seemed trivial.

Thirdly, we must ponder the significance of the law's division into two tablets. This repetition within Scripture serves an essential purpose, as any discerning individual can ascertain. This rationale is simple to comprehend, necessitating no hesitation. Desiring to convey a comprehensive understanding of righteousness, the Lord segments the law into two: the first pertains to our obligations to honor His majesty, while the second encompasses duties towards our neighbors grounded in love. The bedrock of righteousness is honoring God; any infringement disrupts the entire structure, akin to a dilapidated edifice's collapse. Disregarding our neighbor's life through theft and robbery clashes with honoring God's majesty through sacrilege. Abstaining from bodily defilement via fornication is futile if juxtaposed with sullyng God's name through blasphemy. Avoiding murder is inconsequential if the intent is to obliterate the memory of God. Thus, asserting righteousness devoid of religiosity is futile, much like flaunting a headless body. In truth, religion is not solely the head of righteousness and virtue, but also its life force, invigorating them. Without the fear of God, equity and harmony among people are untenable. Hence, we regard divine service as righteousness' inception and foundation, while religion is its wellspring and spirit—nurturing purity and uprightness. Accordingly, the first tablet instructs us in piety and religion, honoring God's majesty. The second delineates harmonious coexistence grounded in the fear of God. This insight aligns with Jesus' condensation of the entire law into two principles: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength," and

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39; Luke 10:27-28).

Nevertheless, though the entirety of the law is encapsulated in two commandments, our Lord expounded on these themes through ten precepts, elucidating the realms of devotion, love for God, and love for our neighbor—ensuring no room for excuses. Thus, understanding the precepts' divisions proves valuable, provided we respect diverse viewpoints, refraining from contentious disputes. This point is mentioned to encourage harmony, not to impose a new division that may provoke conflict.

The number of the precepts is unequivocal, as the Lord's word settles any debate. The contention lies solely in their division. Those who arrange them with three precepts in the first tablet and seven in the second either omit the commandment regarding images from the count or wrongly combine it with the first precept. This stance disregards the Lord's distinct identification of the images commandment. Additionally, they inadvertently fragment the tenth precept concerning coveting neighbors' goods. Refuting this approach, we find that their division lacks early church endorsement, as we shall soon uncover.

Conversely, others—akin to our approach—correctly present four articles in the first tablet. However, they erroneously consider the initial article as merely a promise devoid of a command. Personally, I cannot regard the ten words Moses names as anything but ten precepts unless I am persuaded otherwise through clear reasoning. I firmly believe in distinctly enumerating them, following what appears most plausible. My perspective identifies the introductory statement as a preface to the entire law, followed by ten commandments—four within the first tablet and six within the

second, organized according to our layout. Origen endorsed this arrangement without dispute during his era, while St. Augustine concurred in the third book of "To Boniface." Although he favored a different division elsewhere, it was for a minor rationale: aligning three precepts with the Trinity. Nonetheless, in the same context, he acknowledges his affinity for our division regarding the rest. Another early church father, the author of "Incomplete Commentary on St. Matthew," also aligns with our perspective.

Josephus attributes five commands to each tablet—a distribution prevalent during his time. Despite this, reason and Jesus Christ's authority reject this split. The division blurs the distinction between honoring God and loving neighbors. Christ, on the contrary, places the commandment to honor parents within the second tablet (Matthew 19:18-19). Now, let us heed the voice of the Lord.

The First Commandment

"I am the Eternal One, your God, who liberated you from the realm of Egypt, from the clutches of servitude. You shall have no foreign gods before My countenance."

Whether we perceive the initial sentence as part of the first commandment or as a separate declaration, the essence remains unchanged—as a preamble to the entire law. When legislating, ensuring that laws remain immune to disregard or scorn is essential. The Lord adroitly addresses this matter from the outset, safeguarding His law from contempt. His reasoning rests upon three foundational principles. Initially, He asserts His divine prerogative to issue commands, thereby binding us to obligatory obedience. Subsequently, He offers the gift of His grace to entice us, guiding us toward compliance through benevolence. Lastly, He reminds us of the remarkable benefits bestowed upon us, invoking a sense of

accountability and reprimanding us for any ingratitude should we spurn His commands. The term "Eternal" signifies His sovereignty and legitimate dominion over us. As all creation emanates from Him and subsists within Him, it is only fitting to acknowledge our alignment with Him, as articulated by St. Paul (Romans 11:36). Thus, the term compels us to embrace the Lord's authority, as it would be inconceivable to separate ourselves from the rule of One from whom our existence stems.

Having demonstrated His rightful authority and the imperative of obedience, the Lord, in His kindness, reveals Himself as our God. This expression encapsulates a reciprocal bond, echoed in the covenant where He declares, "I will be their God and they will be My people" (Exodus 6:7). Through this bond, Christ establishes that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob secured salvation and eternal life due to God's promise to be their God (Matthew 22:31–32). Consequently, this statement epitomizes His pledge to be not only our present benefactor but also the conduit to eternal bliss within His kingdom. Numerous passages substantiate the objective of this grace. As the Lord calls us into His community, He selects us, as articulated by Moses, to sanctify us for His glory and to adhere to His commandments (Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2, 26:18–19). Thus arises the divine directive: "Be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 19:1). This, in turn, begets the admonition by the prophet: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a Father, where is the honor due Me? If I am a Master, where is the respect due Me?" (Malachi 1:6).

Subsequently, the Lord recounts the blessings He bestowed upon His servants, a reflection on which should galvanize us. Ingratitude, indeed, stands as the most repugnant transgression. Addressing Israel, the Lord reminds them of His remarkable beneficence,

deserving remembrance for all time. This reminder proves fitting as the law is unveiled. Here, the Lord signifies that His deliverance is to beget reverence, honor, and obedience. To lend significance to this, we must recognize that Israel's bondage in Egypt symbolizes the spiritual captivity in which we all languish until the Lord, through His mighty hand, emancipates us, ushering us into the realm of freedom. Just as He liberated Israel from the cruel dominion of Pharaoh to shape His people, so today He emancipates all whom He acknowledges as His God, rescuing them from the oppressive clutches of the devil—a symbolic counterpart to Israel's physical enslavement. Consequently, no being's heart should remain unaltered by this divine law, for it stems from the supreme Lord; as all creation emanates from Him, it is only fitting that our aspirations find their culmination in Him. None should disregard the summons of this Lawgiver—especially those who acknowledge being chosen to uphold His commandments, anticipating His grace to furnish not only temporal blessings but also the glory of eternal life. Most significantly, the remembrance of God's mercy and power rescuing us from the abyss of damnation should kindle a fervent obedience to our God.

Having thus solidified the foundation of His law and upheld its authority, the Lord imparts the initial precept:

"You shall have no foreign gods before My countenance."

This commandment underscores God's desire for exclusive preeminence and exaltation among His people. The purpose behind this directive is to eliminate all impiety and superstition, which obscure the magnificence of His divinity, and to foster genuine reverence towards Him. This elucidates the inherent significance of the words. Having God as our supreme Deity necessitates attributing

to Him His rightful attributes. Hence, when He prohibits the acknowledgment of foreign gods, He underscores the importance of not diverting what rightfully belongs to Him elsewhere.

While our obligations to God are numerous, they can be distilled into four aspects: adoration, trust, invocation, and thanksgiving. "Adoration" entails the creature's reverence towards God, acknowledging His supremacy. "Trust" is the profound confidence we possess in Him, recognizing His wisdom, righteousness, benevolence, power, and truth. It acknowledges our felicity in sharing and communing with Him. "Invocation" represents the soul's recourse to God as its sole hope in times of need. "Thanksgiving" encompasses our recognition and appreciation of all blessings received. God permits none of these aspects to be directed towards another; instead, He desires them to be wholeheartedly offered to Him. It's insufficient merely to abstain from adhering to foreign gods; rather, one must also anchor oneself in God. Some individuals, albeit wickedly, mock all religions as simplistic. To truly uphold this commandment, genuine religion must take precedence—a religion that directs our souls toward God, recognizes His majesty, places trust in Him, seeks His aid, acknowledges His grace, praises His works, and perceives Him as the ultimate goal. Additionally, we must guard against all forms of malevolent superstition, ensuring that our souls remain steadfast and not wander to various deities.

It is imperative to discern the subtleties of hidden impiety, for it disguises itself beneath plausible justifications. Hidden impiety doesn't entail outright abandonment of the living God; instead, it associates numerous lesser gods alongside Him, thereby fracturing His omnipotence. This disarray disperses the magnificence of His divinity. Similarly, both ancient idolaters, among Jews and gentiles, and modern adversaries have elevated departed saints to a status

akin to companions of God. They honor, invoke, and offer gratitude to these saints. Although it may not seem that God's glory is obscured, the reality is that a significant portion is diluted, surviving only as a notion of His supreme dominion. To truly embrace monotheism, we must ensure that His glory remains undiminished and that all that is rightfully His is dedicated solely to Him.

The text also emphasizes that foreign gods must not be placed before God's countenance. Here, the Lord warns us that we cannot partake in impiety without Him as a witness and observer of our sacrilege. Impiety presumes to deceive God through covert intentions, yet He proclaims omniscience over our machinations. Thus, if we wish to exhibit true religious fidelity, our conscience must remain untainted by malevolent notions. It must shun any semblance of descending into superstition or idolatry. This commandment urges not only external confession of God's supremacy but also purity of conscience, as nothing escapes His gaze or remains hidden from His sight.

The Second Commandment

"You shall not craft graven images or likenesses of things in the heavens above, things on the earth below, or things in the waters beneath the earth. You shall not venerate them or show them honor."

As He previously declared that He alone is God, and no other should be acknowledged or imagined beside Him, He now expounds more explicitly on His nature and the appropriate manner of honoring Him. This illumination safeguards the sanctity of His rightful adoration from falling into the abyss of superstitious practices. Thus, He endeavors to guide us away from the worldly conceptions that the human intellect fabricates when it endeavors to comprehend God with its limited understanding. At the heart of this commandment

lies the intention to prevent the tarnishing of God's due veneration through misguided rituals. It seeks to redirect us from the carnal paths our minds devise when they seek to apprehend God based on their own limitations. Instead, the Lord beckons us to return to His prescribed form of worship, a spiritual and divinely instructed path.

Within this commandment lies the vivid example of the vice of external idolatry. It consists of two fundamental facets: the initial facet rebukes our presumption in attempting to encapsulate or subdue God, whose essence surpasses our grasp, within tangible forms or images. The subsequent facet condemns the act of venerating such images as an expression of religious devotion. The rationale underlying the first facet is elucidated by Moses, who implores us to "remember that the Lord spoke to you on Mount Horeb. You heard His voice, yet you saw no form; therefore, do not craft a likeness of Him" (Deuteronomy 4:15–16). Isaiah echoes this perspective by asserting that attributing a material or visible image to God, a Being who is spiritual and invisible, distorts the reverence rightfully accorded to His majesty. It trivializes His omnipotence by likening it to inanimate materials, such as gold, silver, or carved stone. This argument is reinforced by the Apostle Paul, who in his discourse to the Athenians, contends that as God's offspring, we must not liken His divinity to tangible substances crafted by human hands (Acts 17:29). Hence, it becomes clear that any statues intended as representations of God fundamentally displease Him, constituting an affront to His majesty.

Admittedly, God has occasionally manifested His presence through discernible signs, as denoted by passages where He was "seen face to face." Nonetheless, these signs underscore the transcendence of His essence, often shrouding His appearance in clouds, flames, and smoke. These visual symbols affirm the limitations of human

perception, preventing us from fully beholding His divine nature. Even Moses, who enjoyed a more intimate rapport with God than others, was denied the privilege of beholding His face (Exodus 33:20). Instead, he was informed that mortals could not endure the brilliance of such a sight. Additionally, the altar—a representation of God's presence—was designed to evoke wonderment, as indicated by the Cherubim that shielded it with their wings and the veil that concealed it (Exodus 25:17ff). Hence, those who use the Cherubim to justify images of God and saints deviate from reason. The Cherubim serve as a reminder that no image adequately captures the mysteries of God. They are positioned to obscure human curiosity, preventing us from attempting to visually perceive God. Furthermore, it is imperative to recognize that all forms of likeness are forbidden, challenging the erroneous dichotomy posed by the Greeks. While they abstain from sculpting God, they exhibit an excessive superstition towards painted images. In contrast, the Lord not only restricts the crafting of forms but categorically prohibits any semblance of an image, as it distorts His representation and belittles His magnificence.

Moreover, the passage alludes to the kinds of forms that pagans typically fashioned to represent God. By "things in heaven," it likely refers to the sun, moon, stars, and potentially birds. This elucidation is gleaned from the fourth chapter of Deuteronomy, where birds and stars are mentioned concurrently (Deuteronomy 4:15–19). It is worth noting that some interpretations attribute this to angels, although I deem it pertinent to omit further exploration of this point, as its understanding is widely established.

Subsequently, the text explores the second facet of the commandment, concerning worship. Worshipping God through images is inherently wrong, and this transgression becomes even

graver when it involves images of saints. Idolatry manifests through several degrees. First, human audacity and presumption compel the intellect to formulate a mental conception of God based on its own limited capacity. This endeavor often results in empty, illusory notions rather than a true comprehension of God. This presumption then extends outward, prompting individuals to visually depict God based on their internal concept. In this manner, the intellect gives rise to idols, and the hand subsequently gives them form. The root of idolatry stems from the belief that God's proximity necessitates a physical embodiment. The example of the Israelites beseeching Aaron to craft gods for them when Moses was absent (Exodus 32:11) underscores this point. Although they were well aware of God's power, their limited human understanding demanded a visible representation to affirm God's presence. They sought reassurance of God's guidance through an image preceding them on their journey.

The undeniable truth of these matters becomes evident through everyday experience. The human inclination to find solace in the counterfeit, resembling its own nature, is ever-persistent. This compels people to seek solace in false images, falsely representing the divine essence. Throughout history, humanity, driven by this misguided passion, has fashioned images to reassure themselves of God's proximity, under the assumption that these visual cues attest to His presence. This misguided notion leads them to worship these images as though they encapsulate God Himself. Consequently, as their focus becomes ensnared by these images, their mindset regresses, mirroring that of beasts. They perceive a semblance of divinity within the stone or wood, and this illusion prompts them to revere and marvel at these lifeless forms. Thus, it becomes evident that the worship of images emerges from fleshly and erroneous fantasies. People do not regard these images as deities but rather as vessels containing a fraction of divine power. Therefore, one who

attempts to craft an image of God, be it in the form of a statue or an artifact, unwittingly embraces a form of profound superstition. This is precisely why the Lord's prohibition extends beyond crafting statues; it also encompasses the consecration of monuments or stones that elicit reverence.

Those who attempt to justify the reprehensible idolatry that has tarnished religion for countless years should heed this truth. They assert, "We do not deem the images as gods." However, consider the incident when the Jews constructed the golden calves, a testament to their failure of memory regarding the God who had delivered them from Egypt (Exodus 32:1–6). Despite their awareness of the Almighty, they sought reassurance through a physical emblem. Upon crafting the calves, Aaron invited them to worship the gods who rescued them from Egypt—an indication that they yearned for a connection with the living God, albeit via the medium of the calf. Similarly, we must not underestimate the sagacity of pagans, who comprehended that gods transcended wood and stone. They alternated images while preserving the same deities in their hearts, illustrating that these images merely represented aspects of their gods. Though they frequently carved new statues, they did not perceive them as distinct gods.

Yet, throughout history, all idolaters—whether Jews or pagans—share a common fallacy. They harbor the mistaken belief that crafting images offers a surer comprehension of God's essence. The inception of this false and distorted notion has persevered, leading to an erroneous conviction that God's power manifests through these images. Unfortunately, this misguided tradition has persisted, engendering one misconception after another, until some have come to believe that God's power truly resides within these images. Regrettably, those who worship these images aim to honor the

Eternal God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Similarly, pagans seek to venerate their envisioned gods, dwelling amidst the celestial realm.

Let those who deny the parallels between the past and the present within the papacy cease their deceitful discourse. Why do they kneel before images and beseech these artifacts as though proximity to God's ear is attained through such gestures? Why do distinctions arise among images of the same deity, with some revered and others neglected? What propels them to embark on pilgrimages to idol sites despite possessing similar images at home? Why do they fiercely quarrel over these images, as if safeguarding their gods, instead of yielding their devotion to God Himself? The prevalence of these questions highlights the hypocrisy of those who use Christianity as a veneer to mask their idolatrous practices. Their claim that "we do not regard the images as our gods" echoes similar assertions from history, which failed to exonerate Jews and pagans from idolatry. The prophets and scriptures universally condemn their actions for worshipping wood and stone, as the same misguided conviction perpetuated by contemporary Christians. The core of this issue lies in their worship of God through physical mediums, substituting the spiritual for material tokens.

It is perhaps their contention that these assertions are the words of the uneducated masses. Even if we were to concede this point—though it remains unfounded, given that images are indeed venerated in the papacy—there exists no discernible benefit for the unlearned in images that encapsulate God's representation. The outcome merely fosters misconceptions, potentially transforming individuals into anthropomorphites who conceive of God in physical terms. By referring to the writings of Lactantius and Eusebius, one discerns that they unequivocally associate images with mortals. A

similar sentiment resonates in St. Augustine's pronouncement that not only is the worship of images wrong, but the mere introduction of any image in relation to God is wicked. These depictions of saints serve no purpose other than superficial display, bereft of holiness or virtue. Regrettably, the adornment of these images surpasses all bounds of modesty, a state more debasing than the decorum upheld by even the most immodest of individuals. Although the words are disheartening, they mirror the reality that the images of virgins in church buildings appear less modestly attired than common prostitutes. This revelation underscores the incongruity of asserting these images as "holy relics."

Once more, let us reaffirm that this is not the path to guide Christian souls within the sanctuary of the Church. God desires a different, far more profound instruction for His people—a teaching centered on the proclamation of His Word and the imparting of His sacraments. Such teaching is for all, offering a shared understanding that transcends the inclination to seek fleeting images. It becomes imperative for us to ponder why an abundance of crosses, crafted from wood, stone, silver, and gold, would be required. If the populace grasped that Christ's crucifixion served as redemption for our transgressions, bearing the weight of our curse upon the cross to cleanse us of our sins, would a thousand wooden or stone crosses be necessary? A simple articulation of this truth would undoubtedly impact the ignorant more profoundly than an array of crosses. The allure of gold and silver holds greater sway over the avaricious than the eternal words of God. Thus, we must question those who label others as "ignorant," asserting that their only mode of comprehension rests in visual imagery. It is paramount to recognize that Christ Himself proclaimed that His Spirit and His Word would instruct all members of His Church, molding them into disciples of

God (John 4:23–24; 17:17). Behold, this invaluable insight—an unparalleled blessing that images cannot supplant.

To elucidate further the repugnance of idolatry in the eyes of the Lord, the precept adds the description, "The Eternal One our God, strong, jealous," among other attributes. This pronouncement communicates that God alone should be the object of our unwavering devotion. To inspire this commitment, He unveils His indomitable power, a power He cannot tolerate being belittled. He brands Himself as jealous, signifying His intolerance of any competition for His affection. Moreover, He pledges to defend His majesty and glory, resolutely guarding it against any transference to creatures or idols. Such defense does not merely entail punishment; it extends to subsequent generations, impacting children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren who perpetuate the impiety of their forebears. Conversely, God extends His mercy and benevolence to a thousand generations of those who love Him and heed His commandments.

This marital imagery resonates with the theme of a loving union. Just as God unites us with the Church, embracing us in a spiritual marriage grounded in mutual fidelity, He exhorts us to reciprocate. Hence, as God exhibits unwavering faithfulness in all circumstances, He implores us to maintain the sanctity of our spiritual union. In essence, this calls for our hearts to remain steadfastly devoted to Him, refraining from yielding to the temptations of the devil and carnal desires—a form of spiritual infidelity. When chastising the unfaithful, the Lord uses strong language, equating their actions with adultery, transgressing the sacred boundaries of marital covenant (Ezekiel 23, Hosea 1). The Lord stands as a caring spouse, aggrieved by the prospect of His beloved seeking solace in others. Hence, just as a dedicated husband takes offense at his wife's wandering

affections, the Lord, our spiritual spouse, exhibits profound jealousy when our hearts succumb to impure desires or when His glory is tainted by superstition. In diverting our attention to other objects, we not only violate the faithfulness inherent in our spiritual union but also soil our souls with spiritual promiscuity.

Delving into the warning of generational consequences, we must assess its compatibility with God's justice. It is evident that the nature of humanity is tainted by inherent sin, rendering all those untouched by God's grace susceptible to destruction. However, this demise is a result of their personal transgressions and not a manifestation of God's unjust enmity. Those who endure this punishment are not unjustly burdened with someone else's sin. Rather, they are recipients of their own transgressions, ensnared by their wickedness. If temporal tribulations befall the children of the wicked due to their parents' sins, it can potentially serve as a salutary lesson. Isaiah warns King Hezekiah that due to his sins, his offspring would lose their kingdom and be exiled (Isaiah 39:6–7). Similarly, the households of Pharaoh and Abimelech faced affliction owing to the transgressions committed against Abraham (Genesis 12:17, 20:17–18). While temporal consequences can be attributed to ancestral sins, this interpretation evades the profound implications of the passage. The severity of God's punishment suggests a more comprehensive retribution, extending beyond the temporal realm. Therefore, we must apprehend the statement as follows: God's curse not only affects the wrongdoer but extends to their entire lineage. Consequently, if the father rejects God's Spirit and lives in iniquity, his children, abandoned by God due to their father's transgression, are inclined to follow the same path of destruction. Thus, the cycle continues through subsequent generations, a cascade of spiritual decline.

Firstly, let us assess whether such consequences align with God's justice. Given humanity's inherent sinful nature, those devoid of God's grace are destined for ruin. Yet, this fate is a result of their individual sins, rather than God's unjust vengeance. Those who succumb to this punishment are not unfairly burdened by the sins of others. They experience the repercussions of their own wrongdoings, ensnared by their own wickedness. If the descendants of the wicked endure temporal tribulations as a consequence of their forebears' sins, it can serve as a salutary lesson. Isaiah cautioned King Hezekiah that due to his transgressions, his progeny would lose their kingdom and face exile (Isaiah 39:6–7). Likewise, the households of Pharaoh and Abimelech suffered due to the offenses committed against Abraham (Genesis 12:17, 20:17–18). Although temporal consequences can be attributed to ancestral sins, this interpretation evades the profound implications of the passage. The severity of God's punishment suggests a more comprehensive retribution, extending beyond the temporal realm. Therefore, we must apprehend the statement as follows: God's curse not only affects the wrongdoer but extends to their entire lineage. Consequently, if the father rejects God's Spirit and lives in iniquity, his children, abandoned by God due to their father's transgression, are inclined to follow the same path of destruction. Thus, the cycle continues through subsequent generations, a cascade of spiritual decline.

Secondly, a promise of enduring mercy is granted, assuring blessings upon a thousand generations of those who love God. This assurance frequently surfaces in Scripture and is enshrined in the solemn covenant between God and His Church. "I will be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12), thus echoing the eternal grace bestowed upon the faithful. Solomon similarly affirms that the children of the righteous shall find contentment (Proverbs 20:7). This happiness emanates not only

from diligent upbringing and sound guidance but also from the divine blessing promised to God's devoted servants, permeating their progeny for generations to come. This offers solace to the faithful and serves as a foreboding message to the wicked. If the memory of righteousness and sin carries such weight even after death, with blessings and curses cascading through lineage, it stands to reason that the virtuous shall eternally bask in God's favor, while the ungodly shall endure unceasing misery.

Let us not find contradiction in the instances where, occasionally, virtuous individuals emerge from the lineage of the wicked, or conversely, where unrighteousness sprouts from the lineage of the faithful. In this passage, the Lord did not intend to establish an unchanging decree that would encroach upon His sovereign choice. It is sufficient—both for comforting the righteous and for cautioning sinners—that this proclamation holds true, even if its fulfillment is not constant. Just as the temporal trials dispatched by God stand as evidence of His displeasure towards sin, foreshadowing the impending judgment that will confront all sinners, regardless of whether they face retribution in this present existence, similarly, by showcasing the favor bestowed upon the descendants of the faithful due to their forebears, the Lord offers a glimpse into the lasting expanse of His boundless mercy towards His chosen ones. Conversely, when divine judgment affects successive generations due to a single ancestor's transgression, it serves to underscore the impending severity reserved for the wicked. This, indeed, constitutes the central message embedded within this declaration. Furthermore, God's intent, almost as an aside, is to underscore the magnitude of His mercy, extending it to encompass a thousand generations, while attributing His punitive measures to merely four generations.

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain."

This divine decree resonates with the Lord's desire for His name to be regarded as sacred and distinct by us. The crux of the matter is that we must not tarnish His majesty through disregard or irreverence. Conversely, this command corresponds with the prohibition against demeaning His name; rather, we are to hold His name in the highest regard and reverence. Thus, our thoughts and utterances concerning God or His sacred mysteries should be marked by reverence and humility, aligning with the grandeur of His being. Furthermore, in our contemplation of His creation, let us refrain from crafting notions that do not honor Him.

Three principles ought to be closely upheld. Firstly, all thoughts and expressions regarding God should harmonize with His excellence and the holiness of His name, ultimately magnifying His greatness. Secondly, we must refrain from casually misusing His holy Word or distorting His sacred mysteries to serve our selfish desires or ambitions. Instead, recognizing the sanctity of His Word and mysteries, we are to hold them in highest esteem and veneration. Finally, let us desist from maligning or casting aspersions on His creations—a practice adopted by the wicked as an insult. Instead, let us extol His wisdom, righteousness, and power evident in His handiwork. This is the essence of hallowing God's name. Anything to the contrary profanes His name, diverting it from its intended purpose and, in the process, diminishing its dignity, leading to contempt. Furthermore, misusing God's name thoughtlessly pales in comparison to the grave error of exploiting it for sorcery, necromancy, illicit oaths, and similar malevolent purposes.

Yet, this commandment chiefly addresses the act of swearing—an egregious misuse of God's name. This focus aims to instill in us a

profound aversion to all forms of misusing His name. Swearing, in this context, is invoking God as a witness to affirm the truth of our statement. Blatant blasphemies intended to curse or defy God do not qualify as "swearing." It is worth noting that, when done properly, invoking God as a witness can be seen as a form of glorifying Him. Scripture provides ample evidence of this. Isaiah, for instance, prophesies that even the Assyrians and Egyptians will be received into God's fold, saying they will "swear by the name of the Lord" (Isa. 19:18), acknowledging Him as their God. Similarly, Jeremiah predicts that the people will be taught to "swear by my name," indicating that swearing can serve as an expression of one's faithfulness to God (Jer. 12:16). Swearing by God's name is an affirmation of His eternal Truth and His role as the revealer of hidden matters and the sole arbiter of truth. It is a confession that only He knows the depths of the human heart. Thus, invoking God as a witness is a solemn declaration of faith in His unwavering veracity.

However, invoking God's name as a witness is not to be taken lightly. God takes offense when people swear by false gods, interpreting it as a rejection of His name. This, indeed, signifies the severity of this transgression. He chastises those who swear by His name and the name of their idols, demonstrating His abhorrence for such behavior (Zeph. 1:4–5). In understanding the gravity of misusing His name, we are compelled to hold His name in utmost reverence and to employ it only with sincerity, conscious of the sacredness it represents.

As we consider more deeply the significance of this divine decree, it becomes evident that God intends for His name to be held in the highest esteem, especially when it comes to oaths. Thus, it is imperative for us to be vigilant against any inclination to diminish or disrespect His name, for such behavior is deeply disrespectful. To

perjure oneself by invoking God's name is a grave affront, even referred to as "profanation" in the Scriptures (Lev. 19:12). Indeed, such an act, by treating God's truth as a mere tool for deception, threatens to strip Him of His very essence—His role as the Ultimate Truth. Consider Joshua's plea to Achan to confess the truth: "My son, give glory to the God of Israel!" (Josh. 7:19). This poignant entreaty underscores the dishonor that perjury inflicts upon God's name. When we invoke God's name falsely, we jeopardize His reputation by insinuating His complicity in falsehood. Thus, the gravity of perjury is such that it challenges the very essence of God's veracity. The Pharisees' similar request in the Gospel of John (Jn. 9:24) reveals that this form of adjuration was customary among the Jews. The formulation of scriptural phrases—such as "The Lord is living," or "May God be witness of it on my soul"—serves as a poignant reminder that invoking God's name for oaths carries a solemn weight. These expressions signify that we cannot call on God as a witness to our words without inviting His judgment for false oaths.

Beyond the realm of perjury, a second form of oath takes place—one that, although not entirely profane, nonetheless lowers the honor of God's name by employing it unnecessarily. When we take the name of God in an oath that is truthful but non-essential, we inadvertently demean its sanctity. Hence, we must remember that oaths were instituted not for our frivolous indulgence but to serve the needs of justice. Engaging in oaths for trivial matters is a departure from their intended purpose and is therefore unacceptable. Any justification for such oaths must stem from religious motives or acts of charity. Regrettably, many today transgress in this regard, considering it inconsequential despite its gravity before God. By recklessly employing God's name in insignificant and trivial matters, they err gravely, albeit in the midst of a common practice that has come to be normalized. Yet, we should remain steadfast in recognizing that

God's commandment stands unwaveringly, its associated threat awaiting fulfillment. Those who misuse His name in vain will be held accountable.

Moreover, it is grievous error to substitute the names of saints for God's name in oaths, swearing by the likes of St. James or St. Anthony. This act reflects a blatant impiety, transferring the glory due to God onto His saints. The rationale for God's explicit command to swear by His name—and the corresponding injunction against swearing by strange gods—cannot be dismissed (Deut. 6:13, 2:20; Exod. 23:13). Indeed, as the apostle elucidates, when people swear oaths, they acknowledge the greatness of God above all, while God Himself swears by His own name, being the highest authority (Heb. 6:13–16).

The Anabaptists, advocating the complete abolition of oaths due to Christ's general prohibition, inadvertently misrepresent Christ's intent, thereby contradicting His teachings. In doing so, they posit Christ as opposed to His Father's commandments, which conflicts with Christ's assertion of unity with the Father. The truth remains that Christ did not nullify the law; rather, He aimed to restore its rightful meaning, which had been obscured by the distortions of the scribes and Pharisees. Consequently, it is not accurate to infer that Christ condemned all oaths universally, but rather He focused on those oaths that transgressed the law. His purpose was to rectify the principal transgression, ensuring that oaths no longer became a means of evading accountability. Hence, Christ's words do not censure all oaths; rather, they address those contrary to the law. His life exemplified adherence to the law, which He upheld throughout His teachings. His disciples, likewise, followed His example, including St. Paul who, in keeping with Christ's teachings, used oaths when necessary (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23).

However, the matter remains nuanced, as some stipulate that the exceptions apply to public oaths mandated by authorities or superiors, as well as oaths between superiors and their subordinates. Such oaths are indeed defensible, their validity anchored in scriptural testimonies. The magistracy is commanded to administer oaths in uncertain matters, while the witness is obliged to respond (Heb. 6:16). Evidently, both practices possess scriptural support. Notably, pagans of old regarded solemn, public oaths as religious rituals, in contrast to private oaths which held lesser significance. Nonetheless, condemning all individual oaths that are taken soberly and reverently, pertaining to necessary matters, is perilous. These oaths are founded on sound reasoning and scriptural precedent. If it is permissible for private individuals to invoke God's judgment in their affairs, it is certainly reasonable for them to call upon Him as a witness. Consider a situation where your neighbor falsely accuses you of wrongdoing; seeking to clear your name, you may invoke God's judgment to attest to your innocence, especially if your reputation is at stake due to his persistent unfounded belief.

As we reflect upon these matters, we discern that invoking God as a witness is not as momentous an act as invoking Him as the ultimate Judge. This prompts us to question the rationale behind censuring oaths wherein God is called upon as a witness. Numerous examples from scripture substantiate this view. Both Abraham and Isaac, in their interactions with Abimelech, employed oaths (Gen. 21:31, 26:30). It is worth noting that while these instances might be perceived as public oaths, private individuals like Jacob and Laban also engaged in solemn oaths to solidify their alliance (Gen. 31:43–53). Similarly, the commitment of marriage between Boaz and Ruth was sealed with an oath, even though Boaz was a private individual (Ruth 3:13). Furthermore, Obadiah, a righteous and God-fearing individual, employed an oath to persuade Elijah (2 Kings 18:10).

These examples lead us to a reasonable conclusion: invoking God's name in oaths is valid, provided that the oaths are not hasty, frivolous, or emotionally charged, and that they serve a genuine purpose, specifically upholding God's glory and preserving love and charity with others—the very essence of this commandment.

The Fourth Commandment

Remember to hallow the day of rest. You shall labor six days and do all your works. The seventh day is the rest of the Lord your God. You shall not do any of your own works, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your serving maid, nor your cattle, nor the stranger who is within your gates. For in six days, etc.

The fourth commandment echoes with divine wisdom: "Remember to honor the day of rest." Amidst the labor of six days, we find respite on the seventh—a day consecrated to the Lord, where we cease from our toil and let our works lie dormant. This sacred day extends its grace to all, encompassing family, servants, and even the sojourner. Its significance extends beyond the temporal, inviting us to dive deeper into its spiritual essence.

This precept carries a profound purpose. It calls us to transcend our personal desires and achievements, urging us to dwell on the realms of the divine kingdom. This meditation, ordained by God, becomes our anchor, guiding us towards a place of spiritual renewal. However, let us further consider the commandment, for its uniqueness beckons a nuanced understanding. The early church doctors labeled it "shadowy," a testament to its external observances that, like other Old Testament symbols, found fulfillment in Christ's coming. While their assessment is accurate, we must dig deeper to uncover the commandment's multi-dimensional aspects.

From a higher perspective, we glimpse three underlying causes within this commandment. The seventh-day rest, rooted in ancient Israel, served as a figure—casting a glimpse of the spiritual repose that awaits the faithful. Here, we step away from our own labor, allowing God's hand to work within us. Furthermore, this commandment designated a fixed day for assembling together, embracing God's teachings, and engaging in sacred ceremonies. Additionally, this day extended compassion to those bound by servitude, providing them a much-needed respite from their toils.

Amidst these facets, the profound emphasis remains on the spiritual rest. Through Scripture's passages, we discern God's unwavering dedication to the observance of the Sabbath. He insists upon its sanctification, viewing it as a litmus test of genuine devotion. Prophets mourned its desecration, underlining its pivotal role in the religious life (Jer. 17:21–27, Ezek. 20:19–21, 23–24, 22:8, 26, 23:38). In contrast, God uplifts Sabbath observance, heralding it as the pinnacle of goodness. A prime example lies within Nehemiah, where the Levites acknowledge God's revelation of the holy Sabbath and its significance (Neh. 9:14). The Sabbath emerges as a beacon of distinction, held in higher regard than other precepts.

Moses and Ezekiel further illuminate this theme, affirming its dignity and superiority. In Exodus, God signifies the Sabbath as a perpetual sign of His sanctification, uniting generations under His divine embrace (Exod. 31:13–14, 16–17). Ezekiel, likewise, underscores its importance, positioning it as a sign of God's sanctification for Israel (Ezek. 20:12).

The sanctification of our souls unfolds through the surrender of our own wills—a profound likeness between the external sign and the inward transformation. Let us wholeheartedly rest, inviting God to

work within us. We must release our desires, relinquish the impulses of our flesh, and abstain from actions guided solely by human understanding. In this surrender, God's hand weaves its grace within us, and we find rest in His embrace—a truth illuminated by the apostle (Heb. 3:13, 4:9). Israel's seventh-day rest vividly portrayed this spiritual reality. Its purpose echoes resoundingly, encouraging us to release ourselves completely, enabling God's divine craftsmanship. Our Lord Himself validated this commandment by example—a compelling reason to follow in the footsteps of our Creator.

If a hidden meaning is sought within the number seven, its symbolism of perfection in Scripture makes it a fitting choice, perhaps indicating eternity. This notion aligns with Moses' words—he mentions that "the Lord rested on the seventh day" and leaves it at that, suggesting a profound purpose. Another plausible conjecture unveils itself: the Lord might have chosen seven to symbolize that the faithful's Sabbath finds ultimate fulfillment on the last day. While our journey begins now, the ceaseless battle against our flesh ensures its completion remains distant. Isaiah's prophecy envisions a timeless Sabbath in God's kingdom, where He is all in all (Isa. 66:23; 1 Cor. 15:28). By designating it "the seventh day," the Lord might have aimed to offer His people a glimpse of this perfected Sabbath, stoking a fervent pursuit of such completeness throughout life.

Should this interpretation seem intricate, a simpler one stands at the ready. The Lord appointed a day under the tutelage of the law—a day for meditation and practice, anticipating the everlasting spiritual rest. The choice of the seventh day might reflect the Lord's belief in its adequacy or be a call to imitation through His example. Alternatively, it might signify that the Sabbath's purpose is to mirror our Creator. Whichever interpretation resonates, the core mystery

remains unchanged: God's people were taught to relinquish their own endeavors. Prophets tirelessly emphasized this truth, ensuring the Jews understood that refraining from manual labor was not enough. Isaiah captures this sentiment, declaring, "If you refrain from your own pursuits on my holy day... and glorify Him by abstaining from your works, and if your own will is absent, then you will thrive in God" (Isa. 58:13).

The ceremonial facets of this commandment waned with Christ's advent, for He is Truth incarnate, rendering all symbols obsolete. As the Body, He dissolves shadows, ushering in the fullness of Sabbath. We, too, become partakers through baptism, united with His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:4). The apostle aptly describes the Sabbath as a shadow, its substance found in Christ (Col. 2:16–17). This truth extends beyond a single day—it spans our entire journey, demanding our surrender and transformation, until we are reborn in God's image. Hence, Christians must forsake all superstitious rituals tied to specific days, embracing the spiritual Sabbath that transcends time.

The reasons underpinning this commandment extend beyond mere shadows, finding relevance across all eras. Although the Sabbath's ceremonial aspects have passed, certain principles remain universally applicable. Days set apart for congregational gatherings, sermons, communal prayers, and sacramental celebrations continue to be essential. Likewise, the provision of respite for servants and artisans persists as a testament to God's wisdom and care. These twin aims, evident in the practices of both Jews and Moses, are equally pertinent for us. Proof abounds in God's call for ecclesiastical assemblies, with our need for such gatherings evident in our lives. Should ordered worship be neglected, chaos would readily ensue, as the apostle aptly reminds us, "Let all things be done decently and in order among us" (1 Cor. 14:40). Therefore, this framework of

designated days is a safeguard, preserving honor and harmony within the church. Just as the Lord addressed the Jews' needs through the Sabbath, He provides no less for us, His children.

Now, some may ponder whether daily assembly would erase the distinction of days. The idea of daily communion with God's Word holds merit, yet practical constraints may hinder such frequency. Should a multitude lack the strength or capacity for daily gatherings, love and charity dictate we not burden them further. God's wisdom and care underpin this, guiding our practices.

Amid these reflections, a storm brews around Sunday, unsettling those who claim it resembles Judaism. In response, I affirm that our observance of Sunday is distinct from Jewish customs. Our approach varies, for Sunday is not a rigid religious obligation nor a ceremony enshrining a spiritual mystery. Instead, it functions as a necessary measure to uphold church order. The argument against this practice, citing St. Paul's words, overlooks critical context. Paul chastised those who treated observances as mere shadows while obscuring Christ's glory and the gospel's light. His critique targeted misguided religious devotion, not the legitimate practice that maintains peace within the Christian community. This, he recognized, was integral for the church. For instance, he assigned Sundays to the Corinthians for their almsgiving (1 Cor. 16:2). The move from Jewish festivals to Sunday worship reflects a departure from superstition while preserving necessary order, discipline, and peace within the church. While the number seven doesn't hold the key to binding the church, it's the principle of disciplined worship that matters. Consequently, churches may choose other solemn days for gatherings, provided they uphold discipline and avoid superstition.

In contemplating this commandment's essence, we uncover a truth revealed to the Jews through symbolic imagery, now unveiled to us without the veils of figures. Our purpose is two-fold: to cultivate an unceasing rest from our labors throughout our lives, permitting God's Spirit to work within us. Secondly, we honor the church's rightful structure, gathering to hear the Word, partake in sacraments, and offer formal prayers. Lastly, we display compassion by granting respite to those under our care. Thus, the fallacies propagated by errant teachers fall apart—those who, in past times, imposed a Judaic perspective upon the vulnerable, obscuring the distinction between Sunday and the Sabbath. Their contention that they merely swapped the day while retaining the secret significance of the Sabbath echoes the very superstition St. Paul denounced. Their misguided teachings yield little profit, leading adherents to outpace the Jews in a fleshly perception of the Sabbath. Isaiah's reprimands find more fitting recipients in those who subscribe to these notions, rather than those originally reproached in his era (Isa. 1:12ff, 58:13).

The Fifth Commandment

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be extended on the earth which the Lord your God gives you.

This commandment's profound purpose calls for the preservation of divine order. We are summoned to uphold the ordained hierarchy, acknowledging and revering our superiors. Our reverence must be accompanied by honor and dutiful obedience, recognizing the kindness they have extended to us. Conversely, this commandment restrains us from belittling their stature through disdain, stubbornness, or ingratitude—attributes comprehended under the term "honor" in Scripture. The apostle's declaration that "the priests

who preside well are worthy of double honor" (1 Tim. 5:17) encompasses both reverence and fitting compensation for their labor. Yet, our nature, tainted with pride and ambition, resists the submission entailed by this commandment. The innate defiance within us necessitates gradual acclimatization to submission, commencing with the least odious and most amiable form.

Consider the gentlest of superior roles—the one that can most tenderly coax our hearts toward obedience. This designation serves as an example, easing the resistance bred by our innate human nature. It's noteworthy how the Lord, in His wisdom, systematically familiarizes us with various forms of subordination, commencing with the mildest to soften our hearts. Though distinct in nature, these roles share the same rationale. When the Lord confers authority, He imparts a portion of His name to maintain the authority's standing. The titles "Father," "God," and "Lord" resonate with God's essence, invoking a sense of divine majesty within us. Thus, when individuals are granted these titles, they are bestowed a fraction of God's radiance, raising their status in accordance with their rank. Hence, acknowledging the divine honor vested in those addressed as "father" is paramount, considering the profound significance of the title. Similarly, individuals referred to as "prince" or "lord" reflect, in their own way, the honor reserved for God.

Thus, let us harbor no uncertainty concerning the universal decree laid before us. As we discern the divine ordination of someone as our superior, it becomes incumbent upon us to extend honor, reverence, and love toward them. The offering of service, however humble, is also enjoined. We must not deliberate over whether our superiors merit such esteem; their ascendancy to this position is ordained by God's will. Consequently, the Lord's injunction to honor them stands steadfast. Moreover, we are explicitly commanded to revere the

parents who have ushered us into existence—a lesson that nature itself should have imprinted upon us. Those who defy paternal authority through scorn or rebellion are not mere humans but aberrations. This explains why our Lord prescribes the death penalty for those disobeying father or mother (Deut. 21:18–21), a stern judgment fittingly meted. By rejecting those who have given them life, they forfeit the privilege of living.

A plethora of scriptural passages substantiates our assertion: the concept of honor expounded herein encompasses reverence, obedience, and gratitude stemming from the recognition of blessings. Reverence is enforced when the Lord ordains the death penalty for those who disparage their father or mother (Exod. 21:16), effectively condemning all scorn and contempt. Obedience, the second aspect, is endorsed by the Lord's decree for capital punishment for a rebellious and disobedient child (Lev. 20:9; Prov. 20:20). The third facet, love, is illuminated by the words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 15, affirming God's commandment to serve and exhibit kindness to our parents (Matt. 15:4). Notably, whenever St. Paul alludes to this precept, he exhorts obedience—a trait encompassed by the second facet (Eph. 6:1–3; Col. 3:20).

Simultaneously, the promise is appended to accentuate the commandment's sanctity and underscore its divine favor. St. Paul employs this promise to goad us toward compliance, deeming this the "first precept with a promise" (Eph. 6:2). (It is pertinent to note that the promise previously embraced in the first table encompasses the entire law.) Interpreting the promise here, we discern its significance. The Lord's address was directed toward the Israelites, particularly pertaining to the land destined to be their inheritance. The possession of this land was an embodiment of divine benevolence. Thus, the promise of extended life was a testament to

God's grace, ensuring they would savor His blessings for a prolonged period. In essence, the Lord conveyed: "Honor your father and mother, that your days may be lengthened, allowing you to partake in the land—a tangible symbol of My grace." While all faithful souls enjoy God's blessings across the earth, embracing present life as a divine favor, it's evident that long life is emblematic of God's benevolence. Consequently, this promise is applicable to us. Although God does not always fulfill the promise of long life, His faithfulness is unwavering. The essence resides in the assurance of blessings, exemplifying God's grace, even magnified manifold in death.

In stark contrast, the Lord's pledge of blessings in this life to those obedient to their parents parallels His declaration of curses for the disobedient. The divine judgment is promulgated, cemented by the law. Should evildoers evade human retribution, divine justice shall inexorably be meted. History attests to the demise of the disobedient, met with war, turmoil, and similar fates—divine intervention unveiling itself in their wretched end. Those evading untimely demise often languish in life, estranged from God's blessing, reserving an impending greater suffering. Indeed, they stand far from inheriting this promise.

In summation, it's essential to briefly emphasize that obedience to parents is mandated within the confines of devotion to God (Eph. 6:1). A foundational truth is evident in our exposition. Parental oversight is grounded in God's providence, which necessitates our subjection to them. This subjugation is akin to a staircase, guiding us toward reverence for God—the ultimate Father. If parents advocate transgression of divine law, we must not deem them as true parents. Instead, we ought to consider them as misguided interlopers, endeavoring to steer us away from our allegiance to the true Father.

The same principle applies to princes, lords, and superiors. It would be egregious for their exalted positions to overshadow the greatness of God, as their authority derives from and should magnify His sovereignty, confirming His majesty rather than compromising it.

The Sixth Commandment

You shall not kill.

The profound purpose of this commandment emerges from the unifying thread woven by God to bind all humanity in a sacred bond. In the panorama of life's intricate design, the salvation and safekeeping of every soul must be cherished by each individual. Therefore, distilled to its essence, this commandment proscribes any act of violence, harm, or transgression that inflicts injury upon our neighbor's body. Henceforth, we embark upon a journey through the very essence of this commandment—to diligently grasp that every life is a sanctuary and every body is a temple.

Stepping beyond the threshold of words, the mandate resonates profoundly: if there exists a means to safeguard another's life, a sacred duty emerges. This compels us to be vigilant, meticulously tending to the well-being of our fellow beings. Whether it entails procuring necessities to nurture life's journey or steering clear of actions antithetical to life's sanctity, our resolve must remain unwavering. Furthermore, the summons extends to times when our neighbors encounter adversity, perils, or trials. It's our solemn charge to be their pillars of support, offering assistance to navigate turbulent waters.

When we pause to ponder the Lawgiver who articulates this commandment, we are confronted with a divine intimacy that excavates deep into the recesses of our hearts. The One who

meticulously traces the contours of our innermost thoughts is unequivocally invested in their sanctification. Therefore, this commandment is not confined to mere bodily conduct; it burrows into the labyrinthine chambers of our hearts. It resolutely forbids the slaying of souls by heart's hand. Herein, we unearth a profound revelation: God mandates that our inner affections be harnessed to safeguard the lives of our fellow travelers. For, while the hands may carry out an act of homicide, the heart, when tainted by anger and enmity, is culpable of conceiving such transgressions.

Reflect upon this truth: Can one be consumed by anger toward a brother without nurturing a desire to inflict harm? Is it conceivable to harbor animosity without harboring the intent to harm? Within the intricate web of emotions, hatred unfurls its tendrils from the roots of anger. Thus, the seed of malevolence invariably nurtures a passion to sow evil. Those who seek refuge within semantic subterfuge shall find themselves entangled in their own labyrinth. The Holy Spirit has pronounced with clarity that anyone who clings to hatred in the depths of their heart is, in essence, a perpetrator of spiritual homicide (1 Jn. 3:15).

Verily, through the lips of Christ, we discern an unequivocal proclamation. In Matthew 5:22, it is revealed: "The one who hates his brother is in danger of judgment; the one who erupts in anger faces condemnation by the entire assembly; and the one who employs derogatory language to wound his brother is perilously close to the Gehenna of fire."

The sacred text draws upon two profound rationales to establish this guiding principle: firstly, that humankind is a reflection of the divine, and secondly, that they are of our very flesh. Thus, to preserve the sanctity inherent in God's image, we must vigilantly avoid inflicting

any harm upon our fellow beings. If we are to uphold our shared humanity, we are called to stand by them as if they were an extension of ourselves. The profound counsel arising from this foundation, touching upon the redemptive grace of Christ, shall find its elaboration elsewhere. Nonetheless, it is the Lord's will that we naturally reflect on these twin aspects of a person, both inspiring our benevolent actions: recognizing His indelible imprint in every individual, and embracing them as we do our own flesh. Therefore, let it be known that refraining from the spilling of blood does not absolve one from the accusation of homicide. For any who engage in actions contrary to the well-being of their neighbor, whether through deeds, intentions, or aspirations concealed within the heart, stand before God as perpetrators of this grievous act. Conversely, neglecting to employ the talents and opportunities bestowed upon us for the betterment of our fellow human beings transgresses this sacred directive, emblematic of mercilessness. Now, if the Lord extends such profound concern to safeguarding the physical existence of each soul, we are compelled to grasp the magnitude of our obligation in nurturing the salvation of those immortal essences, which hold immeasurable value in His eyes.

The Seventh Commandment

Thou shalt not engage in fornication (conduct yourself wantonly).

The essence of this divine decree emanates from God's fervent affection for purity and chastity. It beckons us to maintain a considerable distance from all semblances of impurity. Succinctly put, we ought not to allow ourselves to be tainted by any form of carnal defilement or intemperance. The affirmative injunction that parallels this mandate entails the structured cultivation of chastity and sobriety in every facet of our existence. It is, in essence, the

prohibition against lewdness, a vice towards which all forms of intemperance inevitably gravitate. By highlighting the disreputable and ignoble aspects that are conspicuously evident in acts of fornication (as they besmirch the sanctity of our bodies), God effectively nurtures our aversion towards any manner of intemperance.

From the very inception of human creation, the design was such that solitude should be shunned, and companionship embraced [Genesis 2:18]. This very need was further intensified by the blemishes of sin's curse. In response to this necessity, the Lord instituted marriage as a balm for our yearnings, elevating it through His divine sanction and consecration. Thus, it is unmistakably clear that any union between man and woman outside the bounds of marriage stands tainted in His sight. Marriage itself is ordained as a remedy, a safeguard against indulgence in wicked desires. Let there be no self-deception when confronted with the truth: cohabitation outside the confines of wedlock bears the weight of divine condemnation.

Given our dual exigency for this remedy—due to the intricacies of our primal nature as well as the corrupting influence that followed—let each individual introspect upon the endowment granted unto them. Should one not be graced with the special gift of continence, the offered antidote should be embraced, lest they contend against God's design and ordinance. To those who posit that divine assistance allows them to overcome all challenges [Philippians 4:13], it is imperative to acknowledge that such succor is bestowed exclusively upon those who navigate their designated paths—within the realm of their calling [Psalm 91:1, 14]. Those who deviate from their prescribed vocations by rejecting the avenues furnished by God precipitate a reckless endeavor to transcend their inherent needs. The Lord's affirmation of continence as a unique bestowal is an

enlightenment reserved not universally for the church, but for a select few within its fold. He identifies a certain class—those who have chosen to embrace celibacy for the sake of God's dominion, affording them unbridled dedication to His glory. Let no one err in assuming that this is within human power; beforehand, He elucidates that "not all can accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given" [Matthew 19:11-12]. St. Paul corroborates this, affirming that "each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that" [1 Corinthians 7:7].

Amidst the devout ranks of our priests, monks, and nuns, the belief holds firm that they possess the capacity to master self-restraint. Yet, who has conveyed to them the certainty that they can sustain lifelong chastity, a commitment to which they bind themselves eternally? We must acknowledge the divine declaration that "it is not good for man to be alone" [Genesis 2:18], applicable to all. Acutely aware, though they may be (and may the mercy of God shield them from feeling it intensely), of the incessant prods of incontinence that stir within their flesh. In what audacity do they cast aside this universal calling that resonates throughout their lives? Is it not a venture fraught with temerity to reject the overarching design of God's plan? For the gift of continence is often bestowed in due measure, aligned with the exigencies of time. Let them not anticipate that God is bound to extend aid in such obstinacy, but rather be reminded of the admonition: "You shall not test the Lord your God" [Deuteronomy 6:16]. It is indeed a trial of God's benevolence to strive against the very nature He has bestowed upon us and to scorn the provisions He extends, as if they bore no relevance to our existence. These priests, monks, and nuns not only perpetrate this audacious dismissal but also unabashedly dub marriage as "pollution." Yet, marriage—a path that our Lord did not deem unworthy of His grandeur, an honorable institution for all, sanctified by Jesus Christ's presence and adorned

with His inaugural miracle [Genesis 2:18ff; Hebrews 13:4; John 2:1-11]. This disparagement of marriage merely serves to elevate their chosen lifestyle of abstinence. Can it not be clearly discerned that the chasm between abstaining from marriage and embracing virginity is stark? Nonetheless, they lay claim to an "angelic" life, a pronouncement that, without doubt, impugns the divine angels themselves. To liken these celestial beings to fornicators and adulterers—and worse—is a gross affront. No elaborate argument is required to underscore this point; the truth itself stands as a convicting testament.

The repercussions of such audacity and scorn towards divine gifts are conspicuously visible, as our Lord administers stern chastisements. While I am hesitant to divulge the more clandestine sins, the very fabric of society is acquainted with the unsettling reality, the atmosphere tainted by a repugnant odor.

An ostensible rationale is presented to substantiate the notion that priests ought to abstain from marriage. It stems from the ancient Levitical priesthood, wherein priests refrained from conjugal relations while approaching the altar, thereby ensuring a greater purity in their sacrificial offerings. Consequently, they argue, "It is untenable that the Christian sacraments, loftier and more exalted, should be administered by those in matrimony." However, this analogy overlooks a critical distinction: the ministry of the gospel and the Levitical priesthood are not analogous. The Levitical priests symbolized the role of Jesus Christ, the Mediator bridging the divide between humanity and the Divine, facilitating reconciliation with the Father through His unparalleled purity. Given their fallibility, they couldn't fully mirror His sanctity. Thus, the purity demanded of them before entering the sanctuary was emblematic of Christ's role in representing mankind before God's throne [Hebrews 8:5]. Since

the pastoral leaders of the church do not bear this specific responsibility, the analogy falters. The apostle unequivocally asserts, "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge" [Hebrews 13:4].

Furthermore, it stands as a remarkable audacity that the demand for such chastity should be projected as an imperative for priests. By this decree, they cast an unjust aspersion upon the early church—an era where pure teachings thrived, and holiness took even deeper root. Consider this: how can they account for the numerous early church fathers who not only permitted marriage among bishops but also sanctioned it? Would it imply that these revered fathers sanctioned the desecration of God's mysteries due to their perceived impurity? Such would be the implication under the judgment of today's priests, monks, and nuns. Indeed, it's worth noting that the topic of clerical marriage was deliberated upon at the Council of Nicaea. In an environment prone to the invention of novel and superstitious ideas to elicit admiration, certain voices arose advocating the prohibition of marriage for priests. But the words of Paphnutius prevailed, asserting the sanctity of a man cohabiting with his wife. Thus, holy matrimony retained its full dignity, not deemed dishonorable for bishops, and the stain of marriage on the clergy was not established. Subsequently, among the church fathers who succeeded, excepting Jerome, there wasn't such a vehement distancing from the honorableness of marriage. One testimony from St. Chrysostom will suffice, as he is not suspected of being excessively partial to marriage; rather, his disposition inclined toward the exaltation of virginity. He expressed, "The first degree of chastity is unspotted virginity. The second is marriage loyally kept." The affection shared by husband and wife, when cultivated virtuously within marriage, embodies a second form of chastity.

Should married individuals recognize their union as sanctified by God, it should impel them to preserve its sanctity from being tainted by reckless excesses. Although the sanctity of marriage serves as a cloak for the frailty of incontinence, it does not serve as a pretext for indulgence. Hence, they mustn't entertain the notion that every indulgence is permissible. Each partner should conduct themselves prudently and with mutual respect, ensuring that their conduct doesn't transgress the sanctity of their marital bond. Such regulation is mandated by divine design, upholding modesty and restraining the tide of debauchery.

Lastly, we must contemplate that the Legislator who unequivocally condemns wantonness and fornication is none other than our Sovereign Owner. Thus, He rightfully expects integrity from our bodies, souls, and spirits alike. As He denounces immodesty and fornication, He concurrently condemns any efforts to lead others astray—be it through immodest attire, lewd gestures, indecent countenance, or dishonorable speech. A philosopher named Archelaus sagely remarked to a well-dressed young man that the location of indecency on the body holds no relevance. This wisdom holds true before God, the One who abhors all impurity, regardless of whether it emerges within the soul or the body. Let us recognize that here God commands us to uphold chastity, and in doing so, He censures all that contradicts it. Thus, to heed this divine commandment, we must suppress evil desires that kindle within, ensure our gaze remains pure, refrain from adorning our faces in manners akin to immodesty, abstain from uttering dishonorable words that incite lust in listeners, and curb our appetites from giving in to intemperance. For these vices are akin to blemishes that soil the purity of chastity and continence.

The Eighth Commandment

Thou shalt not steal.

The essence of this divine commandment lies in our responsibility to grant to each their rightful due, for any form of unrighteousness is repugnant in the eyes of God. Summarily put, it mandates that we must not covet another's belongings and instead emphasizes the faithful diligence required to safeguard the possessions belonging to each individual. It is essential to comprehend that the possessions acquired by each person were not merely a matter of happenstance, but a result of God's equitable allotment. Hence, to infringe upon another's possession is tantamount to defying God's just distribution. Various forms of theft exist, each bearing its distinct nature. One form embodies violence, as seen in instances where belongings are forcibly seized, akin to acts of brigandage. Another form is rooted in deceit and malevolence, wherein neighbors are deprived through falsehoods, deceit, and trickery. A more insidious form employs cunning tactics to appear righteous while covertly depriving others of their possessions. Flattery is another such means, where persuasive words allure what rightfully belongs to another, disguised as gifts or through other means.

However, to avoid dwelling overlong on the manifold facets of theft, let us briefly recognize that any means used to amass wealth at the expense of others, deviating from Christian sincerity or straying into cunning, must be deemed theft. Although these methods might yield success before human tribunals, God deems them no less than acts of theft. He perceives the snares meticulously set to ensnare the unsuspecting; He witnesses the brutal extortions wielded by those in power to oppress the vulnerable; He discerns the poisonous allure of flattery employed to deceive others. He observes all that escapes human scrutiny.

It's important to note that transgressing this precept extends beyond monetary matters—it encompasses any violation of another's rights. When we neglect our duties toward our neighbor, we are essentially depriving them of their due. Thus, should a manager, tenant farmer, or laborer, instead of faithfully safeguarding the goods entrusted to them, lead a heedless existence, wasting or misusing their entrusted responsibilities—this is a transgression. Similarly, if a servant derides or divulges the secrets of their master, schemes against their master's reputation, or unjustly exploits their master's assets, this is theft in the eyes of God. Likewise, if masters treat their household members inhumanely, this too violates this commandment. Anyone failing to fulfill their responsibilities towards others—be it a master, servant, parent, or child—is effectively withholding what is rightfully another's. Hence, obedience to this commandment necessitates contentment with our circumstances, refraining from dishonorable and unlawful pursuits; it disallows the desire to amass wealth at the cost of our neighbor's well-being; it precludes the plotting to dismantle another's fortune for personal gain; it deters the accumulation of riches through exploitation or ruthless ambition. On the contrary, obedience implies a constant endeavor to assist each other in preserving what is rightfully theirs through counsel and material support. When confronted with deceitful individuals, we ought to be prepared to forfeit our own rather than engage in a battle marked by malevolence. Furthermore, upon witnessing someone in need, we are called to share in their hardship, aiding them in their time of distress through our abundance.

In conclusion, it is paramount that each individual contemplates the obligations they owe to their neighbors in accordance with their roles and status, and fulfills those obligations accordingly. Furthermore, our focus must remain on the Lawgiver, perpetually cognizant that this command is as relevant to the body as it is to the soul. This

steadfast awareness propels us to channel our will towards nurturing and fostering the well-being and progress that benefit all humanity.

The Ninth Commandment

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

The essence of this divine precept rests in the duty to safeguard truth without pretense, for God, who embodies Truth itself, abhors falsehood. Concisely put, it instructs us to refrain from damaging anyone's reputation through slander, false tales, or undermining their belongings through deceit or falsehood. In essence, we are admonished against causing harm through malicious words or mockery. Correspondingly, the affirmative aspect of this mandate necessitates aiding others in upholding what is true, whether it pertains to safeguarding their possessions or preserving their good name. This commandment's meaning is illuminated by the words spoken by our Lord in the twenty-third chapter of Exodus: "You shall not spread a false report. You shall keep far from a false charge" (Exodus 23:1). And: "You shall not spread a false report" (Exodus 23:7). In another passage, He not only condemns the act of gossiping, detracting, and speaking ill but also cautions against deceiving others—He addresses both unequivocally (Leviticus 19:16, 11).

Undoubtedly, as the prior commandments sought to amend cruelty, indecency, and greed, this commandment similarly rebukes falsehood and deception, encapsulating the dual dimensions aforementioned. Whether we tarnish another's reputation through derogatory language or hinder their prosperity through deceitful tactics, God's intention is clear. It matters not whether one envisions solemn oaths uttered in a court of law or private conversations; all must return to the premise that God uses one instance as a

paradigm, encompassing all forms of vice. Furthermore, He selects the one where wickedness is most manifest. Nonetheless, it seems prudent to interpret this commandment more generally, for false testimony in judicial proceedings is invariably intertwined with perjury, a theme previously addressed in our discourse on the first table of the law.

To fulfill this commandment righteously, we are required to employ our words to serve our neighbors in truth, preserving their respect and material welfare alike. The rationale is clear: since a good reputation is more valuable than any wealth, diminishing someone's esteem is tantamount to robbing them of their possessions. Likewise, lying inflicts comparable harm as theft. Remarkably, despite the gravity of this matter, many are oblivious to the offense they commit. Very few remain untainted by this vice, as the world is inclined to scrutinize and unveil the flaws of others. It is ill-advised to seek refuge in the fact that we abstain from lying. The One who forbids tarnishing a neighbor's reputation through falsehood also desires the preservation of their honor to the utmost extent possible. While He strictly proscribes causing harm through lies, His prohibition implicitly underscores the importance of cherishing honor. Hence, every form of detraction is unequivocally condemned herein.

By "detraction," we do not refer to corrective admonition aimed at personal improvement or legal indictment designed to rectify wrongdoing. Nor does it encompass public reprimands that serve as warnings or the responsible sharing of information about someone's wickedness for the sake of preventing others from falling victim to deceit. Rather, it pertains to malicious insults stemming from malevolence or impulsiveness to disparage others.

Moreover, this commandment extends to the realm of jesting and jesters who derive pleasure from ridiculing and causing laughter at the expense of others. Such behavior often leaves lasting marks on the individuals targeted. Considering the Lawgiver's dominion over our ears and hearts ought to rival that over our tongues, it becomes evident that listening intently to detractors, readily embracing their accounts, and swiftly adopting negative assumptions are all equally prohibited as speaking ill. To assert that God detests verbal slander while turning a blind eye to the malevolent intent in our hearts would be a mockery. Thus, driven by our love and reverence for God, we must exert ourselves to refrain from lending our ears or tongues to accusations, derogatory remarks, or mockery. We should likewise guard against entertaining negative suspicions within our hearts. Instead, let us generously interpret the actions and words of others, preserving the dignity of each individual in every conceivable manner.

The Tenth Commandment

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house; thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his servant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's.

The essence of this divine commandment resonates with the divine intention for our souls to be wholly consumed and permeated by the essence of love and charity. Consequently, it necessitates the eradication of all desires that conflict with this noble aspiration. Succinctly put, this commandment instructs us to prohibit any thoughts that stimulate our hearts with wicked desires, ultimately leading to distress or harm for our neighbor. This correlates with the affirmative aspect of the precept: that any ideas, intentions, desires,

or pursuits we entertain should be harmoniously united with what is beneficial and virtuous for our neighbor.

However, a notable challenge arises here. If it holds true that when our Lord forbids adultery and theft, He implicitly condemns indecency and any inclination toward harm, deceit, or plunder, then the discrete prohibition of coveting another's possessions may seem redundant. Nevertheless, we can unravel this quandary by distinguishing between deliberate intent and evil desires. Here, "intent" refers to the will's deliberate resolve, where the heart succumbs to temptation. "Evil desires," on the other hand, encompass emotions or stirrings that arise without deliberate consent, merely inciting the heart toward wrongdoing.

Hence, just as the Lord enjoins our wills, designs, and actions to align with the tenets of love and charity, He likewise calls for the regulation of our thoughts. This aims to ensure that our minds are devoid of any incitement toward the contrary. Much like the previous commandments addressing anger, hatred, lust, theft, and falsehood, this commandment pertains to restraining the heart from both scheming and indulging in malevolent desires.

Moreover, it's crucial to note that the divine expectation is not unfounded. Who can deny that aligning all the faculties of our souls with love and charity is a righteous pursuit? The antithesis of this would naturally entail wickedness. Consequently, if the heart entertains harmful desires for our neighbor, it is indicative of a lack of love and charity. This lack is evident because such wicked inclinations would not find a foothold if the heart were brimming with love and charity.

An objection might arise: "Isn't it unjust to equate fleeting fancies that flit through the mind with evil desires that lodge in the heart?"

In response, it's essential to clarify that we are discussing fantasies that not only pass through the mind but also take root in the heart, thereby igniting malevolent desires. Indeed, whenever we conceive a desire or wish within our minds, the heart is invariably ignited and inflamed by it. Thus, our Lord demands an astonishing fervor of love and charity, a fervor that He refuses to allow the slightest wicked desire to tarnish. He seeks a heart meticulously governed, one that remains unprovoked by the goad of any violation against the law of love and charity. To corroborate this interpretation, I am not alone in my viewpoint; St. Augustine's insight into this precept aligns with this understanding.

While the prohibition encompasses evil desires in their entirety, God illustrates it using objects that commonly entice and deceive us. In doing so, He denies human inclinations any satisfaction when removing the allurements that most often captivate them.

To address another query: "Doesn't the Law exclusively focus on basic principles of righteousness, guiding us at the outset without necessarily leading to perfection?" This perspective contradicts the profound depth of God's intention. The Law inherently encapsulates the epitome of righteousness, serving as a beacon that guides us to emulate God's purity. Moses, in his effort to summarize the commandments for the people of Israel, underscored that fearing God, walking in His ways, serving Him with wholehearted dedication, preserving His commandments, and ultimately embodying love, encapsulates the crux of the Law's teachings (Deuteronomy 10:12–13).

The Law's true purpose revolves around realizing an immaculate righteousness that aligns human life with the divine purity. Indeed, if a person faithfully adheres to the Law's commandments, they will

manifest the divine image in their conduct. This illuminates Moses' perspective, wherein he champions the alignment of human life with God's holiness. Moreover, the fulfillment of this sanctity manifests in two core tenets: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might," followed by "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:37–39). The first entails an entire soul imbued with the love of God, which consequently leads to the love of our neighbor. This idea is echoed by the apostle Paul, who asserts that the essence of the commandments is derived from "love out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and unfeigned faith" (1 Timothy 1:5).

It becomes imperative to resolve a perceived discrepancy in Christ's and the apostles' recitations of the Law's summary. In some instances, they omit the first table. However, this omission doesn't diminish the importance of the first table, nor does it indicate that their discourse pertains solely to the second table. Rather, they address the entire Law in its totality. Notably, Christ refers to mercy, judgment, and faith when addressing works that demonstrate righteousness (Matthew 23:23). While some might interpret "faith" as "religion," the context instead signifies truth. When Christ outlines the commandments that pave the way to eternal life, the emphasis lies on actions that exemplify righteousness—indicating love's primacy as a testament to one's adherence to God's commandments (Matthew 19:18–19).

An inquisitive voice might arise, seeking to inquire: "Does the pursuit of righteousness demand a life steeped in virtuous interactions with our fellow beings take precedence over fearing and honoring God through piety?" To such inquiries, my response is resolute: No. While it holds true that living in harmony and fidelity among others is vital, the paramount importance of fearing God and

honoring Him through piety remains unchallenged. Yet, let us not misconstrue; it is of paramount importance to recognize that the manifestation of love and charity is unattainable without the foundational fear of God. The works of love and charity, in their essence, also serve as a testament to a person's piety. Additionally, let us bear in mind that since God cannot receive the goodness we offer, as evidenced by His own words through His prophet, He does not require our efforts to be directed toward Him. Rather, He directs us to extend our acts of kindness and benevolence towards our neighbors. Thus, it is neither arbitrary nor without purpose that the apostle Paul attributes the apex of faith to love and charity (Ephesians 1:4). Similarly, the apostle reminds us that love toward our neighbor encapsulates the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8), a sentiment reiterated when he summarizes the law as encapsulated in the injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself (Galatians 5:14). This resonates with the teachings of our Lord, who unequivocally states that treating others as we wish to be treated constitutes the essence of the law and the prophets (Matthew 7:12). While the law and the prophets undoubtedly underscore the significance of faith and reverence toward God's name, the commandment to extend love and charity to our neighbors is equally pivotal. However, our Lord recognizes that this commandment primarily pertains to upholding fairness and equity toward our fellow beings. In essence, it is a tangible expression of the fear of God that dwells within us. Thus, let us steadfastly embrace the notion that our lives align harmoniously with the divine will and the commandments of the law when our actions contribute positively to the lives of our brethren. Conversely, the law does not provide us with guidelines for actions that promote self-gain. As human beings are naturally inclined towards self-interest, there is no need for the law to enjoin us further in this regard. This discernment crystallizes the understanding that love for God and our neighbor, rather than self-love, constitutes the

foundation of adhering to the commandments. It becomes evident that the essence of keeping the commandments lies in our love for God and our neighbor, not our love for ourselves. Consequently, a person who places their own interests at the forefront of their endeavors is, paradoxically, living a life far from order. In contrast, the individual who refrains from self-centered pursuits is the one who has truly embraced righteous living. Moreover, our Lord, in His wisdom, elucidates the sentiment of love for our neighbor by drawing a parallel to self-love. This comparison demands our earnest contemplation. It is essential to refrain from misconstruing this comparison, as some may be inclined to do. Rather than instructing individuals to prioritize self-love and then extend that love to their neighbor, our Lord calls for the redirection of the love we naturally bear for ourselves towards others. The apostle Paul concurs with this perspective, highlighting that love is not self-centered, but rather seeks the welfare of others (1 Corinthians 13:5). It is important to dismiss the notion that the rule precedes that which is measured by it. Our Lord does not establish self-love as a superior rule that governs the application of love to our neighbor. Instead, He underscores that our love for ourselves should serve as a model, encouraging us to extend the same degree of care and benevolence to others as we naturally do to ourselves. However, in place of self-centeredness, our Lord calls us to mirror this love in our interactions with others. Furthermore, the parable of the Samaritan elucidates that the term "neighbor" encompasses even the most distant and unfamiliar individuals. Hence, the precept of love must not be confined to those with whom we share bonds of covenant or kinship. While it is undeniable that those closely connected to us warrant deeper care, the principle of humanity directs us to extend goodwill to all individuals. This principle, aligned with God's providence, reaffirms the moral duty of strengthening bonds with those in proximity or affinity. Nevertheless, our approach should transcend

restrictions, encompassing all people without distinction—Greek or non-Greek, deserving or undeserving, friends or foes. The foundation of this approach is not derived from people themselves, but from viewing them through the lens of God's divine presence within each individual. By focusing on God's perspective, we prevent misguided judgments that may obscure our capacity to love. Love in its true essence does not emanate from scrutinizing individuals but from beholding God, who commands us to extend the same love we hold for Him to our fellow beings. Thus, our devotion to righteous living hinges upon looking beyond individuals and fixating our gaze upon God, ensuring our love for them is an extension of our love for God.

At times, the teachings of scholastic doctors have perpetuated a misconceived notion, suggesting that the injunctions to abstain from revenge and to love our enemies are mere "counsels," implying optional adherence. Some suggest that only monks are beholden to these counsels due to their perceived elevated righteousness. Such assertions dismiss the weight of these commandments, claiming them to be excessively arduous even for Christians under the grace of the law. However, let us scrutinize this notion closely. Does this audacious stance render it acceptable to disregard God's eternal law, which mandates the love of one's neighbor? Are we to believe that these doctors are absolved from their audacity in diluting the divine commandment of loving one's neighbor? A careful examination of scripture refutes these notions. The commandments rigorously enjoin us to love even our enemies. This is evident in commands such as feeding our adversary when they are hungry (Proverbs 25:21), guiding their lost livestock back onto the right path (Exodus 23:4–5), and lifting their fallen burdens (Exodus 23:4–5). These commandments are not to be seen as isolated acts of kindness, detached from the love they are meant to embody. Instead, they serve as expressions of love for our enemies. Furthermore, the sacred

scripture reinforces the understanding that vengeance belongs solely to God, who will justly repay each individual according to their deeds (Deuteronomy 32:35). This sentiment is reiterated in Leviticus 19:18, where we are commanded not to seek revenge or hold grudges against our neighbors.

Inscrutable is the path of those scholastic doctors who, in their folly, have sought to efface the very essence of these sacred articles from the divine law. Are we then to believe that when our Lord proclaimed, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you, bless those who curse you, in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:44–45), His words were mere exhortations rather than unwavering precepts? Would it not be fitting to concur with the wisdom of St. John Chrysostom, who discerns the necessity of embracing these commandments as resolute directives? It is imperative to pause and reflect: What remains for us if our Lord strips us of the honor of being counted among His children? According to the bewildering assertions of these "Rabbis," only monks could potentially lay claim to the designation of God's children, for they alone, in their audacity, invoke Him as their Father. Would such reasoning not consign the entire church to a fate shared with pagans and publicans alike? For, shortly after admonishing the need to love beyond familiar circles, our Lord questions, "If you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (Matthew 5:46–47). Thus, shall we embrace the title of "Christian," yet forfeit the celestial inheritance entrusted to us? Such perspectives inadvertently proclaim the lineage of their proponents to be of the adversary rather than of divine grace, for they audaciously reject the shared yoke that binds all God's children. Indeed, it is perplexing whether to marvel more at their ignorance or their audacity in propagating these views. There is scarcely a figure among the early

church fathers who would hesitate to affirm unequivocally that these commandments are unequivocal precepts. The certainty of this understanding finds expression even in the time of St. Gregory, whose teachings unquestionably uphold the preceptive nature of these commandments.

In stark contrast, we observe the paradoxical arguments woven by these doctors. They assert that these commandments would impose an undue burden upon Christians, as if one could envision a mandate more challenging than to wholeheartedly love God with every fiber of our being. In comparison to this command, any injunction appears effortless—whether it be the command to extend love to our adversaries or to banish vengeance from our hearts. Evidently, every facet of the law, even the minutest detail, towers above us in its sublime elevation, seemingly insurmountable by human frailty. It is only through divine grace that we navigate this path with unwavering resolve, as we echo the prayer, "Grant what You command, and command what You will." When they affirm that Christians are under the law of grace, they allude not to an unregulated existence devoid of restraint. Rather, they are engrafted into Christ, by whose grace they are liberated from the curse of the law, and by whose Spirit the law is inscribed upon their hearts. In his epistle to the Romans, St. Paul, in his wisdom, characterizes this divine grace as a "law" (Romans 8:2), upholding the comparison he has drawn between the two. Yet, remarkably, these bewildered souls interpret this term "law" with a mystique it does not inherently possess. Similarly, they relegate both veiled impiety against God—contravening the first tablet of the law—and explicit breaches of the final commandment into a category termed "venial sin." This classification they define as encompassing fleeting desires without deliberate consent, desires that fleetingly traverse the heart. In stark contrast, I assert that wicked desires find entrance into the heart

only when there is a void where the law ought to reign. Forbidden are the worship of foreign gods and the betrayal of our trust in God's providence. When our souls, enticed by doubt, wander aimlessly, ensnared by uncertainty, seeking solace beyond the Divine, the seeds of temptation take root. Thus, these incursions find their origins in the barren recesses of the soul, susceptible to such snares. It follows that the command to love God with the entirety of our being remains elusive when any aspect of our soul remains untethered to this love. When adversities assail, when the onslaught of temptation challenges the purity of our commitment to God's will, it signals that the reign of God's sovereignty has yet to be firmly established within our conscience. Indeed, this aligns seamlessly with the essence of the final commandment. The presence of any wicked desire is a telltale sign of our departure from divine alignment. Consequently, we bear the weight of both wicked desires and transgressions of the law, for our Lord forbids not only the deliberate formulation of harm against our neighbor but also the mere incitement or smoldering of malevolent desires. Where transgressions against the law transpire, God's righteous wrath looms.

Let us not grant even the slightest sinful desire a reprieve from the grip of death's condemnation. Consider the import of Christ's words: "Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19). Do these dissenting voices not fall within this category when they downplay transgressions of the law as mere trifles? Are they oblivious to the magnitude of these infractions, deserving of death? Let them reflect not only on the command itself but also on the authority behind it. For is it a minor affair in their estimation when the majesty of God is besmirched? Moreover, by contravening the divine command, every act that violates the law draws forth His displeasure. Does their conviction of God's wrath fall

victim to such fragility that vengeance remains indefinitely deferred? Indeed, His intentions have been explicitly articulated, if only they would heed His voice instead of obscuring His truth with frivolous quibbles. The proclamation resounds: "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4), while the wages of sin are unequivocally death (Romans 6:23). These individuals concede that wicked desires are sinful, and yet they remain adamant in their denial of the mortal nature of these sins. If they remain entrenched in this delusion, then let the children of God depart from their midst. However, let the children of God remain steadfast in their understanding that all sin, as an affront to God's will, stands condemned, inevitably inviting His wrath. Transgression of the law precipitates eternal death without exception. The sins of the saints and the devout may be considered venial, but this leniency is an act of God's mercy, not a testament to the intrinsic nature of such transgressions.

Building upon our previous discourse concerning the role of the law in unveiling perfect righteousness, it becomes evident that adherence to the law in its entirety signifies righteousness in the presence of the Almighty. Thus, we find Moses, as he imparts the law, solemnly invoking "heaven and earth as witnesses against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing" (Deuteronomy 30:19). We must not ignore the fact that complete obedience to the law is rewarded with the gift of eternal life, a pledge from the Lord Himself. Yet, it is incumbent upon us to reflect on whether we engage in such obedience that kindles within us a semblance of assurance regarding our salvation. What purpose does it serve to apprehend that, through obedience, the promise of eternal life awaits us, if we remain uncertain whether such obedience guarantees our salvation? In this, the frailty of the law is made manifest. Our imperfections render us incapable of achieving the obedience it mandates, consequently depriving us of the promise of life eternal

and plunging us into the abyss of eternal condemnation. This assertion is not limited to a depiction of what transpires; it underscores an inevitable reality. Given that the law's teachings transcend human capacity, we may recognize the promised blessings from a distance, yet are unable to partake in their fruition. Consequently, the law yields naught but a sharper awareness of our wretchedness, extinguishing all hope of salvation and revealing the specter of death. This narrative is intensified by the stern warnings the law bears, not limited to a select few but encompassing all without exception. These stern admonishments persistently assail us, relentlessly pursuing us, painting a vivid portrait of the curse embedded within the law. Hence, when the law stands unaccompanied, our spirits inevitably waver, swaying between despondency and despair, for we are ensnared by the reality that the law casts all humanity into a state of accursedness and condemnation—no soul remains immune to exclusion from the blessings promised to those who heed the law.

Inevitably, a query arises: "Does God, perchance, find amusement in deception? Is it not an affront to dangle the hope of happiness before humanity, to beckon and implore them towards it, and yet to withhold access to its embrace?" This question compels us to engage in a deeper exploration. While the conditional nature of the law may seem to restrict the fulfillment of its promises to those who have achieved perfect righteousness (a feat insurmountable by human endeavor), its promulgation is not without purpose. As we internalize the truth that these promises, in their conditionality, remain ineffectual until God embraces us through His boundless benevolence, independent of our works, we are granted a lens through which the conditional promises gain significance. When we, by faith, receive the goodness bestowed upon us through the gospel, the promises, within their conditional framework, cease to be empty.

At this juncture, the Lord extends His benevolence with such munificence that He not only refrains from dismissing our imperfect obedience but, in His compassion, pardons its imperfections, deeming it worthy and complete. Thus, we become recipients of the fruits of the law's promises, as though the requisite conditions had been fulfilled. However, a more comprehensive explication of this theme is reserved for our subsequent discussion on justification by faith, and I shall refrain from further elaboration at present.

Our declaration that the observance of the law is unattainable warrants further elucidation and validation. Given the apparent perplexity of this assertion, it is crucial to address it, even if it has been vilified, as observed in the censure cast by St. Jerome. Our concern, however, is not with the motivations underlying his stance; our primary aim is to pursue the path of truth. Within the context of this discourse, there is no need to embark on intricate distinctions concerning the various facets of possibility. When I proclaim something as "impossible," I refer to occurrences that have never been witnessed in human history and are destined, according to divine decree, to remain unattainable. Allow me to affirm that no saint, spanning from the inception of humanity, has attained within the confines of mortal existence a love so consummate that it embraces God with the entirety of heart, soul, and strength. Likewise, it remains undeniable that no individual has escaped the blemish of sinful desires. Who, then, shall contest this reality? A vision of holiness akin to that which superstitious conjecture ascribes to saints—comparable to the celestial purity of angels—is just as incongruent with scriptural teachings as it is with empirical experience. Furthermore, we must confront the inescapable truth that attaining such perfection is an endeavor reserved solely for those liberated from their earthly confines. This assertion is buttressed by the unequivocal scriptural evidence at our disposal. As

Solomon inaugurated the temple, he proclaimed, "There is no one who does not sin" (1 Kings 8:46). In the Psalms, David asserts, "No one living is righteous before You" (Psalm 143:2). This sentiment resurfaces repeatedly in the book of Job. The apostle Paul, however, offers the most emphatic validation, affirming, "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh" (Galatians 5:17). Furthermore, he establishes, as irrefutable proof of our universal transgression, the scripture's declaration that "cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them" (Galatians 3:10). This reference unequivocally signifies that none can remain in unbroken compliance.

Within the realm of sacred scripture, every utterance bears the mark of eternity, intertwined with irrevocable necessity. It was this very subtlety that embroiled St. Augustine in controversy with the Pelagians. To counter their aspersions, he conceded that while God possesses the ability to elevate mortals to the pinnacle of angelic perfection, history reveals that such an elevation has neither occurred nor shall occur, for the Lord Himself has declared otherwise. I do not intend to dispute this notion; however, I posit that engaging in debates surrounding God's omnipotence in light of His immutable truths is an exercise in futility. Hence, I assert that if someone proclaims the impossibility of occurrences that our Lord has unequivocally affirmed as non-occurrences, such a statement holds gravitas and should not be trivialized. Yet, should we choose to scrutinize His utterance, we are confronted with the episode when Christ's disciples, seeking guidance on salvation, queried Him. His response resounds: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:25–26). St. Augustine, in his wisdom, expounds that love towards God is birthed from knowledge, a love that cannot be wholeheartedly reciprocated in this transient pilgrimage on earth, for our perception of God's goodness remains

veiled, akin to an image reflected in a mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12). Consequently, the love we profess towards Him remains inherently incomplete. Thus, it becomes an undeniable truth that fulfillment of the law eludes us in this earthly existence, as aptly expounded by St. Paul elsewhere (Romans 8:3).

In pursuing greater clarity, let us consolidate the manifold purpose and utility of the law into a concise enumeration. In my estimation, the purpose and utility of the law can be categorized into three dimensions. First and foremost, by unveiling God's righteousness—the righteousness that pleases Him—the law serves as a stern admonisher, pointing out the unrighteousness inherent within each individual, leaving no room for doubt, eventually leading to conviction and condemnation. This act of revelation is crucial, compelling those who are otherwise blind and ensnared by their self-love to recognize and acknowledge their vulnerabilities and impurities. When one remains unexposed to visible evidence of their weaknesses, they become inflated by an audacious arrogance, convinced of their strength. This deception persists as long as their self-devised measurements of strength remain untested. However, when they venture forth to execute the mandates of God's law, the difficulties encountered act as a humbling force, puncturing their pride. Any prior grandiose notions about their prowess crumble under the weight of the arduous task, causing them to falter, waver, stumble, and eventually falter entirely. Thus, the instruction provided by the law redirects one away from the overconfidence embedded in their nature.

An equally essential purpose of the law lies in its role of purging arrogance, as elucidated earlier. When one remains entrenched in their self-reliance, hypocrisy supersedes genuine righteousness. This artifice, cloaked in the veneer of self-righteousness, leads to an

inflated sense of superiority over God's grace, masked under the pretense of self-devised observances. However, as the individual subjects their life to scrutiny through the prism of God's law, the illusions crumble, and the semblance of false righteousness dissipates. In its stead, an individual discovers the chasm that separates them from true holiness, laid bare in stark contrast to their former perception of purity. Hidden and intricate, these malevolent desires cloak themselves in deception, eluding detection. The apostle, cognizant of the depth of this duplicity, avows that his comprehension of such desires arose solely from the pronouncement of the law, "You shall not covet" (Romans 7:7). Unearthed and brought to light by the law, these evil desires stand exposed, extricated from their hiding places. Left unchecked, these desires, concealed beneath a veneer of righteousness, erode an individual's soul, their existence imperceptible. Thus, the law functions as a mirror through which we encounter not only our inherent weakness but also the ensuing sin and its accompanying curse. Comparable to the reflection of our blemishes upon a mirror's surface, the law unveils our flaws. It is undeniable that one bereft of the capacity for righteousness finds themselves ensnared in the mire of sin. Consequent to sin arises its associated curse. Thus, as the law exposes greater transgressions, it concurrently magnifies the intensity of our damnation, rendering us susceptible to more profound suffering. The apostle articulates this sentiment by affirming that "through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). The first purpose of the law, as elucidated by the apostle, emerges through its effect upon unregenerated sinners, revealing a pronounced and universal transgression. These declarations echo a similar sentiment, indicating that the law functions as an instrument of death, fanning the flames of God's wrath and the specter of mortality (Romans 5:20; 4:13; 2 Corinthians 3:7). It is irrefutable that as the understanding of one's sin is

intensified through the perception awakened by the law, sin itself burgeons, as the transgression gravitates towards rebellion against the divine Lawgiver. Hence, the law stands as a sentinel of God's vengeance, positioned to eradicate the sinner, incapable of anything but condemnation, censure, and loss. In alignment with the wisdom of St. Augustine, we recognize that the law, bereft of the Spirit of grace, becomes a mechanism of censure and death.

To assert that the law's imperatives cast a shadow on its eminence is to neither undermine its worth nor diminish its glory. It is true, had our volition been rooted steadfastly in obedience to the law, mere knowledge of its teachings would suffice for our salvation. However, the reality remains that our inherently flawed and fleshly nature stands diametrically opposed to God's spiritual law. Unable to reform itself through the law's tutelage, the law—originally ordained for salvation, if embraced correctly—morphs into a conduit for sin and death. Our collective conviction as transgressors magnifies in its light; as it unveils the righteousness of God, it simultaneously lays bare our transgressions. The more it extols the reward destined for righteousness, the louder it proclaims the humiliation awaiting sinners. Thus, these proclamations are not an affront to the law; they, in truth, extol the benevolence of God. They underscore the fact that our perverseness denies us the eternal felicity the law promises. This, in turn, illumines the magnanimity of God's grace, a grace that bridges the law's shortcomings and fuels our appreciation for His unwavering mercy. It becomes evident that it is our inherent waywardness that thwarts our attainment of the eternal bliss embedded within the law. This revelation further deepens our understanding of God's grace—an abundant provision that compensates for our deficiencies within the law. Thus, we come to adore His mercy, which ceaselessly showers blessings upon us, stacking one upon the other.

The law's pronouncement of our sin and ensuing condemnation should not plunge us into despair, causing us to relinquish hope and embrace ruination. However, those who succumb to such despondency are ensnared by the stubbornness of their hearts. Yet, as God's children, our response must diverge, culminating in the insight offered by St. Paul. He readily acknowledges, "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (Romans 3:19). Moreover, he imparts another perspective, teaching us that God encompassed all in disobedience, not to consign them to ruin, but to extend His mercy to all (Romans 11:32). This revelation calls us to relinquish hollow estimation of our prowess, recognizing that our sustenance is solely dependent on His benevolence. In embracing our emptiness, stripped of all pretensions, we find solace in His mercy—a mercy manifested through Jesus Christ, attainable to those who ardently seek, believe, and yearn for it. Thus, we find refuge within its folds, sheltered by its shadow, accepting it as the sole harbinger of righteousness and merit. The law unveils the Lord primarily as the arbiter of recompense for immaculate righteousness, an attribute eluding us all. Contrarily, Christ's visage radiates grace and compassion, bestowing favor upon us sinners, unworthy as we may be.

When contemplating the instruction stemming from the law, St. Augustine's expositions resound with profound wisdom. He elucidates how the law mandates obedience, with the underlying purpose of compelling obedience, yet acknowledges human frailty and the resultant failure. This experience prompts us to earnestly seek divine intervention. He states, "The law commands so that, being impelled to obey its mandates and stumbling due to our feebleness, we might learn to implore God's assistance." Another facet of the law's utility surfaces: its role in exposing weakness and

driving individuals to seek the remedy of grace within Christ. Augustine underscores the symbiotic relationship—law commands, while grace empowers one to fulfill its commands. Indeed, the law exhorts us to demand from God what we are unable to achieve. These sentiments illuminate the first advantage of the law. Although primarily pertinent to God's children, it also extends to those beyond their fold. While the unregenerate might not experience the inner conflict that prompts spiritual strengthening within the faithful, their fear and despondency are nevertheless efficacious, spotlighting the fairness inherent in God's judgment. This confrontation with their conscience thwarts their attempts at equivocation, revealing their true standing.

The second purpose of the law addresses individuals who are inclined towards righteousness solely when coerced. Confronted with the law's stern warnings, these individuals, out of dread, shun wickedness. However, this outward constraint does not reflect an inner transformation or genuine obedience to God. Their hearts remain untouched, and their compliance, borne from coercion, is bereft of sincerity. Although external suppression prevents them from manifesting their nefarious intentions, their hearts continue to smolder with evil desires. Their obedience is born not out of reverence for God but rather as a result of the law's terror. Their righteousness, albeit enforced, is essential for societal harmony. God's wisdom foresaw the chaos that would ensue if unrestrained liberty was afforded to each individual. Thus, the law curtails those prone to wickedness, restraining them through dread and preserving societal equilibrium.

Furthermore, we mustn't disregard the value of God's children being guided by this elementary instruction, especially during their time ensnared in the folly of their flesh. A season may arise when our Lord

refrains from immediate revelation to His faithful, allowing them to traverse a period of ignorance before beckoning them. During this juncture, despite their hearts not yet being tamed or subdued, a thread of servile fear prevents them from plunging into complete moral degradation. Although their immediate gain might seem modest, this gradual acquaintance with bearing our Lord's yoke fosters familiarity. It prepares them so that, when the time of divine summons arrives, they're not wholly unfamiliar with yielding to His commandments, viewing them as novel and uncharted waters. The apostle might have alluded to this facet when he mentioned that the law isn't meant for the righteous but for the rebellious, unbelievers, sinners, the wicked, and those entangled in vices that oppose sound teaching (1 Timothy 1:9-10). He thereby signifies that the law operates as a bridle, reigning in the unruly desires of the flesh which, left unchecked, would flow immoderately.

The law's third purpose, inherently pivotal and aligning with its original intent, emerges among the faithful. Those within whom God's Spirit has already established His dominion and might find themselves doubly enriched by the law. Although the law is etched within their hearts by the Holy Spirit's guidance, cultivating an innate inclination for obedience, it continues to offer manifold benefits. Serving as a precious instrument, it enhances their understanding and certainty regarding God's will, a will fervently pursued. Akin to a servant aspiring to serve his master proficiently, these believers are earnestly determined to please God in every way. Yet, they need to be intimately acquainted with His habits and character to harmonize with them. None should consider themselves exempt from this necessity, for none possess such consummate wisdom that they cease to progress day by day or enhance their grasp of God's will through the law's daily teachings.

The law offers more than mere instruction; it extends exhortation, goading God's servants into obedience and fortifying them against sin. While the saints are resolute in their commitment to righteousness, the inertia and weight of their earthly forms often hinder them from fulfilling their duty entirely. The law functions as a whip that spurs them to action—an essential driving force, analogous to a donkey that moves forward only when prodded from behind. To put it plainly, as spiritual beings, they remain encumbered by the weight of their flesh, necessitating the law's persistent prodding to thwart lethargy or indifference. This spiritual paradigm is evocative of David's praise for God's law, wherein he extols, "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7). This sentiment mirrors David's assertion, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105), a sentiment further echoed throughout the same psalm. St. Paul's cited declarations don't oppose this notion; instead, they elucidate the law's capacity to individuals. Conversely, the prophet underscores the value of God's instruction through the law, attuning hearts to its guidance.

In their limited discernment, some dismiss Moses, misconstruing the law's worthiness due to its association with the administration of death. We must reject this fallacy outright. Moses elucidates that despite the law inherently causing death in the sinner, it wields a distinct usefulness and benefit for the faithful. A nearness to death drives Moses to proclaim before the people, "Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe—all the words of this law. For it is not a futile thing for you, because it is your life" (Deuteronomy 32:46-47). To deny the law's significance based on its potential for engendering death is unwise. If we accept this, we would either relinquish the necessity of a righteous living rule or,

alternatively, embrace the law as the sole permanent, immutable standard. Hence, when David emphasizes that "the righteous man meditates in [God's] law day and night" (Psalm 1:2), it isn't confined to a particular epoch but resonates across generations, enduring until the world's end.

It's not to be met with surprise that the law demands a holiness more profound than attainable within our bodily confines. This shouldn't prompt us to forsake its teachings. When enveloped by God's grace, the law doesn't wield its rigor to the extreme, pressuring us into fulfilling its every facet. Instead, it propels us towards the perfection it beckons us to strive for, painting the target we must diligently approach in our lifelong pursuit. This ongoing journey through life mirrors a race, and as we traverse its course, the Lord grants us the promise of reaching the coveted destination—a goal we strive towards despite the distance that separates us from it.

The law serves the faithful as an exhortation. It doesn't shackle their conscience with curses; rather, it rouses them from idleness by reprimanding and chastising their imperfections. Consequently, some suggest that the law is abolished and void for the faithful, attributing this release from its curse. Not that it fails to perpetually champion goodness and holiness, but for them, its role transforms. It ceases to confound their conscience with the specter of deathly fear. This abrogation of the law is evident from St. Paul's teachings and even Jesus Christ Himself, who staunchly denies any intention to dismantle or dissolve the law (Matthew 5:17). The notion of abrogation wasn't borne out of thin air; it likely sprang forth from misconstrued interpretations of His teachings—after all, errors often spring from misconceptions of the truth. To escape this misconception, it's crucial to distinguish between what aspects of the law are abolished and what remains steadfast.

When Jesus declares that He has come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it, asserting that not even a single letter shall pass away until all is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-18), He underscores that His advent doesn't diminish reverence for or obedience to the law. This is sensible, as His mission entails providing a remedy for transgressions against the law. Thus, the law's teaching is neither violated nor diluted by Jesus Christ's arrival. It continues to guide us toward virtuous endeavors—teaching, encouraging, reproof, and chastising as needed. St. Paul's mention of the curse doesn't pertain to the law's teaching role, but rather its function to restrain consciences and keep them captive. Inherently, the law doesn't merely instruct; it vigorously mandates compliance with its directives. Should one fall short, even marginally, the law swiftly pronounces the severe verdict of a curse. The apostle then asserts that "all who are of the works of the law are under the curse" (Galatians 3:10). He further contends that those who don't establish righteousness through remission of sins are confined under the law's strictness. To avert a miserable captivity, one must break free from these constraints. But what constraints are these? They're the strict requirements that relentlessly pursue us through the law's relentless gaze, leaving no sin unscathed. To redeem us from this dire curse, Christ became cursed for us, as indicated: "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). St. Paul, in the subsequent chapter, attests that Christ subjected Himself to the law to redeem those enslaved by it. Simultaneously, he adds, "that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Romans 4:4-5). What does this signify? It signifies liberation from the captivity that ensnares our consciences in the bonds of death. However, the law's authority remains steadfast eternally. Hence, we should continue to greet it with the same reverence and honor.

In the Epistle to the Colossians, a certain passage poses a tad more complexity: "And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Colossians 2:13-14). Here, it appears as though the apostle broadens the scope of abrogation, suggesting that the law's decrees hold no relevance for us. Some assert this applies solely to the moral law, contending that its stringent severity has dissipated, not its teachings. Others, upon closer examination of St. Paul's words, discern that this pertains specifically to the ceremonial law. It's noted that St. Paul often employed the term "decrees" when referring to this facet of the law. As he tells the Ephesians, "For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances" (Ephesians 2:14-15). There's little doubt this encompasses ceremonial elements. He clarifies that this law acted as a barrier, segregating Jews from Gentiles. While the second interpretation refines the first, there still appears to be a lingering incompleteness in elucidating the apostle's proclamation.

I firmly discourage amalgamating these two passages, as they differ in essence. Regarding the passage in Ephesians, its import is thus: To unequivocally validate their acceptance into the Israelite community, St. Paul informs them that the impediment separating them had been eradicated—the ceremonies. The rituals that Jews employed for consecration and offerings to God had isolated them from the gentiles. However, in Colossians, a deeper enigma is at play. This letter addresses the misguided persistence of Christian adherence to Mosaic customs—ceremonies that individuals sought to enforce. Like

the situation dealt with in Galatians, St. Paul expounds further and traces the origins of this contention. If one scrutinizes these ceremonies merely from the lens of necessity, why then does he designate them as "decrees," "mandates etched in stone," and antagonistic to us? Why would he emphasize the abrogation and nullification of these almost entirely pivotal aspects of our salvation? Evidently, we must dig deeper into this matter beyond the veneer of external rituals.

My trust lies in having gleaned the authentic comprehension, provided you concede the truth encapsulated in St. Augustine's words in certain passages. St. Augustine avows that in Jewish ceremonies, confession of sin was paramount, rather than purification. What was the essence of their sacrifices if not a declaration of deserving death, by replacing their lives with the animals offered? Their ritual ablutions were akin to admissions of impurity and contamination. Through these acts, they acknowledged the debt of their blemishes and wrongdoings, yet the debt wasn't settled through this confession. Hence, the apostle claims that redemption from sins occurred through Christ's death, as sins persisted during the Old Testament era, unremoved (Hebrews 9:12, 10:11ff). It is apt, therefore, that St. Paul labels these ceremonies as charges against those who observed them, for these ceremonies indicated and attested to their condemnation. This doesn't conflict with the reality that the forefathers of the Old Testament shared in the same grace as us. Their participation in grace was facilitated by Christ, not the ceremonies that St. Paul, in this context, distinguishes from Christ, for these rites veiled His glory after the revelation of the gospel. In essence, ceremonies, when viewed intrinsically, are aptly referred to as markers against salvation, as they serve as authoritative tools to compel consciences into acknowledging their transgressions. Hence, as the deceivers aimed to corral the Christian

community into adhering to these rites, St. Paul explores their origin, cautioning the Colossians about the peril that would ensue if they succumbed (Colossians 2:16-23). By yielding, they would be stripped of Christ's grace, as His all-encompassing purification, achieved through His death, nullified these external practices, which had hitherto acknowledged their indebtedness to God, an indebtedness they were unable to absolve.

CHAPTER FOUR

Of Faith, Where the Apostles' Creed Is Explained

From the foregoing chapter, the Lord's expectations enshrined in His law are now clear. Should the minutest aspect escape our grasp, He unveils His anger and the dread verdict of eternal demise. Additionally, we have unveiled that adhering to the law, beyond humans' grasp, presents an insurmountable challenge. Consequently, a glimpse inward reveals a bleak panorama, bereft of hope, and an ominous portent of death's clutches, a poignant exile from the divine embrace. Subsequently, we've ascertained that a singular path emerges to evade this abyss—an avenue paved by divine mercy, yet contingent on firm faith embraced with unwavering hope.

Amidst this exploration, the nature of requisite faith beckons explanation—the faith serving as the vessel through which God's chosen heirs step into the heavenly kingdom. The prevalent misconception ensnaring many, where 'faith' merely signifies the acquiescence to gospel narratives, demands rectification. The roots of this misapprehension intertwine with the sophists and Sorbonnists who, through murky definitions, attenuate the potency of faith. Perniciously, they weave a web of "formed" and "unformed" faith, conferring the appellation 'faith' to a vacuous opinion, devoid of divine reverence and piety. Scripture unequivocally repudiates this notion. While I refrain from a direct assault on their definitions, I wish to elucidate faith's essence as illuminated by the divine discourse. Such illumination underscores their empty prattle.

This distinction is naught but hollow verbiage. While pedagogically useful in discerning the knowledge of God possessed by the ungodly, the sole faith acknowledged is the singular faith echoed by St. Paul, cherished by God's progeny.

In our quest for a profound understanding of faith, it becomes evident that not every word of God securely anchors the human heart in faith. Hence, we must endeavor to uncover the focal point of faith within God's word. While God's voice pronounced, "You shall die" to Adam [Genesis 2:17], and announced, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" to Cain [Genesis 4:10], these declarations, rather than fortifying faith, prove liable to erode it. We concede that faith indeed obliges us to embrace God's truth whenever He speaks, irrespective of His message or manner. However, our current exploration revolves around identifying the bedrock within God's word upon which faith can stand and rest. Should our conscience perceive solely disdain and retribution, terror inevitably takes hold. Consequently, if dread of God consumes the conscience, how can it not flee? Faith, conversely, should draw us toward God, not propel us away from Him. It's evident that our current definition is incomplete, for it's insufficient to merely comprehend God's every volition as faith. Consider the possibility of substituting "benevolence" or "mercy" for "will"; this might offer a closer alignment with the essence of faith. Our inclination to seek God grows once we grasp that our well-being rests in Him. This revelation is encapsulated in His assurance of caring for our salvation. Thus, the bedrock of faith is founded on the promise of His grace—a testimony that He is our Father, favoring us, and upon which the human heart can confidently repose.

Furthermore, the significance of apprehending God's benevolence is realized when faith prompts us to find solace within that

benevolence. To achieve this, knowledge tinged with doubt must be cast aside, for true faith flourishes in unwavering conviction, untroubled by vacillation. Human understanding, shrouded in darkness, remains incapable of fully comprehending God's will. The heart, accustomed to wavering doubt, craves confirmation to rest in faith's persuasion. Hence, both human understanding and the heart necessitate external illumination and affirmation for God's word to resonate fully within us. Now, a comprehensive definition of faith emerges—firm and unwavering knowledge of God's benevolent will toward us. This knowledge, grounded in the promise freely bestowed through Jesus Christ, is unveiled to our intellect and imprinted upon our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

With meticulous scrutiny, let's dissect each word. Upon this thorough examination, I'm confident that any lingering difficulties shall dissolve. When faith is characterized as the "knowledge of God's will," we are not referring to sensory comprehension. Faith transcends human senses, demanding the spirit to ascend beyond itself for its acquisition. Even after this ascent, faith does not achieve a comprehensive grasp. Instead, it thrives in unwavering conviction, comprehending more through the certainty of persuasion than it could via human understanding. St. Paul's words resound with wisdom: he urges us to comprehend the boundless dimensions of Christ's love, surpassing earthly comprehension (Ephesians 3:18–19). This elucidates that faith's grasp of an infinite God is accompanied by infinite certainty, surpassing mere understanding. Correspondingly, St. John labels faith as knowledge, affirming believers' unassailable awareness of their status as God's offspring (1 John 3:1). Thus, while certainty prevails, faith is nurtured through unwavering assurance rather than empirical human proofs.

St. Paul further accentuates this disparity. He underscores our earthly pilgrimage, distinct from God, as we navigate guided by faith rather than sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). This underscores that faith thrives amidst realms invisible to the naked eye, beyond our visual perception. Hence, faith's essence resides not merely in comprehension but more significantly in unwavering certainty.

Let us emphasize that this knowledge is not just firm, but "certain and unwavering," underscoring its unshakeable nature. Faith shuns the realm of doubtful and fleeting opinions, seeking instead a resolute and steadfast assurance akin to the confidence we hold in well-tested and understood matters. Some individuals perceive God's mercy with limited consolation, plagued by doubt whether it extends to them. This skepticism constrains their view of God's abundant mercy, causing anxious distress. They acknowledge God's vast mercy showered upon many, yet falter to believe it embraces them or that they can reach it. With this midway perspective, inner peace and confidence elude them, overshadowed by doubt and apprehension. On the contrary, scriptural faith intertwines assurance and confidence, igniting trust in God's goodness. The Apostle draws courage from faith, invoking boldness through confidence, affirming that "through Christ and our faith in him we can now come fearlessly into God's presence" (Ephesians 3:12). Such is the alignment between faith and confidence that the term "faith" often echoes "confidence."

At the heart of faith resides a pivotal truth: the promises of mercy God extends are not merely external verities, but they are to be internalized within our hearts, becoming personal realities. This intimate embrace leads to the confidence that Paul elsewhere terms "peace" (Romans 5:1), possibly an offshoot of confidence. This peace is a haven, comforting and joyous, granting respite to the conscience

amidst God's impending judgment. Without this peace, the conscience writhes in turmoil, seeking temporary escape by veering towards forgetfulness. Yet this fleeting respite is short-lived, as God's judgment resurfaces in memory.

In summation, authentic faith is characterized by the unwavering conviction that God, a benevolent Father, bears a goodwill toward us. This faith propels us to anticipate all blessings from His abundant kindness. Anchored upon God's promises of goodwill, unwavering expectation of salvation takes root (Romans 8:38–39). The Apostle emphasizes this by stating, "if we continue to the end, confident of hope" (Hebrews 3:6). In this declaration, he affirms that genuine hope in God empowers one to boldly proclaim heirship to the heavenly realm. This fact remains unaltered: those of true faith, fortified by the assurance of salvation, fearlessly defy the devil and death, as elucidated in the Apostle's conclusion to the Romans. "I am convinced," he declares, "that nothing can ever separate us from God's love" (Romans 8:38–39). Consequently, he asserts that the eyes of our understanding aren't truly enlightened unless we fixate upon the hope of the eternal inheritance to which we are called (Ephesians 1:18). This theme resonates consistently: the true depth of God's benevolence surfaces when accompanied by unwavering assurance.

A potential objection arises: "Yet the faithful often experience quite the opposite, battling not just the usual doubts, but facing extreme fright due to vehement temptations." This discrepancy appears at odds with the faith's unwavering certainty discussed earlier. To preserve the integrity of the preceding discourse, let's unravel this quandary. When we speak of faith's certainty and assurance, it isn't a certainty untouched by doubt or a security devoid of worry. Instead, we acknowledge that the faithful wage a continuous struggle against

their own doubts. Their conscience is far from a tranquil sanctuary undisturbed by tempests. However, amid these conflicts, they never relinquish the resolute confidence they initially embraced in God's mercy. To fathom this better, we must revisit the dichotomy between Spirit and flesh. This separation endows the faithful with a dynamic struggle: they find themselves simultaneously uplifted by the knowledge of God's goodness and downtrodden by the weight of their own imperfections. This dichotomy plays out within their hearts—the joy of God's promise coexisting with the bitterness of human frailty; the peace of the gospel contrasted with the trembling sight of sin; the embrace of life intertwined with the fear of death. This tumult arises due to the inherent imperfection of faith, as earthly existence never fully realizes the ideal state where absolute confidence eradicates all doubt. Consequently, this ongoing battle emerges as the flesh, tainted with doubt, contends with and seeks to undermine the firm foundation of faith.

In response, someone might inquire: "If doubt intertwines with certainty within the faithful heart, are we not led back to the assertion that faith is neither certain nor clear, but rather mired in obscurity and confusion?" To this, I answer resolutely: No. While diverse reflections may tug us in different directions, the presence of doubt does not equate to a severance from faith. Being subject to bouts of disbelief doesn't plunge us into the abyss of unbelief. Undermined by uncertainty doesn't imply stumbling into a pit of despair. The culmination of this spiritual warfare consistently demonstrates faith's triumphant conquest over the adversities that seem to threaten its very existence. In essence, the slightest trace of faith sparks a journey where God's kindness and favor become evident. While this perception may be distant, it's an indubitable sight, dispelling any deception. As we progress, growing in wisdom, we draw closer to God's countenance, gaining a surer view. This

advancing proximity deepens our intimacy with this knowledge. As the illumination of God's knowledge dawns, ignorance's shroud gradually dissipates. Yet, ignorance doesn't hinder our grasp of God's will, nor does obscured perception dilute our understanding. This marks the core and foundation of faith.

It resembles a scenario where someone confined in a sunless prison glimpses the sun's radiance through a narrow window, casting an oblique and partial illumination. Although the view is not unhindered and unobstructed, even such limited brightness suffices to guide and serve. Similarly, while we dwell within the confines of our earthly vessel, ensnared in shadowy obscurities, the tiniest flicker of God's light unveiling His mercy offers ample illumination for firm conviction. The Apostle, too, addresses these aspects, unveiling divine wisdom's limited portion granted to us in this temporal existence. Yet, in another instance, he emphasizes the resolute assurance intrinsic to even the smallest droplet of faith. He attests that through the gospel, we behold God's glory unmasked, undergoing a transformation into His image (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Amid such obscurity, uncertainties, and ignorance, myriad misgivings and apprehensions may arise—especially considering our proclivity for disbelief. Additionally, various temptations exert their influence, launching sporadic assaults. Chiefly, the conscience grapples with the weight of sin, alternating between self-reproach and silent lamentation, occasionally convulsing with inner torment. Hence, whether adversity seems to signal God's displeasure or the conscience finds reasons for self-critique, these instances become ammunition for doubt to wage war against faith. The adversary's intent: to paint God as an opponent, fueling fear rather than hope, and inciting a perception of God as a mortal adversary.

In this battle, faith arms itself with the shield of God's Word. When assailed by the notion that God stands as an antagonist due to affliction, faith counteracts with the defense that even in suffering, God's mercy prevails, inflicting love rather than wrath. Confronted by the reflection of God as a just judge punishing transgressions, faith raises the shield of mercy, ready to pardon upon a sinner's return. Thus, the faithful soul, though tormented, eventually surmounts these trials. Its confidence in God's mercy remains unyielding and steadfast, metamorphosing doubts into an even greater assurance of this trust. Saints throughout history reflect this phenomenon. Even when confronted by God's chastisement, their laments are directed toward Him. When it appears they may not be heard, they still cry out. After all, why lament to One from whom they expect no succor? How could they implore if they didn't anticipate aid? This exemplifies how disciples, rebuked by Jesus for their wavering faith, still beseeched His assistance (Matthew 8:25–26). We reiterate the earlier assertion: faith's root never fully withers from the faithful heart. Despite potential erosion, its luminance endures, always kindling a spark. Job encapsulates this when he vows to trust God, even if He takes his life (Job 13:15). Therefore, the saints are never on firmer grounds for despair than when they sense God's hand poised to confound them, based on their current perception.

There exists a distinct type of fear and trembling that not only upholds the certainty of faith but also reinforces it. This occurs when the faithful perceive the divine punishments meted out to the wicked as instructive lessons. These serve to deter them from provoking God's wrath through similar transgressions, thus fostering vigilant avoidance of evil. Furthermore, they recognize their own frailty and learn to rely utterly on God, realizing that without Him, they're more fragile and transient than a mere gust of wind. The Apostle, after

recounting God's punitive actions against the Israelites, invokes a sense of trepidation among the Corinthians, urging them to steer clear of repeating the same errors (1 Corinthians 10:6ff). This isn't intended to erode their confidence but rather awaken them from complacency, which tends to smother faith rather than bolster it. Similarly, he draws wisdom from the Jews' downfall to admonish the steadfast, guiding them to guard against stumbling (Romans 11:17ff). This isn't meant to sow doubt in their resolution, but rather to shatter arrogance and misguided self-reliance, preventing us—gentiles—from disparaging the Jews, whose place we've inherited. Moreover, when he advises us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), he isn't demanding uncertainty but instead encourages us to root ourselves in the power of our Lord while maintaining profound humility.

Indeed, nothing solidifies our faith in God's certainty and confidence as profoundly as acknowledging our own deficiencies and recognizing the extent of our wretchedness. This recognition doesn't breed despair but instead underscores our need for God. In this vein, let's reflect on the words of the prophet: "But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you" (Psalm 5:7). Here, the psalmist aptly intertwines the unwavering trust stemming from God's mercy with a sense of holy reverence and trembling before His majesty. (Through the radiance of His majesty, we discern our own defilement.) Similarly, Solomon's wisdom resounds: "Blessed is the one who fears the LORD always, but whoever hardens his heart will fall into calamity" (Proverbs 28:14). This fear begets heightened caution and wisdom, rather than despair. It's a fear that, in moments of self-doubt, seeks solace in God; when disheartened, it finds restoration in Him; when lacking confidence, it finds rest in the hope we have in Him. Thus, the faithful can experience fear and trembling

while simultaneously embracing profound consolation. They ponder their insignificance on one hand and God's unchanging truth on the other.

Scripture attributes the fear of God to the faithful consistently. This fear is sometimes called the starting point of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Psalm 111:10), and at other times, wisdom itself (Proverbs 15:33; 29:15). It's a singular fear, arising from two distinct sentiments. God demands both the reverence due a Father and the respect owed a Master. Consequently, those who genuinely wish to honor God endeavor to approach Him as dutiful children and willing servants. The obedience rendered to Him as Father, He designates as "honor"; the service offered as Master, He names "fear." "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear?" He admonishes (Malachi 1:6). While He distinguishes these aspects, He initially groups them under the umbrella of "honor." Thus, the fear of God for us encompasses both reverence and fear—a blend of both. It's unsurprising that the same heart experiences both these sentiments. Certainly, considering the kind of Father God is to us yields a compelling incentive to avoid offending Him, surpassing even the fear of death, let alone the threat of hell. Conversely, given our fleshly inclination toward wrongdoing, we must remind ourselves that the Lord abhors all transgression. Those who disregard this truth invoke His wrath and must not evade His just retribution.

When St. John asserts, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18), he doesn't contradict the above. He speaks of the trembling associated with unbelief, distinct from the fear of the faithful. The ungodly don't fear God because they're concerned about displeasing Him; rather, they dread His ability to punish and

shudder at the mere mention of His wrath. Their fear is compounded by its immediacy; they anticipate its impending descent to crush them. In contrast, as previously stated, the faithful's primary apprehension is offending God, not punishment. They're not paralyzed by fear as if hell were imminent; rather, they exercise caution to avert peril. The Apostle addresses the faithful, urging them not to be deceived, as God's wrath befalls rebellious children (Ephesians 5:6). He's not prophesying the onset of God's wrath but warning them that such retribution awaits the wicked due to their sins. This admonition ensures that the faithful don't emulate the wicked and thus meet a similar fate.

Another pivotal aspect under the purview of "God's benevolence" is the attainment of salvation and eternal life. When God's favor rests upon us, we lack nothing to affirm our assurance of salvation. It suffices that God's countenance shines upon us, as the prophet proclaims, "Let your face shine, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:3). In this vein, the summary of our salvation encapsulates this reality: "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:14). This underscores that once reconciled with God, the threats looming over us cease to jeopardize our well-being. Thus, faith encompasses not only the promises for the present and future but also unwavering assurance of all the blessings the gospel heralds.

Yet, faith doesn't assure us of long years, grand accolades, or abundant wealth in this temporal existence, for these are not the divine guarantees. Instead, it rests content in the knowledge that, even amidst life's myriad challenges, God will never forsake us. The bedrock of faith is rooted in the anticipation of the life to come—this is where God's word leaves no room for uncertainty. Regardless of the hardships and distress that might befall those embraced by the

Lord's love, His benevolence remains the source of their profound happiness. Hence, when encapsulating blessedness, we evoke God's grace, the font from which all blessings flow. This theme resonates throughout scripture, which frequently underscores God's love/charity when referencing eternal salvation or any form of goodness. David aptly attests that when the faithful bask in God's goodness, it eclipses all desires and surpasses any life's sweetness (Psalm 63:3).

The bedrock of faith is firmly anchored in "the gracious promise," as faith finds its secure footing on this very promise. Although faith acknowledges God's truthfulness across all spheres—be it commandments, promises, or warnings—it truly commences with the promise, gravitating toward it and making it the focus. Faith derives its sustenance from the promise of mercy, which is inherently gratuitous. Conditional promises, on the other hand, hinge on our works and are devoid of life unless we find it within ourselves. To ensure unwavering and steadfast faith, we must rely upon a promise of salvation—one that the Lord offers freely out of compassion, considering our wretchedness above our merit.

For this reason, the Apostle attributes this role primarily to the gospel, which he aptly dubs "the word of faith" (Romans 10:8). This distinction isn't extended to the commandments or promises of the law, as only this divine proclamation, a testament of God's kindness, can bolster faith. This Gospel is the ministry of reconciliation that God employs to draw humanity back to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:18). Thus, it stands as the most compelling testimony of God's benevolence and serves as a prerequisite for faith. Consequently, when affirming that faith must rest upon free promises, we don't disregard the faithful's acceptance and reverence for God's entire Word. Instead, we highlight the promise of mercy as faith's true

objective. While the faithful certainly acknowledge God as a Judge and Punisher of transgressions, their focus remains on His mercy—His kindness, compassion, patience, goodness, generosity, and love, extended to all His creation (Psalm 86:5, 15; 103:8; 145:8–9).

Furthermore, our emphasis on encompassing all promises in Christ isn't arbitrary, as the Apostle encapsulates the entire Gospel in the knowledge of Christ (Romans 1:17). In another instance, he affirms that all of God's promises find their affirmation and fulfillment in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20), ratifying them. This is easily understood: when God promises goodness, He simultaneously bears witness to His benevolence, rendering every promise a testament to His love. This doesn't conflict with the fact that the wicked may benefit from God's hand while simultaneously incurring His stern judgment. Their lack of recognition or reflection upon the origin of their blessings prevents them from truly understanding God's goodness. In contrast, the faithful, when turning away from promises directed toward them, ultimately store up harsher punishment for themselves.

Although it is through our acceptance of promises that their efficacy becomes evident, their veracity and essence remain undiminished, impervious to our unbelief or ingratitude. Consequently, when the Lord extends His promises, inviting us not only to partake in the fruits of His goodness but also to ponder and honor them, His affection for us is unveiled. We must, therefore, reiterate this truth: every promise is a testament to God's love toward us. It's beyond doubt that God's love is encapsulated in Christ alone, for He is the cherished Son upon whom the Father's affection rests (Matthew 17:5). Thus, this love must reach us through Him. Therefore, the Apostle rightly dubs Christ as "our peace" (Ephesians 2:14) and portrays Him as the conduit that bridges the Father's will to us

(Romans 8:3). Hence, whenever a promise is extended, we must perceive it in the light of Christ; Paul's assertion that all God's promises are ratified and realized in Christ is not an erroneous statement.

This straightforward declaration within God's word should suffice to instill faith in us, were it not for our spiritual blindness and obstinacy. Our human spirit, inclined toward vanity, can scarcely grasp the profundity of God's truth. It remains befuddled, unable to fathom His divine radiance. Thus, the bare word alone offers little benefit without the Holy Spirit's enlightenment—a poignant reminder that faith transcends human comprehension. Simultaneously, merely illuminating the understanding with God's Spirit falls short unless the heart, too, is fortified by His power. It's a great folly, propagated by certain theologians, to reduce faith to a mere agreement with God's word, one limited to understanding and devoid of heart's confidence and assurance. Faith is indeed a unique gift bestowed by God in two aspects: firstly, through the illumination of human understanding to comprehend God's truth, and secondly, by fortifying the heart in that truth. The assertion that no one can believe in Christ except through divine bestowal is perceived as odd by the world. This occurs partly because the profound nature of heavenly wisdom is underestimated, coupled with a disregard for human ignorance and fragility when grappling with God's mysteries. It is also due to the oversight of the central role of heart's steadfastness within faith. Nonetheless, this error can be surmounted. Just as Paul stipulates that a person's spirit is necessary to testify to their own will, the same principle applies to us understanding God's will (1 Corinthians 2:11). Moreover, when God's truth remains questionable even in matters directly perceived by the senses, how can it be unwavering and indubitable when the Lord pledges unseen and incomprehensible things?

In this arena, human wisdom proves inadequate and blinds us. The first stride towards reaping benefits in the Lord's school is renouncing this human wisdom. It acts as a veil that obstructs our grasp of God's mysteries, which only become accessible to the humble (Matthew 11:25; Luke 10:21). Flesh and blood are incapable of revealing them; the natural person is inept at grasping spiritual matters (Matthew 16:17). Conversely, God's instruction appears absurd to them, as it can only be comprehended spiritually (1 Corinthians 2:10ff). Thus, the Holy Spirit's guidance is paramount, and His power reigns supreme in this realm. No human being has fully comprehended God's secrets, nor served as His counselor. It is the Spirit that enables us to discern even hidden truths, illuminating our understanding. As Jesus Himself elucidates, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father" (John 6:44–46).

Since we can't approach Christ unless we are drawn by the Spirit, the moment of being drawn catapults us above our comprehension. When the soul, illuminated by the Spirit, obtains a new perspective to perceive heavenly truths, the radiance that once dazzled our souls becomes accessible. Through the light of the Holy Spirit, the human understanding gains a taste for the mysteries pertaining to God's kingdom—mysteries that formerly eluded its grasp. This mirrors our Lord Jesus Christ's experience: while He indeed reveals the kingdom's mysteries to the two disciples mentioned by Luke, their understanding remains incomplete until their senses are unveiled to comprehend the scriptures (Luke 24:27). After the apostles received divine instruction, the Spirit of truth was still necessary, infusing their understanding with a deeper insight into the teachings they had

previously heard (John 16:13). God's word, akin to the sun, shines upon all to whom it is proclaimed. Yet, it is ineffective among those blind to its brilliance. As we are inherently blind to these spiritual truths, their penetration necessitates the illumination of God's Spirit—the inward Master guiding our understanding.

Ultimately, it's essential that the understanding's acquisition is enshrined in the heart. If God's word merely hovers in the mind, it hasn't been embraced by faith. True reception occurs when it takes root in the heart's depths, serving as an impregnable fortress against the onslaught of temptations. Since understanding illuminated by God's Spirit constitutes true enlightenment, His power is even more evident in fortifying the heart. The heart's lack of confidence surpasses the mind's blindness, and bolstering the heart's assurance proves more challenging than instructing the understanding. Herein lies the purpose of the Holy Spirit as a seal—a seal to inscribe the same promises in our hearts that He first engraved on our understanding, and as a guarantee to affirm and validate them. The apostle succinctly states, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:13–14). This vividly portrays how the Holy Spirit marks the hearts of the faithful with a seal, infusing them with confidence, and aptly labeling Him the Spirit of promise for His role in quelling any doubts surrounding the gospel. Similarly, to the Corinthians, Paul remarks, "But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (2 Corinthians 1:22). In another instance, he attributes the foundation of our hope's confidence and boldness to the Spirit's assurance (2 Corinthians 5:5).

One cannot help but recognize the dangerous implications of the theologians' and sophists' teachings—a toxic doctrine asserting that we can only possess a conjectural understanding of God's grace, based on our own perceived worthiness of it. Should we attempt to gauge God's affection for us through our works, it must be acknowledged that comprehending even the slightest inkling of His grace proves insurmountable. Yet, since faith ought to align with God's unadulterated and gratuitous promise, any room for doubt is obliterated. How will we stand firm against the devil's schemes if we believe that God's favor hinges solely on our merit? However, as we have reserved a dedicated chapter to address this matter, we'll defer its exploration. For the time being, it's evident that conjecture and similar sentiments of uncertainty are diametrically opposed to faith. To bolster their erroneous stance, the sophists frequently misrepresent a passage from Ecclesiastes: "No one can know if he deserves hate or love" (Ecclesiastes 9:1). Yet, it's crucial to emphasize that this statement has been inaccurately translated in the common version. Even young minds can discern that Solomon's intention is to underscore the futility of estimating, based on present circumstances, who God loves or despises. Prosperity and adversity befall the righteous and the wicked alike, those who serve God and those who disregard Him. This observation leads to the conclusion that God's love or hatred is not always manifested in current events. Solomon employs this to expose the shortcomings of human comprehension, highlighting its inherent limitation in comprehending fundamental truths. This echoes his prior remark, asserting that people often fail to distinguish between the fate of human souls and animals, a deficiency resulting from their inability to perceive the distinction. Should we deduce from this that our belief in the immortality of souls rests solely on conjecture? Would it not be deemed absurd? Consequently, is it not equally preposterous for these sophists to argue that human certainty regarding God's

grace is unattainable, as it eludes the discernment of transient events?

The sophists contend that claiming an infallible knowledge of the divine will is rash presumption. I would concede this point, had we been audacious enough to subject God's incomprehensible wisdom to the confines of our limited understanding. Yet, when we simply echo St. Paul's assertion that we have received a Spirit who transcends worldly realms and originates from God, a Spirit through whom we apprehend the goodness bestowed upon us (1 Corinthians 2:12), what grounds do they possess to object without affronting the Holy Spirit? If deeming a revelation from the Spirit as false, uncertain, or ambiguous amounts to a grievous sacrilege, then how can we be faulted for affirming the certainty of His revelations to us?

The sophists might retort that our bold proclamation of the Spirit of Christ is an act of audacity, revealing their immense folly. To envision those who aspire to be the educators of the world displaying such ignorance in the foundational tenets of Christianity is astonishing. Their stance becomes evident through their writings. St. Paul asserts that only those led by the Spirit are truly children of God (Romans 8:14). Contrarily, the sophists advocate that God's children are guided by their own spirits, devoid of God's Spirit. St. Paul teaches that unless the Spirit, who exclusively testifies to our souls that we are children of God, imparts this designation to us, we cannot claim God as our Father (Romans 8:16). Although the sophists do not prohibit invoking God's name, they effectively deprive us of the Spirit, the guide through whom we should approach Him. St. Paul declares that one who isn't led by the Spirit of Christ cannot be considered His servant. Despite this, the sophists formulate a new version of Christianity, entirely detached from the Spirit of Christ. St. Paul provides no assurance of the blessed

resurrection unless we sense the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, while the sophists construct a hope devoid of such spiritual connection.

Perhaps the sophists might assert that they do not deny the Holy Spirit's necessity, yet they advocate humility and modesty, encouraging us to remain unaware of His presence. However, what does the Apostle mean when he instructs the Corinthians to examine themselves, testing whether Jesus Christ dwells within them, and warns that anyone lacking this awareness is reprobate (2 Corinthians 13:5)? St. John echoes this sentiment: "By this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us" (1 John 3:24). Thus, what we truly do is cast doubt upon Jesus Christ's promises when we endeavor to serve Him without the presence of His Spirit, even though He had proclaimed that His Spirit would be poured out upon all His chosen ones (Joel 2:28). In essence, we diminish the Holy Spirit's glory by isolating faith from His realm, the very realm that is His domain. Since these foundational teachings form the bedrock of our faith, it's bewildering to label Christians as arrogant when they glorify the presence of the Holy Spirit—without whose presence, Christianity itself would cease to exist. The sophists, by their example, affirm Christ's statement that His Spirit remains concealed from the world, and only those in whom He resides truly comprehend Him (John 14:17).

In their relentless quest to undermine the bedrock of faith, the sophists assail it from another angle, suggesting that while we may deduce God's grace based on our current righteousness, the assurance of our perseverance remains uncertain. Nevertheless, they argue, we can maintain a confident hope of salvation even if we possess nothing beyond a "moral conjecture" that we currently stand in God's grace. Regrettably, the apostle's words convey an entirely

different sentiment. He unequivocally declares, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39).

The sophists, in their pursuit of evasion, offer a flimsy resolution—contending that the apostle arrived at such knowledge through a distinct revelation. Their attempt to escape is bound by their own web, for here the apostle addresses the general blessings that befall all believers through faith, rather than his personal experience. "Certainly," they assert, "but the apostle himself seeks to stir a sense of caution within us, warning us of our frailty and inconstancy when he admonishes, 'Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall' (1 Corinthians 10:12)." This holds true; yet, he does not intend to invoke fear for the sake of fear itself, but rather to guide us in humbling ourselves under God's omnipotent hand, as St. Peter advocates (1 Peter 5:6). Furthermore, how whimsical it is to restrict the certainty of faith, which ideally should extend beyond this earthly realm and encompass future immortality, to a fleeting moment! Thus, when the faithful acknowledge that it is by God's grace they are granted the ability, illuminated by His Spirit, to behold the promise of future life through faith, such a glory should not be misconstrued as arrogance. To be ashamed of confessing this glory amounts to ingratitude rather than exemplifying moderation and humility, effectively obscuring and diminishing the magnificence of God's goodness that deserves our utmost reverence.

In a similar vein, the sophists' other fabrications are dismantled using the same rationale. Firstly, they construct the notion that faith is "perfected" when a virtuous affection is amalgamated with the knowledge of God. Secondly, they propagate the idea that ascribing

the term "faith" to ignorance and misconceptions about God deceives the ignorant masses. Concerning their first falsehood, they expose their misunderstanding by labeling "informed faith" as ignorant and hollow agreement, thus betraying their lack of comprehension regarding the essence of faith's consent to receive God's truth. As we have already elucidated, the consent of faith emanates from the heart, surpassing the realm of intellect to the domain of affection. Thus, faith is often referred to as obedience—a term elevated by the Lord above all other forms of servitude (Romans 1:5). This appellation is rightfully conferred, given the immeasurable significance of God's truth, a truth corroborated by believers, as witnessed by St. John the Baptist (John 3:26, 5:33). It is therefore unequivocal that the Sorbonnists err profoundly in asserting that "perfected faith" emerges from the union of consent and virtuous affection, for consent, as portrayed in scripture, cannot exist devoid of virtuous affection.

Furthermore, there exists a more conspicuous rationale. Faith, in receiving Christ as offered by the Father, embraces Him not merely as the source of righteousness, forgiveness, and peace, but also as the wellspring of sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30) and the fountain of living water. Therefore, faith, which necessarily involves apprehending Christ's sanctification, cannot authentically recognize Him without comprehending the sanctifying influence of His Spirit. To put it more succinctly, faith is intrinsically linked to knowledge of Christ, and knowledge of Christ is inseparable from the sanctification of His Spirit—thus, faith and virtuous affection cannot be disentangled.

Those who frequently cite St. Paul's declaration that even if someone possesses unwavering faith enabling them to move mountains yet lacks love, such faith amounts to nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2) are

gravely misunderstanding the passage's connotation. They intend to concoct an "imperfect faith," devoid of love. Regrettably, they overlook the context in which the term "faith" is used in this passage. St. Paul is discussing diverse spiritual gifts conferred by the Holy Spirit, including tongues, powers, and prophecies, urging the Corinthians to prioritize gifts that yield greater benefits for the entire church body (1 Corinthians 12:10). He promises to reveal an even more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31). Though these gifts possess inherent excellence, they remain ineffectual without being conduits for love, given that their primary purpose is to edify the church. If they fail to serve this purpose, they lose their essence and worth. To emphasize this truth, St. Paul employs different terminology, employing alternative names for the same graces he previously mentioned. For instance, the "power" mentioned earlier is now referred to as "faith," signifying the power to perform miracles. Given that this capacity, whether termed faith or power, is a unique gift from God susceptible to misuse by the wicked (similar to the gifts of tongues, prophecies, and others), it's understandable that it stands distinct from love. The critical error stems from the sophists' failure to recognize the multiple connotations of the term "faith." They unreasonably persist in treating it as a consistent concept. The specific passage from St. James they invoke to bolster their claim will be addressed in a subsequent discussion.

The notion of "implicit faith" entertained by some not only obscures authentic faith but eradicates it altogether. Is it not considered an act of faith when one, in surrendering their senses to the guidance of the church, acknowledges and believes? Certainly, faith does not subsist in ignorance but in knowledge—knowledge not only of God, but also of His divine will. Our salvation is not contingent on our readiness to accept all that the church decrees as true, nor do we relegate to the church the duty of inquiry and comprehension. Our salvation is

grounded in the knowledge that God, in Christ, has reconciled us to Himself as our benevolent Father. It is through this knowledge that we receive Christ—bestowed upon us for righteousness, sanctification, and eternal life. Our entry into the heavenly realm hinges on this knowledge, not on blindly submitting our spirit to enigmatic matters. When the apostle affirms that one believes in their heart for righteousness and confesses with their mouth for salvation (Romans 10:9), he does not imply that implicit belief in what one does not understand suffices. Rather, he calls for a clear and unblemished comprehension of God's goodness, which constitutes our righteousness.

I do not deny the inevitability of our existing in a realm of ignorance, where many truths remain veiled until we, shedding our mortal bodies, draw closer to God. In matters such as these, I concede that the most prudent course is to suspend judgment and, for now, anchor our will in unity with the church. However, it is fallacious to use this as a pretext to ascribe the label of "faith" to pure ignorance. True faith rests upon the knowledge of God and Christ—not merely reverence for the church. Alas, the chasm the sophists have carved is vast: whatever the church presents to the uninformed masses, they receive without discernment, even embracing the most absurd errors. This uncritical compliance, which leads people into perdition, becomes all the more problematic considering that they believe with a caveat: "if the faith of the church dictates." Through this approach, they pretend to uphold truth while immersed in error, to cling to light amidst darkness, and to possess knowledge in the midst of ignorance. To counter these deranged notions, I urge readers to contrast them with our teachings. The brilliance of truth itself will furnish an ample arsenal of arguments to silence these sophists.

The essence of faith finds a perfect expression when directed toward the gospel, its ultimate destination. Yet, it is vital to ask what faith should primarily focus on within the gospel. We touched on this briefly when highlighting how the gospel's essence resides in Jesus Christ. This implies that not only are all promises encapsulated within Him, but they are also revealed through Him (2 Corinthians 1:20). However, a more detailed exploration of this theme is warranted.

"Eternal life is to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). Indeed, a correct understanding of the Father and Christ is paramount. The Father's nature is discerned exclusively through the Son, for while the Father dwells in unapproachable light, He radiates the brilliance of that light upon us through His Son. Although invisible to our eyes and understanding, the Father offers us His living image through His Son. Thus, the apostle refers to the illumination of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4). Christ, acknowledged as the light of the world (John 8:12, 12:46), unveils the splendor of divine glory to humanity. It is accurate to say not only that Christ is the radiance of the Father's glory and the exact representation of His nature (Hebrews 1:3), but also that in Christ, the Father's glory is revealed to us, and His nature is unveiled. The Father has chosen to place all that He possesses in Christ, enabling the Father to commune with us through Christ and glorify His name (John 13:3, 15:15). Consequently, to seek access to the Father, one must return through the only avenue capable of revealing Him—Christ. When Christ identifies Himself as "the way" (John 14:6), He asserts His exclusive role as our guide. Likewise, when He calls Himself "the door" (John 10:7), He proclaims His role as the gateway, as affirmed in other verses: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to

reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22). Just as we must be drawn by the Spirit of the Father to be stirred to seek and embrace Jesus Christ, we must also acknowledge that the Father, who remains invisible, is only to be sought in Jesus Christ—the image of the Father.

This understanding constitutes genuine knowledge of Christ—accepting Him as the Father offers Him to us, replete with the inexhaustible riches of heaven. Through Christ, we discover a wellspring of joy and all things good (John 1:16). However, to fully appropriate these riches, we must first comprehend the pathway through which they have been procured for us. This pathway entails Christ's obedience—a demonstration evident in His fulfillment of everything requisite for our salvation according to God's eternal purpose. In parallel to the gospel being the ultimate goal of our faith, and Christ being its distinct destination within the gospel, the gospel itself centralizes on Christ's accomplishments and sufferings for our redemption.

To offer a comprehensive understanding of faith, it is imperative to illuminate the facets within Christ that substantiate and fortify it. A vivid depiction of its essence will facilitate a holistic grasp of its character, much like a painting that encapsulates the whole. In this endeavor, the Apostles' Creed serves as our artistic rendition, encapsulating the entirety of our salvation's narrative with meticulous precision. While the authorship of the creed is disputed, I remain untroubled by the question of its origin. It has unanimously been attributed to the apostles by early church fathers, whether they believed it to be a collective composition or a compilation of teachings summarized by others—a title granted to confer it with authority. Regardless of its provenance, one truth remains unshaken: from the inception of the church, and even from the era of the

apostles, it has functioned as a public and assured expression of faith. It is improbable that a single individual authored it, given its enduring authority across generations. The fundamental fact is irrefutable—the creed encapsulates the entirety of our faith's narrative, leaving no aspect omitted. Therefore, we need not excessively agonize over the identity of its author. Instead, we should rest in the certainty of the Holy Spirit's truth, rather than expend energy debating who communicated it or which hand penned it.

Before delving into the exposition of the creed, let us first acknowledge two vital considerations. The first is that the purpose of expounding this narrative is not merely to possess a superficial knowledge of it. Instead, the intention is for our understanding to ascend to loftier realms of comprehension. The creed conveys two kinds of elements—visible and invisible—and we must examine both aspects thoroughly. The spiritual concepts such as the power of God, the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins, while intangible to the eye, demand our belief to extend beyond mere acknowledgment. Our faith should engender confidence and hope, driving us to not only recognize God's omnipotence but also to experience His sustaining power and to genuinely receive the Holy Spirit's influence. This principle should apply equally to other analogous tenets. The same holds true for visible events in the creed—Christ's birth, death, resurrection, and ascension. Rather than merely external observance, the faithful soul should mine deeper, contemplating the underlying wisdom that informed these events. Our faith's objective is to apprehend the narrative, while its purpose is to contemplate the hidden and unfathomable aspects derived from this narrative. For instance, from Christ's death, we derive assurance in the satisfaction He offered, and from His resurrection, hope for eternal life springs forth.

The second consideration revolves around the structure of the creed. It consists of three segments, each corresponding to the description of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three segments encapsulate the entire essence of our redemption. The fourth segment outlines the spheres within which our salvation is situated. This sequence holds great significance and must not be overlooked. To grasp our salvation's essence, we must initially engage with these three foundational aspects—the vast benevolence and love of the heavenly Father, His sacrificial delivery of His Son for us to restore life (1 John 3:16), the obedience of the Son in fulfilling God's merciful plan for our salvation, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that transmits the blessings of God's goodness in Jesus Christ to us. St. Paul's wishes for the Corinthians encapsulate this concept—invoking the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:13). Our blessings are rooted in God's love, offered through Christ's grace, and realized through the Spirit's empowerment. Subsequently, we consider the faith regarding the church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life—forming the fourth segment of the creed.

Throughout history, Satan, aiming to eradicate faith from its very roots, has perpetuated turmoil surrounding the divinity of Jesus Christ and the distinction of persons within the Godhead. Evil spirits, incited by him, have sown discord among believers, often disturbing the faithful with disputes that challenge the integrity of the scriptures. To commence our exploration of the creed, it seems fitting to address these matters. However, my intention is not to engage in protracted debates with dissenters, but rather to instruct those who possess a teachable spirit. I refrain from presenting a comprehensive argument, despite the gravity of the issue, opting instead to highlight the path we ought to tread and the pitfalls we

must avoid. My primary concern remains the education of those who are receptive to the truth.

Foremost, considering the loftiness of scriptural mysteries, a balanced and composed approach is essential to comprehend them. In this context, exercising moderation and sobriety becomes particularly imperative. Our thoughts and language should refrain from surpassing the bounds of God's Word. The task of compressing God's infinite essence into human understanding is an audacious endeavor, especially when we have yet to grasp the nature of the sun's body that remains visible to our eyes. How then can our limited understanding encompass the vastness of God's substance? Let us leave to God the knowledge of Himself. He alone, in the words of St. Hilary, is equipped to testify about Himself, as He is known solely to Himself. We should conceive Him as He reveals Himself, seeking knowledge only through His Word. Chrysostom's five homilies against the Anomoeans provide insightful arguments on this matter. Nevertheless, let us be cautious, learning from the past, and content ourselves with the lessons scripture imparts. When pondering God's essence, let us not entertain speculations but adhere to His Word in our thoughts, reflections, and speech.

Scripture repeatedly and unmistakably attests to the existence of one God—a singular, eternal, infinite, and spiritual essence. Prolonged arguments are unnecessary to validate this truth. The Manicheans' distortion of a few testimonies to assert two principles is sheer folly. Similarly, Anthropomorphites, who attributed a physical form to God based on scripture's anthropomorphic language, gravely misconceived His nature. These anthropomorphic expressions, attributing features like a mouth, ears, hands, and feet to God, are a divine condescension, akin to a nurse's gentle tone when speaking to a child. These expressions do not unveil God's essence but rather

adapt His revelation to our limited understanding. Therefore, any attempt to measure God's essence based on such descriptions is futile. Consequently, we affirm the unity of God's infinite, eternal, and spiritual essence.

Yet, comprehending the distinctions among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit within the Godhead is far from straightforward and often perplexes many. Let us divide this discussion into two parts. First, affirming the divinity of the Son and the Spirit, and second, explaining the manner of distinction between the Father, Son, and Spirit. Scripture offers an abundance of evidence to establish both aspects. For instance, when we encounter the term "God's Word," it is illogical to envision a fleeting voice echoing through the air. Rather, it denotes eternal Wisdom abiding within God—a source of ancient oracles and prophecies. Prophets in the Old Testament, as confirmed by St. Peter, communicated through the Spirit of Christ, just as apostles and truth-bearers in subsequent times did (1 Peter 1:10ff; cf. 2 Peter 1:21). This understanding is evident in Moses' account of creation, where God's eternal counsel, not a transient will, set forth the world's genesis (Genesis 1–2). Solomon's portrayal of Wisdom corroborates this understanding—begotten from eternity, it oversaw the world's creation and continues to guide God's work (Proverbs 8:22). St. John's words provide the most intimate insight, as he declares that the Word, present with God from the outset, is God Himself (John 1:1–2). Each phrase highlights the eternal essence of the Word. Consequently, while heavenly revelations are rightfully termed "words of God," we must recognize the essential Word—the origin and fount of all revelations—unchanging and eternal in God.

Amidst the faithful, there exists a subtle group who, while not openly challenging the Son of God's divinity, secretly attempt to undermine

His eternity. They posit that the Word's existence commenced when God, in the act of creating the world, spoke forth His command to bring all things into being. This viewpoint, however, treads upon the majesty of God without due contemplation, as it suggests an element of novelty in His essence. Such an assertion disregards the principle that names ascribed to God in relation to His works were attributed when these works came into being—such as the title "Creator of heaven and earth." Moreover, it is impiety to suggest any name that implies change in God Himself. This perspective distorts the narrative, insinuating that Moses indicated the absence of the Word prior to the act of speaking. Yet, should we deduce non-existence before manifestation? Quite the opposite; as the power of His Word was manifest simultaneously with the creation of light, its pre-existence becomes apparent. Jesus Christ, the Word, confirms this eternal presence, transcending time itself: "Father! Glorify your Son in the glory which I had with you eternally, before the world was made" (John 17:5). This declaration goes beyond temporal constraints, illuminating the eternal nature of the Son and affirming His divine essence.

With the foundation of His divinity established, let us now explore this revelation. However, before we proceed, it is beneficial to briefly touch upon the Son's appellation as "Son of God." Early church fathers, convinced of the Son's eternal generation from the Father, sought to corroborate this belief through Isaiah's prophecy: "Who will explain His generation?" (Isaiah 53:8). Yet, their interpretation veered from the truth, as the prophet referred not to the Son's begetting but to the multiplication of descendants in Christ's rule. Assertions drawn from the Psalms carry little assurance, for the line "I have engendered you from my womb before the star of the morning" (Psalm 110:3) stands on a translation that diverges from

the Hebrew original. In truth, the Hebrew reads: "The dew of his birth is like the emergence of the star of the morning" (Psalm 110:3).

A more compelling argument arises from the apostle's words, proclaiming that all things were created through the Son (Colossians 1:16). This logic upholds the Son's pre-existence, for His creative power necessitates His existence. Nonetheless, similar reasoning falters, as the name "Christ" is ascribed to Him in instances where it may not correspond to His eternal state—just as Christ is attributed to Moses in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:4). Similarly, stating that Jesus Christ is "yesterday, today, and will be forever" (Hebrews 13:8) lacks the robustness to assert His eternal suitability as the name "Christ." Thus, misusing scripture to support our cause only exposes our faith to the mockery of heretics.

For me, a single argument suffices to solidify my conviction in the Son's eternity: God, the Father, is truly Father only through His Son, to whom alone this honor rightly belongs. Therefore, as God has eternally been invoked as Father, it follows that the Son, by whose role this relationship was established, eternally existed.

Turning to the heart of the matter—proving the Son's divinity—two lines of evidence converge. The Son of God is unequivocally referred to as "God" in clear scriptural testimonies, and His divinity is substantiated by the potency of His works. In Psalms, David declares, "Your throne, O God, will remain forever; the scepter of your reign is a scepter of uprightness" (Psalm 45:6). Critics might attempt to argue that the term ELOHIM is applicable to angels and celestial beings. Yet, no scriptural instance depicts an eternal throne established for a mere creature. This is not merely "God," but also "One with eternal dominion." This divine authority is not bestowed upon any but the true God. In the following verse, this God is

anointed by His God, identifying Him as Jesus Christ, who, in His humanity, humbly submits to God the Father.

Isaiah portrays Him as the Living God, endowing Him with attributes befitting the living God alone. The prophet pronounces, "Here is the name by which He will be called: 'the Living God, Father of the age to come'" (Isaiah 9:6). Attempts to distort this passage to reduce it to "the powerful God" prove futile. Jeremiah similarly testifies that Jesus Christ is the seed of David, destined for the salvation of His people, and the Eternal One of righteousness (Jeremiah 23:5). By ascribing this name to Jesus Christ, the true God's essence is affirmed. This declaration aligns with another prophecy—Jesus Christ avowing, "I will not give my glory to another" (Isaiah 42:8). This resonates against the Jews' efforts to apply this name to altars and the church. Their contentions are hollow; altars represent monuments, not God's essence, while the church's name signifies God's presence within it.

Amidst these, a more intricate passage emerges—the 33rd chapter of Jeremiah—where what is said of Jesus Christ is attributed to the church. Yet, this passage not only fails to counter our argument but reinforces it. The prophet initially testifies that Jesus Christ is our true God, the source of righteousness. He then signifies the church's knowledge of this truth, allowing it to boast in His name.

The New Testament overflows with a multitude of testimonies, necessitating the selection of pertinent passages over an exhaustive compilation. It is imperative to highlight the apostles' proclamation that prophecies concerning the Eternal God have found fulfillment or will find fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Isaiah predicts that the God of armies will be a stumbling block for the Jews and Israelites (Isaiah 8:14). Paul affirms this fulfillment in Christ (Romans 9:32–33),

thereby identifying Christ as the very God of armies Isaiah foresaw. Similarly, Paul emphasizes that "we must all come to the judgment throne of Christ; for it is written that 'every knee will bow before me, and every tongue will swear in my name'" (Romans 14:10–11; Isaiah 45:23). As God proclaimed this of Himself in Isaiah, its manifestation through Jesus Christ confirms His status as the God whose glory is unparalleled. Furthermore, what Paul conveys to the Ephesians, concerning Christ's ascent to lead His adversaries captive (Ephesians 4:8), resonates with a passage referring to God's victory over His people's enemies (Psalm 68:18). St. John attests that it was the glory of the Son of God that Isaiah witnessed, even though Isaiah referred to the majesty of the living God (John 12:40; Isaiah 6:10).

Moreover, the passages cited by the apostle in the Epistle to the Hebrews undeniably pertain to God alone. For instance, "Lord, you have established the heavens and earth from the beginning," and "Worship Him, all you His angels" (Hebrews 1:10, 6; Psalm 97:7; Psalm 102:25). Although these designations honor God's majesty, applying them to Jesus Christ is not misappropriation, as their fulfillment lies solely in Him. He is the one who extends mercy to Zion and takes possession of all peoples and territories, establishing His kingdom universally. Why would St. John hesitate to attribute God's majesty to Jesus Christ, having initially affirmed in his gospel that He was God Eternal (John 1:1, 14)? Similarly, why would St. Paul shy away from placing Him on the throne of God, after explicitly declaring His divinity by proclaiming Him as the blessed God eternally (Romans 9:5)? To underscore his unwavering conviction, Paul also conveys that Jesus Christ is God manifest in flesh (1 Timothy 3:16). Bearing the title of the blessed God eternally, Jesus merits all glory, as the apostle teaches in another passage (Romans 9:5). This truth resounds unequivocally as Paul underscores that, since Jesus Christ possessed God's glory, He did not perceive it as

robbery to be equal to God, humbling Himself unto emptiness (Philippians 2:6–7). Notably, St. John further affirms that Jesus Christ is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20).

Considerably, St. Paul predominantly bestows the title "God" upon Jesus Christ, openly declaring the oneness of God amidst the existence of numerous deities: "Although one may name several gods in the heaven and on earth, we nevertheless have one God only, from whom are all things" (1 Corinthians 8:5–6). Paul's attribution of God's manifestation in flesh and His acquisition of the church through His blood (1 Timothy 3:16; Acts 2:22ff, 20:28) nullifies the notion of a secondary, unknown god. Moreover, the consistent belief of the faithful substantiates this conviction; the apostle Thomas' confession—addressing Jesus as his God and Lord (John 20:28)—conveys that he worshipped the solitary God he had always known.

Furthermore, if we evaluate Jesus Christ's divinity based on the works attributed to Him in scripture, His divine nature becomes even more evident. When Jesus asserts that He has always worked with His Father, the Jews comprehend, despite their foolishness, that He claims the power of God. As St. John records, the Jews seek to kill Him, for He not only violated the Sabbath but also behaved as the Son of God, equating Himself with God (John 5:17–18). This passage resoundingly certifies Jesus' divinity. Governing the world through providence and power, and holding all things under His command (Hebrews 1:3), solely befits the Creator. The authority to forgive sins—professed by the Lord in Isaiah—"It is I, it is I, Israel, who wipes out your sins because of myself" (Isaiah 43:25)—incites Jewish outrage, perceiving it as an affront to God. Nevertheless, not only does Jesus assert this power through words, but He also proves it through miracles (Matthew 9:2ff). Hence, the ministry of forgiving sins, along with the power to do so—a power God once revealed—

unmistakably resides eternally in Jesus Christ. The discernment of people's thoughts and secrets—a divine attribute—is also evident in Jesus Christ, confirming His divinity.

The realm of miracles stands as practical evidence of His divinity, discernible by the senses (John 2:11). While prophets and apostles also performed miraculous deeds, a significant disparity arises; they merely functioned as instruments of God's gifts, while Jesus Christ innately possessed the power. On occasion, Christ referred glory to His Father through prayer (John 11:41–42), yet more frequently He showcased His intrinsic authority. His conferment of the ability to perform miracles to others, under His own authority, attests to His role as the true Author of miracles. The evangelist narrates His granting the apostles power to raise the dead, heal lepers, and cast out demons (Mark 6:7, 13). The apostles employed these abilities in ways that unmistakably traced their origins back to Jesus Christ. Peter's words to the paralytic, "In the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk" (Acts 3:6), highlight this attribution to Christ. Thus, it's unsurprising that Jesus Christ utilized His miracles to expose the Jews' disbelief, for their direct manifestation by His authority unequivocally testified to His divinity. Furthermore, encompassing salvation, righteousness, and life within Himself, Christ demonstrates His divine essence. He is not merely a recipient of salvation; He embodies salvation itself. When reflecting upon Christ's goodness, one must acknowledge that goodness and righteousness, in the truest sense, reside within Him. The evangelist's teaching echoes this truth: "From the beginning of the world life was in Him, and because He was life, He was also the light of the people" (John 1:2, 4). In light of these profound revelations of His divine majesty, we find confidence and faith to place in Him. This decision, rooted in His Word, counters the notion of entrusting one's faith to a mere creature. St. John exhorts, "Believe also in me"

(John 14:1), reinforcing the trust that stems from believing in God. St. Paul affirms, "We believe in Jesus Christ to be justified by the faith of Jesus" (Galatians 2:16), elucidating Isaiah's words, "Whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame" (Romans 10:11; Isaiah 28:16), and "There shall come forth a root from Jesse to rule the peoples, and the peoples will hope in Him" (Romans 15:12; Isaiah 11:10). The repetition of the saying, "Whoever believes in me will have eternal life" (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:40; 17:3; etc.), underscores this profound truth.

Furthermore, the invocation that hinges upon faith is rightfully directed to Him—a form of invocation that profoundly resonates with God's majesty. The prophet Joel avows, "Whoever calls on the name of God will be saved" (Joel 2:32), while Solomon asserts, "The name of God is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10). Thus, the name of Christ invoked for salvation underscores His identity as God. St. Stephen's plea, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" (Acts 7:59), exemplifies this practice. Witnessed within the Christian community, Ananias attests to the power of Christ's name in invoking salvation (Acts 9:13). Consequently, the fullness of divinity is unmistakably present in Jesus Christ. St. Paul's confession, expressed among the Corinthians, affirms the supremacy of Christ's name. Exclusively teaching the knowledge of His name, Paul refrains from preaching anything other than Christ (1 Corinthians 2:2). This declaration aligns with God's prohibition to glory in any name other than His own (Jeremiah 9:24). This truth resounds: Jesus Christ is not a mere creation; acknowledging Him as such would be a travesty, for knowing Him constitutes our singular glory. Furthermore, the salutations commonly placed at the beginning of apostolic writings resonate; they extend the same benefits from Jesus Christ as they do from God the Father. This not only signifies that through Christ's intercession, we acquire God's

benefits but that Christ Himself bestows them. Such knowledge, rooted in practical experience, far surpasses speculative deliberations. The faithful soul attests to the unmistakable presence of God, tangibly sensing His existence through revival, enlightenment, salvation, justification, and sanctification.

This leads us to affirm the same foundation to affirm the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The scriptures attribute qualities to Him that transcend our human experiences and the realm of creatures. Primarily, He extends everywhere, upholding, preserving, and imparting life to all things in the heavens and on earth. His infinite expansiveness excludes Him from the category of creatures, as divine omnipresence and the bestowal of life upon all beings inherently emanate from God. If rebirth into incorruptible life transcends physical power's grandeur, how exalted is the Holy Spirit, the source of this life? Scripture abundantly teaches that He, by His own power, initiates regeneration (John 3:6) and even promises future immortality (Romans 8:11).

In the fullness of divine revelation, the offices inherently belonging to divinity are attributed to both the Spirit and the Son in scripture. He, the Spirit, uncovers the deep mysteries of God [1 Corinthians 2:10], providing counsel that transcends the realm of mere creatures. Wisdom and eloquence, characteristics befitting God's majesty alone, are ascribed to Him—a reality that aligns with the words of our Lord to Moses (Isaiah 11:2; Exodus 4:11). Through the Spirit, we partake in the divine realm, experiencing the life-giving power that emanates from Him. Our righteousness finds its source in Him; sanctification, truth, grace—all that embodies goodness—emanate from His boundless essence. St. Paul underscores this truth, stating, "There is only one Spirit from whom we receive all kinds of good" (1 Corinthians 12:11). Particularly noteworthy, scripture refers to Him

as "God." St. Paul deduces that we are temples of God, dwelling within us, a notion that should not be taken lightly. Throughout the Scriptures, our Lord's promises of choosing us as His temples and tabernacles find fulfillment through the indwelling of His Spirit within us (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19; 2:12). The apostle's writings alternate between calling us the "temple of God" and the "temple of His Spirit" [1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19]. As St. Peter reproaches Ananias for deceiving the Holy Spirit, he declares that Ananias lied not to people, but to God (Acts 5:4). Isaiah's prophetic words are attributed to the Holy Spirit by St. Paul (Acts 28:25ff; Isaiah 6:9–10). When Isaiah depicts God's distress due to the people's stubbornness, St. Paul attributes this affliction to the Spirit of God (Isaiah 63:10).

In summation, a single argument suffices to firmly establish the triune divinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If our baptism signifies initiation into the faith and devotion to one God, the name in which we are baptized designates our God. Thus, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are encompassed within the same divine essence, evidenced by our baptism performed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. St. Paul links these three—God, faith, and baptism—so closely together (Ephesians 4:5–6) that he demonstrates their interdependence. The unity of faith, affirming a single God, logically implies that differing faiths would necessitate different gods. Baptism, as a sacrament of faith, confirms this unity. It follows that baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19) demands our belief in them. This command underscores the inseparable unity of the triune God, declaring the three as one.

As we firmly establish the truth of a singular God, the conclusion emerges that the Son and the Holy Spirit share the divine essence. The misconceptions of the Arians become evident as they conceded

the title of God to Jesus Christ while denying His divine substance. Similarly, the Macedonians erred by limiting the Holy Spirit to the bestowal of grace, dismissing the reality that He is the source of wisdom, understanding, strength, and all powers. The truth, however, remains undivided—the Spirit's grace flows in diverse forms, while His essence remains whole, in harmony with the apostle's words (1 Corinthians 12:11).

In the pages of scripture, a delicate distinction between God, His Word, and the Holy Spirit emerges—a distinction that calls for reverence and sober contemplation, given the immense mystery it entails. The wisdom of St. Gregory of Nazianzus resonates deeply: "I cannot think of one of them without being surrounded by the three; I cannot discern the three without being carried back to the one." Thus, while acknowledging the reality of a distinction, we must tread carefully to avoid envisioning a trinity of persons that bewilders the mind and does not ultimately lead to unity. Certainly, the terms "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" signify genuine distinctions, avoiding any inclination to perceive them as mere labels to differentiate God in various ways. Yet, it is essential to recognize that this distinction implies unity rather than division. Consider, for instance, how the heavenly Father designates His Son as a "companion" or "neighbor" in Zechariah (Zechariah 13:7). This term implies a distinction between the Father and the Son, as there exists no familial relationship between God and creatures. Similarly, the Son emphasizes His differentiation from the Father by asserting the existence of another who testifies on His behalf (John 8:18).

Scripture, too, substantiates this distinction between God and His Word. When the Father creates all things through His Word, it underscores the differentiation between them. Importantly, this distinction does not originate with the incarnation of the Son, as the

pre-existent Son dwelled in the Father's bosom (John 1:18) before descending to take on human form. This truth affirms that the Son's reign in glory existed from the beginning.

Likewise, the distinction between the Holy Spirit and the Father is evident in the Spirit's procession from the Father, while the distinction between the Spirit and the Son emerges when Jesus Christ speaks of another Comforter coming (John 15:26), a distinction reaffirmed across various passages. Yet, explaining the essence of this distinction proves a challenge. While some analogies from human affairs have been borrowed by early church fathers, they themselves confessed the limitations of such analogies. Thus, an element of caution is warranted, lest our words be misconstrued and misused.

Indeed, the distinction is expressed in scripture: the Father is the origin of all actions and the source of everything; the Son embodies wisdom, counsel, and the arrangement of all things; the Holy Spirit represents power and efficacy in all actions. The unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's eternal existence is irrefutable—God's wisdom and power could never exist independently, making it senseless to prioritize one over the other. Although divine unity necessitates no hierarchy of first or second within eternity, the order between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remains significant. The Father is identified as the first, followed by the Son emanating from Him, and the Holy Spirit proceeding from both. This sequence mirrors the human mind's natural inclination, contemplating God, His Wisdom, and His Power in an orderly progression. This order is evident in passages like Romans 8, where the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of the One who raised Christ from the dead, showcasing unity without distinction (Romans 8:9, 11). This harmony resonates with St. Peter's testimony that it was the Spirit of

Christ through which the prophets spoke (1 Peter 1:11), aligning with scripture's frequent assertion of the Spirit as both the Spirit of the Father and of the Son.

In truth, the distinction within the triune God does not negate unity; rather, it affirms the unity. It confirms that the Son shares the same divine essence as the Father, evidenced by their mutual possession of the same Spirit. Similarly, the Holy Spirit's essence is not separate from that of the Father and the Son, for He is their Spirit. This unified essence is uniquely expressed within each Person, reflecting their distinct roles. The Father fully resides in the Son, and the Son in the Father, as affirmed by Christ Himself: "I am in my Father and my Father is in me" (John 14:10). The consensus of the church fathers aligns with this understanding; they refute any differentiation within the Essence among the Persons. While some early fathers seemingly presented differing ideas, such as referring to the Father as the beginning of the Son, they ultimately upheld the unity of the divine essence. The seemingly contradictory language is better reconciled when considering that sometimes they explained that the Son possessed His divinity and essence from Himself.

The claims of Sabellians, who liken God's titles to adjectives like "powerful," "good," "wise," and "merciful," are easily refuted upon deeper reflection. These titles are descriptions that illuminate God's nature toward us, while the titles "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" reveal His inner essence. The distinction between these names and attributes is crucial. Furthermore, we must not confuse the Spirit with the Father and the Son merely because God is referred to as Spirit (John 4:24). Indeed, it is fitting for the entirety of God's essence to be characterized as spiritual, with the Father, Son, and Spirit being harmoniously united within this essence. Just as

scripture identifies God as Spirit, it also affirms that the Spirit is of God and proceeds from God (John 15:26).

Those who approach these truths without contentiousness recognize how the Father, Word (Son), and Spirit exist harmoniously within a single divine essence. Even the most stubborn opponents struggle to refute this point. The Father and the Son are God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet, the truth that emerges remains unwavering—there is only one God. On the other hand, scripture explicitly names three distinct entities, highlights their individualities, and distinguishes them. This is the essence of both three and one: a singular God, a singular essence. Who are these three? Not separate gods, not distinct essences, but rather, three attributes or qualities. The early Greek church fathers aptly described this as one essence containing three hypostases. Those using Latin language, while agreeing on the essence, modified one term slightly. They asserted the existence of one essence and three persons, perceiving the latter term as indicative of a relational aspect.

Critics and dissenters raised objections, comparing the terms "essence" and "hypostasis" to human inventions absent from scripture. However, the unassailable reality remains that three distinct entities coexist within the same divine deity. It is essential to recognize that these words merely convey concepts found within scripture. The call to remain within scriptural boundaries is valid, urging us to avoid introducing new terms that could lead to division and disputes. Engaging in unnecessary word-battles and quarrels detracts from the truth and weakens love and charity. While the critique of using words not found word-for-word in scripture is reasonable, it's important to strike a balance. Demanding every word align syllable-by-syllable with scripture would be impractical and dismiss many valuable sermons. However, if "strange words" refer to

inventions driven by curiosity, defended with superstition, leading to strife instead of edification, and straying from scriptural simplicity, it is a prudent stance. Reverence for God in both thought and language must match our understanding of His majesty, as our human thoughts and expressions fall short of grasping His fullness.

Nonetheless, finding a middle ground is necessary. While scripture guides our thoughts and words, there's room to clarify concepts that may be obscurely presented therein. This is permissible as long as our explanations faithfully align with scriptural truth, are rooted in reason, and avoid excessive liberty. Instances of this abound in our daily lives. Can it not be argued that the church adopted the terms "Trinity" and "persons" to defend the truth against slander and misconstruction? Criticizing these terms as novel suggests discomfort with the light of truth—especially when these words serve to elucidate scriptural truths that are challenged by adversaries. In the face of contemporary challenges, clear explanations are essential to confront those who evade the truth. Just as early church fathers confronted erroneous teachings with straightforward explanations, these clarifications left no room for misinterpretation, curbing the potential for deceit.

Arius, in his attempt to align with the testimonies of scripture, confessed Jesus Christ as God and the Son of God. However, he persisted in claiming Christ was created and had a beginning like other creatures. In response, the early church fathers proclaimed Christ as the eternal Son of God, of the same substance as the Father, to expose Arian impiety. Had Arians confessed Christ's divinity from the start, they might not have denied His divine essence. Critics who question the intention of these fathers to incite conflicts ignore the gravity of these matters. A single word, carefully chosen, ignited fervent debates, revealing true believers from heretics.

Following Sabellius, who dismissed the significance of the titles "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit," and likened them to the attributes of God such as "powerful," "good," and "wise," we must address his misguided claims. While Sabellius acknowledged the Father and the Son as God, he later retreated, asserting that his words were akin to calling God "good" or "wise." Yet, he ventured further, suggesting that the Father was the Son and the Son was the Holy Spirit, erasing all distinction. Those in that era, upholding the honor of God, confronted Sabellius, urging him to recognize the trifold nature of one God. In response, they established the truth that within the divine essence, a trinity of persons coexists.

If these names were not coined haphazardly, then we should not be hasty in condemning them. It is preferable for these terms to be buried, if only the faith remains unwavering worldwide—that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, yet distinct in their characteristics. The word "hypostasis" appears to carry the same significance in the apostle's words as the early church fathers assigned to it here. The apostle refers to the Son as the image of the hypostasis of God the Father (Hebrews 1:3). I disagree with interpreting "hypostasis" as essence, suggesting that Christ merely reflects the Father's image, like wax conforming to a seal. Instead, I believe the apostle implies that the Father, while distinct, fully manifests Himself in the Son. His very person—His hypostasis—radiates and is unveiled. It would be improper to label Christ as the image of His Father's essence, as He encompasses the essence wholly, not partially or through transfer, but in its entirety.

However, I am not so naïve or dogmatic as to provoke intense disputes over simple terms. It's evident to me that the early church fathers, though deeply respectful in their discussions, did not always reach unanimity in every instance. They varied in expressions and

forms of speech, as evidenced by the councils and writings of St. Hilary and St. Augustine. Discrepancies also existed between the Greek and Latin perspectives. To illustrate, the Latin fathers interpreted the Greek term "homoousios" as "consubstantial," signifying the Son's sameness of substance with the Father. Conversely, St. Hilary mentioned "three substances" in God over a hundred times. He lamented the necessity of expressing profound truths through human words, and acknowledged the limitations of language in conveying divine mysteries. It's crucial to recognize this diversity within the church's tradition.

St. Hilary's moderation serves as a reminder not to hastily condemn those who don't fully embrace our vocabulary. Educating them about the necessity behind our expressions and gradually familiarizing them with our terminology is essential. In a climate of defending against Arianism and Sabellianism, any resistance to these explanations may raise suspicions of sympathy with these errors. Arius admitted Christ's divinity, but in secret, he wavered, suggesting Christ was created and had a beginning. He confessed Christ's unity with the Father but privately implied it was a common privilege for the faithful. Affirming that Christ is of the same substance as the Father dispels such falsehood without straying from scripture. Sabellius claimed that the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit lacked significance. By asserting the existence of three entities within God—while maintaining their unity—we address this error and silence the heretic.

While some may find superstition in these terms, it's undeniable that scripture proclaims one God, signifying unity in divine essence, and yet it also names three, highlighting distinct characteristics. When these truths are acknowledged plainly and without deception, the

exact words used become secondary. Now, let us proceed to expound upon the creed.

THE FIRST PART

I believe in God the Father almighty

Let us first consider the manner of speaking. To believe in God signifies more than mere mental assent; it implies acceptance, devotion, and commitment to Him and His Word. The phrase originates from the Hebrew language, which equates "to believe in God" with "to believe God" and have faith in Him. The faithful, in uttering this confession, declare their acceptance and acknowledgment of God as their own, binding themselves to Him as His devoted servants. This covenant enables them to join in exclaiming, "You have been our God from the beginning; therefore, we will not perish" (Habakkuk 1:12). When we claim God as our own, we secure life and salvation in Him. The appellation "Father" is coupled with "God" to reinforce this assurance. Through His beloved Son, upon whom His divine favor rests (Matthew 3:17), God reveals Himself as our Father, inviting us into a spiritual relationship from which all heavenly and earthly bonds derive, as affirmed by St. Paul (Ephesians 3:14). Through faith, we not only approach God but also encounter Him as our Father, for we cannot know Him apart from His Son, who conveys to us this extraordinary privilege. With God as our Father, we become His cherished children, and as His children, we also become heirs (Romans 8:17; 2 Corinthians 6:18).

In attributing to God the attribute of almightiness, we do not subscribe to the sophists' notions of impotence and inertia. On the contrary, we recognize His power as active, effective, and all-encompassing. God is deemed "almighty" not because He remains passive while capable of performing all things, but because He

exercises dominion over all creation. Through His providence, He orchestrates the affairs of heaven and earth, executing His divine plan and counsel (Psalm 115:3). As He accomplishes His desires and nothing escapes His watchful gaze, all transpires by His divine decree and authority. While we touch on this concept briefly now, a more extensive examination will be undertaken later. Through faith, we glean a twofold consolation in God's omnipotence. Firstly, we grasp His boundless ability to do good and ensure the salvation of His faithful. His hand governs and oversees all creation; heaven and earth are under His sovereign rule, and every creature is subject to His command. Secondly, faith finds solace in His protective care, as everything that could endanger us is subject to His will. Even the devil, with all his malevolent schemes, is restrained by the divine will. In essence, all forces opposing our salvation are under God's command.

Creator of Heaven and Earth

As we contemplate the Creator of heaven and earth, the wicked are compelled by the mere observation of the world to acknowledge His existence. However, faith provides a distinct perspective for contemplating God as the Creator, as mentioned in Hebrews 11:3: "By faith we understand that the world was created by God's word." Indeed, comprehending the significance of designating God as the "Creator of the world" requires faith. Although it might seem that we comprehend this truth within our minds and confess it with our words, our earthly minds typically cease their contemplation at recognizing God's power in creation. These minds, when striving their utmost, merely acknowledge the power and wisdom He employed in the act of creation. Subsequently, these earthly minds vaguely grasp a general act of sustaining and directing the creations, attributing the motion of all creatures to this.

Nevertheless, faith ascends to higher realms. Beyond acknowledging God as the Creator of the world, faith recognizes Him as the Sustainer and Everlasting Ruler. This goes beyond a universal force guiding the cosmic framework; faith apprehends His meticulous providence, which sustains, preserves, and imparts life to all His creations, down to the smallest birds of the sky. While the distinction may appear subtle, human wisdom scarcely reaches the profundity of this insight, a reflection exemplified in Psalm 104. In this psalm, David meditates on the intricate divine care underlying creation, especially evident in verses like, "All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground" (Psalm 104:27-30). Similar expressions are woven throughout Scripture. We learn that life itself is sustained by God, as emphasized in Acts 17:28, while dew and rain originate from His hand to nourish the fields. At His command, the heavens turn as hard as iron. From Him emanate both peace and war, life and death, light and darkness, plagues and health, abundance and famine, all expressions of His goodness and justice.

Through these teachings, the faithful conscience derives a particular solace. If God provides sustenance to the raven, creatures that beseech His aid (Psalm 147:9), how much more will He nourish us, His people and the sheep of His pasture (Psalm 79:13)? If He takes note of a sparrow's fall through His knowledge and will (Matthew 10:29), how much more will He safeguard our salvation? He pledges to preserve us as the apple of His eye (Zechariah 2:8). Recognizing that life transcends mere physical sustenance and depends on the life-giving word from God's mouth (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3),

we find reassurance in His promise of unwavering assistance, ensuring our needs are met. When we encounter barrenness, famine, or disease, our perspective shifts from attributing such circumstances to chance, acknowledging them as expressions of God's wrath. In summary, understanding God as our Creator, Protector, and Nourisher compels us to recognize our identity as His, our lives as lived according to His will, and our actions as directed by His grace.

Ascribing the glory of creation to the Father in no way excludes the Son and the Holy Spirit. Instead, this attribution is to be understood in the context of the personal characteristics of the Divine, as we have previously expounded. As the Father is designated as the beginning of all things, we acknowledge Him as the Maker of all. However, this creation occurs through His Wisdom and by His Spirit. To truly fathom God as the Creator of heaven and earth and as the almighty Father, we must place our trust in His providence. We must meditate on His mercy and paternal benevolence, magnifying Him in our hearts and expressing honor, reverence, and love for our heavenly Father. Wholeheartedly devoted to His service, we accept all things from His hand, even those that appear contrary to our well-being. Believing that His providence orchestrates adversities and trials for our salvation, we find solace in the midst of challenges. Therefore, regardless of circumstances, we must never doubt His favor, love, and unwavering commitment to our well-being, as the first part of the creed imparts the lesson of fostering such unwavering confidence.

THE SECOND PART

In Jesus Christ, His Only Son, Our Lord

The profundity of Jesus Christ being the focal point and essence of our faith becomes evident when we consider that every facet of our salvation finds its culmination and unity in Him. The prophet's declaration that "the Lord came to save His people" (Habakkuk 3:13) emphasizes that the Lord, through His Christ, fulfills the work of His mercy to redeem His people. Firstly, our Redeemer is named "Jesus," a title bestowed by the Father, reflecting His mission to save and deliver people from the grip of sin (Matthew 1:21). In Christ alone, we discover salvation. The bestowal of this name holds divine significance, underscoring the unique avenue of salvation found solely in Him. Thus, the Scriptures affirm that "there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). This name, therefore, signifies to all believers that they should seek salvation exclusively in Him and offers unwavering assurance that it is indeed attainable therein.

Furthermore, the title "Christ," meaning Anointed, accompanies "Jesus." While the term "anointed" possesses relevance in other contexts, it holds a distinct significance for Christ, as He receives this title with singular privilege. God anoints all recipients of His Spirit's grace, extending even to faithful believers. Consequently, all the faithful are God's anointed. This spiritual anointing is shared by prophets, kings, and priests, characterized not merely by external ceremonial acts but a deeper spiritual consecration. However, all such anointings pale in comparison to that of our Savior. While others received diverse portions of grace according to God's measure (Romans 12:6), Christ alone possesses the fullness of these graces. John the Baptist emphasizes that God granted Christ His Spirit without limits, enabling believers to draw from His abundance and receive grace upon grace (John 3:34; 1:16). The prophet Isaiah predicted that the Spirit of the Lord would rest upon Him, not conferring a solitary grace but equipping Him with wisdom,

understanding, strength, counsel, knowledge, and piety (Isaiah 11:2). This prophecy was realized at Christ's baptism, when the Spirit descended upon Him, visibly confirming His spiritual anointing (John 1:32).

Indeed, the Spirit of God is aptly referred to as "anointing," with His graces symbolized as "oil." Without His nourishment, we remain barren and desolate, devoid of vitality. God's Spirit, having abundantly indwelt Jesus, selected His soul as a conduit through which to pour out on us. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on believers occurs through participation in Jesus, each one receiving through shared communion. This highlights the distinction between Christ's anointing and ours. Our Lord received the full measure of spiritual riches from God, and He bestows portions of these upon us. By resting upon Him, the Spirit establishes Him as the source from which we partake and commune in the graces of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, this anointing ordained Jesus as King by the Father, subjecting all powers in heaven and on earth under His dominion, in accordance with Psalm 2:8. He was also consecrated as Priest, fulfilling the role of mediator with the Father. These concepts hold immense significance in reinforcing and nourishing our faith. The nature of His kingdom transcends the earthly and corruptible; it is spiritual, belonging to the realm of the afterlife and the heavenly kingdom. His reign is directed not solely for His benefit but primarily for ours. He empowers and fortifies us, adorning us with His magnificence, enriching us with His blessings, and elevating us to the majesty of His kingdom. By participating in His authority, He endows us with the strength to combat the forces of evil, sin, and death. Through His righteousness, we are clothed and adorned, poised in anticipation of immortality. In this manner, our lives become fruitful for God through good deeds.

Regarding His priestly role, the benefits are no less profound. He intercedes with the Father on our behalf, securing divine favor through His mediation and the eternal reconciliation He achieved through His death. By making us participants in His sacrifice, He not only advocates for us but also allows us to offer prayers, thanksgivings, ourselves, and all that we possess to the Heavenly Father. The ancient promise that His people would become both kings and priests (Exodus 19:6) finds fulfillment in our Savior. Through Christ alone, we gain access to the realm of righteousness and the sacred dwelling of God. To summarize, through the name "Jesus," our confidence in redemption and salvation is confirmed. Through the title "Christ," we are invited to partake in the communication of the Holy Spirit and the sanctifying fruits He imparts. Christ's sanctification on our behalf, as He declared (John 17:19), establishes a bridge for us to commune with God, participate in His blessings, and receive His graces.

The appellation "Son of God" signifies a profound reality concerning Jesus Christ. He is not a Son by adoption or through the grace granted to other faithful individuals. Instead, He is the genuine and natural Son of God, making Him extraordinary and distinct. While the Scriptures bestow the privilege of being called "children of God" upon the regenerated, Jesus Christ alone is uniquely termed the true and exclusive Son. How can He truly stand apart amidst the multitude of brethren unless He inherently possesses what others receive as a gift? It is imperative to exercise caution when encountering viewpoints that regard Jesus Christ as the exclusive Son of God solely due to His conception by the Holy Spirit in the virgin's womb—a notion that echoes the fallacious notion held by the Manicheans, who imagined humans to be of divine substance due to God breathing life into Adam. In contrast, Scripture unveils that the

Son of God is the very Word of God, begotten by the Father prior to all ages.

While it is true that some cite references such as God not sparing His own Son (Romans 5:8, 10) and the angel declaring that the virgin-born child shall be called the Son of God (Luke 1:32), a deeper exploration is required. Such arguments warrant careful consideration. If the premise that Jesus Christ became the Son of God only at the moment of His conception in the virgin's womb is upheld, then it logically follows that He began to be the Word of life only when He manifested in human form. In this vein, the argument raises questions concerning passages like the prophecy stating, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2). However, a pivotal passage from St. Paul clarifies this ambiguity. He asserts that Christ was "born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:3-4). This declaration underscores the separation between His divinity and flesh. Indeed, this statement's lucidity negates ignorance, emphasizing that any resistance would stem from obstinacy. It is vital to acknowledge that Jesus Christ was the Son of God in His incarnate form, although speaking edifyingly calls us to perceive Him not solely as the eternal Word of God, but also as the embodiment of humanity, a concept that will be expounded upon further.

Finally, the title "Lord" is conferred upon Jesus Christ, for the Father has ordained Him to assume the roles of our Lord, King, and Lawgiver. Correspondingly, when He manifested in flesh, He explicitly demonstrated His intention to govern and rule. As the

apostle declares, "But to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live" (1 Corinthians 8:6). This statement signifies more than His role as a Teacher or Master, urging us not only to heed His teachings but also to recognize His authority and sovereignty. He is our Leader and Chief, commanding our submission to His power, our obedience to His will, and the alignment of all our endeavors with His purpose. As the firstborn of the Father's household, He wields dominion over His brethren, distributing the inheritance's blessings according to His divine discretion.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary

The luminous mystery of the incarnation possesses the ability to both enlighten the understanding and provoke contemplation. Nevertheless, when misunderstood, this profound truth can lead to confusion and laborious contemplation. Therefore, a brief elucidation is in order before we proceed. Firstly, it is indispensable that the Mediator bridging the gap between humanity and divinity should be authentically both God and [hu]man. Our transgressions erected a barrier between us and God, estranging us from the heavenly realm and causing God to seem remote. Only one possessing the capacity to span this chasm was capable of effecting reconciliation—an entity capable of traversing this expanse. Could it be an offspring of Adam? Yet fear restrained Adam's descendants from approaching the Divine presence. Could it be an angel? Even they required a chief to unite them harmoniously with God. The question arises: Who could fulfill this role? Indeed, it would have been a forlorn situation had not the grandeur of God condescended to humanity, for our feeble nature lacks the means to ascend to His majesty. Consequently, it was imperative for the Son of God to

become Immanuel—God with us—uniting His divinity with our humanity, thereby establishing an inseparable bond. Without such a union, the hope of God dwelling within us and offering assistance would remain feeble in the face of the vast disparity between our insignificance and the magnificence of Divine Majesty.

In presenting Jesus as our Mediator, St. Paul explicitly designates Him as "man" (1 Timothy 2:5). While he could have alternatively referred to Him as "God" or perhaps omitted the term "man," Paul's choice illuminates his awareness of our frailty. By identifying Jesus as "man," he signifies that Jesus is our near companion, as He shares in our humanity. Paul's intent is to underscore a concept more comprehensively addressed elsewhere—that our High Priest is not devoid of compassion for our weaknesses. Having encountered temptations akin to ours but remaining without sin, Jesus empathizes with our human predicaments (Hebrews 4:15).

A deeper understanding emerges upon contemplating the role of the Mediator. This role is no ordinary task—it encompasses the restoration of God's grace, transforming us from children of humanity into children of God. Likewise, it grants us a heavenly inheritance, elevating us from heirs of perdition to heirs of salvation. Yet, who could fulfill such a monumental responsibility? None other than the Son of God, made Son of man, divinely joining His nature with ours. Thus, He imparts His inherent attributes to us through divine grace. This unique unity assures us of our status as God's children, as the natural Son of God adopts our humanity, merging His essence with our earthly existence. By embracing our human condition, He extends to us what was originally His, endowing us with divine favor. Consequently, the unique Son of God—possessor of heavenly privilege—extends kinship to us, granting us assurance of

our status as heirs to the heavenly realm. Indeed, we become co-heirs with Him, partaking in His divine inheritance.

The necessity for our Redeemer to be both true God and true man stems from two pivotal aspects. First, His purpose was to vanquish death—Life itself was the sole force capable of achieving this feat. Additionally, He was to conquer sin—a task reserved for Righteousness alone. His mission also included subduing the celestial forces of darkness, the malevolent entities known as devils—a feat only possible for a Power transcending both the earthly and heavenly domains. Such attributes reside uniquely in God. Thus, through His boundless mercy, the Lord emerged as our Redeemer, triumphing over death and sin.

Our redemption further entailed the restoration of mankind's obedience, counteracting the disobedience that led to our downfall. In assuming the role of Adam, Jesus embraced humanity's name and nature, offering obedience to the Father on behalf of all humanity. He thereby demonstrated humanity's potential to fulfill God's requirements. By accepting the burden of human flesh, He bore the penalty of sin, a punishment etched upon the same flesh that had transgressed (Romans 5:12ff). Moreover, as the only One capable of defeating death as God, yet unable to experience death solely as man, Jesus united divinity with humanity. This union enabled Him to withstand human frailty and endure the sting of death, ultimately achieving victory. To deny Christ's divinity or humanity is not merely a disservice to His greatness and goodness, but also a detriment to faith itself, undermining the foundation upon which unwavering faith stands.

To further linger in substantiating His divinity would, I am convinced, be redundant. His true human nature was impugned by

both Manicheans and Marcionites who aimed to dismantle it. The Manicheans speculated that He brought a spiritual form from the heavens, while the Marcionites propagated the notion that He inhabited a phantom or illusion—a mere semblance of a body. However, numerous scriptural references robustly repudiate these two fallacies. Long ago, the promise of blessing was not predicated upon a celestial progeny or a feigned human guise; rather, it was rooted in the lineage of Abraham and Jacob (Genesis 17:7, 16). The eternal throne was not pledged to an ethereal entity, but to the Son of David and the fruit of his lineage (Psalm 132:11). Thus, when manifested in flesh, He is hailed as the Son of Abraham and David (Matthew 1:1), not because His origin commenced with His virgin birth as if He was first shaped from the aether, but due to His fleshly lineage, as clarified by St. Paul (Romans 1:3, 9:5). Elsewhere, St. Paul attests that He descends from the Jews (Galatians 3:16). Thus, by embracing human designation as "man," Jesus deems Himself "Son of man," denoting that He is a man born of human lineage. Given the frequency, variety, and simplicity with which the Holy Spirit emphasizes this truth through diverse voices, who could have anticipated audacity to equivocate on this matter?

Moreover, a host of testimonials exist to dispel such unfounded aspersions. St. Paul asserts that "God sent His Son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). A plethora of passages convincingly illustrate His vulnerability to cold, heat, hunger, and other human frailties. Nevertheless, we must select those that fortify our hearts with authentic confidence, such as when it is stated that He did not exalt angels above humans in His incarnation, but "He took on our nature so that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death" (Hebrews 2:14, 16). Through this union, He identifies us as His brethren, a kinship evidenced by His willingness to intercede and extend mercy (Hebrews 2:11, 17). Furthermore, the

assertion that "we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are" (Hebrews 4:15) offers substantial comfort. Heretics falter when distorting passages to bolster their misconceptions. Marcion and his associates contorted Paul's declaration that Christ took on human likeness and form, erroneously asserting that Christ adopted an illusionary form rather than a true body. Yet, Marcion overlooked Paul's intent in this passage. The apostle did not aim to clarify the physical form Christ assumed; rather, he underscores Christ's humility in choosing to manifest Himself in human appearance (Philippians 2:6–8). Meanwhile, the Manicheans fashioned a corporeal form for Christ from air, arguing that Christ—designated as the second, heavenly Adam—originated from heaven. However, the apostle in this passage does not address Christ's celestial essence, but the spiritual authority conferred upon Him to impart life. Conversely, faithful affirmation of Jesus Christ's true human nature is substantiated by this passage. Had He not shared our nature, St. Paul's vigorous argument asserting the necessity of Christ's resurrection—hinging on the truth that Christ's resurrection guarantees ours—would be rendered insubstantial (1 Corinthians 15:16ff).

Regarding the phrase "The Word was made flesh" (John 1:14), it ought not to be misconstrued as a transformation into flesh or a mingling of substances. Rather, it signifies that the Word assumed a human body—akin to a temple—in which to dwell. The Son of God, already existing, became the Son of man, not through a fusion of essences, but through a unification of personhood. Thus, He harmoniously blended and united His divinity with the humanity He embraced. Though both natures retained their distinct attributes, Jesus Christ remained singular, devoid of two separate personas.

If we seek a parallel to this mystery of the two natures in Christ, the concept of a person offers an apt metaphor. A person consists of two distinct natures, with each retaining its inherent qualities; a soul is not equivalent to a body, and vice versa. Thus, certain attributes uniquely pertain to the soul or the body. However, the nature of a person incorporates characteristics of both the soul and body. Consequently, a person, comprised of these two distinct elements, remains indivisible. This metaphor illustrates that a person embodies a single nature comprising two distinct components, each maintaining its individuality while coexisting harmoniously.

Scripture indeed employs this discourse regarding Jesus Christ. It alternately attributes qualities that exclusively pertain to humanity, divinity, or both combined natures. This precise fusion of the two natures within Jesus Christ, skillfully articulated by the early church fathers as "communication of properties," is revealed through scriptural passages. My assertions find validation within these scriptures; I merely amplify these truths. Christ's assertion that He existed before Abraham's creation (John 8:58) could not be applied to His humanity, which emerged centuries after Abraham's era. Phrases like "firstborn of all creation," denoting precedence over everything and the sustainer of all (Colossians 1:15–17), exceed the bounds of human attributes. Such accolades belong inherently to divinity. Conversely, designations such as "Servant of the Father" (Isaiah 43:10) and statements about His growth in age and wisdom (Luke 2:52), His admission of lesser knowledge than the Father's (Matthew 24:36), His inclination not to seek His own glory, and His limited awareness of the final day (John 3:13) align aptly with His humanity. His divinity, as God, is akin to the Father, omnipotent and all-knowing. The concept of communication of characteristics is discerned in St. Paul's assertion that "God obtained His church by His blood" (Acts 20:28) and "the Lord of glory was crucified" (1

Corinthians 2:8). Though God lacks blood and does not endure suffering, Christ, being both God and man, was crucified and shed His blood for us. This form of expression, although unconventional, bridges the actions of His humanity with His divine nature. Similarly, the assertion that God gave His life for us (1 John 3:16) demonstrates communication of attributes between Christ's humanity and His divine nature. Christ's statement that no one ascended to heaven except the Son of Man, even when He was not yet bodily in heaven (John 3:13), indicates that due to the unity of His two natures, He attributes qualities of one nature to the other.

To truly grasp Christ's essence, we must explore passages where both natures are united. Such passages abound in the Gospel of St. John. These declarations neither exclusively belong to Christ's humanity nor His divinity; they encapsulate His person, which unites divinity and humanity. Such passages underscore Christ's authority to forgive sins, raise the dead, grant righteousness, holiness, and salvation (John 5:27; 10:18; 17:12), and to judge the living and the dead, thereby sharing the Father's honor (John 5:22–23). He is the world's Light (John 1:9; 8:12), the compassionate Shepherd (John 10:11, 14), the exclusive Door and the Vine (John 10:7, 9; 15:1, 5). These attributes were not assumed upon incarnation but preexisted before the world's creation. They decidedly do not conform to human attributes. We should also consider St. Paul's statement that Christ shall deliver the kingdom to God the Father, having executed judgment (1 Corinthians 15:24). The reign of the eternal Son of God knows no commencement nor termination. While His reign has no end, He willingly subjected Himself to the limitations of human flesh, relinquishing majesty to obey the Father (Philippians 2:7). Yet, posthumously exalted, He received a preeminent Name (Philippians 2:9) and will eventually surrender His glory, along with the entirety

of His fleshly inheritance, to the Father. This exchange maintains unity and affirms God's comprehensive sovereignty.

Such reflections ease the burden of many vexations. It's astounding how some, lacking insight, torment themselves when confronted with these forms of expression—utterances that ascribe to Christ attributes fitting neither His humanity nor divinity alone, but cohesively to His person as God and man. Pondering the profundity of this mystery with due reverence, one discovers its harmony. However, the misguided may sow confusion, misapplying attributes intended for Christ's humanity to discredit His divinity and vice versa. Their stance insinuates that Christ is not truly a man in His divinity, nor divine in His humanity. This audacious endeavor attempts to negate both Christ's divine and human nature—rendering Him devoid of both. Rejecting such misguided notions, we affirm that Christ, united with two distinct yet undivided natures, stands as our Savior and the authentic Son of God, even through His humanity—not simply on account of His humanity. It is imperative to shun the error of Nestorius, who not only misconstrued but divided Christ's natures, culminating in a dual Christ concept. Scripture instead resounds with clarity, affirming that the Virgin Mary is the mother of our Lord, and that He who shall be born of her will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35, 43).

We avow His birth from the Virgin Mary, recognizing Him as the true descendant of Abraham and David, as foretold in the law and prophecies. This dual purpose kindles faith with profound meaning. Through His embodiment, the Son of God perfects human salvation, inviting us into communion with Himself and His divine treasures. By stepping into our human role, He overcomes the grasp of the devil and death, securing victory and triumph for us. Furthermore, tracing His lineage back to David and Abraham reinforces the certainty that

our Redeemer is the long-awaited fulfillment of God's ancient promise (Genesis 17:16, 22:17–18; Psalm 132:17).

The assertion that He was conceived by the Holy Spirit underscores His divine purity. The One sent to purify us would not bear an impure origin. The human vessel chosen by God to dwell within should remain untainted by the corruption of humanity. Thus, the Holy Spirit's extraordinary power transcends natural law, sanctifying Jesus Christ's conception. His birth reflects perfect holiness and purity, teaching us to seek these virtues solely in Him, as His conception remained untainted by human corruption.

Subsequently, Christ's fulfillment of our redemption takes center stage. His mortal incarnation was guided by the divine purpose of appeasing God's wrath through His obedience. He humbly submitted to the Father even unto death. This obedience becomes the crux of our salvation, as St. Paul aptly notes: "Just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18). In this context, our salvation finds its essence: the Son of God forsaking His own will, dedicating His life to the Father's pleasure, and enduring death's agony, all to reconcile the divine wrath stirred by human rebellion. This obedience's merit lies at the core of our redemption, reconciling the heavenly Father with humanity's prior state of enmity. Christ's self-sacrifice offered a fragrant plea, appeasing God's just judgment and securing eternal sanctification for the faithful. Through His sacred blood, the price of our redemption, He quenched the flames of divine anger, purifying our sins.

When seeking assurance of salvation, we must anchor ourselves in this redemption—God's favor made manifest, the heavenly portal

opened for us, and righteousness attained on our behalf. Scripture continually reinforces this truth: Christ's sacrifice restored God's goodwill toward us, serving as the cornerstone of our confidence and life. His blood washes away the defilement and stains of our sins, as articulated by St. John's words: "The blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Thus, our redemption finds its essence in Christ's satisfaction, liberating us from sin's chains and restoring us to righteousness and holiness. Through His atonement, we are reconciled with a God who abhors nothing in us but our sin.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified

We solemnly acknowledge that He endured suffering under the governance of Pontius Pilate, undergoing crucifixion—a testimony not only to authenticate historical truth but also to unveil the depths of our redemption. Christ's death, orchestrated meticulously to vanquish sins and expunge the condemnation spawned by transgression, necessitated a specific manner of demise. To flawlessly execute every facet of our redemption, a particular form of death was ordained. This chosen path was paramount, wherein He assumed our condemnation and bore the weight of God's wrath, effecting our liberation from both.

Primarily, He endured judgment under the jurisdiction of the provincial governor, subject to the verdict of the judge, to emancipate us from condemnation in the presence of the supreme Judge. Had He been slain by bandits or felled in a tumultuous riot, these modes would not have sufficed as a form of atonement. But His trial before a tribunal, charged by witnesses, and sentenced by a judge, underscored His portrayal as an offender. Here, two facets deserve reflection, serving as solace for our faith. When Christ, indicted and suspended between malefactors, fulfilled the prophecy

"He was numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:9; Luke 22:37), it actualized the heralded fulfillment, as He assumed the burden of retribution fitting sinners. Paradoxically, His absolution by the very mouth that condemned Him (Pilate, constrained to attest to His innocence multiple times—John 18:38, 19:4) echoed the ancient prophecy, wherein He paid for the theft He had never committed (Psalm 69:4). Thus, Christ embodies both the role of a sinner and an innocent victim, magnifying our comprehension of His vicarious suffering and redemption. Therefore, He suffered under Pontius Pilate, condemned unjustly yet absolved righteously.

The choice of crucifixion carries profound mysteries. The cross bore a divine curse, affirmed not solely by human perception but ratified by divine law (Deuteronomy 21:23). Through His crucifixion, Christ willingly embraced the curse, a necessity arising from His divine purpose. This pivotal act mandated that the curse we merited, a consequence of our sins, be transferred to Him, a divine act of deliverance. This principle was prefigured in Mosaic sacrifices, where victims named "sin" bore the weight of sin's curse, symbolizing a symbolic acceptance of the curse. Christ fulfills and transcends these symbols, as the substance of these ancient shadows. Thus, He becomes the ultimate sin offering, His soul a sacrifice for transgressions, transferring the curse back onto Himself, thereby sparing us from its grip (Isaiah 53:10-11). In this divine exchange, He who knew no sin bore the sin of humanity, so that we might inherit God's righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Similarly, Christ's crucifixion holds the essence of this divine transaction, signifying our liberation from the curse. The cross, a symbolic sign of curse, transformed into a symbol of blessing. As Christ embraced the cross, He broke the shackles of the curse, turning it into a means of liberation. His crucifixion exemplifies the

fulfillment of the prophecy that "all our sins were laid upon Him" (Isaiah 53:6), where sins were imputed to Him for ultimate redemption. This transformation from curse to blessing finds resonance in Paul's words, highlighting Christ's role as a curse-bearer to bring about our salvation (Galatians 3:13). The ancient declaration "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Deuteronomy 27:26; Galatians 3:10) paved the way for the blessing promised to Abraham, extending salvation to all. Notably, Christ did not passively accept the curse, but actively shattered its power, substituting blessing for our curse.

In Christ's condemnation, we discover absolution; in His curse, we unearth blessings. Amidst the echoes of His crucifixion, faith finds refuge in the certainty of salvation—through His sacrifice, redemption, and the profound exchange of curses for blessings.

Dead and buried

Behold, the profundity of His journey unfolds—from the embrace of death to the embrace of the tomb—revealing His relentless commitment to fulfill our sacred duty, to ransom our souls from the grip of sin's debt. Death, an inescapable shackle, had ensnared us, but Christ willingly surrendered Himself to its dominion, the ultimate ransom for our liberation. The apostle's words resound, "He tasted death for all" (Hebrews 2:9), encapsulating His self-sacrifice. Through His demise, life was secured; by His death, death's tyranny was abolished. His manner of demise differed from our own; He yielded to death's clasp, not to be obliterated, but to obliterate death itself, dismantling its authority. He faced death head-on, not as a victim, but as a victor, rendering the devil's reign futile. Through His death, He emancipated us from the shackles of death's terror

(Hebrews 2:14-15). This is the initial harvest reaped from His sacrificial death.

A second harvest emerges as death's transformative power permeates our mortal beings, arresting our earthly desires. By its very force, death quashes the old self within us, rendering it impotent (Romans 6:6). In harmony with this transformative purpose, the burial of Christ underscores our burial to sin. The apostle's voice resounds, "We have been buried with Him through baptism into death" (Romans 6:4), unveiling a profound linkage to His burial. Further, he asserts that "through Christ's cross, the world is dead to us and we to the world; we have died with Him" (Galatians 6:14, 2:19). Here, the call is not merely to mimic His death but to partake in its efficacy, lest we render our Redeemer's death ineffectual.

Hence, a twofold grace emanates from the death and burial of Jesus Christ: liberation from death's clutches and the crucifixion of our earthly inclinations. As we walk alongside Him on His path to the grave, the transformative impact of His death reverberates within us. We emerge liberated from the tyranny of death's shadow, and yet, something profound transpires beneath the surface. Our mortal impulses are subdued; our old selves, entombed. Through this transformative journey, the resonance of Christ's death shapes our lives, inviting us to share in the transformative power of His sacrifice. May we not merely bear witness but partake in His crucifixion, allowing our lives to echo the victory achieved on the cross. Through His death and burial, the seed of renewal is sown, inviting us to embrace the transformative path toward resurrection and renewal.

He descended into hell

Amid the discussions of early church scholars regarding the inclusion of this phrase within the creed, let us not omit its essence, for it unveils an enigmatic and profound truth. While historical records suggest variations in its adoption, we must not disregard its significance. Some church fathers acknowledged this descent, albeit interpreting it diversely. The origins of its insertion may dwell in obscurity, yet we find within it a complete embodiment of our faith, woven with scriptural threads. Herein lies a quintessential element, essential to our redemption.

Some equate this phrase with the earlier mention of burial, deeming it a mere restatement. Admittedly, the term "hell" is at times synonymous with "grave." However, two compelling reasons counter this notion. It would be incongruous to obscure a clear concept with cryptic language, a needless repetition. A second explanation, revolving around the notion of Christ liberating Old Testament fathers from a subterranean prison or "limbo," is grounded in legend rather than truth. Citing Zechariah and Peter as support yields tenuous connections. Zechariah's "pit without water" symbolizes the abyss of sin, and Peter's reference pertains to Christ's proclamation of redemption, not liberation from a subterranean domain. Therefore, discernment warrants rejection of this fable.

Instead, a more certain interpretation unveils itself, a truth profoundly steeped in divine wisdom. Christ's descent embodies unparalleled significance, as He confronted death's abyss to intercede against divine wrath. In this divine struggle, He contended with the powers of hell, grappling with the specter of eternal death. The prophet's voice echoes, proclaiming His role as a guarantor and debtor, bearing the weight of sin's punishment (Isaiah 53:4-5). Yet, He emerged victorious, vanquishing death's dominion (Acts 2:24).

Seek clarity within this context: Can one fathom the agony of feeling forsaken by God, to endure isolation, bereft of divine aid, engulfed in the prospect of destruction? Christ trod this agonizing path, grappling with the weight of suffering. His anguished cry, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46), resonates as an authentic lament. Conjectures that it reflected the emotions of others are untenable, for the depth of bitterness underscores its authenticity. It does not insinuate God's wrath toward Christ, for how could the Father be angry with His beloved Son, with whom He declared His pleasure (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22)? Christ's intercession for humanity would lose meaning if His actions had estranged the Father from Himself.

However, Christ bore the weight of divine punishment, experiencing the signs of divine displeasure. He wrestled with the devil's power, death's dread, and the anguish of hell. Through this profound struggle, He emerged triumphant, dismantling the forces that shackled humanity. His victory alleviates the fear of death's clutches, for He journeyed into the abyss and conquered its dominion. Thus, through His descent, the abyss is transformed, from a pit of despair into a chasm of hope that we might no longer fear in death the things which our Prince has destroyed.

The third day He rose from the dead

Beyond the visage of Christ's cross, death, and burial, faith must venture to gain profound fortitude. While Christ's death encompasses the consummation of salvation—reconciliation with God, appeasement of divine justice, annihilation of the curse, and liberation from merited retribution—the dawn of living hope arises not through His demise but His resurrection (1 Peter 1:3). Just as His resurrection victoriously overcame death, our own liberation from its

grip hinges firmly on His triumph. The apostle's words illuminate this truth—Christ "died for our sins and was raised for our righteousness" (Romans 4:25). His death vanquishes sin, while His resurrection rekindles righteousness. This division within our redemption clarifies that Christ's death eradicated sin and death, whereas His resurrection established righteousness and bestowed life anew.

As we've discussed the mortification of our earthly desires through partaking in Christ's cross, another fruit, stemming from His resurrection, awaits contemplation. The apostle's insight emerges: in sharing His death's likeness, we participate in His resurrection to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). Another passage echoes this notion—dying with Christ mandates mortifying our earthly aspects, while being raised with Him impels us to seek heavenly things (Colossians 3:1). These verses not only call us to emulate the resurrected Christ's transformative power but also emphasize our rebirth in righteousness through His potent resurrection.

Furthermore, His resurrection assures us of our impending revival. As Christ's resurrection forms the bedrock and essence of our own resurgence, certainty of our future resurrection takes root within us.

A fleeting note—He "rose from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:20), underscoring His actual demise and revival. His victory over mortality, encapsulated within mortal flesh, remains a testament to His unparalleled journey.

He ascended into the heavens and is seated
at the right of God the Father almighty

Even as Christ's glory and might were magnified through His resurrection, relinquishing the humility of His mortal form and the

ignominy of the cross, His reign attained its zenith upon His ascension. This truth emerges as the apostle declares that He "ascended to fulfill all things" (Ephesians 4:10). The expanse of grace intensified, His majesty expanded more fully, and His omnipotence was more profoundly manifest—nurturing His own and quelling His adversaries. Embracing the heavens, His bodily presence withdrew from our view. However, His absence wasn't a cessation of aid to His earthly faithful but a governance fortified by a more pervasive potency. The assurance of His perpetual presence, vouched until the world's end, found realization in this ascension. As His body soared above celestial realms, His authority surged beyond earthly confines.

In tandem with His ascension, He assumed His rightful place at the Father's right hand (Ephesians 1:20). This metaphor mirrors the practice of monarchs appointing deputies to govern on their behalf. Christ, elevated to a position of authority, operates as the Father's partner in overseeing creation. This term illuminates His ordination as Lord over heaven and earth, formalizing His sovereignty and dominion, enduring till the final judgment. The apostle clarifies this concept, depicting Christ as elevated above all principalities, powers, dominions, and names, now and forever. This verity reinforces the direction His ascendancy takes—His rule over creation's heavenly and earthly spheres, guiding their destinies, and commanding obedience.

While some err by perceiving this term as signifying Christ's blessedness, it signifies a dominion that encompasses the subjection of all creatures—celestial and terrestrial—to His majesty. The apostolic references (Acts 2:33, 3:21; Hebrews 1:3) allude to Christ's entrusted authority. The notion that "seated" entails His heavenly blessedness overlooks the depth of His omnipotent dominion. Although St. Stephen observes Him standing (Acts 7:56), it signifies

His power's majesty, not His bodily posture. "Seated" symbolizes His heavenly throne.

The ascension confers manifold benefits upon our faith. Christ's passage to heaven reopens an entrance sealed by Adam. As He enters heaven in our humanity and on our behalf, the apostle's proclamation gains resonance—through His ascension, we are united with Him in the heavenly realm (Ephesians 2:6). Assurance sprouts from possession in our Head, not mere hope. Moreover, His presence with the Father emboldens us. In the heavenly sanctuary, Christ functions as our perpetual Advocate and Intercessor (Hebrews 9:11, 7:25), captivating the Father's gaze with His righteousness and deflecting attention from our transgressions. He reconciles our hearts to the Father, affording us access through His intercession (Romans 8:34). Graces and mercies are bestowed upon us, dispelling dread and turning the Father into a gracious figure, not an intimidating one.

Lastly, we unearth Christ's profound authority, the source of our strength, deliverance, and triumph against evil. His ascent vanquished adversaries, enriching His people with spiritual blessings (Ephesians 4:7ff). Positioned on high, His effusion of power empowers us, bestowing spiritual life, sanctification, and precious gifts upon His church. His vigilant shield safeguards against harm, and His dominion annihilates all who oppose His cross and our salvation. Ultimately, He reigns supreme, conquering every foe until His enemies, shared by the faithful, are vanquished, the church perfected.

From there He will come to judge the living and the dead

Henceforth, the disciples of Jesus Christ possess ample markers to discern the potency of His presence. Yet, given that His sovereign

dominion remains veiled beneath the modesty of His human form, faith is justly directed towards His forthcoming tangible appearance. He will descend visibly, akin to His ascent (Acts 1:11), revealing Himself in the resplendent majesty of His kingdom—an aura of immortality, an infinity of divine power—accompanied by His angelic retinue. We are instructed to anticipate our Redeemer's return from heaven, when He will segregate the righteous from the unrighteous (Matthew 25:31ff). None, alive or deceased, can evade His judgment. The resonating trumpet call will reverberate across the earth, summoning all to stand before His judgment throne—both the living and those who have passed before (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

Some interpret "the living and the dead" as the virtuous and the wicked. It is evident that several early church fathers grappled with interpretations of these words. However, the initial significance is more fitting, as it aligns with the simplicity and convention of Scripture. It doesn't oppose the apostle's assertion that all are destined to die once (Hebrews 9:27). Though those alive during the judgment will not meet natural demise, their transformation—akin to death—renders the term apt. While not everyone will experience prolonged slumber, all will undergo metamorphosis (1 Corinthians 15:51–52). This signifies the abrupt destruction and renewal of earthly existence. This transformation, a kind of death, remains applicable to the living and the deceased before the judgment. The deceased in Christ will rise first; then the living shall join the Lord in the air, as articulated by St. Paul (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). Likely, this creedal article emerged from St. Peter's discourse in Acts 10:42 and St. Paul's poignant address to Timothy, where the living and the dead are explicitly addressed (2 Timothy 4:1).

From this truth, we draw unique solace: the One appointed to judge is the same One who deigned to ordain us as co-participants in His glory. He ascended His throne not to condemn but to redeem—such is His profound mercy! Could a Prince of boundless compassion truly cast away His people? Would the Head shatter its own members? Could the Advocate condemn those under His protective wing? If the apostle dares to assert that none can accuse us when Christ intercedes on our behalf (Romans 8:34), it stands certain that our Intercessor, Christ, will not condemn us. He has assumed our cause, vowing to bolster us. It is no trifling reassurance to affirm that we shall face no tribunal except that of our Redeemer, from whom salvation is anticipated. Furthermore, the One who presently promises eternal bliss through the Gospel will then cement this pledge through judgment. So magnificently has the Father honored His Son with the authority to judge (John 5:22, 27), providing balm to His servants' anxious consciences. Without this sure hope, dread of judgment might prevail.

As we contemplate the comprehensive essence of our salvation, we must be vigilant against dispersing even the slightest fragment of it elsewhere. The name of Jesus itself proclaims that salvation resides solely in Him (Acts 4:12). Should we yearn for the endowments of the Holy Spirit, His anointing provides them. If strength is our pursuit, it's found within His dominion. The quest for purity is met by His immaculate conception. Gentleness and kindness radiate through His birth, uniting Him with us to show compassion (Hebrews 2:17, 5:2). In His suffering lies redemption; in His condemnation, our absolution. His cross abolishes the curse, offering us blessing. Satisfaction is derived from His sacrifice, purity from His blood. Our reconciliation unfolds through His descent into the depths. The mortification of our earthly desires rests within His burial; the dawn of a fresh existence is encapsulated by His resurrection, bestowing

the prospect of immortality. As we aspire to our celestial inheritance, His ascension assures it. And when seeking aid, comfort, and the bounty of goodness, His kingdom provides. In our anticipation of judgment, His role as Judge ensures our safety.

In essence, as the reservoir of all goodness resides within Him, we must draw upon His wellspring rather than seeking it elsewhere. Those who, while primarily focused on Him, still wander in search of diverse hopes, stray from the true path by dispersing their thoughts—despite their attention to Him. Yet, once we've truly comprehended His boundless riches, such doubt can find no foothold within our minds.

THE THIRD PART

I believe in the Holy Spirit

Following faith in the Father and the Son, we journey onward to embrace faith in the Holy Spirit—an essential cornerstone in our journey towards salvation. For the truths revealed about our cleansing and sanctification through Jesus Christ are only realized when He is bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit. The apostle underscores this by stating that we are cleansed and sanctified in the name of Jesus Christ and through the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11). This implies that the graces bestowed by Jesus Christ are imprinted within us by the Holy Spirit. Thus, after acknowledging the Father and the Son, it is fitting to embrace faith in the Holy Spirit, who confirms the fruit of divine mercy and the grace attained through Jesus Christ.

When the term "Spirit" resonates, let us recall the multifaceted roles that scripture attributes to Him, and anticipate the blessings He imparts according to its testimony. Scripture teaches that every

manifestation of God's grace is the handiwork of His Spirit, for the Father operates through the Son by the Spirit. Through the Spirit, God creates, sustains, imparts life, and safeguards all of His creations. The Spirit calls and draws the faithful to God's embrace, justifies them, instills new life and sanctifies them, bestows a variety of graces, and fortifies them with celestial power until they reach their ultimate destination. When the Holy Spirit dwells within us, He enlightens our understanding, revealing the generous gifts of God's benevolence through Jesus Christ. He is aptly likened to a key that unlocks the treasures of the heavenly realm, and His illumination serves as the eye of our comprehension, enabling us to perceive them. Thus, He is also referred to as a Guarantee and Seal (2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5; Ephesians 1:13), affirming the certainty of God's promises within our hearts. At times, He is hailed as the Master of truth, the Originator of light, and the Source of wisdom, knowledge, and insight. He purifies us, setting us apart as sanctified vessels for God, adorning us with His holiness to become God's abode. By watering our souls, He encourages us to bear fruits of righteousness. Hence, the Spirit is often symbolized as "water," echoing the prophet's verses: "All you who are thirsty, come to the water" (Isaiah 55:1). Additionally: "I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground" (Isaiah 44:3). Christ's words align with this imagery when He invites all who thirst to partake of the living water (John 7:37). Furthermore, the Spirit is referred to as "water" due to its purifying potency, as seen in Ezekiel's prophecy where the Lord promises clear waters to cleanse His people (Ezekiel 36:25). He refreshes us with His divine nourishment, imbuing us with the essence of life, which is why He is symbolized as "oil" and "anointing." The Spirit burns away the impurities of our corrupt desires, igniting love within our hearts, which is why He is likened to "fire." He breathes divine life into our beings, enabling us to live not for ourselves, but under His guidance.

Hence, any goodness that arises within us is the fruit of His grace and power. Conversely, our inherent qualities amount to spiritual blindness and moral waywardness.

It's abundantly clear that directing our faith towards the Holy Spirit is indispensable and advantageous. In Him, we encounter the radiance that illuminates our souls, our spiritual rebirth, the dissemination of all graces, and, most importantly, the embodiment of all goodness originating from Jesus Christ.

THE FOURTH PART

I believe the holy catholic church, the communion of saints

In this unfolding journey, we come to embrace faith in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints—a sanctuary of unity and sanctity that beckons us to contemplation. To begin, let us reflect on the phrasing "believe the church" rather than "in the church." Although the latter form is more prevalent today and had currency in the early church, the early church fathers, including St. Cyprian and St. Augustine, advocated for "believe the church." Their reasoning, indeed, holds substance. "Believe in God" resonates with entrusting Him as the epitome of truth and anchoring our confidence in Him. However, extending such phrasing to "in the church" or other aspects like forgiveness of sins and resurrection of the flesh seems incongruous. While I do not seek to quarrel over semantics, it is wiser to embrace clarity in our expressions rather than veer into needless obscurity.

With utmost heed, let us remember our earlier counsel: hitherto, the foundation, the catalyst, and the root of our salvation have been unveiled. Now, we venture into understanding the ramifications. One who apprehends the omnipotence of God, the benevolence of Christ's

righteousness, and the potency of the Holy Spirit has perceived the catalyst of salvation. Yet, the methodology through which salvation takes form within us remains veiled until we consider the realm of the church, the absolution of sins, and the promise of eternal life. Hence, after comprehending God's role as the source of life, it naturally ensues that we consider His divine work that materializes within us.

Firstly, the church is presented to us as an object of belief rather than mere acceptance. This prompts us to acknowledge that all believers are interconnected by the bonds of faith, constituting a collective body under the leadership of Lord Jesus—the guiding light and leader. Above all, the church stands unified under the lordship of Christ, functioning as a cohesive body with Christ as its head. This mirrors the eternal decree of God's choice, where He elected His own to gather within His dominion (Ephesians 1:4, 21; Galatians 3:28). By embracing faith in the church, we recognize a unified assembly—a congregation that goes beyond mere numbers. We affirm our integration into this body, casting aside any uncertainty. To inherit the celestial realm, it is essential to establish our connection with Jesus Christ, our Head, and be in communion with fellow believers. After all, scripture unequivocally underscores that salvation finds its boundaries within the church's unity. Thus, the prophecies that allude to salvation in Zion and Jerusalem should be discerned as emblematic of unity (Isaiah 2:3; Joel 2:32). Likewise, when the Lord proclaims eternal condemnation, He declares those who stand apart from His people as ineligible, forever unenrolled among the children of Israel (Ezekiel 13:9).

Furthermore, this union is christened as "catholic" or universal, symbolizing a congregation of God's elect intertwined and bonded in Christ. They function like the limbs of one body, uniting in true

harmony. Though distinct, they share a common life sustained by the Spirit of God, fostering identical faith, hope, and love (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:17, 12:12–13; Ephesians 4:4). Not only do they share a common inheritance, but they also partake in the divine essence, basking in the presence of God and Jesus Christ.

In our expedition, we now arrive at the profound realm of faith encompassing the holy catholic church and the communion of saints—a journey that unfolds in sacred splendor. To commence, let us fathom the words "believe the church" instead of "in the church." While the latter is customary today and echoes through the echoes of antiquity, the voices of St. Cyprian and St. Augustine advocate the former with conviction. A reason undergirds this preference: "Believe in God" resonates as a trust in His truth and the bedrock of our confidence. Yet, extending this syntax to "in the church" or parallel expressions like the remission of sins and the resurrection of flesh feels incongruous. While I avoid wrangling over semantics, clarity of expression takes precedence over ambiguity.

With unwavering intent, let us heed the counsel shared earlier: thus far, the bedrock, the catalytic spark, and the core of our salvation have been unveiled. Now, our voyage leads us into its realization. One who comprehends the omnipotence of God, the benevolence of Christ's righteousness, and the potency of the Holy Spirit has embraced the catalyst of salvation. Yet, the mechanism by which salvation unfurls within us remains shrouded until we navigate the realm of the church, the absolution of sins, and the promise of eternal life. Thus, having grasped God's role as the fountain of life, it becomes imperative to probe His divine life woven within us.

Primarily, the church emerges as an object of faith, a sanctuary where daily refinement burgeons, albeit perfection still eludes. It

advances ceaselessly yet has not attained the zenith of holiness—an idea that shall be expounded further on. Prophetic foretellings concerning Jerusalem—a place sanctified, where the unholy are prohibited from entry, and God's temple transcends impurity (Joel 3:17)—mustn't be misconstrued as implying blemish-free church members. Rather, the faithful ardently aspire toward consummate purity and sanctity, and by divine grace, this unrealized perfection is attributed to them. While at times, signs of sanctification may remain hidden, we must anchor ourselves in the conviction that from the dawn of existence till eternity's close, the church has endured. The spectrum of human existence, corrupted by Adam's sin since inception, has never deprived the Lord of instruments fit for honor. Hence, each epoch has been bathed in His mercy, underscored by unswerving promises. As He affirms, "I have established a covenant for My chosen ones. To David, My servant, I pledge eternal preservation of his lineage; an everlasting seat I shall ordain" (Psalm 89:28–29). Further, "The Lord has chosen Zion, His divine abode, as His perpetual dwelling" (Psalm 132:13–14). And these words resonate: "Behold, the Lord proclaims—the Lord who set the sun for the day and the moon for the night: when this rhythm halts, the seed of Israel shall cease" (Jeremiah 31:35–36).

The subsequent clause, "the communion of the saints," although overlooked by early church scholars, merits our veneration. Just as believing in the church is requisite, understanding what it signifies is equally imperative. This dimension of the phrase unveils the church's essence and character—an amalgamation wherein Jesus Christ unites the faithful. This unity bears paramount significance, enabling them to partake in all things virtuous. Yet, it is pivotal to note that each individual possesses diverse graces, as eloquently put by St. Paul, acknowledging the manifold gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4). This unity does not demand the dismantling of societal

structures wherein every individual possesses his rightful domain; it hinges on a coherent communion aligned with the apportionment of blessings and graces. Sharing the blessings bestowed by the hand of God becomes a necessity, even if these blessings are bestowed upon individuals and not others (1 Corinthians 12:11). Similar to the diverse roles within the human body, unity emerges, underpinned by mutual service (Romans 12:4–6).

Proceeding, faith in the holy church and its communion infuses us with abundant fruit. Recognizing our connection with this church through faith in Christ breeds rich rewards. This revelation assumes monumental importance—salvation stands fortified upon pillars so sturdy that even if the world crumbled, salvation would remain unshaken. First, it stems from God's irrevocable election and remains steadfast unless His eternal providence were to shatter. Furthermore, Christ preserves His wholeness, preventing the severance of His faithful or the disintegration of His body. We are assured that truth walks hand in hand as we abide within the church. Lastly, the promises stand true: God's presence shall eternally grace Jerusalem's precincts (Psalm 46:5). This unity of the church possesses the potency to embrace us within God's presence.

Likewise, the term "communion" ushers in profound solace. It underscores that all graces bequeathed to His members and ours intertwine, solidifying our hope through the blessings bestowed upon others. To sustain unity with the church, it's not imperative that we perceive a visible congregation. The edict to "believe the church" entails recognizing its presence, whether visible or unseen. Our faith does not waver when we acknowledge an invisible church beyond our comprehension. Our task isn't to delineate the elect from the reprobate—that prerogative belongs to God alone. Instead, we hold unwavering certainty: those who, through divine mercy and the

power of the Holy Spirit, partake in Christ's essence, are sanctified as God's rightful heritage. And in this inheritance, we too find our place—a testament to unbounded grace.

Now, we set forth to explore the visible church that our senses perceive. Its nature demands our discernment. The Lord has etched discernible marks onto His church for our recognition, albeit His sovereign judgments remain concealed. While distinguishing His chosen ones is His sole prerogative, He has instated an order that imparts daily lessons in our limited discernment. Those deemed beyond redemption sometimes traverse the path to salvation, while seemingly unwavering believers falter. God alone perceives those who'll persevere to the journey's end—the ultimate juncture of salvation. However, recognizing our yearning to distinguish His children, the Lord accommodates our capacity. While absolute faith may evade us, love shall guide us, and we shall recognize as church members all those who, through confession of faith, virtuous lives, and participation in the sacraments, declare allegiance to the same God and Christ as we do.

From this, let us unveil the essence of the church—a sacred communion bound by the thread of common devotion. As we explore its core, we uncover a defining truth: wherever God's word is spoken with purity and the sacraments reverently administered in Christ's name, the church is truly present. The promise of our Savior echoes as a beacon of truth: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matthew 18:20). As we embark on this profound exploration, let us proceed with a clear vision: the universal church embraces those who embrace God's truth, bound by shared religion. Beneath this universal mantle, local assemblies in cities and villages unite believers under the banner of faith. Those

who confess faith, while not genuinely part of the church, are considered members until they face public scrutiny.

However, assessing churches and individuals necessitates nuanced perspectives. There are instances where individuals, though unworthy in private estimation, find acceptance within the church, thanks to its collective tolerance, as the body of Christ. In these cases, we perceive them as brethren, though our private views may differ. A contrasting approach applies to the multitude. If a congregation upholds the ministry of the word and reveres its sacraments, it undoubtedly stands as a church. In these congregations, the word and sacraments bear fruit. Thus, unity within the universal church endures despite diabolical attempts to fracture it. Moreover, we must not undermine the authority vested in local ecclesiastical assemblies, essential for addressing communal needs.

The bedrock of the church resides in the preaching of God's word and the administration of sacraments. These are not hollow rituals; rather, they bear fruits nurtured by divine blessings. While immediate fruits might not manifest in every instance, a reverent embrace of the gospel and diligent sacramental observance will undoubtedly yield results. Whenever the gospel echoes fervently and sacraments are dutifully upheld, an unshakable church presence emerges. It is incumbent upon us to acknowledge its authority, heed its guidance, value its counsel, and respect its admonishments. Separation, mockery, and disdain for its unity are gravely discouraged. So deeply does God value the communion of His church that withdrawing from a community where the ministry of the word and sacraments are practiced amounts to betrayal of the faith. His high commendation of the church's authority mirrors His own

authority. Thus, let us vigilantly embrace the prescribed markers and esteem them according to God's discernment.

Yet, Satan schemes fervently to undermine these markers. He seeks to either obliterate the authentic signs distinguishing the church or provoke disdain for them, rupturing unity. Witness the era when the pure gospel was shrouded, the same malevolence seeks to dismantle Christ's ordained ministry within His church—a dire threat to its edification (Ephesians 4:11–13). The temptation to sever ties from a congregation that bears Christ's church marks is perilous—a snare to reckon with. Thus, vigilance is imperative on both fronts. To unmask the pretenders parading as churches, we must scrutinize every congregation that claims the church's mantle through the lens God provides. A congregation adhering to His word and sacraments possesses genuine credentials. Conversely, a congregation asserting church status while sidelining God's word and sacraments must be met with vigilance and not rashness.

We conclude by affirming that the unsullied ministry of the word and the unadulterated sacramental administration provide an assuring pledge. In congregations where both are upheld, even in the presence of faults, the church thrives. It is vital that we avoid condemning assemblies that uphold both—even if stained by vice. Moreover, there exist varying degrees of theological importance. Some teachings are sacrosanct and non-negotiable, akin to the bedrock of Christianity—such as the unity of God, the deity of Jesus Christ, and salvation through divine mercy. Others are subjects of discourse yet coexist harmoniously, nurturing unity. Consider the disparity in beliefs about the immediate afterlife—some affirm a swift transfer to heaven while others perceive existence in God. Such variances do not warrant division or obstinacy. As the apostle aptly counsels, "If in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you"

(Philippians 3:15). This insight underscores that differences in less crucial matters shouldn't incite turmoil or rebellion.

Verily, it is an undeniable truth that the preeminent essence lies in unanimity across every facet and circumstance. Nevertheless, given that there exists not a single soul devoid of entanglement in certain realms of ignorance, we are presented with a binary choice: either forsake the congregation entirely, or extend forgiveness to those whose ignorance is confined to matters innocuous to salvation and unblemished by defiance against faith. In this discourse, I am not inclined to champion the cause of any misapprehensions, no matter how trivial, nor do I wish for them to thrive through dissembling and adulation. Instead, I posit that in our journey, we must not hastily forsake the ecclesia wherein the fundamental tenets of our redemption and the sacred rites, ordained by our divine Sovereign, are meticulously preserved. And yet, in our endeavor to rectify what appears amiss within the ecclesiastical domain, we discharge a solemn duty. The counsel of Saint Paul resonates deeply here, wherein he declares: "Let the vessel bearing a loftier revelation come forth to voice, while the initial orator abides in silence" (1 Corinthians 14:30). By this, the truth stands evident that each member of the congregation is entrusted with the charge of edifying others in accordance with the measure of grace bestowed, as long as this undertaking transpires in seemliness and harmony. It demands of us to neither sever our affiliation with the community of believers nor disrupt the established order or governance.

Turning our attention to the blemishes adorning moral conduct, a wider margin of leniency ought to be granted. In this domain, it is all too facile to stumble, ensnared by the devil's intricate snares. Throughout ages, there have existed those who, feigning an immaculate sanctity akin to heavenly angels, spurned any

communion with their fellow beings, discerning naught but human frailty therein. Of yore, such were the sect known as the Cathars, denoting the pure, and akin in spirit were the Donatists. In our contemporary milieu, akin tendencies are espoused by certain Anabaptists, those who aspire to wear the mantle of superiority and perceive themselves as surpassing the rest. Others, ensnared by a fervor for righteousness bereft of circumspection, incur transgressions more by their inconsiderate zeal than through audacious presumption. Upon witnessing that the fruits reaped among the recipients of the gospel do not mirror the teachings imparted, they hasten to decree the absence of a legitimate assembly. While their sense of offense is not unwarranted and indeed, we are the architects of their distress more often than we admit, we can scarcely exonerate our cursed indolence, a negligence which Divine Justice shall not leave unchastised—its retribution already heralded through grievous chastisements. Alas, woe be unto us who, through our intemperate license, inflict wounds upon feeble consciences and propagate scandalous impressions!

Yet, those whom we address are not devoid of fault, for they too transgress boundaries. In their quest for impeccable sanctity, they venture beyond the precincts of due moderation. When the Lord implores the practice of compassion, they abandon this injunction, immersing themselves entirely in severity and austerity. In their belief that sanctity prevails solely within a realm where flawless purity and piety reign, they depart from the fold of God's assembly, under the illusion that they sever connection with the company of transgressors. They argue that the Church of Christ stands sanctified. Yet, they must hearken to His utterances: His declaration that it amalgamates the virtuous and the wayward alike. The parable likening the Church to a net which ensnares diverse species of fish, only discernible upon their haul ashore, echoes with truth (Matthew

13:47–48). Similarly, His words in another allegory, equating the Church to a field wherein good wheat is sown but interwoven with unrelenting weeds, signify the inseparability of these elements until the harvest's culmination (Matthew 13:24ff). As our Lord attests to the Church's perpetual vulnerability to this disheartening state, marred incessantly by the presence of the misguided, it is futile for them to seek a congregation devoid of impurity or taint, a futile endeavor indeed.

Verily, there emerges the assertion that the dominion of vices, spanning vast domains, stands intolerable to endure. Though I concur that an alternative scenario would be more desirable, yet as rebuttal, I present unto them the wisdom of St. Paul. Behold, in the midst of the Corinthians, it was not a mere smattering who had succumbed, but the collective entity itself had veered towards corruption. A multitude of transgressions, colossal in nature, had taken root—virtue tarnished, teaching marred [1 Corinthians 3:3ff; 5:1ff]. Iniquities, not trifling but substantial, festered. Moral decrepitude found kinship with doctrinal distortions. Now, what course of action did the holy apostle, a chosen vessel of the Holy Spirit, upon whose testimony the very edifice of the church rests, undertake in response? Did he advocate for segregation? Did he cast them from the fold of Christ's dominion? Did he invoke a final anathema to eradicate them entirely? Not only did he refrain from such measures, but rather, he pronounced them the church of God, a congregation of saints, acknowledging their identity as such. If, amid the Corinthians, a congregation endured through times marred by quarrels, factions, and discontent; amid legal wrangling and discord; amidst prevailing malevolence and the endorsement of wickedness, deplorable even by heathen standards; amidst the defamation of Saint Paul, their rightful patriarch, and the mockery of the resurrection—a denial striking at the core of the gospel—and wherein

Divine blessings were channeled towards ambition, rather than love; in a milieu where impropriety and chaos unfolded; even so, if, during such an epoch, the congregation persevered, owing to its steadfast adherence to the preached word and the sacraments—pray, who would dare strip from those who scarcely incur a tenth of such transgressions, the designation of "church"? I query, what fate would those who scrutinize contemporary congregations with such severity mete out to the Galatians, who had verged upon dissent against the very gospel? Nonetheless, even amidst their lapses, Saint Paul acknowledges a fragment of the church's presence among them.

Let the faithful equip themselves with such spiritual weaponry, lest in their fervor to manifest unyielding ardor and zeal for righteousness, they inadvertently sever ties with the celestial realm—the sole dominion where righteousness reigns. For as our Lord ordained, the preservation of communion within His church mandates the convening of public assemblies, wherein His word and the sacred rites are upheld. Whosoever, on account of aversion to the depraved, forsakes this fellowship, treads a path susceptible to estrangement from the communion of saints. It behooves them to recognize that within this expansive assemblage, a multitude exists that is genuinely virtuous and innocent in the eyes of God—beings beyond perceptible sight. Let them also ponder that amidst the pool of sinners, a contingent is burdened by remorse and, nudged by reverence for the Divine, aspires towards betterment. Reflect, it is not mere transitory acts that warrant judgment—ofttimes, the most pious falter gravely. Contemplate, the word of God and His sanctified sacraments bear greater potency and relevance in preserving the church than the misdeeds of certain tainted elements in sundering its unity. Lastly, reckon that God's judgment carries more authority in delineating true ecclesiastical presence than the counsel of mortals.

However, if congregations maintain a virtuous equilibrium, they shall not incubate wickedness within their fold, given the awareness that such souls revel in their vices. The Lord, in His wisdom, has averted the rampant spread of corruption by instituting a salutary antidote. To this end, excommunication has been ordained—an act which expels those who, under a veneer of Christ's faith, transgress dishonorably and iniquitously, tarnishing His name. Such souls are unworthy to claim the mantle of Christ's appellation. Thus, when the congregation expels obvious adulterers, fornicators, thieves, swindlers, robbers, abductors, murderers, seditious agents, brawlers, perjurers, and blasphemers—as well as transgressors who indulge in excess, intemperance, and squander, and those who perpetrate falsehoods—should these souls prove impervious to counsel, the church's exercise of this jurisdiction remains eminently reasonable. This regimen asserts the authority granted unto it by God. Lest anyone belittle this ecclesiastical verdict or deem it trifling to be condemned by the verdict of the faithful, let it be known that the Lord attests this to be naught but a proclamation of His own decree—a pronouncement upheld in the celestial realm. Thus, those ordained with God's word to denounce falsehood and waywardness wield that same word to embrace repentant hearts in compassion (Matthew 18:15–18). Those who opine that congregations can persevere indefinitely without the adhesive force of such discipline are grievously misled, for it is undeniable that the remedy, foreseen by the Lord as requisite, cannot be forsaken. The palpable benefit derived from this regimen accentuates the extent of our need for it.

Behold, the initial significance emerges in the prevention of the wicked from being reckoned amidst the assembly of Christians, thus averting the great offense to God—an insinuation that the ecclesia serves as a sanctuary for the wicked and their unrighteous ways. Since the ecclesia constitutes the corpus of Christ, its sanctity

remains impervious to the intrusion of decayed members, for such defilement would inevitably cast a shadow upon its Head. Thus, to eliminate any lewd aspersions upon the Divine name, those who, through their iniquities, besmirch the banner of Christianity must be exiled. Another utility surfaces in shielding the virtuous from contamination spurred by the lifestyle of the ungodly—such ensnarements occur frequently. For, owing to our innate tendency to stray, naught proves easier than emulation of a nefarious model. The sagacity of the apostle is manifest in this regard, as he enjoined the Corinthians to sever ties with one who had committed incest, affirming: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (1 Corinthians 5:6). The apostle, perceiving great peril, disallowed virtuous souls from commingling or fostering intimacy with the wayward, asserting: "But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one" (1 Corinthians 5:11).

A third utilization emerges, wherein excommunication serves as a crucible for the penitent, inducing them to amend their ways, their confounded state impelling them to metamorphose for the better. Thus, their iniquities warrant chastisement, particularly for the sake of their salvation—so that the rod of the church might serve as a beacon, guiding them towards recognition of their transgressions, which may fester and harden in the absence of corrective measures. Those severed from the ecclesiastical fold are not thereby relinquished from the realm of salvation, but disciplined for temporal reformation, impelling them to forsake wickedness and embrace a sanctified and honorable path. This principle is echoed in the apostle's subsequent declaration: "If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thessalonians 3:14). Similarly,

elsewhere, when he conveys that an incestuous individual in Corinth has been "delivered over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 5:5)—in my understanding, this signifies that temporal condemnation is imposed to yield eternal salvation. Though certain interpretations posit that it entails temporal torments orchestrated by the devil, I regard this as speculative, whereas my understanding aligns with the exposition provided.

Thus, it befits us not to efface those who undergo excommunication from the fold of the elect, nor to surrender them to a sense of hopelessness, assuming their demise is foregone. Indeed, it is legitimate to regard them as strangers to the ecclesia, as per the framework outlined earlier; however, this perspective should only pertain to the duration of their separation. Even if we detect in them an abundance of pride and obstinacy, rather than humility, we should entrust them into God's hands, commending them to His benevolence, while nurturing a hope for a brighter future that transcends their present state. In essence, we must refrain from condemning to eternal damnation those solely under the dominion of God, yet evaluate the quality of each individual's deeds in consonance with God's law. In following this principle, we tether ourselves to the judgment unveiled by God, rather than indulging our own preconceptions. We must exercise caution in pronouncing judgments, lest we inadvertently constrain God's omnipotence and subject His compassion to our limited perceptions. In the dispensation of His mercy, the most wicked can be transfigured into virtuous beings, and strangers may find refuge within the ecclesia. Thus, human perspectives are foiled, and human presumptions are reprimanded—a presumption that frequently extends beyond its rightful domain if left unchecked.

As for the proclamation of Christ, wherein He asserts that what His word-bearers bind or loose on earth will likewise be bound or loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:19, 18:18), it does not necessarily imply our capacity to delineate individuals within His ecclesia. This promise resonates twice, each with distinct import. Initially, the Lord does not intend to bestow visible markers enabling us to outwardly discern those bound or absolved. Rather, He attests that those who, on this terrestrial plane (in this present life), accept the gospel's teachings by faith—embracing the redemptive offering of Christ—will veritably be absolved and unshackled in heaven, in the presence of God on His celestial throne. Conversely, those who scorn and reject the gospel bear witness to their continued bondage, both on earth and before God in heaven, indicating a state of intensified captivity. In the latter instance, wherein excommunication is addressed, the authority to bind and loose is vested within ecclesiastical censure. Such censure neither dooms the excommunicated to eternal damnation nor instills despair, but rather, serves as a cautionary measure. It alerts them to the impending perdition, unless they mend their ways. Distinct from anathema—termed execration by ecclesiastical scholars—whereby one is deprived of all hope of pardon and consigned to the dominion of the devil, excommunication, instead, chastises moral conduct. While it may entail punishment of the individual, this act simultaneously invokes impending damnation, steering them onto the path of salvation. Should they comply, the church stands ready to embrace them in fellowship, welcoming them to partake in communion.

Henceforth, if we are to properly uphold the precepts of ecclesiastical discipline, although it is not sanctioned to partake in close association or profound intimacy with the excommunicated, let us, nonetheless, endeavor with utmost earnestness to extend efforts wherein they might be drawn back unto righteousness, and

subsequently be reunited with the communion of the church. This might be achieved through exhortation, teaching, or through the channels of mercy, kindness, and fervent prayers to God. The apostle himself imparts this wisdom to us: "Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (2 Thessalonians 3:15). This very spirit of gentleness is expected from the entire congregation, particularly when receiving those who exhibit signs of repentance. For the apostle does not advocate severe stringency, nor does he endorse unwavering sternness. Instead, he envisions the church as extending itself willingly, embracing the wayward souls, lest the one repenting be inundated with excessive sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:7). Should this equipoise be unguarded, the peril lies in descending from disciplined guardianship into the abyss of Gehenna, metamorphosing from reformers into executioners.

The significance of God's word and the sacraments within our midst has been previously elucidated—the veneration and reverence we ought to extend, ensuring they remain as indelible tokens and badges of the church. The truth is, no moral transgressions can render an assembly devoid of churchhood wherever this ministry stands whole. Moreover, even in instances where minor imperfections mark the teaching or the sacraments, their potency remains undiminished. Furthermore, it has been clarified that errors warranting pardon are those that do not assail the foundational doctrines of our faith or oppose the articles universally embraced by the faithful. As for the sacraments, the tolerable faults are those that fail to subvert or dismantle the institution ordained by the Lord.

However, should the circumstances culminate in the propagation of falsehoods that undermine core elements of Christian doctrine and obliterate essential knowledge; if the sacraments are divested of their significance—this, in turn, signals the church's dissolution, akin to

the rending of a person's throat or the piercing of their heart. Contemplating the realm of the papal dominion in this light reveals the measure of churchhood that subsists therein. Behold, falsehoods have tainted the priesthood, tarnishing the ministry of God's word; the sanctity of our Lord's Supper has been violated, replaced by an egregious sacrilege. The service to God is obscured, befouled by innumerable superstitions. Practically all the teachings essential for the sustenance of Christianity lie interred and trampled upon. Public congregations are reminiscent of academies of idolatry and impiety. Hence, in abstaining from participation in such ignoble and sacrilegious endeavors, we do not isolate ourselves from the ecclesia of God. For, the communion of the church is intended not to unite us in practices of idolatry, impiety, ignorance of God, and other forms of wickedness, but rather to anchor us in reverence for God and obedience to His truth. A more profound comprehension of the respect we ought to extend towards the beleaguered churches oppressed under the yoke of the Roman idol can be garnered by juxtaposing their plight with the historical archetype of the ancient Israelite ecclesia, as portrayed by the prophets.

In times when God's covenant flourished unabated in the realms of Judah and Israel, a genuine ecclesia was nurtured, for the foundational elements were firmly in place. Within the Law, the edicts of truth were inscribed; their dissemination was entrusted to priests and prophets. The sacrament of circumcision served as the rite through which they were inducted into the fold of God's people. Other sacraments, enacted to solidify faith, complemented this ceremony. Hence, it remains indisputable that the testimonies and appellations, with which our Lord dignified His ecclesia, held pertinence within that era. Subsequently, due to their drift from God's law, they gradually relinquished this esteemed status through their engagement in idolatry and superstition. Would anyone dare

strip the title of "church" from those to whom our Lord bequeathed the ministry of His word and the stewardship of His sacraments? Conversely, who would have the audacity, without exception, to confer the designation of "church" upon an assembly wherein the word of God is openly desecrated or the ministry of the word—essential to the church's vitality—is shattered?

"What if," one may inquire, "a semblance of the church existed among the Jews subsequent to their descent into idolatry?" The answer, though intricate, becomes clear upon contemplation. If we perceive the church through the prism advocated here—characterized by reverence for its judgments, adherence to its authority, acceptance of its counsel, heed to its chastisements, and steadfastness within its communion—then the prophets vehemently decry that such assemblies steeped in idolatry should not be deemed churches, but rather, should be regarded as profane and tainted synagogues. For, had they truly constituted churches, prophets like Elijah, Micah, and other servants of God would have been ostracized from their ranks. Both the priests and the people, along with the prophets, considered these individuals more accursed than the uncircumcised. If these were indeed churches, it would transpire that the church would metamorphose from a vessel of truth into a harbinger of falsehood—a bastion not of the living God but of graven idols (1 Timothy 3:15). Yet, among the Jews, vestiges and privileges unique to the ecclesia still lingered, chiefly in the form of God's covenant. Its perseverance, upheld through unwavering resistance to the tide of impiety among the people, as opposed to mere acquiescence, cemented its veracity. Thus, by virtue of God's unwavering grace and goodness, the divine covenant stood unshaken, impervious to the perfidy of the people. Circumcision, too, remained untarnished despite the impurity that had tainted their hands, remaining a sign and sacrament of this covenant. Hence, our

Lord proclaimed that the progeny born of this people were His own (Ezekiel 16:20-21).

With equal conviction, should someone presently regard the congregations under the papal dominion as assemblies ordained by God, even as they stand ensnared (as we perceive) in idolatry, superstition, and errant doctrines—believing that they must remain steadfastly in their communion, even aligning themselves with their teachings—they would find themselves led astray. If indeed these gatherings are deemed churches, then the authority of the keys is entrusted unto them. Yet the keys are irrevocably interwoven with God's Word, which in these very churches is expelled and cast aside. Furthermore, if they indeed hold the mantle of churches, then Christ's promise, wherein actions bound or absolved on earth resonate in heaven, must find fulfillment there. However, given that all those who sincerely proclaim themselves as disciples of Jesus Christ are banished and excommunicated from their midst, it follows that either Christ's promise is rendered hollow and vacuous, or these assemblies are bereft of their ecclesiastical character in this regard. Lastly, concerning the ministry of the Word—those realms merely echo with doctrines of impiety and an array of fallacies. Therefore, either they fail the test of being churches in this aspect, or we find ourselves bereft of the means to discern between the gatherings of the faithful and the assemblies of the Turks.

Yet, it remains within our allowance to acknowledge that vestiges and semblances of churchhood linger there—remnants that our Lord has preserved amidst their shattered state. Foremost among these are the enduring presence of God's covenant, steadfast and indomitable, and the sacrament of baptism, symbolizing this covenant. This sacrament, sanctified by the very utterance of the

Lord, retains its potency despite the impious disposition of humanity.

In summation, we neither categorically reject the existence of a church therein, nor do we simply acquiesce to its presence. They embody churchhood to the extent that our Lord safeguards the remnants of His scattered people within their midst. Furthermore, certain traces of the church endure, particularly those that cannot be vitiated by the snares of the devil or the frailty of human wickedness. On the contrary, given that the criteria we have just discussed are absent within them, if we seek a church that adheres to proper order, I contend that a lawful manifestation of the church remains absent. The antichrist has upheaved and upended every facet, transforming these environs into a reflection of Babylon rather than the sanctified city of God. It is a matter of common knowledge that the antichrist holds dominion there, implying that these may indeed be recognized as God's assemblies, albeit ones sullied and defiled by the abhorrent practices of the antichrist.

The Forgiveness of Sins

The blessing of forgiveness finds a harmonious union with the church, for it is granted solely to those who partake in the church's fellowship. As the prophet Isaiah declares, this celestial Jerusalem must first be erected, wherein the subsequent grace unfolds: the expunging of transgressions for all who are its citizens. I say "must first be erected" not because the church could endure without the absolution of sins in any manner, but because the Lord has pledged His mercy solely within the communion of the saints.

Indeed, forgiveness of sins marks our initial entry into the church and the realm of God's kingdom; devoid of it, we lack the covenant or the rightful claim to God's kinship. The words of the prophet Hosea

resonate: "In that day," declares the Lord, "I will establish a covenant with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky. I will shatter the bow and the sword and warfare will cease from the land. I will make a lasting covenant with them, characterized by righteousness, justice, kindness, and compassion" (Hosea 2:18-19). This demonstrates how our Lord reconciles us to Himself through His boundless mercy. Similarly, elsewhere, when He foretells gathering His dispersed people, He proclaims, "I will cleanse them from all the guilt they incurred by rebelling against Me" (Jeremiah 33:8). Thus, the church extends its embrace to us through the inaugural act of baptism, symbolizing that entrance hinges on the cleansing of our impurity by His benevolence. The deeper nuances of this forgiveness and its mechanisms shall be explored meticulously elsewhere.

Yet, let us observe here what the sequence of the creed imparts: forgiveness of sins does not rest upon our merits but emanates solely from God's gracious favor. Following the creed's proclamation that through Christ's righteousness, God's benevolence beckons us and that He yearns to assume the role of a benevolent Father for us, and after expounding upon the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit through which we partake in Christ's nature, the creed concludes by addressing the church, which is born from these truths. Subsequently, the creed articulates the concept of forgiveness of sins, the conduit through which we become integral to the church. This sequence emphasizes that forgiveness does not emanate from any source other than Christ Himself, buoyed by the Holy Spirit's authority. We must dismiss the notion that our Lord includes us within His church solely once, through the medium of forgiveness. Rather, He sustains and preserves us through it. After all, why would our Lord bestow upon us a pardon devoid of practical utility? God's mercy would be rendered ineffective and ineffectual if it were a one-time bestowal. Each faithful soul bears testimony to this, as none are

exempt from myriad weaknesses throughout life, weaknesses necessitating God's mercy. Hence, since we carry the remnants of sins as long as we live, it is undeniable that we could not persist even a single moment within the church's fold if God's grace did not continually uphold us through the forgiveness of our transgressions. On the contrary, the Lord has summoned His own to eternal salvation, beckoning them to trust that His grace stands ever prepared to bestow mercy upon their transgressions. Consequently, we are summoned to believe that through God's merciful provision of Jesus Christ's merit and the sanctification wrought by His Spirit, our sins have been and are continually being pardoned, a reality that unfolds daily as we remain intertwined with the body of the church.

In response to those who strive to strip the church of its unique role in salvation, we must fortify consciences against this insidious fallacy. Similar to the Novatians of yore, our current age witnesses the presence of Anabaptists who mirror this distorted notion. They hold that God's people, once baptized, are reborn into an untainted, angelic existence, untouched by the blemishes of the flesh. Should these individuals stumble into impurity following baptism, the Anabaptists deny them anything but the unyielding rigor of God's judgment. In essence, they withhold all hope of forgiveness and mercy from the sinner who, having received God's grace, falters into sin. Their concept of forgiveness of sins revolves exclusively around the initial regeneration. Despite scripture's clear refutation of this falsehood, let us address the grave peril of this error, both for those who propagate it and those influenced by it.

Foremost, given that God's command urges all the faithful to daily implore forgiveness, this very act is an admission of our sinful nature. Such petitions are not in vain, as our Lord Jesus never ordained a petition He would not fulfill. He not only assures that the

entirety of the prayer He imparted will reach the Father, but also specifically underscores the efficacy of this particular plea. Thus, what more do we seek? The Lord desires His saints, each day throughout their lives, to acknowledge their status as sinners, and in return, He promises them pardon. How audacious it is to either deny one's identity as a sinner or, when one stumbles, to banish them from grace altogether! Furthermore, whom did He instruct to forgive seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22)? Was it not our brethren? This directive impels us to mirror His mercy. Thus, He pardons not merely once or twice, but whenever a humble sinner, afflicted and wounded by awareness of their sins, beseeches Him.

Let us begin with instances from the church's inception. The patriarchs, after receiving circumcision and entering God's covenant, undoubtedly imbibed their father's teachings on righteousness and virtue. Nonetheless, they conspired to slay their brother (Genesis 37:18ff). This act, reminiscent of the most hardened criminals, culminated in the sale of Joseph, an act of heinous cruelty. Simeon and Levi avenged their sister's dishonor by murdering the inhabitants of Shechem, a violent act their father condemned (Genesis 34:25ff). Reuben committed abominable incest with his father's concubine (Genesis 35:22). Judah, driven by lust, committed dishonorable deeds by consorting with his daughter-in-law (Genesis 38:16ff). Yet, rather than erasing them from the ranks of God's chosen people, they ascended as leaders. What of David, the chief justiciar, who, seeking to expiate his transgressions, committed an even graver sin by shedding innocent blood (2 Samuel 11:15)? Already regenerated and bearing greater testimony to this than other children of God, he succumbed to a wickedness that would appall even the pagans. Despite this, mercy embraced him.

To avoid protracted enumeration, consider the numerous promises of God's mercy toward the Israelites. Time and again, the Lord's benevolence shone upon them. Moses pledges compassion and restoration if the people repent after straying into idolatry and forsaking the living God: "The Lord your God will bring you back from captivity and have compassion on you; He will gather you from all the nations where He has scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back" (Deuteronomy 30:3-4). Restricting this discussion avoids its interminable length, for the prophets brim with such promises, showering mercy upon a people steeped in myriad sins. Rebellion stands as one of the gravest sins, equated to divorce between God and His church, yet His benevolence pardons even this. Jeremiah's prophetic words echo this sentiment: "Is there a man who divorces his wife and she leaves him? Does he not return to her again? Why then do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another? ...Return, faithless people, for I am your husband" (Jeremiah 3:1, 14). A fervent desire emanates from one who declares, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11). Consequently, Solomon consecrated the temple as a place where prayers for forgiveness of sins would resonate: "When Your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against You, and when they turn back and acknowledge Your name, praying and making supplication to You in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of Your people Israel" (1 Kings 8:46-50). The presence of sacrificial offerings for sins in God's law is not arbitrary; had He been ignorant of His servants' perennial imperfections, this remedy would not have been prescribed.

Let us contemplate whether, with Christ's arrival, wherein the plenitude of grace has been fully revealed, this divine favor has vanished for the faithful. Does this imply that they dare not beseech forgiveness for their transgressions? Does it suggest that when they stumble, mercy remains elusive? Such an assertion would insinuate that Christ came to dismantle rather than redeem His own. Would God's benevolence, which graced the saints of old, be entirely extinguished? However, if we stand by the Scriptures' resounding proclamation that grace and love have manifested fully in Christ (2 Timothy 1:9-10) and that the abundance of His mercy extends through Him (Titus 3:5-6), if we acknowledge that reconciliation with humanity has been achieved, we must affirm that His mercy now flourishes more plentifully than ever before. Witness the living examples before us. Peter, who had heard directly from Christ that failing to confess His name before mortals would result in rejection before heaven's angels, denied Him thrice, even with blasphemy. Yet grace did not elude him (Matthew 10:33, 26:69-75, 9:13). St. Paul chastened the disorderly in the Thessalonian community, inviting them to repentance (2 Thessalonians 3:15). Peter did not forsake Simon Magus but encouraged him, urging him to seek God's forgiveness (Acts 8:22). Reflect upon the past when grievous sins stained entire congregations. How did St. Paul respond? He redirected the congregation toward righteousness instead of pronouncing a final curse (2 Corinthians 12:15, 19). Galatians' apostasy from the gospel was no trifling matter. The Corinthians were even less excusable, mired in grave vices. However, neither group was alienated from God's benevolence. In fact, those who had committed more severe offenses—acts of wantonness, indecency, and impurity—were specifically summoned to repentance. The covenant between Christ, all His adherents, remains immutable, a bond declared unwavering by His words: "If his sons forsake My law and do not follow My statutes, if they violate My decrees and fail to keep

My commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take My love from him" (Psalm 89:30-33). In the creed's progression, grace and mercy are underscored to abide unceasingly in the church. It follows the mention of the church with the forgiveness of sins. Thus, it must be present among the church's members.

Certain individuals, adopting a more nuanced perspective, refrain from labeling every sin as unpardonable. They limit this category to willful or deliberate violations knowingly committed. Nonetheless, they assert that only sins of ignorance are eligible for forgiveness. Yet, considering that God's law prescribes offerings to absolve voluntary sins, and distinct offerings for those committed unwittingly (Leviticus 6:2ff, 4:2, 13, 22, 27), what recklessness it is to deny hope of pardon for deliberate transgressions! I contend that Christ's singular sacrifice possesses the potency to forgive the intentional sins of the faithful. God substantiates this through the physical sacrifices, symbols of Christ's offering. Who would absolve David by alleging ignorance, knowing he had received sound instruction in the law? Could he remain ignorant of the gravity of adultery and homicide? Did he not condemn these acts in his subjects daily? Did the patriarchs perceive fratricide as commendable? Could the Corinthians, who received ample instruction, fathom that immorality, fornication, hatred, and strife pleased God? Even after receiving solemn admonition, did Peter fail to recognize the sin in denying his Master? Let us not, through our harshness, close the door on God's mercy that beckons us so generously.

I recognize that certain early church scholars interpreted daily forgiven sins as minor transgressions arising from frailty. Additionally, they opined that the solemn penance required for

serious offenses should not be repeated, similar to baptism. However, their words should not be misconstrued as promoting despair among those who falter again after experiencing repentance. Nor should they downplay the significance of daily faults in God's eyes. They acknowledged that saints often stumble into unfaithfulness—sometimes swearing needlessly, succumbing to excessive anger, even venturing into outright insults—thus falling into vices that our Lord abhors. Their phrasing aims to distinguish between private and public sins or offenses causing grave scandal within the church. The rigorous penance imposed upon those deserving ecclesiastical correction sought not to render God's pardon unattainable. Rather, it aimed to deter others, ensuring they steered clear of offenses warranting excommunication. Scripture, however, demands a more tempered and compassionate approach. It teaches that the strictness of ecclesiastical discipline should never plunge the beneficiaries of correction into abject sorrow.

Nonetheless, those who remain steadfast in their stance against voluntary sins often invoke the apostle's authority, suggesting he extinguishes all hope of absolution for such transgressions. He asserts that for those who have once been enlightened, tasted the grace from above, shared in the Holy Spirit, and savored God's word and the powers of the age to come, if they slip once more, it is irrevocable for them to be led back to penance. They are likened to crucifying the Son of God anew and scoffing at Him (Hebrews 6:4-6). In another passage, he states, "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment" (Hebrews 10:26-27). These verses once gave the Novatians ground to disturb the church when misconstrued. Initially appearing severe, certain conscientious individuals questioned the legitimacy of this epistle,

though its apostolic essence is evident. Addressing those who accept it, I shall illustrate how these passages do not bolster their error.

Primarily, the apostle must be in harmony with his Master, who affirms that every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven except the sin against the Holy Spirit, unforgivable both in this age and the next (Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; Luke 12:10). Undoubtedly, the apostle adhered to this exception, as opposing Christ's grace would be inconceivable. Consequently, his words in these instances ought to be interpreted solely in relation to the sin against the Holy Spirit. If this elucidation proves inadequate, I shall further demonstrate how his words lead to this conclusion. To elucidate this, understanding the nature of the abominable, unforgivable sin becomes crucial. St. Augustine describes it as an unyielding, persistent obstinacy up until death, coupled with a lack of trust in obtaining grace. However, this interpretation does not align with Christ's assertion that it will not be forgiven in this age. This leaves us with two options: either Christ's statement was superfluous, or the unpardonable sin can be committed in this present world. According to St. Augustine, it is only committed if one perseveres in it until death. Some propose that to harbor ill will towards the graces bestowed upon one's neighbor constitutes a sin against the Holy Spirit. Though the basis for this assertion is unclear, the genuine definition must be presented, supported by solid evidence, to dispel any misconceptions.

I posit that one sins against the Holy Spirit when, although touched by the light of God's truth and unable to claim ignorance, one obstinately resists for the sake of resistance itself. To clarify, the Lord Jesus elaborates that "anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matthew 12:32). St. Matthew employs "spirit of blasphemy" instead of

"blaspheme against the Spirit" (Matthew 12:31). Can one insult the Son of God without indirectly affronting His Spirit? When ignorance leads a person to contradict God's truth, speaking ill of Christ while inwardly possessing a conviction that they would not contest the veracity of God's truth once revealed, these individuals sin against the Father and the Son. Today, many reject and scorn the gospel's teachings, which they would hold in reverence and embrace wholeheartedly if they believed it to be the gospel. However, those who, in their conscience, recognize that the teaching they resist originates from God, yet continue to defy it and attempt to obliterate it, commit blasphemy against the Spirit. Among the Jews, such individuals existed—those who could not resist the Spirit's voice through Stephen, yet attempted to thwart it (Acts 7:55). Some acted out of zeal for the law, but others exhibited malice and impiety, raging against God and His teachings despite knowing their divine origin. These were the Pharisees, whom Jesus Christ chastised for denouncing the Holy Spirit's power as being from Beelzebub.

Hence, the spirit of blasphemy manifests when a deliberate malevolence endeavors to undermine God's glory. St. Paul underscores this concept when he testifies that he received mercy because his unbelief resulted from negligence and ignorance (1 Timothy 1:13). If ignorance and unbelief prompted by negligence received absolution, then deliberate unbelief stemming from knowledge and malevolence must logically be bereft of mercy. Upon closer inspection of the passage, it becomes apparent that the apostle speaks with this notion in mind. His words are directed at those who suppose they can easily return to Christianity after once denying it. Seeking to dispel this perilous notion, he asserts a simple truth: those who knowingly and willfully renounce Jesus Christ can never partake in Him again. He refers to those who not only flout His

teachings through wayward living but, with deliberate intent, fully reject His word.

Regrettably, the Novatians and their adherents misconstrued the terms "fall" or "overturn." Their interpretation suggests that one stumbles by failing to adhere to God's law, which prohibits stealing, for instance. However, I contend that a comparison of contrasting notions is essential here. When the apostle speaks of those who "fall away after being enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away" (Hebrews 6:4-6), it must be understood that they have deliberately extinguished the light of the Spirit. They have cast aside God's word and the sweetness of His grace, distancing themselves from His Spirit. To emphasize further that he speaks of malevolent and deliberate impiety, he even inserts the word "voluntarily" at one point. In proclaiming that no further sacrifice remains for those who knowingly and intentionally sin after comprehending the truth, the apostle does not negate Christ's perpetual sacrifice for absolving the faithful's sins. This concept has been addressed extensively throughout the epistle, elucidating Christ's priesthood. Rather, he signifies that when this sacrifice is rejected, no other recourse exists. To reject it involves trampling the gospel truth underfoot, driven by a purposeful intent.

Some may raise an objection, stating that it appears unduly cruel and incompatible with God's mercy to exclude any sinner from receiving forgiveness, especially when they are in dire need of it. The response is straightforward. The apostle does not assert that God withholds pardon from those who turn to Him. He explicitly states that they will never return to repentance because, due to their ingratitude, God justly afflicts them with eternal blindness. Some may argue that

certain passages, such as the example of Esau attempting to regain his birthright through tears and cries but in vain (Hebrews 12:16-17), contradict this perspective. Similarly, the prophet's words that God will not heed their cries (Micah 3:4) could raise doubts. Yet, scripture employs such phrasing to signify neither genuine repentance nor earnest entreaty to God. Rather, it underscores the anguish that compels the wicked, when facing ultimate calamity, to recognize the truth they had previously derided as fanciful. They come to realize that their well-being depends on God's help, which they can no longer beseech sincerely. The prophet uses the term "cry," and the apostle employs "tears" to denote the anguish that afflicts the wicked in their desperation and affliction. They grasp that their only solace, God's benevolence, has slipped beyond their reach.

The resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

Here lies the culmination and realization of our blessed destiny. Firstly, we must firmly establish our faith in the resurrection of the flesh, through which we attain the eternal life. This understanding arises because our mortal bodies cannot inherit the kingdom of God, and the perishable cannot inherit the imperishable. Indeed, the resurrection of the flesh appears not only arduous to accept but entirely inconceivable, when viewed through the lens of human reasoning. Thus, even though numerous philosophers have grasped the concept of the soul's immortality, not a single one among them has ventured into the realm of believing in the resurrection of the flesh. For how could one fathom the notion that bodies, some decomposing in the earth, others devoured by worms, birds, or beasts, and some reduced to ashes by fire, could one day be restored to their original form? Yet, the Lord effectively addresses this apparent incredulity, bearing witness to the future resurrection with unwavering words and providing visible evidence through Jesus

Christ. Thus, what might otherwise seem beyond belief is unveiled before our eyes in tangible form.

To comprehend this forthcoming resurrection, we must continually turn our gaze to Jesus Christ, who serves as both the exemplar and the essence of it. The apostle aptly urges us to consider this, as he speaks of the transformation of our bodies into "a body like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). Just as Christ was raised in the same body that bore His suffering, which, however, exhibited a transformed glory after resurrection, we too shall be raised in the same mortal flesh we currently possess, albeit transformed in essence following the resurrection. The apostle employs metaphors to convey the diversity of resurrection bodies, comparing human and animal flesh to substances of the same kind yet varying quality. Similarly, the stars share a common essence while differing in brilliance. Thus, we shall retain the essence of our earthly bodies, yet their quality will undergo transformation. This mortal body, though currently corruptible, shall not be eradicated in the resurrection. Rather, it will cast off its corruption, becoming incorruptible, and discard its mortality, embracing immortality (1 Corinthians 15:41, 53). Hence, no hindrance exists to prevent the Lord from reclaiming all those who met death's embrace before the day of judgment, employing the same divine power showcased in the resurrection of His Son. Those who are alive at that appointed time will transition to immortality more by an abrupt transformation than by a natural process of dying.

As the prophecy foretells the complete fulfillment of "Death is swallowed up in victory," it is fitting to envision eternal life as simultaneous with the resurrection of the flesh (1 Corinthians 15:54). Regarding the surpassing nature of this eternal life, even if every human language were exhausted to convey its grandeur, only a

fraction of its essence could be grasped. While scripture speaks of God's kingdom brimming with brilliance, joy, and bliss, such descriptions remain distant from our full comprehension, obscured by metaphorical language until the day when the Lord reveals Himself to us face to face. Therefore, recognizing the limitations of verbal expression for describing this spiritual blessedness, the prophets often resorted to employing earthly imagery. Nevertheless, as we strive to nurture a fervent longing and anticipation for this life, we should primarily reflect on this truth: if God, as our ever-flowing wellspring, encompasses the totality of goodness, then those seeking supreme good and complete happiness need not yearn for anything beyond Him. It is worth noting that St. Peter asserts that the faithful are destined to partake in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). How could this be? The Lord shall be glorified in His saints and magnified among those who have embraced His gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:10). Should the Lord bestow His glory, power, and righteousness upon His chosen ones and truly commune with them, it is prudent to recognize that every conceivable blessing is encapsulated within this divine grace. Even as we engage in profound contemplation, it remains essential to acknowledge that we stand at the threshold of understanding, merely embarking on the initial stages of comprehending the enormity of this mystery within the confines of our present existence.

Within this confession, we find no mention of the resurrection of the wicked or the eternal death that awaits them. The creed is solely dedicated to offering solace to the faithful, nurturing their assurance of salvation. Yet, let us not entertain curiosity by supposing that the wicked shall remain unresurrected due to its omission. The fate of the wicked in the hereafter is revealed elsewhere, and the elements that ought to evoke trepidation are well communicated. Therefore, let us refrain from seeking these aspects within the creed, which is

intended solely to affirm and fortify our faith. Does not the Lord Jesus amply attest to the universal resurrection, proclaiming that "He will gather all nations before Him, separating them as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:31)? Similarly, He declares in another place: "those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29). Can we seek clearer affirmation than the confession made by the Apostle Paul before Felix, the governor of Judea, wherein he anticipated the future resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (Acts 24:15)? The plethora of testimonies overwhelmingly supports the certainty of the universal resurrection, dispelling all doubts for even the most impulsive skeptics. The destinies of the righteous and the wicked are so intertwined that affirming one implicitly assumes the other. The Lord alluded to this fact through the prophet, stating, "The day of vengeance is in My heart, and the year of My redeemed has come" (Isaiah 63:4, among other instances). Furthermore, He proclaims, "You shall see and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like grass; and the hand of the Lord shall be known to His servants, and His indignation to His enemies" (Isaiah 66:14). This reality, veiled in obscurity during this world's transient span, finds ultimate fulfillment on the day of reckoning, when God's judgment and righteousness will be unveiled.

However, as we lack the apt vocabulary to adequately illustrate the horrifying suffering of the wicked, their torments are metaphorically depicted through physical images: darkness, tears, lamentations, gnashing of teeth, unending fire, and incessantly gnawing worms (Isaiah 66:24). Certainly, the Holy Spirit employed these metaphors to evoke an intense dread that resonates with every sense. When the Spirit describes Gehenna's abyss, an abyss prepared for all eternity, engulfed in raging fire perpetually fueled by ever-ready wood, and

kindled by the breath of God (Isaiah 30:33), the aim is to provoke an understanding of the profound horror awaiting the wicked. While these figures guide our contemplation toward grasping the lamentable plight of the wicked, our primary focus should center on the excruciating consequence of being eternally severed from the fellowship of God. Moreover, we must grapple with the grim reality of encountering God's majestic presence, which opposes us unrelentingly and pursues us unceasingly. Initially, His wrath ignites as a raging fire, consuming and obliterating everything in its path. Subsequently, every element of creation seems enlisted to execute His judgment, so that those facing God's wrath perceive heaven, earth, sea, animals, and all other facets of existence aligned against them, poised for their utter destruction and downfall. This underscores the Apostle's assertion that the unbelieving shall endure eternal punishment, pursued by the presence of the Lord and the brilliance of His power (2 Thessalonians 1:9). If a tormented conscience, confronted by God's presence and the intensity of His wrath, experiences anguish, torment, and desolation akin to a thousand chasms, surpassing the unbearable in a single minute, how immeasurably greater the suffering of one perpetually ensnared in the grip of God's wrath?

In contemplating theological errors, it is evident that the notion propagated by the Chiliasts, who correlate Christ's kingdom and the defeat of the devil and his followers with a thousand years, is devoid of substance and exhibits childishness. This misconception, requiring neither refutation nor acknowledgment, fails to merit attention. The entirety of scripture resounds with unequivocal declarations that neither the blessedness of the chosen nor the anguish of the wicked shall cease. We stand at a crossroads: we must embrace the certainties proclaimed within God's Word, encompassing realities imperceptible to the eye and unfathomable by

human rationale, or we must surrender to disbelief entirely. Those attributing a thousand years of blessedness to God's children for their future existence inadvertently neglect the indignity directed towards Christ and His eternal dominion. If immortality is not bestowed upon the faithful, the inevitable conclusion is that Christ, in His glorified state, would remain devoid of immortal splendor. If the blessedness of the elect finds its culmination, it signifies that Christ's kingdom—wherein they partake—is fleeting. Ultimately, those advocating the thousand-year concept reveal either a profound ignorance of divine truths or a malevolent intent to challenge God's grace and Christ's omnipotence. The realization of divine grace and Christ's omnipotence necessitates the elimination of sin and the eradication of death, ushering in the restoration of eternal life. Concerning the allegation of ascribing great cruelty to God by proclaiming the wicked's punishment as eternal torment: even those bereft of sight comprehend the folly of this notion. The suggestion that the Lord perpetrates egregious harm by withholding His kingdom from those who, through ingratitude, rendered themselves undeserving of it, is but folly. "But," they counter, "sins are temporal." While I concede this point, it must be acknowledged that God's eternal majesty, which they have affronted, renders the perpetuity of their sin's memory appropriate. "Yet," they protest, "the measure of correction surpasses the magnitude of sin." I counter that this is a blasphemous assertion, denoting a lamentable devaluation of God's majesty, when scorning His majesty seems less significant than the forfeiture of a soul. Let us distance ourselves from these imprudent voices, lest our engagement implies their ideas warrant valid refutation in light of our initial exposition.

Wherever genuine faith resides, it invariably ushers forth the unwavering hope of eternal salvation, or even catalyzes its formation. Should this hope remain absent, any eloquent rhetoric or refined

expressions about faith are rendered futile. Faith, as we have elucidated, constitutes a steadfast conviction in God's veracity—an infallibility immune to falsehood, deception, or disappointment. Consequently, those firmly entrenched in this conviction naturally anticipate the fulfillment of the Lord's promises. This perspective regards divine pledges as reliable truths, thus granting substance to hope—an anticipation of the veracious blessings that faith has attested to. Herein, faith certifies God's truthfulness; hope anticipates its eventual manifestation. Faith affirms His paternal role; hope anticipates His paternal revelation to us. Faith affirms the conferral of eternal life; hope anticipates its forthcoming realization. Faith lays the groundwork upon which hope rests; hope, in turn, nourishes and supports faith. Just as no one can receive anything from God without initially believing in His promises, the fragility of our faith necessitates the support of hope, fostering endurance lest it falter. Thus, the Apostle Paul's assertion that hope firmly anchors our salvation assumes profound relevance. Hope, exercising patience as it awaits the Lord's timing in silence, reins in faith to prevent undue haste (Romans 8:24–25; Isaiah 36:21). Hope stabilizes faith to preclude wavering regarding God's promises or harboring doubts concerning them. In its nurturing embrace, hope renews and consoles faith, preventing it from succumbing to weariness. Through its unwavering guidance, hope steers faith toward its ultimate destination, ensuring endurance that does not falter midway or on the initial stretch. Ultimately, hope perpetually revitalizes and fortifies faith, sustaining it through daily renewal.

Delving into this interplay between faith and hope highlights the manifold ways hope bolsters faith. This exploration exposes the challenges faced by those who have embraced God's Word. Initially, the Lord often suspends the fulfillment of His promises, keeping us in eager anticipation longer than desired. In such instances, hope is

tasked with the prophet's admonition to persevere amidst delayed promises (Habakkuk 2:3). Occasionally, God not only permits our despondency but also seems to veil His favor. In such moments, hope serves as our stronghold, enabling us to wait upon the Lord, even when His countenance remains veiled from us (Isaiah 8:17). As St. Peter notes, skeptics emerge, derisively querying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4). This sentiment is further reinforced by the flesh and the world. Here, faith, reinforced by hope, steadfastly gazes upon the eternal glory of God's kingdom, deeming a thousand years as a single day (Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8). The likeness and synergy between faith and hope are evident; Scripture sometimes interchanges these terms, as evidenced when St. Peter ascribes faith's preservation to God's power until the revelation of salvation (1 Peter 1:5), a sentiment more fittingly attributed to hope. This is not without cause, for we have affirmed that hope embodies the endurance and resilience intrinsic to faith.

Examining the teachings of the master of the Sentences, it becomes apparent how grievously he errs in proposing a dual foundation for hope—namely, God's grace and the merit of deeds. In truth, the essence of hope finds its singular purpose in faith. As demonstrated, faith's exclusive focus rests upon God's boundless mercy; it remains unwavering in its gaze upon this divine attribute, refraining from wandering elsewhere. Let us, however, explore the rationale put forth by the master of the Sentences: "If you dare," he contends, "to entertain hope without having merited or deserved it, it is not hope but presumption." Allow me to question: what manner of individuals would refrain from reproach when faced with such beliefs that deem certitude in God's trustworthiness to be audacious and presumptuous? These thinkers brandish the notion that tranquility

grounded in the promise of God is nothing short of recklessness. Such proponents warrant the following admonishment: their company is fittingly found among those who have aligned themselves with sophists, specifically the Sorbonnists. As for us, the instruction from God is unequivocal: He commands sinners to anchor themselves in unwavering hope for salvation. Thus, with resolute confidence in His fidelity, we are bold to embrace His truth. Rejecting all reliance on our own accomplishments, we ardently place our trust in His mercy and hope with unshaken conviction for the promises He has graciously extended to us.

CHAPTER FIVE

Repentance

After discussing faith, let us now examine the subject of repentance, for it is not only intricately joined together with faith, but also born out of it. As the gospel proclaims the divine grace and forgiveness to sinners, liberating them from the wretched shackles of sin and death, and ushering them into the kingdom of God, it becomes evident that one cannot truly receive the gospel's grace through faith without redirecting their wayward life and committing themselves earnestly to the contemplation and practice of genuine repentance.

There are those who argue, quite flippantly, that repentance precedes faith, rather than springing forth from it. They base this assertion on a rather literal interpretation, saying, "In their sermons, Christ and John first urge people to repentance, and then declare that the kingdom of God draws near. This same commandment was given to the apostles, and even St. Paul adhered to a similar order, as recounted by St. Luke" (Acts 17:30, 26:20). However, in their strict adherence to the sequential arrangement of words, they fail to grasp the underlying purpose of these statements and how they are intricately connected.

When Jesus Christ and John the Baptist issue the admonition, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near" (Matthew 3:2, 4:17), are they not implying that repentance is caused by the fact that Jesus Christ offers us grace and salvation? In essence, their words can be understood as follows: "Since the kingdom of God has drawn near, let us engage in repentance." Moreover, St. Matthew, in his account

of John's preaching, asserts that it fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, who spoke of a voice crying out in the wilderness, saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight His paths" (Matthew 3:3; Isaiah 40:3).

Therefore, it becomes clear that repentance is not a precursor to faith, but rather a natural outgrowth of it. It is the transformative response to the nearness of the kingdom of God, made possible through Jesus Christ. Behold, the prophet's decree states that the voice of repentance should commence with words of solace and joyful news.

Repentance in General

Yet, when we proclaim that faith is the source from which repentance springs, we do not suggest that it must endure a prolonged period of gestation. Rather, we seek to emphasize that one cannot truly embrace repentance until they recognize their belongingness to God. And how can one lay claim to belonging to God without first comprehending His boundless grace? However, the intricacies of this matter shall be expounded upon in the subsequent section.

Now, let us turn our attention to those who concoct a novel strain of Christianity, wherein certain days of repentance must be observed before one is deemed worthy of baptism and permitted to partake in the grace of the gospel. Alas! These proponents of error and madness, the self-proclaimed "spiritual" Anabaptists, fail to furnish any substantiation for their misguided notions. It is truly an unfortunate fruit borne by their deranged spirits—this notion of reserving a meager few days for repentance, a practice meant to span the entirety of a Christian's life.

Long ago, wise men endeavored to expound on repentance in its purest form, adhering strictly to the principles laid forth in scripture. They posited that repentance comprises two inseparable facets: mortification and vivification. They explained "mortification" as "a deep sorrow and fear of heart that arises from the realization of sin and the awareness of God's impending judgment." When one gains true insight into their transgressions, they cannot help but develop an aversion to sin. Indeed, they become displeased with themselves, confessing their wretchedness and shame, while harboring hope for transformation. Moreover, as this sense of impending judgment engulfs them (for the two are intertwined), they experience profound humility, terror, and a crushing weight of despair. They tremble and are disheartened, devoid of hope. This, my friends, is the initial stage of repentance, aptly referred to as "contrition."

The other facet, "vivification," is illuminated by the comforting embrace of faith. When an individual, plagued by the consciousness of their sin and gripped by the fear of God, directs their gaze towards His benevolence and mercy—contemplating the grace and salvation bestowed upon humanity through Jesus Christ—a transformative solace ensues. They find respite, their spirits rekindled, as they inhale the breath of life anew, transcending the grip of death itself.

It is not uncommon for some to perceive two distinct forms of repentance, as they observe the varied ways in which the term is employed throughout scripture. To differentiate between them, they have labeled one as "legal" repentance, wherein the sinner, wounded by the searing agony of their transgressions and consumed by the terror of God's wrath, remains ensnared in a state of perpetual turmoil, unable to break free. The other kind of repentance they have dubbed "evangelical," for it is through this form that the sinner, despite being deeply afflicted within, rises to greater heights,

embracing Jesus Christ as the cure for their ailment, the solace for their terror, and the savior from their wretchedness.

We find examples of legal repentance in the accounts of Cain, Saul, and Judas (Genesis 4:13-14; 1 Samuel 15:24-25, 30; Matthew 27:3-4). Scripture depicts their repentance as a recognition of the weight of their sins and a fear of God's impending judgment. However, their focus remained fixed solely on divine retribution and the looming specter of judgment. Inevitably, they were overcome and their lives were ruined by this narrow perspective. Their repentance served as a gateway to perdition, leading them down a path to the torments of hell even in this present life, as they began to experience the wrath of God's majestic fury.

Conversely, we witness evangelical repentance in the lives of those who, despite being pierced to the core by the sting of sin, rise with confidence in the mercy of God and return to Him. Consider Hezekiah, who, upon receiving the message of his impending death, found himself distressed. Yet, he wept, prayed, and, contemplating God's mercy, gained renewed confidence (2 Kings 20:3; Isaiah 38:2ff). Similarly, the Ninevites were terror-stricken by the grave pronouncement of their imminent destruction. They clothed themselves in sackcloth and ashes, beseeching the Lord with prayers, hoping that His wrath might be turned away (Jonah 3:5-6). David, too, acknowledged his grievous sin of deceiving the people with a facade of righteousness. Nevertheless, he implored, "Lord, take away the sin of your servant" (2 Samuel 24:10). When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David recognized the gravity of his transgressions, humbling himself before God and patiently awaiting forgiveness (2 Samuel 12:13). We witness this form of repentance in the hearts of those who were profoundly moved by the preaching of St. Peter, as they exclaimed, "What shall we do, brothers?" placing their trust in

the goodness of God (Acts 2:37). The repentance of St. Peter himself is also of this nature, as he wept bitterly but never ceased to hope (Matthew 26:75; Luke 22:62).

Repentance More Deeply Understood

Although these truths hold firm, it appears, based on my understanding of scripture, that we must apprehend the term "repentance" in a different light. It is rather amusing how some individuals conflate faith with repentance, despite the clear words of St. Paul in Acts, where he testifies of "repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ" as separate entities (Acts 20:21). Here, St. Paul himself distinguishes between faith and repentance. So, what shall we make of this? Can genuine repentance truly find its footing without faith? Absolutely not. While inseparable, they must be discerned as distinct. Just as faith cannot exist without hope, faith and hope are indeed separate entities. Similarly, repentance and faith, though bound together indissolubly, should be joined rather than confused. I am well aware that the term "repentance" encompasses the entire act of conversion to God, of which faith is a principal component. However, the precise nature and essence of repentance will become clear once we inquire into its characteristics. It is worth noting that the Hebrew term for repentance signifies "conversion," while the Greek equivalent denotes a "change of counsel and will." In truth, these terms align well with the essence of repentance itself. For at its core, repentance entails a turning away from ourselves and redirecting our gaze towards God. It necessitates forsaking our initial thoughts and wills, and embracing a new paradigm.

Therefore, in my discernment, it is fitting to define repentance in the following manner: it is an authentic conversion, a complete

turnaround of our lives, leading us to wholeheartedly follow God and the path He reveals to us. Such a conversion springs forth from a genuine and unfeigned fear of God, which manifests itself in the mortification of our sinful nature and the vivification of the Spirit within us. This is the essence we must embrace when considering the numerous exhortations found in the writings of the prophets and apostles. Their intention is to guide the people of their time toward a state of repentance, urging them to feel a deep sense of shame for their transgressions and to be struck by the reverential fear of God's judgment. Through this humbling and prostration before the majesty of the offended God, they seek to realign individuals onto the right path. Hence, whenever they speak of turning back and returning to the Lord, of repenting and doing repentance, they always strive toward the same objective. St. Paul and St. John declare, "Let them produce fruits worthy of repentance" (Matthew 3:8; Acts 26:20; cf. Romans 6:4, 7:4–6). By this, they imply that a transformed life must bear witness to a genuine amendment in all its actions.

Three Views on Repentance

However, before we proceed any further, let us thoroughly unpack the aforementioned definition, which comprises three essential elements. Firstly, when we speak of repentance as a conversion of life to God, we demand more than mere external actions. We require a profound transformation within the depths of one's soul, wherein the old nature is stripped away, making room for the production of fruits worthy of this spiritual renewal. This notion finds resonance in the prophet's command for those he exhorts to repentance to possess a new heart. Even Moses, in his exhortation to the people of Israel regarding true conversion, repeatedly emphasizes the necessity to turn their hearts and souls wholly towards God. The prophets too employ this expression with great frequency (Ezekiel 18:30-31).

However, it is in the fourth chapter of Jeremiah that we find a particularly illuminating passage through which we may grasp the true nature of repentance. There, God speaks in this manner: "Israel, if you turn, turn to me. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good" (Jeremiah 4:1-4). Here, we witness the affirmation that in order to embark upon a path of righteousness, one must begin by uprooting all impiety from the depths of the heart. It is for this reason that Isaiah mocks the hollow endeavors of the hypocrites in his time, who sought to reform their lives externally, while neglecting the crucial task of breaking free from the chains of impiety that ensnared their hearts. In another passage, Isaiah masterfully illustrates the kind of works that ought to flow from true repentance (Isaiah 58:1-14).

Now, let us turn our attention to the second aspect. We have stated that repentance arises from a genuine fear of God. Indeed, before the conscience of a sinner can be led to repentance, it must first be stirred by the weight of God's judgment. When the thought takes hold in the depths of the human heart that one day God will ascend His throne of judgment, demanding an account of all our deeds and words, it becomes an incessant goad, relentlessly urging and compelling the wretched sinner to embrace a new life. This relentless awareness of impending judgment leaves no room for respite or tranquility, but rather, it drives the sinner to continually strive towards a transformed existence, that they may stand securely before the judgment seat. Hence, when scripture exhorts us to repentance, it frequently serves as a reminder that God will one day judge the world. Consider the words of Jeremiah: "lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of your evil deeds" (Jeremiah 4:4). Similarly, in St. Paul's sermon to the Athenians, he proclaims that God, having permitted people to walk in ignorance, now commands all to repent, for He has appointed a day on which

He will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:30–31). Numerous other passages echo this sentiment. At times, scripture even underscores the reality of divine judgment through historical events, serving as a sobering reminder to sinners that greater suffering awaits them if they do not mend their ways in due time. We find an example of this in the twenty-ninth chapter of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 29:23).

Now, as the commencement of our conversion to God entails a deep-seated abhorrence and dread of sin, the apostle rightly asserts that godly sorrow is the catalyst for repentance. He refers to it as "godly sorrow" (2 Corinthians 7:10), for it is not merely a fear of punishment, but a profound aversion and condemnation of sin itself. This sorrow arises from the understanding that sin is displeasing to God, and thus, we despise and detest it with every fiber of our being.

Let us now consider the third aspect, wherein we assert that repentance encompasses two fundamental components: the mortification of the flesh and the vivification of the spirit. While the prophets, in their simplicity, conveyed these truths to a people enveloped in ignorance, their teachings aptly expound upon the essence of repentance. They proclaimed, "Cease to do evil and devote yourselves to good," and beckoned, "Cleanse yourselves from your filth, forsake your perverse ways, learn to do good, pursue righteousness and mercy" (Psalm 34:14; Isaiah 1:16-17), and so on. By calling individuals to turn away from malevolence, they demanded nothing less than the crucifixion and demise of the entire sinful nature within them. However, let us not underestimate the arduousness of this commandment, for it necessitates the complete abandonment of self and the annihilation of our very being. To truly put the flesh to death (Romans 8:13), we must renounce everything that is of ourselves and allow it to be reduced to nothingness. You

see, every inclination and emotion stemming from our fallen nature stands in opposition to God and acts as an adversary to His righteousness. Therefore, our initial step towards obedience to the law requires the renunciation of our nature and the relinquishment of our own will. Moreover, the prophet's words also signify the renewal of life through subsequent actions, such as righteousness, justice, and mercy. Engaging in external deeds alone would prove insufficient unless our souls first cultivate a genuine love and inclination towards them. This transformation occurs when God's Spirit, in His holiness, remodels our souls, guiding them towards new thoughts and affections, rendering them unrecognizable compared to their former state. Both mortification and vivification find their source in our union with Christ. Indeed, if we are true participants in His death (Romans 6:3ff), the power of His sacrifice crucifies our old selves, putting to death the accumulation of sin within us, and weakening the stronghold of corruption in our original nature. And if we partake in His resurrection, we are resurrected to a new life that aligns with God's righteousness. It is through communion with Christ that these transformative processes unfold within us.

In essence, repentance can be understood as a spiritual rebirth—a process aimed at restoring the divine image within us, an image that was obscured and all but erased through Adam's transgression. The apostle aptly describes this transformation as the removal of the veil from our eyes, allowing us to reflect God's glory and be transformed into His likeness through the work of His Spirit. He urges us to be renewed in our inner selves, to put on the new self created in God's image, characterized by righteousness and true holiness (2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:23-24; Colossians 3:10). Through this regeneration, accomplished by the grace of Christ, we are reinstated into God's righteousness, from which we were excluded by the sin of

Adam. It pleases God to restore, in their entirety, all those whom He adopts into the inheritance of eternal life, reclaiming them as His own.

Tears and Fasting

Now, let us examine the fruits of repentance. Some individuals, influenced by the passages in which the prophets admonish the people to repent with tears, fasting, and outward signs of mourning—such as wearing sackcloth and ashes on their heads (as notably mentioned in Joel 2:12-13)—erroneously believe that the crux of repentance lies in fasting and weeping. However, we must firmly challenge this misconception. In the passage from Joel, the emphasis is rightly placed on the complete transformation of our hearts, on rending our hearts rather than merely tearing our garments. Tears and fasting are mentioned as circumstantial elements that were particularly fitting for that specific time and context. Joel, having pronounced God's impending judgment upon the people, urges them to avert it not only through a change in their way of life but also by humbling themselves and displaying signs of sorrow. Just as an individual accused of a crime might grow a beard, leave their hair uncombed, and don mourning attire to seek mercy from a judge, so too it was fitting for the people indicted before God's throne to outwardly demonstrate their repentance and plea for pardon, acknowledging that their hope lay solely in His unfathomable mercy.

Although the practices of wearing sackcloth and putting ashes on the head were customary in those days and hold no relevance for us today, we must not dismiss the significance of tears and fasting, particularly when the Lord presents us with signs of impending calamity. When He allows dangers to manifest before us, He signals His readiness to execute judgment, with His divine arm poised for

action. Thus, the prophet aptly encourages the shedding of tears and the observance of fasts as visible expressions of genuine sorrow for those whom he had warned of the impending wrath of God. It would be commendable if today's ecclesiastical pastors followed suit. In times when they perceive the approach of calamities, be it war, famine, or plague, they ought to exhort their congregations to turn to the Lord in prayer, accompanied by tears and fasting. However, let us ensure that these acts are rooted in the fundamental task of rending our hearts rather than merely tearing our garments. Undoubtedly, fasting has not always been intrinsically linked to repentance, but it serves as an appropriate means for those who desire to testify that they acknowledge their deserving of God's wrath and yet seek pardon through His boundless mercy. Jesus Christ Himself associates fasting with suffering and affliction. He pardoned His apostles for not fasting during His presence with them, for it was a time of joy. However, He anticipated that they would have the opportunity to fast during moments of sorrow and separation when they would be deprived of His physical company (Matthew 9:15–16). Here, I am referring to solemn and public fasting. Yet, it is crucial to note that the life of a Christian should be characterized by temperance and sobriety, to the extent that it appears to be a perpetual fast, an ongoing state of self-restraint from beginning to end.

Repentance Preached by Christ and His Apostles

Indeed, if we consider the well-established truth that the entire essence of the Gospel revolves around two fundamental pillars, namely, repentance and the forgiveness of sins, we cannot help but recognize that the Lord, in His infinite grace, justifies His servants not only to absolve them of guilt but also to restore them to a state of true righteousness through the sanctifying work of His Spirit. This

serves as the very essence of the preaching of John the Baptist, who was divinely appointed as the angelic messenger to pave the way for the coming of Christ. His resounding proclamation echoes through the ages: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). By calling the people to repentance, John urges them to acknowledge their sinful condition, to condemn themselves and their works before the Almighty, and to fervently desire the mortification of their flesh and the transformative regeneration of God's Spirit. Simultaneously, his announcement of the kingdom of God is an invitation to faith. When he declares that the kingdom of God is near, he is signifying the arrival of forgiveness of sins, salvation, life, and all the blessings bestowed upon us through Christ. It is for this reason that the other evangelists testify, "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). This indicates that he preached to people who were burdened by the weight of their transgressions, directing them back to God and instilling within them the hope of His abundant grace and salvation.

In a similar manner, Christ initiated His sermons by declaring, "The kingdom of God is near; repent and believe in the gospel." Firstly, He proclaims the opening of the divine storehouses of mercy in Himself; secondly, He calls for genuine repentance; and finally, He emphasizes unwavering confidence in God's promises. In another passage, seeking to encapsulate the entirety of the gospel message, He states that it was imperative for Him to suffer, be raised from the dead, and for repentance and the forgiveness of sins to be proclaimed in His name (Luke 24:46–47). The apostles echoed this proclamation after His resurrection, testifying that God had raised Him up to grant repentance and forgiveness of sins to the people of Israel (Acts 5:30–31). Penitence is preached in the name of Christ when the teachings of the Gospel expose the corruption that permeates human thoughts,

affections, and actions, prompting the recognition that regeneration is necessary for anyone seeking entry into the kingdom of God. Forgiveness of sins is preached when individuals are shown that Christ is their redemption, righteousness, salvation, and life, and through Him, they are accounted as righteous and blameless before God. Consequently, His righteousness is freely credited to them. Both repentance and the remission of sins are received through faith. However, since the focal point of faith is the goodness of God, by which our sins are pardoned, it becomes necessary to differentiate between faith and repentance.

Repentance and Change of Life

The initial step in repentance, which stems from a genuine abhorrence for sin, grants us the first glimpse into the knowledge of Christ. It is in the hearts of impoverished and afflicted sinners, those who groan under the weight of their transgressions, who labor tirelessly, burdened and famished, overwhelmed by their afflictions and wretchedness, that Christ chooses to reveal Himself (Isaiah 61:1; Matthew 11:4–5). Conversely, once we embark on the path of repentance, it is a lifelong journey that should persist until our final breath if we desire to find true rest and abide in Christ. He came to summon sinners, but His call is an invitation to repentance (Matthew 9:13; Acts 5:31). Though He blesses the unworthy, it is with the expectation that each individual turns away from their sinful ways. This sentiment is echoed throughout Scripture. Therefore, when the Lord bestows upon us the remission of sins, it is customary for Him to request a corresponding amendment of life, emphasizing that His mercy ought to serve as the impetus and foundation for our transformation. He declares, "Execute justice and righteousness, for salvation is near." Furthermore, He proclaims, "Salvation will come to Zion, to those in Israel who turn from their transgressions." And

He exhorts, "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that He may have compassion on him" (Isaiah 56:1, 59:20, 55:6–7). Likewise, the apostle urges, "Repent therefore and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). However, we must note in this passage that the condition is not presented as the foundation for obtaining pardon. On the contrary, since the Lord desires to extend mercy to humanity for the purpose of facilitating their amendment of life, we are reminded of the ultimate goal we must strive for if we seek to receive forgiveness from God.

In the confines of our mortal bodies, we find ourselves engaged in an unceasing struggle against the corruption that permeates our very nature. Plato, in his musings, proclaimed that the life of a philosopher is a meditation on death. Yet, we can assert with greater veracity that the life of a Christian is characterized by a relentless endeavor and unyielding discipline in mortifying the flesh. It is through the death of our sinful nature that the Spirit of God may truly reign within us. Thus, I believe that those who have acquired a profound discontentment with themselves have made significant progress. However, let us not remain stagnant at this point, but rather, let us direct our aspirations and yearnings towards God. Through our grafting into the death and resurrection of Christ, let us persevere in a continuous state of repentance.

Indeed, those who are genuinely moved by a detestation of sin cannot do otherwise, for one does not develop a hatred for sin without first being captivated by a love for righteousness. This simple truth resonates deeply with the teachings of Scripture, as it reflects the profound interplay between sin and righteousness.

Repentance Not Understood by the Scholastics

Now, let us turn our attention to the perspectives espoused by the sophists regarding repentance. I shall endeavor to address their teachings concisely, as brevity is my aim in this writing. Delving too deeply into their convoluted arguments would only lead us further into their intricate mazes, making it arduous to find an escape from their clutches. Therefore, let us tread cautiously, mindful of the potential complexities that lie ahead, while seeking clarity and understanding in this matter.

It appears that those who claim to provide a definition of repentance have utterly failed to grasp its true essence. Their reliance on select quotations from the early church fathers, though seemingly profound, falls short of capturing the profound nature and essence of repentance. Let us examine these statements they present:

"To do repentance is to weep for sins previously committed and not to commit those for which they must afterward weep." And, "It is to groan for all past evils and no longer commit those for which they must afterward groan." These utterances, while appealing on the surface, fail to encompass the depth and significance of repentance. They serve merely as exhortations to penitents, urging them to refrain from falling into the same sins from which they have been delivered.

It is worth noting that, even if one were inclined to regard these statements as accurate definitions, it would be just as easy for a contentious individual to refute them. After all, should we accept everything uttered by the early church fathers as definitive statements, there exist other quotations of seemingly equal value. For instance, St. Chrysostom described repentance as a curative

medicine, a divine gift bestowed from above, an astonishing power transcending earthly laws.

However, let us not be swayed by these isolated proclamations. It is crucial to discern the true meaning of repentance, one that transcends mere exhortations and quotations. Only then can we attain a comprehensive understanding of this transformative spiritual discipline.

Having presented their subtle definition of repentance, these scholars proceed to divide it into three parts: contrition of heart, confession of mouth, and satisfaction of works. They seem to take great delight in their ability to divide and define, honed as they are in the art of dialectic. However, their division is as ill-fitting as their definition, despite their lifelong devotion to the study of such matters.

If one were to challenge them, employing their own definition as an argument, suggesting that a person can weep for past sins and abstain from committing them again without confessing with the mouth, how would they defend their division? If it is indeed true that a person who does not confess orally can still be a genuine penitent, then repentance can exist without this particular aspect of confession. If they respond by asserting that this division should pertain to repentance as a sacrament or to its complete perfection, which they fail to grasp in their definitions, then they have no reason to criticize me. Rather, the fault lies with their lack of clarity and purity in their definitions.

It is vital to recognize that the matter at hand is not a trivial dispute, but a question of immense significance—the forgiveness of sins. When these scholars insist on these three elements—heartfelt regret, verbal confession, and works of satisfaction—as necessary for

repentance, it implies that these requirements are essential for obtaining forgiveness. If there is anything we must truly comprehend in our religious understanding, it is this: the means, the manner, the conditions, and the level of difficulty or ease involved in obtaining the remission of sins. Without certainty and clarity in this knowledge, the conscience remains restless and at odds, lacking peace with God, confidence, and assurance. It is in a constant state of trembling, turmoil, torment, and dread of God's judgment, striving to flee from it whenever possible. If the forgiveness of sins is contingent upon the conditions they impose, then we are left in a state of wretchedness and despair unlike any other.

The Doctrine of Contrition as Taught by the Scholastics

The theologians, in their wisdom, prescribe contrition as the first essential step towards obtaining pardon and grace. They insist that this contrition must be done properly, fully, and entirely. Yet, they fail to provide any clear guidelines as to when one can be certain that they have truly accomplished this contrition and fulfilled their obligation. Poor consciences are left in a state of tremendous distress and anguish, for they are burdened with the requirement of due contrition without knowing the magnitude of the debt, unable to ascertain when they have paid what is owed.

If theologians assert that we must do what lies within our power, we find ourselves trapped in an endless cycle. When can one ever dare to assure themselves that they have exerted all their strength in weeping for their sins? Consequently, after much internal debate, consciences, desperate for relief and unable to find solace or refuge, may resort to self-imposed affliction and forcibly extract tears, all in the name of fulfilling this contrition. If theologians wish to accuse me of slander, I challenge them to present a single person who has not

been plunged into despair by such teachings, or a solitary individual who has not feigned affliction as a feeble attempt to appease God's judgment, while true remorse remains elusive.

In the face of such a predicament, it is crucial to reflect upon the implications of this theological position. How can consciences find genuine peace and reassurance when the standard for contrition remains undefined and unattainable? Is it not time to reconsider and seek a more merciful and gracious approach that aligns with the compassionate nature of our loving Creator? Let us earnestly explore the depths of divine forgiveness and the boundless nature of God's grace, for it is in embracing the magnitude of His mercy that true contrition and transformation can be found.

We have previously stated that forgiveness of sins is never granted without repentance, for it is through genuine and heartfelt affliction and wounded conscience that one can sincerely implore God's mercy. However, let us be clear that repentance itself is not the cause of this forgiveness, thereby relieving souls from the torment of feeling obligated to perfectly accomplish contrition. Instead, we instruct the sinner to shift their gaze from their own regret and tears and fix their eyes upon the boundless mercy of God.

Moreover, we emphasize that it is those who labor and carry burdens who are called by Christ. He was sent to proclaim good news to the impoverished, to heal the wounded hearts, to offer liberation to the captives, freedom to the prisoners, and solace to those in mourning (Matthew 11:5; Isaiah 61:1). This excludes the Pharisees who were self-righteous and blind to their own poverty, as well as those who scorn God, showing no concern for His wrath and seeking no remedy for their wickedness. Such individuals do not labor, they are not afflicted in their hearts, nor are they bound or captive; they do not

weep. There exists a profound distinction between instructing a sinner to strive for forgiveness by achieving full and complete contrition, an impossible task as propagated by these theologians, and guiding them to hunger and thirst for God's mercy through a recognition of their own wretchedness. We exhort them to embrace their toil, affliction, and captivity, leading them to seek comfort, rest, and deliverance. In essence, we teach them to glorify God through humility.

Confession: A So-Called Proof From Scripture

Regarding the matter of confession, an age-old controversy has persisted between the canonists and scholastic theologians. The former assert that confession is merely a product of human legislation, an ordinance established by ecclesiastical authorities. On the other hand, the latter claim that confession is divinely commanded. This ongoing dispute serves as a stark reminder of the audacity displayed by theologians, who, in their pursuit, have manipulated and distorted numerous passages of scripture to support their own agenda. Yet, recognizing the futility of their efforts, the most cunning among them have devised a clever escape route, suggesting that confession possesses divine origins in its essence but has adopted its specific form through human law. Such reasoning mirrors the feeble attempts of those less versed in legal matters who twist the words directed at Adam—"Adam, where are you?"—to substantiate divine law. Similarly, they attribute divine law to the subsequent response wherein Adam, in his defense, implicates the woman given to him by God. However, it is worth noting that the formulation of confession, both shaped and unshaped, owes its existence to civil law, not divine law!

Now, let us examine the arguments put forth by these theologians in an attempt to prove that God commanded confession, whether in its current form or otherwise. They argue, "Our Lord sent the lepers to the priests" (Matthew 8:4; Luke 5:14, 17:14). But why did He send them? Was it to confess their sins? Has it ever been heard that the Levitical priests were ordained to hear confessions (Deuteronomy 17:8-9)? This prompts these theologians to resort to allegory, asserting, "The Mosaic law dictated that priests should distinguish between different types of leprosy, and sin is spiritual leprosy, thus falling under the purview of the priest's judgment." Before addressing this, I pose a question: If, according to this passage, priests were appointed as judges of spiritual leprosy, why do they also claim authority over the recognition of natural and bodily leprosy? Is it not a blatant manipulation of scripture to alter its meaning in such a manner? "The law assigns the judgment of leprosy to the Levitical priests; let us then appropriate it for ourselves. Sin is spiritual leprosy; therefore, let us assume the role of sin's judges."

I must emphasize that since the priesthood has been transferred, it is imperative that the law be transferred as well. With Jesus Christ as the fulfillment and culmination of all priesthoods, He assumes all the dignity and prerogative associated with it. If these theologians find delight in allegories, let them present Christ as the sole Priest and bestow upon Him all jurisdiction; we can easily embrace this proposition. However, the allegory they employ is misguided, as it conflates purely civil law with ceremonial practices. So, why does Christ send the lepers to the priests? It is to prevent the priests from accusing Him of transgressing the law, which stipulates that the one healed of leprosy should present themselves before the priest and undergo purification through a prescribed offering. He commands the lepers whom He had healed to fulfill the requirements of the law, saying, "Go, show yourselves to the priests and offer the gift that

Moses commanded, as a testimony to them" (Matthew 8:4; Mark 1:44; Luke 5:14). Indeed, this miracle should serve as a testimony to them. The priests had declared these individuals as lepers, and now they must acknowledge their healing. Are they not, against their own will, compelled to bear witness to the miracles of Christ? He allows them to test the authenticity of His miracle, leaving them with no option but to acknowledge it. Yet, despite these undeniable proofs, they persist in their equivocation. Thus, this miraculous work stands as a witness against them. As another passage states, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (Matthew 24:14). Additionally, it is said, "You will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness to them" (Matthew 10:18), signifying that they will be further convicted at the divine judgment. If these theologians prefer to rely on the authority of St. Chrysostom, let it be known that he teaches that Christ acted in this manner because of the Jews, so as not to be seen as one who disregarded the law.

Confession: A Second So-Called Proof From Scripture

These theologians, ever fond of their allegories, present their second argument from the same source as if allegories possess some great power to substantiate their teachings! Yet, I would be content if allegories alone were sufficient, especially since I could claim them with greater legitimacy than they can. They claim that after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He commanded His disciples to unbind and free him (John 11:44). Firstly, they blatantly deceive with their assertion, for nowhere does it state that He commanded His disciples to perform such a task. It is far more plausible that He directed those words to the Jews present at the scene, so that the miracle would be evident without a shadow of doubt, eliminating any

suspicion of trickery. His power would appear even more remarkable as He raised the dead through the sheer force of His word, without physical contact. Indeed, I understand it in this manner: our Lord, seeking to remove any wicked doubt from the minds of the Jews, desired them to roll away the stone, perceive the putrid stench, witness the unmistakable signs of death, and then behold Lazarus resurrected solely by the power of His commanding voice. They would be the first to touch Lazarus, serving as living testimony to the miracle. Nevertheless, let us hypothetically grant that these words were spoken to the disciples. What, then, do these theologians deduce from this? How can they further expound upon this passage through their cherished allegory? Perhaps they will suggest that our Lord intended to teach His faithful to release those whom He had resurrected. That is to say, they should not recall the sins that He has forgotten, nor condemn those whom He has absolved. They should not make accusations about matters for which He has granted pardon, nor be harsh and unyielding in punishment when He, in His mercy, has been gracious, tender, and compassionate in extending forgiveness! Oh, let these theologians behold the brilliance of their allegories and wield them as their shield and authority!

Confession: Two New Testament Texts Explored

They make an attempt to bolster their position by citing supposedly clear passages from Scripture. They argue, "Those who came to John's baptism confessed their sins, and James commands us to confess our sins to one another" (Matthew 3:6; James 5:16). To this, I respond that it is no revelation that those who sought baptism from John confessed their sins. After all, John had been preaching a baptism of repentance and administered water baptism for the purpose of repentance. Whom else would he baptize except those who openly acknowledged themselves as sinners? Baptism serves as

a symbol of forgiveness of sins; naturally, it is reserved for sinners who recognize their need for such forgiveness. Hence, they confessed their sins in order to partake in baptism. There is indeed good reason for James to instruct us to confess to one another. However, if these theologians paid closer attention to what follows, they would discover that it hardly supports their argument. James continues, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another" (James 5:16). He intertwines mutual prayer and mutual confession. If it were necessary to confess solely to priests, then it would logically follow that we should pray exclusively for them as well. According to James' words, only priests would have the privilege of confessing. After all, if he instructs us to confess to one another mutually or reciprocally, it implies that the confessor must also hear the confession of the other person. This privilege, however, they reserve exclusively for priests. Therefore, in accordance with their own line of reasoning, we shall willingly concede to them the duty of confessing!

Let us discard such nonsensical arguments and grasp the straightforward and clear meaning of the apostle. He teaches us to communicate and reveal our weaknesses to one another, seeking counsel, compassion, and mutual comfort. Moreover, let us be aware of the weaknesses of our brothers and sisters, and let each one of us, in turn, pray to God for these very weaknesses. So why do they wield St. James against us? We ardently emphasize the need for confessing our unworthiness before God, for it is through this confession that we can humbly acknowledge His boundless mercy. We go even further and declare that all who fail to confess their sins before God, His angels, the church, and indeed, all people, are cursed and condemned. For God has encompassed all under the weight of sin, so that every mouth may be silenced, every human being humbled, and He alone may be justified and exalted. (Galatians 3:22; Romans 3:9, 19).

Confession in Church History

I find it truly astonishing how audacious they are to assert that the confession they speak of is rooted in divine law. While we acknowledge that the practice of confession is ancient, we can easily demonstrate that it was initially voluntary. Their own histories attest to the fact that there was no law or decree until the time of Innocent III. Numerous accounts from ancient writers and historians reveal that it was a disciplinary measure instituted solely by the bishops, rather than an ordinance established by Christ or His apostles. Allow me to present just one of these historical records, which should suffice to support my argument.

Sozomen, a respected author of Ecclesiastical History, recounts that this practice was a decree specifically observed in the western churches, particularly at Rome. This clearly indicates that it was not a universal practice throughout all the churches. Furthermore, Sozomen highlights the fact that a designated priest was assigned to this role, thereby debunking the theologians' claim that the keys were indiscriminately bestowed upon the entire priestly order. It was not a responsibility shared by all, but rather the duty of a chosen individual elected by the bishop for this purpose.

Moreover, Sozomen mentions that this practice was followed in Constantinople until an incident occurred involving a woman who deceitfully used confession as a pretext to engage in an inappropriate relationship with one of the deacons. As a result of this immoral behavior, Nectarius, the esteemed bishop of Constantinople known for his holiness and profound teaching, abolished the practice of confession. I suggest these individuals lend their ears to this historical account and reconsider their stance.

Let us reflect deeply on the origins and development of confession, seeking wisdom and discernment in our understanding. May we always turn to the true source of authority, the teachings of Christ and His apostles, guided by the light of reason and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

If auricular confession were truly a divine law, how could Nectarius have had the audacity to abolish it? Are these theologians accusing this revered and esteemed figure, who was respected by all the early church fathers, of heresy and schism? By their own reasoning, they would condemn not only Nectarius but also the entire church of Constantinople, as well as all the eastern churches, for supposedly disregarding an inviolable law imposed upon all Christians. It is truly astounding that they dare to open their mouths and speak against the actions of these individuals.

The fact is that the abolition of confession is abundantly supported by the teachings of St. Chrysostom, who himself served as the bishop of Constantinople. His words are so clear and explicit on this matter that it is astonishing these theologians have the audacity to challenge them. He unequivocally states, "If you want to wipe out sins, confess them. If you are ashamed to disclose them to a person, confess them every day in your soul. Confess them to God, who can purify them. Confess them on your bed, in order that your conscience may each day recognize its evil." Furthermore, he emphasizes, "It is not necessary to confess before a witness; only make the acknowledgment in your heart; this examination does not require a witness; it is enough that God alone may see and hear you." St. Chrysostom repeatedly stresses that there is no need to confess to a person who may later rebuke or shame you, but rather one should bring their wounds before God, the compassionate Healer of souls.

Shall we then claim that St. Chrysostom, in speaking in such a manner, was so reckless as to release people's consciences from the very bonds that God had ordained? Certainly not. What he understood as not being commanded by God, he did not dare to impose as necessary. He recognized the true healing power that comes from confessing our sins to God alone, without the need for a human intermediary. St. Chrysostom understood that it is in God's presence, in the depths of our hearts, where true repentance and healing occur.

Confession of Sins According to Holy Writ

Let us therefore ponder the wisdom of these teachings, and let us approach confession with a sincere and contrite heart, seeking reconciliation with God and allowing His grace to transform us. May we never impose unnecessary burdens on ourselves or others, but instead embrace the freedom and mercy offered to us through Christ.

To investigate this matter further, let us faithfully explore the nature of confession as revealed in God's Word. We shall then address their fabrications regarding confession, albeit not exhaustively (for who could drain such a vast sea?), but focusing on the crux of their teachings. It is worth noting that scripture often employs the term "confession" in the context of praise, a fact that these audacious individuals conveniently ignore as they wield such passages to bolster their claims. Take, for instance, their assertion that confession engenders joy in the heart, citing the Psalm: "With the voice of joy and confession" (Psalm 42:4). May the uninformed grasp the true meaning of these words and learn to discern it from the other, so as not to fall easily into the trap of such falsehoods.

Regarding the confession of sins, scripture instructs us as follows: since it is the Lord who forgives, forgets, and blots out our

transgressions, let us confess them before Him to obtain grace and pardon. He is the Divine Physician, so let us present to Him our wounds and sores. It is He who has been offended and wounded, so let us implore His mercy and seek reconciliation. He knows the depths of our hearts and sees every thought, therefore, let us lay open our hearts before Him. It is He who calls sinners, so let us turn to Him in repentance. As David proclaims, "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin" (Psalm 32:5). David's plea for mercy echoes the same sentiment: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, according to your steadfast love" (Psalm 51:1). Daniel also offers a similar confession: "We have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments" (Daniel 9:5). Scripture abounds with comparable examples.

Indeed, as St. John affirms, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins" (1 John 1:9). It is through confession, directed toward our merciful Lord, that we find solace in the assurance of His forgiveness. The act of confessing our sins is a means by which we acknowledge our brokenness before God and seek His loving restoration. So let us approach Him with contrite hearts, knowing that He is faithful and compassionate, ready to embrace us and grant us reconciliation. May this understanding of confession guide us on our journey of faith, leading us to a deeper relationship with our forgiving God.

To whom do we confess our sins? Surely, it is to Him—the Almighty. But on one condition: with a contrite and humble heart, we prostrate ourselves before Him, honestly acknowledging our faults and seeking absolution through His infinite goodness and mercy. Whoever truly confesses before God will surely find their tongue ready to proclaim

His mercy among the people. It is not merely a whisper in secrecy, but a courageous disclosure of our poverty and a testament to God's glory, not just once, but repeatedly, openly, and for all to hear.

Consider the example of David, who, after being confronted by Nathan and pierced by the prick of conscience, confessed his sin both to God and before the people. He declared, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13). No more excuses or equivocations. He desired that his guilt be evident, not only to God but also to his fellow human beings. Let us follow this solemn confession, akin to the collective repentance of Nehemiah and Ezra's time (Ezra 10:1–17; Nehemiah 9:1–37). All churches should emulate this practice when seeking God's forgiveness, as it is customary among well-ordered congregations.

Furthermore, the Scriptures commend to us two additional forms of confession. The first is for our own benefit. It is what St. James speaks of when he urges us to confess our sins to one another (James 5:16). The intention behind this is that by revealing our weaknesses to each other, we may mutually offer counsel and comfort. The second form of confession is driven by love for our neighbor, who has been wounded by our transgressions. It aims to reconcile and restore peace with them. Christ Himself addresses this in the Gospel of Matthew, saying, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Through confessing our sins, we seek to mend the bonds of love that have been strained by our offenses.

As for the first form of confession, though Scripture does not designate a specific person to whom we must unload our burdens, it

allows us the freedom to choose a trustworthy fellow believer who can lend a listening ear to our confession. However, it is worth noting that pastors are particularly suited for this role. Their divine appointment as shepherds of God's flock positions them to guide us in overcoming sin and to proclaim God's goodness for our comfort. Thus, when one finds their conscience entangled in such perplexity that they cannot find solace alone, it is wise not to disregard the remedy graciously offered by God. Let them, with prudence, confess individually to their pastor and receive the solace and comfort that comes from the pastor's ministry. After all, it is the pastor's responsibility to bring solace to God's people through the individual teaching of the gospel, as well as in public gatherings. However, let us always maintain the balance that conscience must not be ensnared and subjected to a yoke in matters where God has granted us freedom.

Roman Catholicism's False Doctrine on the Power of the Keys

In examining the pages of Scripture, we find no trace of the confessional practice concocted by those theologians. Oh no, they have devised a grand scheme of their own! According to their decree, all individuals, regardless of gender, once they reach the age of discretion, are obligated to confess each and every sin to their own parish priest at least once a year. As for the remission of sins, it is contingent upon one's unwavering intention to confess. Should that intention be unfulfilled when the opportunity arises, any hopes of entering paradise are dashed. Furthermore, the priest holds the vaunted power of the keys—the authority to bind or loose the sinner. They vehemently argue that the words of Christ, that which they bind on earth shall be bound in heaven (Matthew 16:19; cf. Matthew 18:18), cannot be rendered meaningless.

Ah, but here's where the contention arises among their ranks. Some claim that there is essentially only one key—the power to bind and loose—and that while knowledge is required to wield it correctly, it is merely an ancillary component and not its essence. Others, noticing the sheer disorderliness of such a notion, have devised a division of keys: discretion and power. And yet others, seeking to temper the caprice of the priests, have introduced additional keys: the authority to distinguish (employed when issuing definitive verdicts) and power (employed when enforcing said verdicts). They have even appended knowledge as a counselor. Alas, they dare not simply interpret binding and loosing as the forgiveness and absolution of sins, for they hear the Lord Himself declare through His prophet, "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake" (Isaiah 43:25). Instead, they assert that it is the prerogative of the priest to pronounce who is bound and who is loosed, to declare which sins are retained and which are forgiven. They claim that the priest makes these proclamations during the act of confession, when he absolves or retains sins, or through his verdict when he excommunicates or absolves from excommunication.

Nevertheless, they cannot escape the undeniable fact that the unworthy are often bound or loosed by their priests, despite their lack of heavenly authority for such actions. As their last line of defense, they contend that the bestowal of the keys must come with certain limitations. They argue that Christ promised that when a priest's verdict is justly pronounced in accordance with the merits of the individual being bound or loosed, it will be ratified in heaven. Furthermore, they claim that these keys were granted to all priests and are conferred upon them by bishops during their ordination from deacon to priest. However, the exercise of this power is restricted to those in ecclesiastical office. Thus, the keys always

remain with priests, even when excommunicated or suspended, albeit rusted and rendered impotent.

Those who assert such claims may appear somewhat reasonable when compared to others who have forged new keys, as if fashioning their own custom locks, to guard what they call the "treasure of the church." They audaciously label the merits of Jesus Christ, the apostles, martyrs, and other saints as this so-called treasure. They contend that the supreme guardianship of this vault has been entrusted to the Bishop of Rome, who holds the key to the initial distribution of these spiritual goods. He, in turn, can bestow them upon others and delegate the authority to distribute them further. And thus, indulgences were born—sometimes granted by the Pope as a plenary remission, at times for a specific number of years, while cardinals received a hundred days and bishops a mere forty.

Obligatory Confession a Cruel Affliction of Conscience

I shall address each of these points briefly, but for now, let us set aside the discussion of the rights and insults they hurl upon the souls of the faithful, for that shall be examined in due course. As for their imposition of a law that necessitates the enumeration of all sins and their denial of forgiveness unless one possesses an unwavering intention to confess, while also proclaiming that the gates of paradise are shut tight against those who spurn the opportunity to confess—such notions are utterly intolerable. How do they expect one to compile a comprehensive list of sins? Even David, who undoubtedly pondered deeply upon the confession of his own transgressions, could not do more than exclaim, "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults!" (Psalm 19:12). In another place, he laments, "My iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me" (Psalm 38:4). Indeed, he

understood the profound depths of our sins, the multitude of offenses dwelling within each person, the many heads of this monstrous entity called sin, and the lengthy tail it drags behind. David did not endeavor to provide a complete reckoning but, from the depths of his sinfulness, he cried out to God, saying, "I am submerged, buried, suffocated; the gates of hell have enclosed around me. Let your right hand rescue me from this pit of drowning, from this abyss of death into which I have fallen!" Who now, in light of David's struggle to fathom the number of his own sins, would dare to believe they can meticulously account for their own?

The torments inflicted upon the consciences of those who had a glimpse of God's presence resembled the fires of Gehenna. They embarked on an arduous task of accounting, meticulously dissecting sins into arms, branches, and leaves, following the classifications of these self-proclaimed experts of confession. They meticulously weighed the characteristics, quantities, and circumstances of each transgression. At the outset, they may have made some progress, but as they looked deeper, all they could see was an endless expanse of sky and sea, devoid of any safe harbor or resting place. The further they ventured, the more the numbers multiplied, rising before their eyes like towering mountains that obstructed their view, leaving no hope of ever escaping this labyrinthine maze. Thus, they remained trapped in this anguish, finding no resolution but sinking deeper into despair.

Then, like inhumane executioners, theologians presented a remedy for the wounds and sores they had inflicted upon these tortured souls. Their solution? Each individual should do what was within their power. Yet, new worries pierced them, and fresh torments flayed these hapless beings as thoughts haunted their minds: "I haven't devoted enough time to it. I haven't zealously pursued it as I

should have. I've neglected certain aspects due to my own carelessness and inexcusable negligence." The theologians, in their attempt to soften these afflictions, added other prescriptions: "Do penance for your negligence! If it isn't too grave, you may find forgiveness."

But these measures fail to heal the wounds; they are more akin to poisons coated with honey, designed to mask their bitterness and deceive before their true nature is revealed. This dreadful voice incessantly echoes in their ears: "Confess all your sins." The horror it invokes cannot be pacified except by a certain and unwavering comfort. The fact that a significant portion of the world has fallen prey to such seductive notions, wherein a lethal poison is disguised as sweetness, does not stem from their belief that God is appeased or that they find contentment within themselves. Rather, it is akin to sailors dropping anchor in the middle of the sea, seeking respite from the toils of their voyage, or a weary pilgrim who, exhausted and stumbling, sits by the wayside to rest. They have sought this temporary reprieve, though it proves woefully insufficient for their true needs.

I will not labor extensively to prove what is evident to each individual's experience. However, let me succinctly describe the nature of this law. Firstly, it is utterly impossible, inevitably leading to ruin, damnation, confusion, and the utter destruction of those who adhere to it, plunging them into despair. Moreover, by diverting sinners from a genuine understanding of their transgressions, it transforms them into hypocrites who remain ignorant of both God and themselves. By obsessing over the enumeration of their sins, they conveniently forget the hidden abyss of vice residing deep within their hearts—their concealed iniquities and impurities. To truly apprehend such darkness, one must primarily contemplate

their own wretchedness. In contrast, the proper manner of confession lies in acknowledging and confessing an abyss of evil within us, one that overwhelms our senses. We witness this form of confession in the words of the publican: "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner," implying, "All that exists within me is but sin, so immense that neither my thoughts nor my tongue can fully grasp its magnitude. May the abyss of Your mercy swallow up the abyss of my sins!"

"But," someone might inquire, "is it not necessary to confess each sin? Does God not find satisfaction in confession unless it is expressed in these few words: 'I am a sinner'?" I respond that our utmost endeavor should be to lay bare our entire heart before God, as far as humanly possible. It is not merely a matter of confessing our status as sinners but genuinely embracing that identity, recognizing, with utmost contemplation, the vast extent and various forms of our sinful filth. We must acknowledge not only our impurity but also the specific nature of our impurity, contemplating its enormity and multiplicity. We must acknowledge not only our indebtedness but also the overwhelming burden of debts that weigh us down. We must acknowledge not only our wounds but the multitude, gravity, and mortal nature of these wounds. Nevertheless, even when a sinner has bared their soul before God with such awareness, they must sincerely believe that numerous other evils still reside within them, which they cannot fully comprehend. The depth of their wretchedness is such that minutely examining it or discovering its boundaries becomes an arduous task. Hence, let them cry out, echoing the words of David: "Who can discern their own errors? Cleanse me from hidden faults!" (Psalm 19:12).

Furthermore, these theologians have the audacity to claim that sins are not forgiven unless one possesses a specific intention to confess,

and that the gates of paradise remain firmly shut to those who pass up the opportunity for confession. How absurd it is for us to concur with such notions! The forgiveness of sins has not changed; it remains consistent throughout history. We find no mention of those who obtained forgiveness of sins from Christ being required to whisper their confessions into the ear of a certain Mr. John. How could they confess when confessors did not yet exist, and the practice of confession itself was unknown for a considerable time? Yet, even during that period of ignorance, sins were forgiven without the conditions these theologians impose. Let us not dispute this matter as if it were a dubious proposition, for the eternal Word of God is unambiguous: "When the wicked person turns away from his wickedness, he shall save his life. He shall live" (Ezekiel 18:27). Those who dare to add conditions to this divine promise do not bind sins but rather restrict God's boundless mercy.

Auricular Confession a Plague

It comes as no surprise, then, that we reject this auricular confession, a plague-like and perilous phenomenon that poses numerous threats to the Church. Even if it were a matter of indifference, its lack of fruitfulness and utility, coupled with the multitude of errors, sacrileges, and impieties it has spawned, make it worthy of abolition. Certainly, these theologians boast about certain advantages that they claim arise from auricular confession, extolling them to the utmost. However, these so-called benefits are either fabricated or trivial. They particularly emphasize the value of shame experienced by the penitent, arguing that it serves as a severe affliction that leads to greater vigilance in the future and prevents God's vengeance by inflicting self-punishment. But are we not subjecting individuals to immense shame when we summon them to this lofty heavenly tribunal and to the judgment of God? Is it truly a great gain if we

refrain from sinning due to our embarrassment before others, yet harbor no shame in the presence of God, who bears witness to our wicked conscience? Such a notion is utterly false and misguided.

Let us not be deceived by these fallacies and illusions. Let us instead turn our hearts and minds toward genuine repentance, seeking the boundless mercy and forgiveness of our gracious Lord. It is in sincere contrition and humble submission to God that we find true reconciliation and renewal.

Behold the remarkable phenomenon that ensues after people have made their confessions to the priest! It appears that they acquire an unparalleled boldness and license to commit evil, as if they could simply wipe their mouths clean and proclaim that all scores against them have been erased. Not only does this embolden them to sin throughout the entire year, but it also relieves them of any concern about confession for the remaining months. They cease to sigh for God, neglecting introspection, and instead accumulate sin upon sin until, in their minds, they disgorge all their transgressions together once again when the next confession period arrives. And once they have regurgitated their sins, they believe they have effectively discharged their burdens and evaded God's judgment, which they have conveniently transferred to the priest. They delude themselves into thinking that God will forget what they have revealed to the priest.

Furthermore, who among them approaches the day of confession with a sense of courage and readiness? Who goes to confession with a truly sincere heart, rather than being dragged there like a reluctant prisoner, compelled against their will? (Except, perhaps, the priests themselves, who delight in joyously recounting their own deeds to one another as if they were pleasant tales.) I shall not waste much

ink recounting the repugnant abominations that pervade auricular confession. I shall only say this: if the venerable Nectarius, that holy man we mentioned earlier, had not acted wisely in removing confession from his church or indeed eradicating it altogether, merely in response to a single rumor of fornication, then we are sufficiently forewarned today to take similar action in the face of the countless debaucheries, fornications, adulteries, and incestuous acts that are bred from this practice.

The Power of the Keys

Let us now investigate the power of the keys, the very foundation on which these self-proclaimed "confessionists" base their authority. They raise the question, "Were the keys given without reason? Would Christ have spoken in vain when He declared, 'Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven'?" To this, I respond that there is indeed a profound reason behind the giving of the keys. However, we must be careful to distinguish between the two passages where the Lord testifies that the binding and loosing on earth corresponds to binding and loosing in heaven. It is a lamentable ignorance that leads these wild boars, in their usual manner, to confuse these passages and muddle their meanings.

One of these passages is found in the Gospel of John, where Christ, in commissioning His apostles to preach, breathes upon them and imparts these words: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained." Here, the keys of the kingdom of heaven, previously promised to St. Peter, are bestowed upon him and his fellow apostles. Nothing was promised to Peter alone that he did not equally receive along with the others. It was said to him, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." In this instance, all the apostles are instructed

to proclaim the gospel, which opens the door of the heavenly kingdom to those who seek the Father through Christ, while closing and barring it to those who turn away from this path. It was said to Peter, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Similarly, it is now declared to all of them collectively, "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained." Binding, therefore, signifies the retention of sins, while loosing signifies the pardoning of sins. Indeed, through the remission of sins, consciences are freed from their true chains, whereas the retention of sins keeps them tightly bound. Allow me to offer an interpretation of this passage that is straightforward, genuine, and appropriate, avoiding excessive subtleties or strained explanations.

The commandment to forgive or retain sins, as well as the promise given to St. Peter regarding binding and loosing, should be understood in connection with the ministry of the Word. When our Lord established this ministry for His apostles, He entrusted to them the authority to bind and loose. After all, what is the essence of the gospel if not the proclamation that all of us, enslaved by sin and death, can find deliverance and redemption through Jesus Christ? Conversely, those who fail to recognize and embrace Christ as their Liberator and Redeemer are condemned to eternal imprisonment.

By entrusting this sacred mission to His apostles, our Lord affirmed its divine origin and demonstrated His own involvement in it. This served as a source of great comfort, both for the apostles themselves and for those who would receive this message throughout the nations of the earth. It was a testament to the authenticity and significance of this divine embassy.

The apostles faced immense challenges, toiling with unwavering dedication, bearing heavy burdens, engaging in perilous work, and ultimately sealing their preaching with their own blood. It was crucial for them to possess unwavering certainty that their labor was not in vain or devoid of purpose, but rather brimming with divine power. Amidst afflictions, adversities, and imminent dangers, they needed the assurance that they were engaged in God's work. In the face of a hostile world that opposed them, they required the knowledge that God was on their side. Though they lacked the physical presence of Christ, the very source of their teaching, on Earth, they understood that He resided in heaven, confirming the truth of their proclamation.

Furthermore, it was imperative to provide the audience with undeniable testimony that this teaching did not originate from the apostles themselves, but from God Almighty. It was crucial to emphasize that this message did not stem from earthly sources but emanated from the heavens. Human capabilities alone could not facilitate the forgiveness of sins, the assurance of eternal life, or the proclamation of salvation. Therefore, Christ Himself attested that in the preaching of the gospel, the apostles were mere instruments through which He spoke and made promises. The remission of sins they proclaimed was God's genuine pledge, and the damnation they warned against was God's definite judgment. This testimony remains steadfast for all eternity, assuring us that the gospel, regardless of the preacher, is the very utterance of God. It is proclaimed from His heavenly throne, inscribed in the book of life, and ratified and confirmed in the heavenly realms.

Hence, we come to understand that the power of the keys is simply the preaching of the gospel. In truth, it is not an authoritative power bestowed upon individuals, but rather a divine ministry entrusted to

them as stewards of God's Word. Christ did not grant this power exclusively to human beings, but to His Word, through which He has appointed individuals as ministers.

Let us now turn our attention to another passage, which we must interpret in a distinct manner. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is written: "If one of your brothers does not want to listen to the church, let him be to you like a gentile and profane person. Truly, truly, I tell you that all that you have bound on earth will be bound in heaven, and what you have loosed will be loosed there." (Matt. 18:17-18). However, we should not regard these two passages as completely dissimilar, for they bear a significant resemblance and share a great affinity. Both passages speak in general terms, highlighting the same authority of binding and loosing, grounded in the word of God. They possess a common commandment to bind and loose and convey the same promise.

Nevertheless, there is a distinction between them. The first passage specifically relates to preaching, to which the ministers of the word are ordained. It centers on the proclamation of the gospel and the authority bestowed upon those who minister in its name. The second passage, on the other hand, encompasses the realm of church discipline, particularly the act of excommunication, which the church is permitted to exercise. When the church excommunicates an individual, it is symbolically binding that person, signifying a judgment upon their life and conduct, and serving as a warning of the potential consequences of their actions. It is not an act of condemning them to eternal destruction and perpetual despair. Conversely, when the church receives someone into its communion, it is symbolically loosing them, welcoming them into the fellowship and unity that is found in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we can discern that the power of binding and loosing operates in both realms, intertwining the realms of preaching and discipline. Through the word of God, ministers exercise this authority in preaching the gospel and proclaiming God's forgiveness. Similarly, the church exercises this power through its disciplinary actions, discerning right from wrong, warning of potential damnation, and embracing those who repent and seek reconciliation. In both cases, the power of binding and loosing is derived from the unity between the earthly and heavenly realms, as God's divine plan is enacted through the ministry of the church.

So, in order to dispel any notion that the judgment of the church is a trivial matter or a mere human opinion, our Lord Himself testifies that such a judgment is nothing less than the proclamation of His divine verdict. He assures us that whatever the faithful pronounce on earth will be ratified in heaven. The faithful possess God's Word, by which they discern and judge the wicked and perverse, and it is through that same Word that they extend grace and reconciliation to those who repent and amend their ways. Their judgment aligns with God's righteous law, which is not a mere earthly opinion but His holy will and heavenly oracle.

Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that when Christ refers to the "church," He is not referring to a select group of clergy with certain outward signs of authority, such as tonsures or shaven heads. Rather, He is speaking of the entire community of faithful believers gathered in His name. Let us not be swayed by the mockery of those who question how one can present a complaint to a scattered and dispersed church. Christ clarifies that He is referring to every Christian congregation, established in various places and provinces. As He declares, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20).

The Spirit, the Word and the Keys

These two passages, as I have briefly and plainly explained, are utilized by those lacking discernment to bolster their arguments regarding confession, excommunication, jurisdiction, and the imposition of laws. They even attempt to derive support for their practice of indulgences. However, if I were to cut through these matters with one stroke, I would deny their claim that their priests are true vicars or successors of the apostles. Nonetheless, the examination of this matter shall be addressed separately in due course.

It is quite amusing to see how they confidently arm themselves with these claims, believing they can use them to fortify their position. However, they fail to recognize a crucial point: Christ did not grant His apostles the power to bind and loose until He had poured out the Holy Spirit upon them. Therefore, I firmly deny that the power of the keys is suitable for anyone except those who have received the Holy Spirit. It is absurd to think that one can wield the keys without the guiding and governing presence of the Holy Spirit, who instructs and directs their actions. While they may boast of having the Holy Spirit, their actions prove otherwise, unless, of course, they consider the Holy Spirit to be something trivial and inconsequential, as they seem to imply. But their claims hold no weight, for people do not place their trust in them.

Their entire scheme crumbles when examined closely. Regardless of the door they claim to have the keys to unlock, we must always question whether they possess the Holy Spirit, who is the true Director and Moderator of the keys. If they dare to claim that they have the Holy Spirit, we must then ask them: Can the Holy Spirit fail? Although they may not openly confess it, their teachings

indirectly admit to this truth. Thus, we must conclude that no priests possess the power of the keys. They whimsically and without discernment bind those whom our Lord intended to set free and release those whom He intended to bind. Their claims are nothing but a façade, lacking any true foundation.

It is quite amusing to witness their desperate attempts to justify themselves when confronted with clear evidence that they haphazardly bind and loose without discrimination. They try to assert that they possess the power even without the necessary knowledge. While they do not dare deny the importance of learning for its proper use, they conveniently teach that the power is granted even to those who administer it poorly. However, since the power lies in the statement, "what you bind or loose on earth will be bound and loosed in heaven," either Jesus Christ's promise is false or those who are entrusted with this power should bind and loose as they ought to. They cannot twist the meaning by suggesting that Christ's promise is limited based on the deserving or undeserving nature of the individual.

We also affirm that no one can be bound or loosed unless they deserve it. Yet, the messengers of the gospel and the church possess God's word to determine this worthiness. Through this word, the messengers of the gospel can promise the forgiveness of sins in Christ by faith to all who embrace Him, and they can declare damnation upon those who reject Him. In this word, the church proclaims that those who engage in immorality, adultery, theft, murder, greed, and sinful acts have no share in the kingdom of God, and it can firmly restrain them with strong bonds. Likewise, through this same word, the church can release those whom it comforts when they genuinely repent.

But what kind of power is it if one does not know what is to be bound or loosed? How can one bind or loose without knowledge? Then, why do they claim to grant absolution by an authority supposedly granted to them when the absolution itself is uncertain? What purpose does this imaginary power serve when its effect is nonexistent? These questions expose the flaws in their claims and render their supposed power meaningless.

It is quite amusing to observe their feeble attempts to defend the efficacy of their usage, which can be regarded as nothing more than null or, at best, extremely uncertain. They themselves admit that the majority of priests do not properly wield the keys, while acknowledging that the power of the keys is ineffective when not used lawfully. In light of this, who can guarantee that the one who absolves me has indeed employed the keys correctly? If the priest is inadequate, all I receive is a whimsical absolution that goes something like this: "I am unsure of what should be bound or loosed in you, as I have no grasp of the keys. However, if you deserve it, I absolve you." Such an absolution holds as much weight as if it were uttered by anyone else—be it a layperson (although mentioning that might upset them) or even a Turk or a devil. Essentially, it amounts to saying, "I lack the sure and certain Word of God, which serves as the reliable guide for binding and loosing. Nevertheless, I possess the authority to absolve you if you happen to be deserving."

Clearly, their aim becomes evident when they assert that the keys encompass the authority to distinguish and the power to carry out their decisions, with learning acting as a mere counselor for proper usage. In their disorder and licentiousness, they seek to reign without God and without His Word, discarding the need for divine guidance and making themselves the ultimate arbiters of absolution.

How audacious and misguided they are in their attempts to operate without the foundation of God's authority and His infallible Word.

It is quite amusing to witness their attempts to adapt their keys to fit various doors and locks, as if these keys possess a universal jurisdiction that can be applied to confessions, decrees, excommunications, and who knows what else. Allow me to provide a concise explanation for this matter.

When we consider Christ's command to His disciples in the Gospel of St. John, where He grants them the authority to loose or retain sins (Jn. 20:23), it is important to note that He is not appointing them as legislators, officials, copyists, or even humble petitioners. Instead, He bestows upon them a special testimony, honoring them as ministers of His Word.

Similarly, in the Gospel of St. Matthew, when Christ grants His Church the power to bind and loose (Matt. 16:19), He is not instructing them to excommunicate the poor souls who are unable to satisfy their creditors based on the authority of some mitered and horned figure, accompanied by the extinguishing of candles and the ringing of bells. Rather, He desires that the waywardness of the wicked be reformed through ecclesiastical discipline, by the authority of His Word, and through the ministry of His Church.

Let us not be carried away by their fantastical interpretations and convoluted applications of the keys. Instead, let us seek to understand the true essence and purpose of these keys—to bring about the transformation of hearts and the restoration of the fallen, all through the power of God's Word and the faithful ministry of His Church.

Trafficking in Indulgences

It is indeed quite amusing to witness the delusions of these individuals who claim that the keys of the Church involve the dispensation of the merits of Jesus Christ and the martyrs, as if the pope possesses the authority to distribute them through his bulls and indulgences. One cannot help but wonder if these individuals are in greater need of a remedy to purge their minds rather than arguments to convince them.

The refutation of indulgences, which have already been undermined by numerous criticisms, hardly requires an elaborate effort. The very fact that they have endured and been upheld for so long, even in the midst of great excess and impropriety, serves as a testament to the darkness and errors in which people have been entangled for years.

People are beginning to see through the deception and manipulation of the pope and his indulgence peddlers. They have come to realize that the salvation of their souls has been commodified, with the purchase of paradise being subjected to a predetermined percentage. Nothing is offered freely. Under the pretense of indulgences, people's purses were drained of their offerings, only to witness the wicked squandering of that money on debauchery, vice, and gluttony. Ironically, those who fervently promoted indulgences were often the ones who held them in the greatest contempt.

This monstrous system continued to grow with each passing day, arrogantly raising its head higher and higher. Each day brought forth new seals of papal bulls, eagerly seeking to extract more silver from the pockets of the people. Yet, despite these exploitative practices, people accepted indulgences with great reverence, even worshiping and purchasing them. Only those with greater discernment could perceive that these were deceitful ploys, though they believed there might still be some benefit to be gained from this deceptive game.

Fortunately, as the world has gradually grown wiser, the fervor for indulgences has waned and become increasingly dormant, until it may eventually fade away completely. It is a hopeful sign that people are beginning to reject these manipulative practices and seek a more authentic understanding of their faith.

It is essential to expose the true nature of indulgences, not only as they have been practiced with all their deceit, robbery, and violence, but also to understand them in their proper and better sense, stripped of any incidental characteristics or vices. In truth, indulgences are nothing but a defilement of Christ's blood and a cunning scheme of the devil to divert the Christian people from God's grace and the life found in Christ, leading them astray from the path of salvation.

Consider how Christ's blood could be more shamefully polluted and dishonored than by denying that it alone is sufficient for the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, and satisfaction, unless its deficiency is compensated elsewhere? The testimony of St. Peter declares that the law and the prophets bear witness that the remission of sins must be received in Christ (Acts 10:43), yet indulgences claim to grant remission of sins through the merits of St. Peter, St. Paul, and other martyrs. St. John affirms that it is Christ's blood that cleanses us from all sins (1 John 1:7), but indulgences twist this truth by proclaiming the blood of martyrs as absolution for sins. St. Paul declares that Christ, who knew no sin, became sin for us, providing satisfaction for sin so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21), while indulgences assign the satisfying of sin to the blood of martyrs. Paul vehemently asserts that Christ alone was crucified and died for us (1 Corinthians 1:13), yet indulgences audaciously claim that St. Paul and others died for us. In another passage, Paul declares that Christ obtained His

church by His own blood (Acts 20:28), but indulgences set a different price for obtaining it—the blood of martyrs. The apostle states that Christ, through His oblation, has perfected eternally those whom He sanctified (Hebrews 10:14), but indulgences contradict this truth by asserting that the sanctification achieved by Christ's sacrifice is perfected by the blood of martyrs. St. John reveals that all the saints have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14), yet indulgences misguide us to believe that we should wash our robes in the blood of the saints.

No Treasury of Merits

Indeed, their blasphemous teachings reach a pinnacle of extreme sacrilege. Let us examine their conclusions: they claim that the martyrs, through their deaths, have served God in excess, accumulating an abundance of merits that can be shared with others. Therefore, the blood of the martyrs is mixed with that of Christ and amassed as a treasure of the church for the remission and satisfaction of sins. They twist the words of St. Paul, stating that he fills up what is lacking in Christ's passion for the sake of His body, which is the church (Colossians 1:24). In essence, they reduce Christ to a mere common saint, barely distinguishable among the multitude of other saints. They leave only His name, while attributing the power of forgiveness, purification, and satisfaction to this accumulation of merits.

Let us consider their arguments, however. They propose that the blood of the martyrs should be shared for the common good of the church, so as not to be wasted. But was it not sufficient usefulness for the martyrs to have glorified God through their deaths? Did they not bear witness to His truth by shedding their blood? Did they not testify, through their contempt for this present life, that they sought

a better one? Did their constancy not strengthen the faith of the church and weaken the resolve of their adversaries? I would argue that they gain nothing from this notion if Christ alone is the one who made atonement, if He alone died for our sins, if He alone was offered for our redemption.

It is essential that we uphold the truth that Christ, and Christ alone, is the focus of our preaching, our contemplation, and our reliance when it comes to obtaining the forgiveness of sins, purification, and satisfaction. Let us not diminish His unique and incomparable sacrifice by intertwining it with the merits of mortals. May we cling to the Gospel message that proclaims Christ as our Savior, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Oh, the malevolence with which they twist and corrupt the passage where St. Paul speaks of making up what is lacking in the passion of Christ! How they misinterpret and misapply his words to serve their own agenda! Let us shed light on this matter.

St. Paul is not referring to any lack in the power of redemption, purification, or satisfaction accomplished by Christ's passion. No, he is addressing the afflictions that the members of Christ, the faithful, endure in their mortal bodies. He reminds us that Christ, who suffered in Himself once, continues to suffer daily in His members. What an honor He bestows upon us by considering our afflictions as His own!

When St. Paul mentions suffering for the sake of the church, he does not mean suffering for its redemption, reconciliation, or satisfaction. Rather, he speaks of suffering for its edification and growth. In other passages, he expresses his willingness to endure tribulations for the sake of the elect, that they may attain salvation in Christ Jesus. He willingly bears these burdens for their comfort and salvation.

Let us not misconstrue St. Paul's words as suggesting any lack in Christ's passion with regard to righteousness, salvation, and life. He does not seek to add anything to the magnificent and complete fulfillment brought forth by Christ's passion. In fact, he testifies boldly and eloquently that through Christ, grace abounds to overcome the abundance of sin. It is by this grace alone that all the saints have been saved, not by their own merits, whether in life or in death. St. Peter himself confirms this truth, stating that it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as the saints are (Acts 15:11).

Therefore, let it be known that anyone who seeks to establish the worth of a saint anywhere other than in God's mercy insults both God and His Christ. Salvation and the fullness of grace reside solely in God's boundless mercy, not in the merits of human beings. Let us turn our hearts and minds to the magnificence of God's mercy and the surpassing greatness of Christ's passion, for in them we find true salvation and life eternal.

Indeed, why should we spend so much time discussing matters that are clearly abominable and contrary to the truth? It is evident that such monstrous practices should be exposed and rejected without hesitation. And even if we were to ignore these abominations, the fundamental question remains: Who gave the pope the authority to confine the grace of Jesus Christ within lead and parchment, when the Lord intended for it to be proclaimed and distributed through the preaching of the gospel?

Either God's word must be false, or indulgences are nothing but lies. In the gospel, Christ is offered to us with the fullness of heavenly blessings, encompassing His merits, righteousness, wisdom, and grace without any limitations or exceptions. St. Paul bears witness to

this when he speaks of the ministry of reconciliation, declaring that we are to be reconciled to God through Christ, who, being sinless, became a sacrifice for our sins so that we might be made righteous in Him.

On the contrary, indulgences take the grace of Christ and confine it to the pope's possession, measuring it out and attaching it to lifeless materials such as lead and parchment, as well as specific places. In doing so, they separate Christ's grace from the living and powerful word of God. This stark contrast highlights the absurdity and falsehood of indulgences.

The Theologians' Doctrine of Satisfaction Rejected

They seem to give great importance to satisfaction, placing it in the third position within the framework of repentance. They go on and on about the necessity of satisfying God for the sins committed, as if abstaining from past wrongdoings and striving to lead a better life were not enough. According to them, various means can be employed to redeem sins, such as shedding tears, observing fasts, making offerings, giving alms, and engaging in other charitable works. They assert that it is our duty to appease God, settle the debt owed to His justice, make amends for our transgressions, and seek pardon through these acts. Although our Lord, in His merciful generosity, has forgiven our sins, they argue that His justice still requires punishment. Ultimately, their viewpoint boils down to this: while we receive forgiveness for our sins through God's mercy, it is supposedly accomplished by the merits of our own works, which are seen as a form of compensation for our transgressions. In this way, they suggest that God's justice can only be satisfied through the offering of satisfactions.

In contrast to such deceitful claims, I present the unequivocal teaching of Scripture on the free remission of sins (Isa. 52:3; Rom. 5:8; Col. 2:13–14; Tit. 3:4–5). What does remission mean if not a gift bestowed out of sheer generosity? A creditor is not said to remit a debt when he acknowledges that the payment has been made to him; rather, it is the one who, without receiving anything, freely and generously pardons the debt who is truly remitting it. And why, pray tell, do they dare resurrect their satisfactions, which have already been thoroughly refuted? What audacity! Did not the Lord declare through Isaiah, "It is I, it is I who wipe out your iniquities for the love of myself, and I will not remember your sins anymore" (Isa. 43:25)? In doing so, did He not openly proclaim that the cause and foundation of this remission stems solely from His own goodness? Furthermore, since the entirety of Scripture testifies that we must receive the forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:43), does it not exclude all other names? How, then, do they teach that forgiveness is obtained in the name of satisfactions? And let them not claim that while satisfactions may be the means, it is not in their name but in the name of Jesus Christ. When Scripture speaks of being "in the name of Christ," it means that we bring nothing of our own for remission, that we lay no claim to our own merits, but rather come to it solely through the love of Christ; just as St. Paul affirms that "God reconciled the world to Himself in His Son for love of Him, not counting people's sins against them" (2 Cor. 5:18–19).

I cannot help but anticipate their twisted response, in line with their perverse thinking. They may argue that reconciliation and remission occur only once, at the time of baptism when we are received in grace by Christ. However, if we happen to stumble and fall after baptism, they will insist that we must atone for our sins through satisfactions. According to them, Christ's blood does not avail us unless it is dispensed through the keys of the church. But why am I merely

expressing my apprehension? They openly and shamelessly proclaim their impiety on this matter, not just a few of them, but all of their theological schools. Their esteemed teacher, after acknowledging, as St. Peter declares, that Christ has paid the debt of our sins on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24), promptly qualifies and corrects this statement with an exception or counterclaim. According to their doctrine, in baptism, all temporal punishments for sin are remitted, but after baptism, they are diminished through repentance. Thus, they argue that the cross of Christ and our repentance work together for remission. Yet, the words of St. John paint a different picture: "If someone has sinned," he says, "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, and He is the propitiation for our sins" and "I write to you, little children, because by His name your sins are remitted" (1 Jn. 2:1–2, 12). Clearly, St. John is addressing the faithful. By presenting Jesus Christ as the propitiation for their sins, he reveals that no other satisfaction can appease sins against God. He does not say, "God has reconciled you once through Christ; now seek other means to reconcile yourselves!" Instead, he proclaims Christ as the perpetual Advocate who, through His intercession, continually restores us to the grace of the Father. Christ is the perpetual propitiation through which sins are continuously purified. We must remember the timeless words of St. John the Baptist: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold the one who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1:29). It is He, and He alone, who takes them away. He is the only Lamb of God, the singular offering for sins, purification, and satisfaction.

Let us carefully consider two important aspects. First, we must ensure that the honor rightfully belonging to Christ remains fully intact. Secondly, we must provide solace and peace to troubled consciences by assuring them of the pardon of their sins in the sight of God. Isaiah eloquently proclaims that the Father has placed upon

the Son "the iniquities of us all, so that through His wounds we may be healed" (Isa. 53:4–6). St. Peter echoes this truth in different words, affirming that Christ carried all our sins in His body on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24). St. Paul teaches us that sin was condemned in the flesh when Christ, for our sake, became sin itself (Rom. 8:3). In other words, when He willingly offered Himself as a sacrifice, all the weight and curse of sin were annihilated in His flesh. Upon Him was laid the burden of sins, accompanied by their curse, divine judgment, and the damnation of death.

In light of these profound truths, we are not to entertain the fables and falsehoods that suggest we can only partake in the power of Christ's death through our own acts of repentance after baptism. Instead, whenever we have sinned, Scripture directs us back to the sole satisfaction found in Christ. Consider the abhorrent teachings of those who claim that God's grace operates solely in the initial remission, but if we stumble thereafter, our works are required to obtain pardon. If such were the case, how could we reconcile these testimonies with the person of Christ? What an immense contrast it is between acknowledging that our iniquities were placed upon Christ for purification and claiming that they are cleansed through our own works! How preposterous to suggest that Christ is the propitiation for our sins, only to demand that God be appeased by our feeble efforts!

If our aim is to grant peace to the conscience, how can it find solace in the notion of redeeming sins through satisfaction? When will it ever find assurance of having fulfilled its satisfaction? It will be trapped in perpetual doubt, constantly questioning whether God is truly favorable towards it. Such a burden will only bring torment and fear. Those who trivialize sin by settling for light satisfactions display a profound disregard for God's righteousness. They fail to grasp the

gravity of sin, as we have already emphasized elsewhere. Even if we were to concede that some sins can be redeemed, what can they possibly achieve when burdened by countless transgressions? A hundred lifetimes would be insufficient to satisfy the demands of such sins, even if one devoted every moment to the task.

Mortal and Venial Sins

In their desperation, these theologians seek refuge in a frivolous distinction between mortal and venial sins. According to their twisted logic, the former require great satisfaction, while the latter can be easily cleansed through superficial remedies like reciting the Lord's Prayer, using blessed water, or receiving the absolution of the Mass. Their mockery of God knows no bounds. Despite constantly uttering the words "mortal" and "venial" sin, they fail to grasp their true meaning. They even dare to classify the most heinous sin of all—the impiety and corruption of the human heart—as venial. On the contrary, we declare what Scripture teaches: "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) and "the soul that sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:4, 20). These are the clear principles by which we discern good from evil. As for the sins of the faithful, they are considered venial not because they do not deserve death, but because through God's mercy, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). Their sins are not imputed to them; rather, they are wiped away by the unmerited grace of God.

It is no surprise that they would slander this teaching, accusing it of being a mere paradox reminiscent of the Stoics who equate all sins. But their own words betray them, and they can be easily refuted. Let me ask them this: among the sins they acknowledge as mortal, do they not recognize that some are greater than others? Therefore, it does not logically follow that sins are equal, even if they are all

equally deadly. Scripture clearly declares that death is the consequence of sin, just as obedience to the law leads to life. The verdict is inescapable: transgression brings about death. They cannot evade this judgment.

So tell me, what escape do they propose to satisfy such a multitude of sins? It may take a day to satisfy one sin, but during that very time, they commit numerous other transgressions. After all, not a day passes without the righteous stumbling and sinning repeatedly. And when they attempt to atone for a multitude of sins, they end up committing even more, plunging themselves into an endless abyss. And mind you, I am speaking of the most righteous among them. Oh, how their confidence in satisfaction crumbles! What are their dreams and expectations? How dare they continue to cling to the notion of satisfaction? Their folly knows no bounds.

Oh, how they strive to free themselves from the predicament they find themselves in! They concoct a clever distinction between punishment and fault, acknowledging that God's mercy forgives the fault but insists that the punishment remains. According to their twisted logic, satisfactions are necessary to appease God's righteous demand for payment in order to obtain the remission of punishment. How fickle they are in their teachings! Now they declare the remission of fault to be free, while in another breath they prescribe prayers, tears, and other preparations as the means to merit it.

But let us turn to the unyielding testimony of Scripture, which directly refutes this distinction. Although I have already presented compelling evidence to support this, I will bring forth even more passages, hoping that these serpents will be so constrained that they cannot even wiggle the tip of their tail. Listen to the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who declares the new covenant established by

God in Christ: "He will no longer remember our sins." Another prophet, Ezekiel, sheds light on its meaning when the Lord says, "If the righteous turns away from his righteousness, I will no longer remember all his righteousness. If the sinner withdraws from his iniquity, I will no longer remember all his sins." When God declares that He will no longer remember the person's righteousness, it signifies that He will not consider it for repayment. Thus, not remembering sins means not counting them for punishment. This truth is echoed in other passages: casting sins behind the back, wiping them away like a cloud, casting them into the depths of the sea, not imputing them, hiding them away. The words of Isaiah, Micah, and the Psalms affirm this divine action (Isa. 38:17, 44:22; Mic. 7:19; Ps. 32:1–2).

Oh, how clearly the Holy Spirit has explained His meaning through these expressions, if only we have the humility to listen and be taught! When God punishes sins, He imputes them; when He punishes, He remembers; when He calls them into judgment, He does not hide them away; when He examines them, He does not sweep them behind His back; when He gazes upon them, He does not wipe them out like a passing cloud; when He brings them forth, He has not cast them into the depths of the sea.

Now let us turn to another passage in the prophet to understand under what condition the Lord forgives sins. He says, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (Isa. 1:18) In Jeremiah, we find these words: "In that day, declares the Lord, 'I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, "The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.'"" (Jer. 50:20) In brief, when the Lord speaks of tying sins in a sack, folding them into a bundle, or engraving them

in steel with an iron point (Job 14:17, 19:24; Hos. 13:12), it undoubtedly signifies His intention to punish sins.

"Ransom" and "Sacrifice"

Therefore, there should be no doubt that the first statements promise that God will not punish the sins He forgives. If we want to comprehend the meaning of these words, we must simply consider the contrary interpretation.

I implore the readers to heed God's word and not rely solely on my own interpretations. What purpose would Christ have served if the punishment for our sins still remained? When we proclaim that in His body He bore all our sins on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24), we mean precisely that He endured the suffering and punishment that our sins deserved. Isaiah vividly expressed this truth when he declared that "the chastisement of our peace was laid upon Him" (Isa. 53:5). What does "the chastisement of our peace" refer to if not the punishment owed to our sins, which we ourselves should have borne before we could be reconciled with God? Christ, through His sacrificial act, delivered us from the very pains of our sins.

When the apostle Paul speaks of the redemption accomplished by Christ, he commonly uses the Greek term "apolytrōsis" (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14), which conveys not only the notion of simple redemption as commonly understood, but also the idea of a price and satisfaction that we might call a ransom. Hence, he states in one place that Christ offered Himself as a ransom for us (1 Tim. 2:6), signifying that He willingly became our substitute, bearing the responsibility and serving as the guarantee to fully free us from all the debts of our sins.

Above all, we find a compelling argument in the manner by which the Lord prescribed the expiation of sins in the Mosaic law. In that divine instruction, He did not present a variety of ways for making satisfaction but rather established the sacrifices as the sole means of repayment. He painstakingly enumerated the different sacrifices to be offered, corresponding to the various types of sins. Now, what does this signify? When the Lord did not command sinners to seek satisfaction through their own good works and merits in order to obtain pardon, but rather required them to offer sacrifices for each expiation, it becomes evident that He intends to testify to the existence of only one kind of satisfaction that pacifies His righteousness.

Let us remember that the sacrifices offered by the Israelites were not regarded as mere human works; their value derived from the very source that rendered them authentic, namely, Christ's unique sacrifice. As for the recompense God seeks from us, the prophet Hosea expressed it eloquently in a single word: "Lord, you will destroy all our sins," signifying the remission of sins, "and we will offer you the sacrifices of our lips," representing the satisfaction that is nothing other than heartfelt gratitude (Hos. 14:2).

Punishment and Atonement

But let us humor these theologians as they wield their chosen scriptural testimonies against us. They present the case of David, reproved by the prophet Nathan for his grave transgressions of adultery and homicide, yet receiving pardon for his sins. However, they argue, he was subsequently punished through the death of his son conceived in adultery. From this, they assert the need to redeem our own sufferings and punishments through satisfactions even after the remission of our sins. They bring forth Daniel's exhortation to

Nebuchadnezzar to redeem his sins through almsgiving, as well as Solomon's words about the remission of iniquities due to righteousness and charity, a sentiment also echoed by St. Peter. Furthermore, they reference the woman sinner in the Gospel of Luke, whose abundant love resulted in the forgiveness of numerous sins.

How delightfully twisted their understanding of God's ways is! They consistently view His works through a distorted lens. However, had they taken the time to truly discern what should not be disregarded, they would have grasped that God employs two forms of judgment. In the case of David, the correction he received was not an act of vengeance or punishment for his sins, if only they had observed keenly.

Let us inquire into the purpose of the chastisements that God, in His wisdom, sends our way to correct our sins. It is crucial for us to grasp their significance and distinguish them from the punishments inflicted upon the reprobate. Therefore, it would not be excessive to briefly explore these matters.

In our understanding, the term "judgment" encompasses all forms of punishment, which can be classified into two distinct categories: the judgment of "punishment" and the judgment of "correction." When God employs the judgment of punishment, He deals with His enemies in a manner that reveals His righteous wrath, aiming to bring about their destruction and utter annihilation. This is when God's punishment is accompanied by His wrath, constituting an act of divine vengeance. Conversely, the judgment of correction does not involve God's anger or a desire to destroy or confound. Therefore, it is not appropriate to label it as vengeance, but rather as admonition and exhortation. While the former corresponds to the role of a judge,

the latter aligns with the heart of a loving father. When a judge punishes a wrongdoer, the punishment befits the sin committed, for it is a reflection of the malevolence displayed. On the other hand, a father, when correcting his son, seeks not vengeance for his transgressions but endeavors to teach him and foster greater vigilance for the future.

St. Chrysostom, in his own unique manner, presents a parable that elucidates this distinction, ultimately arriving at the same conclusion. He states, "The son is beaten, like the servant; but when the servant is beaten, he is punished because he has sinned, receiving his just deserts. The son is chastised with compassionate discipline." Hence, the chastisement of a son serves the purpose of guiding him towards amendment and leading him back to the right path, while the servant receives the consequences he deserves due to the master's righteous indignation.

God's Wrath vs. God's Correction

To facilitate our understanding, let us establish two key distinctions. Firstly, whenever punishment is wielded for the sake of vengeance, it reveals God's wrath and curse—a disposition that He never directs towards His faithful. Conversely, correction serves as a manifestation of God's blessing and a testament to His love, as the Scriptures affirm (Job 5:17–18; Prov. 3:11–12; Heb. 12:5–6). This disparity is frequently acknowledged. The afflictions experienced by the wicked in this world merely serve as a gateway and precursor to the depths of hell, offering them a foretaste of their eternal damnation. Tragically, they remain obstinate and fail to derive any meaningful benefit from such chastisements. Instead, the Lord uses these afflictions to prepare them for the unfathomable suffering that awaits them. In stark contrast, when the Lord chastises His servants,

it is not to consign them to death. Rather, the blows of His rod are administered for their instruction and refinement (Ps. 118:18; 119:67, 71). Consequently, the faithful have historically endured such chastisements with patience and a tranquil spirit. Conversely, they have been struck with terror when faced with punishments that clearly manifest God's wrath. Jeremiah beseeches the Lord, saying, "Chastise me, Lord, but let it be for my improvement and not in your wrath, lest I be crushed. Pour out your fury on the nations who do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your name" (Jer. 10:24–25). David echoes this sentiment, entreating, "Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath" (Ps. 6:1; 38:1). It is worth noting that references to the Lord's anger towards His servants when He punishes them and corrects their faults do not contradict this understanding. Isaiah declares, "I will give thanks to you, Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me" (Isa. 12:1). Habakkuk likewise states, "In wrath, remember mercy" (Hab. 3:2). Furthermore, when it is said that God profanes His inheritance (Isa. 42:24; 47:6), we must recognize that it does not pertain to God's will or His purpose in chastising His own. Rather, it speaks to the profound sorrow experienced by all those who encounter His strictness and severity.

Indeed, it is through His divine wisdom that God, at times, pricks His servants with mere goads, while on other occasions, He wounds them to the very core, causing them to feel as if they stand at the precipice of hell. In doing so, He warns them that they have incurred His wrath, yet simultaneously assures them of His abundant mercy, surpassing even His strictness. The covenant that He established with Jesus Christ and His followers remains steadfast, for He has pledged that it shall never be broken. Hear His words: "If your children forsake my law and do not walk in my righteousness, if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments, I will

punish their transgressions with the rod and their iniquities with stripes, but I will not remove my steadfast love" (Ps. 89:30–33). Moreover, to provide us with utmost certainty, He emphasizes that the rods with which He chastises us are of human origin (2 Sam. 7:14). By this illustration, He reveals His intent to treat us with gentleness and kindness. Thus, those whom He strikes with His hand can find no refuge, for they would be utterly confounded and lost. This gentleness, which He consistently demonstrates towards His people, is also articulated by the prophet: "I have tried you in the furnace of affliction, but for my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another" (Isa. 48:10). This signifies that although the tribulations He sends to purify His people from their vices, He tempers them, ensuring they are not excessively severe.

Let us examine another crucial distinction—one that illuminates the varying purposes of God's chastisements. When the wicked are scourged by the whips of God in this world, they begin to taste the severity of His judgment. Though they remain unpardoned, having failed to heed the warnings of His wrath, their punishment serves not to correct them but solely to impress upon them the reality of a just Judge who will not allow them to evade their just deserts. In stark contrast, the faithful are disciplined not to appease God's wrath or to satisfy His judgment, but rather to yield fruit through repentance and a return to the path of righteousness. These chastisements, we observe, are more concerned with the future than with the past. Allow me to borrow the words of St. Chrysostom, who aptly states: "The Lord, in punishing us for our sins, seeks not retribution but rather to instruct us for the future." In light of this distinction, we perceive that when Saul was stripped of his kingdom, it was punishment, but when David lost his son, it was correction intended to prompt him toward amendment. Similarly, the words of St. Paul

resonate with wisdom: "But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world" (1 Cor. 11:32). These afflictions that befall us are not intended to shame us but to guide us.

St. Augustine, too, echoes our sentiments when he discerns a profound disparity in the chastisements meted out by our Lord upon His elect and the reprobate. He asserts, "For the elect, these are exercises once they have received grace; for the reprobate, they are condemnations devoid of grace." Citing the examples of David and others, he affirms that our Lord's chastisements aim solely to cultivate humility within His chosen ones. Let us not misconstrue Isaiah's proclamation that "the iniquity of the Jewish people is pardoned, for they have received double for all their sins" (Isa. 40:2) as implying that the remission of sins hinges upon the chastisements we endure. Rather, Isaiah's words convey the message that God, having exacted sufficient punishment and afflicted them profoundly, now invites their hearts to be revived and filled with joy through the proclamation of His merciful grace.

Amidst the bitter trials that befall the faithful, it becomes imperative for them to embrace a particular contemplation: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Pet. 4:17). How would the faithful endure their afflictions if they perceived them as manifestations of God's retributive wrath? If one being struck by the hand of God considers Himself the target of a vengeful Judge, it becomes impossible for him to fathom that God is not wrathful and hostile toward him. Consequently, all he can do is view God's rod as a curse and damnation. In essence, those who believe that God's will is to continue punishing them will never be able to convince themselves of His love. However, we can only derive

benefit from His discipline if we understand that He is indeed displeased with our vices, yet still maintains a favorable disposition toward us—bearing within Himself a profound love for His children. Whether suffering is eternal or temporal, it matters not; be it wars, famines, plagues, or illnesses, these are all manifestations of God's curses, just as the judgment of eternal death, when our Lord employs them as instruments of His wrath and vengeance against the wicked.

God's Free Pardon is Free

Let us inquire into the purpose behind God's correction of David, for it is an enlightening lesson. The correction was not aimed at exacting retribution from David to repay his sin, but rather to impart a profound understanding of God's displeasure towards the gravity of adultery and homicide. By revealing His anger against such acts, God sought to caution David against ever daring to commit such transgressions again in the future. Similarly, we must contemplate the purpose behind God's affliction of the Jewish people with a dreadful plague due to David's disobedience in conducting a census (2 Sam. 24:1, 15ff). Although David was pardoned for the offense, God, in His wisdom, utilized the chastisement as both an example for all ages and a means to humble David. The Lord disciplined him sternly with His rod. This aligns with the universal curse pronounced upon humanity, wherein the miseries we endure—despite having received grace—are reminiscent of the consequences Adam faced for his transgression (Gen. 3:16–19). Through these trials, the Lord warns us about the severity of transgressing His law. Thus, humbled and awakened to our own poverty, we are compelled to yearn ardently for true blessedness.

Should someone claim that the calamities we endure in this mortal life are mere retribution for our sins, it would befit us to deem them

lacking in understanding. St. Chrysostom, it appears, shared a similar sentiment when he wrote, "If God chastises us with the intention of preventing us from persisting in wickedness or remaining hardened when He guides us towards repentance, then punishment is no longer necessary." Accordingly, God administers correction with discernment, tailoring His approach to suit the nature of each individual. Yet, as all of us invariably go astray and stand in need of chastisement, our compassionate Father, who seeks our ultimate welfare, visits His corrective rods upon us without exception.

It is quite astonishing how these theologians fixate on a single example like David and remain unmoved by the multitude of instances that clearly demonstrate the free remission of sins. Consider the publican who descended from the temple justified (Luke 18:14)—no punishment pursued him. When St. Peter sought forgiveness for his transgression (Luke 22:62), St. Ambrose astutely observed, "We read about his tears; we read nothing about satisfaction." And let us not forget the paralytic who was told, "Rise, your sins are forgiven" without any imposition of punishment (Matthew 9:2). Scripture abounds with absolutions that are unequivocally depicted as freely given. Therefore, it is from this plethora of examples that we should derive our rule, rather than focusing solely on isolated cases with peculiar circumstances.

Let us examine the exhortation delivered by Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar, urging him to redeem his sins through acts of justice and compassion for the poor (Daniel 4:27). It is essential to note that Daniel did not intend to convey that justice and mercy served as propitiatory offerings to appease God or secure deliverance from punishment. The sole ransom ever accepted was the precious blood of Christ. Rather, when Daniel speaks of redemption, he

addresses it in relation to people rather than God. It is as if he were saying, "Oh King, you have wielded an unjust and oppressive rule; you have oppressed the weak, exploited the impoverished, and treated your subjects wickedly. Therefore, in recompense for your unjust actions, extend mercy and justice to your people."

Let us not be swayed by a singular example while neglecting the broader body of evidence that portrays God's gracious remission of sins. The multitude of instances in which forgiveness is bestowed freely should guide our understanding, reminding us of the immeasurable mercy that flows from our compassionate Lord.

In the same vein, when Solomon declares that a multitude of sins are covered by love or charity, he is not suggesting that they are concealed before God, but rather among people. Let us consider the complete sentence: "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses" (Proverbs 10:12). Solomon, in his customary manner of contrasting opposites, juxtaposes the destructive outcomes of hatred with the fruitful effects of love or charity. The underlying message is clear: Those who harbor hatred engage in acts of violence, accusation, and insult, fostering a climate of vice and reproach. On the other hand, those who genuinely love one another choose not to focus on faults, but rather to endure and rectify them through gentle admonishment, rather than exacerbating them through constant criticism. It is crucial to understand that this comparison pertains to human relationships and interactions, not to the forgiveness of sins before God. Therefore, let us not cast doubt upon the integrity of St. Peter when he quotes this passage in the same context (1 Peter 4:8). Similarly, when Solomon affirms that our sins are forgiven through mercy and acts of kindness (Proverbs 16:6), he does not imply that they are expiated before God, leading Him to remit the punishments that He would otherwise inflict upon us. Instead, following the

common language of Scripture, Solomon signifies that God bestows His favor upon all those who abandon their sinful ways, turning to Him in holiness and producing good works. In other words, he suggests that God's anger subsides and is appeased when we cease from evil. We have examined this manner of speaking in detail in other discussions.

Explanation of Luke 7:36

Regarding the passage in St. Luke (Luke 7:36ff), those who approach it with discerning judgment and a sound mind will find no cause for disagreement. In this account, the Pharisee secretly questioned our Lord's ability to discern the woman's sinful state, assuming that if He truly knew her, He would not have allowed her to approach Him so readily. Consequently, the Pharisee concluded that Jesus could not be a prophet since He seemed susceptible to deception. To illustrate that the woman was no longer defined by her sins due to their forgiveness, our Lord presented a parable: "A moneylender had two debtors; one owed him fifty francs, the other owed five hundred. He graciously forgave the debt of both. Now, which of them will love him more?" The Pharisee responded, "Certainly, the one who had the greater debt forgiven." To this, our Lord replied, "You have judged rightly. Therefore, consider that this woman, who has shown great love, is a testament to the forgiveness of many sins." It is evident from these words that our Lord did not attribute the remission of sins to the woman's love. Rather, He used her love as a visible confirmation, drawing a parallel to the debtor who was forgiven the larger sum. Thus, we must interpret these words within the context of the parable: "You perceive this woman as a sinner, but you should acknowledge her as transformed because her sins have been forgiven. Her love serves as an outward manifestation of the forgiveness she has received, a means by which she expresses

gratitude for the goodness bestowed upon her." This line of reasoning employs an argument of consequences or consistency, whereby we establish a truth through the signs that accompany it. Ultimately, our Lord openly testifies to the means by which the sinner obtained pardon for her sins: "Your faith has saved you." Hence, it is through faith that we receive forgiveness, and through love or charity, we offer gratitude and acknowledge the generosity of our Lord.

The Doctrine of Satisfaction in the Early Church

I must confess that the statements found in the writings of the early church fathers regarding satisfaction do not greatly trouble me. Frankly speaking, it seems to me that many of them, and practically all those whose works have come to our attention, either lacked understanding on this matter or expressed themselves too harshly. However, I am not inclined to believe that even if they were indeed ignorant or simple, they intended their words about satisfaction to be understood in the same manner as the modern proponents of satisfaction do. Take, for instance, the words of St. Chrysostom: "When one seeks mercy, it is so that he may escape examination for his sin, so that he may be spared the severity of justice, so that all punishment may cease. Where there is mercy, there is no more Gehenna, no more scrutiny, no severity, no punishment." No matter how much they may attempt to twist these words, they can never be reconciled with the teachings of the scholastics on satisfaction. Furthermore, in the book attributed to St. Augustine titled "On Ecclesiastical Dogmatics," it is stated in the fifty-fourth chapter: "The satisfaction of repentance is to remove the causes of sin, not to yield to sin's suggestions." This clearly indicates that in the time of St. Augustine, the notion of repaying past sins through satisfaction was rejected. Instead, every act of satisfaction was seen as a means of

guarding against future transgressions and refraining from evil. I will not even mention what St. Chrysostom says, that the Lord requires nothing from us except that we confess our sins before Him with tears, as such sentiments are frequently echoed by the early church fathers. And indeed, in one place, St. Augustine refers to the works of mercy toward the poor as remedies to obtain pardon from God. However, to prevent any confusion or misinterpretation, he further explains his statement in another passage: "The flesh of Christ is the true and singular sacrifice for sins, not only for those forgiven in baptism but also for those that occur afterward due to the frailty of the flesh. These sins, for which the church daily prays 'forgive us our debts,' are indeed forgiven through this unique sacrifice."

It is quite amusing to observe how the early church fathers often referred to "satisfaction" not as a repayment rendered to God, but rather as a public declaration. This declaration was made by those who, after being corrected through excommunication, sought to re-enter the communion of the church and demonstrate their genuine repentance to the community of believers. They would observe certain fasts and engage in other practices to signify their sincere remorse for their past lives, or perhaps to erase the memory of their wickedness. This act of "satisfying" was not aimed at appeasing God, but rather the church itself. The confessions and acts of satisfaction employed in modern times are derived from this ancient custom, albeit in a twisted and distorted manner. These practices have been so corrupted that even their original essence is hardly recognizable.

Now, I am aware that the early church fathers occasionally spoke rashly, as I mentioned earlier. I do not wish to deny that they may have had their moments of failure. However, their works, though slightly blemished, are now utterly tainted when handled by these wild boars. When it comes to arguing from the authority of the early

church fathers, I am curious to know whom these proponents of satisfaction will present to us. The majority of the quotations found in their leader Peter Lombard's book are nothing more than the fantastical musings of deluded monks, falsely attributed to saints such as Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Chrysostom. Lombard draws extensively from a book called "On Penitence," which was haphazardly stitched together by an ignorant individual using excerpts from both reputable and dubious authors, and is conveniently credited to St. Augustine. However, it is the type of book that any moderately educated person would be ashamed to associate with their own name.

Satisfaction and Purgatory

Now, let us address the tiresome matter of purgatory, which, with a swift stroke, is severed, overturned, and laid bare by this axe of truth. There are some who suggest that we should simply avoid discussing purgatory altogether, claiming that it only stirs up trouble and yields little edification. While it may seem appealing to cast aside such trifling issues, the consequences are far too significant to ignore. Purgatory, you see, is not merely a concoction of absurdities; it is currently propped up by even greater abominations and has become a stumbling block of considerable magnitude. So, it is hardly advantageous to pretend otherwise.

One could play along for a while, pretending that purgatory was conceived by sheer madness and audacious presumption, without any foundation in the Word of God. Perhaps it was born out of dubious revelations, cunningly contrived by the trickery of Satan. Maybe certain passages in Scripture were wickedly distorted to lend support to this concoction. Although our Lord considers it no trivial offense that human presumption rashly ventures into the secrets of His judgments, strictly forbidding us to consult the dead for answers (Deut. 18:11) and warning against scorning His voice, and He certainly does not allow His Word to be treated so irreverently, we might be inclined to tolerate such things for a time, dismissing them as insignificant.

However, when the purification of sins is sought elsewhere other than in Christ, when satisfaction is transferred to something other than Him, it becomes perilous to remain silent. To separate the purging of sins from the all-sufficient work of Christ is to veer dangerously off course. It is time to confront this deviation and shed light on the truth.

Let us raise our voices and proclaim with conviction that purgatory is a treacherous illusion devised by Satan himself. It not only gravely insults the boundless mercy of God but also renders the cross of Christ utterly meaningless. Purgatory shatters and annihilates our faith, leaving it in ruins. What is their purgatory but a punishment that souls supposedly endure to atone for their sins? Yet, if we strip away the fallacy of satisfaction, their entire purgatorial construct crumbles to the ground.

Now, considering what we have previously established beyond any doubt, that the blood of Christ alone serves as the purification, offering, and satisfaction for the sins of the faithful, what more need be said? Purgatory stands exposed as a grotesque and blasphemous affront to Jesus Christ. I shall not probe the multitude of lies and sacrileges that are perpetuated to uphold and defend purgatory, nor shall I elaborate on the stumbling blocks it introduces into our religious practices. Suffice it to say that this source of impiety has spawned innumerable evils, casting its dark shadow over the hearts of many.

Purgatory Not in Scripture

Let us now turn our attention to the flawed arguments of these theologians who falsely claim certain scripture passages to support their erroneous beliefs. They assert that when the Lord proclaims that the sin against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this world or the next, it implies the forgiveness of some sins in the next world. To this, I must ask: Is it not evident that our Lord is speaking about the accountability for sin in that passage? If that is indeed the case, then it serves no purpose for their purgatory, for they claim that in purgatory, one faces the punishment for sins already forgiven in this mortal life.

However, in order to silence their claims completely, I shall provide a clearer resolution. In His desire to eliminate all hope of pardon for such a detestable sin, our Lord did not merely state that it would never be forgiven. To emphasize the severity of the matter, He employed a division, distinguishing between the judgment experienced by one's conscience in the present life and the final judgment that will be revealed on the day of resurrection. It is as if He conveyed the following message: "Beware of waging deliberate malevolence against God, for such rebellion leads to eternal death. Those who intentionally strive to extinguish the light of the Spirit presented to them will not obtain forgiveness in this life, where sinners are given the opportunity to repent, nor in the last day when God's angels will separate the righteous from the wicked, purifying His kingdom of all stumbling blocks."

Let us now address their attempt to exploit the parable from the Gospel of Matthew: "Come to an agreement with your opponent so that he may not bring you before the judge, and the judge may not hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny" (Matthew 5:25-26). If we accept their interpretation that the judge represents God, the opponent represents the devil, the officer represents an angel, and the prison represents purgatory, then perhaps they may feel victorious. But it is worth noting that in this passage, Christ intended to highlight the numerous perils individuals subject themselves to when they choose to persist in their disputes and legal battles rather than seeking amicable resolution. His aim was to urge us, through this warning, to always seek reconciliation with everyone. Where then, I ask, do they find their purgatory in this parable? In short, let us consider and embrace the passage in its straightforward meaning, and we will find none of the elements they attempt to attribute to it.

Let us now address the argument they present, drawing from the words of St. Paul: "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Philippians 2:10). These theologians confidently assert that by "those under the earth," one cannot be referring to those in eternal damnation, but rather the souls in purgatory. It would be a reasonable argument if the apostle's mention of "bowing the knee" referred to the genuine adoration offered by the faithful to God. However, the apostle is simply teaching that Jesus Christ has received supreme lordship over all creation from the Father. Therefore, what is amiss if by "those under the earth" we understand the devils who will indeed appear before the throne of the Lord to acknowledge their Judge with fear and trembling? St. Paul himself clarifies this prophecy in another passage, stating, "For we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me'" (Romans 14:10-11). Now, they may counter by pointing to a passage in the Book of Revelation: "And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'" (Revelation 5:13). I willingly grant them this point. However, let us consider which creatures are being referred to here. It is evident that even those without souls or understanding are included among them. Therefore, it signifies that all elements of the world, from the highest heavens to the depths of the earth, each in their own place, extol the magnificence of their Creator.

I shall remain silent concerning their references to the history of the Maccabees, as I do not consider that book as part of the canonical Scriptures. However, they believe they have found an impregnable stronghold in the words of St. Paul: "If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as

through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15). They ask, "What fire could St. Paul be referring to if not purgatory, which cleanses our stains so that we may enter the kingdom of God in purity?" In response, I would like to point out that several early church fathers interpreted these words differently. They understood the "fire" mentioned here to represent the trials and tribulations, symbolized by the cross, through which the Lord tests and purifies His people, cleansing them from all impurities. Indeed, this interpretation appears to be much more plausible than the notion of a purgatory.

However, I must respectfully disagree with this opinion, as I believe I have a clearer and more certain understanding. Let us consider the apostle's use of metaphors and parables when he refers to teachings concocted by human minds as "hay, wood, and stubble" (1 Corinthians 3:12). The purpose of this parable becomes evident upon closer examination: just as wood is quickly consumed when exposed to fire, these human teachings prove to be utterly frail and incapable of enduring the test. Now, it is widely recognized that this test is conducted by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in order to maintain the consistency of the parable, the apostle describes the testing process by the Holy Spirit as "fire" (1 Corinthians 3:13). In the same way that gold and silver are more thoroughly tested when subjected to intense heat, allowing their purity to be discerned, the truth of God is further fortified and confirmed in its authority when subjected to spiritual scrutiny. When wood, hay, and stubble are cast into the fire, they are swiftly consumed and reduced to ashes. Likewise, any human inventions that lack the foundation of God's Word cannot withstand the refining scrutiny of the Spirit and are ultimately annihilated. In summary, if the teachings under discussion are likened to wood, stubble, and hay, which are consumed and vanquished by fire, and if it is only by the Spirit of God that these teachings are destroyed and rendered powerless, then it logically follows that the Spirit is the very

fire by which they are tested. This testing is what St. Paul refers to as "the day of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 3:13), employing the scriptural language that signifies the manifestation of the Lord's presence in various forms. Primarily, His countenance shines upon us when His truth illuminates our hearts and minds.

We have already established that the fire, as understood by St. Paul, signifies nothing other than the testing conducted by the Holy Spirit. Now let us consider the understanding of how those who suffer the loss of their work will be saved through this fire. This inquiry will not pose a great challenge if we carefully consider the individuals being referred to in this context. St. Paul mentions those who, in their earnest desire to edify the church, adhere to the solid foundation of faith, yet introduce various elements that are incongruous with it. In other words, they do not deviate from the essential and fundamental tenets of faith, but rather fall into the trap of incorporating human speculations alongside God's revealed truth. Consequently, it becomes necessary for such individuals to experience the loss of their works. This entails the elimination of their own additions, which have been intermingled with the divine Word, rendering them futile and insignificant. However, in the midst of this process, their very beings will be saved. It is important to note that God does not endorse or approve of their errors or ignorance. Nevertheless, through the gracious working of His Spirit, our Lord will draw them back, rescuing them from their misguided paths. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all those who have contaminated the sacred purity of Scripture with the defilement of purgatory to abandon their efforts, allowing their works to crumble and be cast aside.

CHAPTER SIX

Of Justification by Faith and by the Merits of Works

In the contemplation of these pages, it becomes manifestly clear that there exists but one sanctuary for the deliverance of souls, a sanctuary of unwavering faith, for all humanity. It is through this faith that salvation flows, for the encompassing law casts its curse upon all. Let us not forget the previous discourse on the essence of faith, the divine graces it imparts to mortal souls, and the prolific fruits it yields within them. The crux of the matter is this: through faith, we receive and embrace the embodiment of Jesus Christ, a divine bestowal manifested by the benevolence of the Almighty. Our union with Him begets a dual grace. Primarily, we find reconciliation with the Almighty through His unblemished purity. Our place in the heavens transforms from the judgment seat of an austere Judge to that of a benevolent and compassionate Father. Secondly, sanctification prevails through the infusion of His Spirit, guiding us towards contemplation and embodiment of virtue and righteousness. As we consider the discourse of regeneration, the second facet of grace, adequate attention has been dispensed. In contrast, justification has received a lighter touch, for a preliminary grasp of faith's active nature and its intrinsic link with virtuous deeds was deemed essential. It is imperative to also fathom the nature of the saints' virtuous deeds, an integral aspect to be addressed henceforth.

With measured contemplation, we shall examine more profoundly into the subject of justification by faith, mindful of its paramount standing as the cornerstone of Christian doctrine. Let this knowledge propel each individual to ardently pursue comprehension. For in the absence of understanding God's divine intention towards us, the foundation for our salvation and spiritual edification crumbles, leaving us bereft of devout reverence and godliness. However, the urgency to grasp this concept amplifies as its profundity is unveiled.

Let us avert stumbling at the very outset—lest we find ourselves ensnared in inconclusive debates—by meticulously explicating the phrases: "to be justified in the eyes of God" and "to be justified by virtue of faith or deeds."

That soul stands justified before the Divine gaze, deemed righteous within the compass of Divine judgment, worthy of His ineffable righteousness. As sin remains an abomination in the eyes of the Almighty, the transgressor finds no solace in His presence. Iniquity breeds divine wrath, and where sin festers, God's retribution looms. Thus, the mantle of justification embraces those who emerge not as sinners but as bearers of righteousness. Such souls find serene repose at the celestial tribunal of Divine justice, while the sinners falter and are confounded. In the fashion of one unjustly accused, who stands acquitted before the magistrate and proclaimed innocent, we echo that the soul attains righteousness through justification. In the Divine sphere, one stands justified before God when divinely separated from the throng of transgressors, bearing the witness of God's righteousness. The justified soul is the one who, through virtuous deeds, attains such purity and holiness in life that it garners the appellation of righteousness before God. Alternatively, through the uprightness of deeds, the soul appeases the Divine judgment. Conversely, the soul attains justification by faith when, relinquishing reliance on deeds, it seizes the mantle of Jesus Christ's righteousness. Clad in this divine righteousness, the soul stands not as a sinner but as the righteous before God's presence.

However, recognizing that many misconstrue a faith-righteousness intertwined with deeds, let us, before proceeding, clarify that the righteousness of faith stands distinct from that of deeds, inherently opposing each other. The Apostle asserts, "I count all things as loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for

whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Philippians 3:8–9). The polarity of these two forms of righteousness is evident here; one must relinquish one's righteousness to apprehend Christ's. In a different context, the Apostle attributes the downfall of the Jews to their endeavor "to establish their own righteousness," leading to a disregard for "the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:3). By prioritizing personal righteousness, they unwittingly forsake the Divine righteousness, thus necessitating the annihilation of the former to embrace the latter. This notion aligns with St. Paul's assertion, "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith" (Romans 3:27). Therefore, as long as even a vestige of righteousness remains in one's deeds, grounds for self-congratulation persist. Thus, if faith precludes all self-exaltation, the coexistence of faith-righteousness and deed-righteousness becomes untenable.

It is the theologians of Sorbonne who have propagated the fallacious notion, commonly held, that equates a certainty of future rewards with "faith." Moreover, they ascribe the term "grace" not to the bestowal of free righteousness, but to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in virtuous and holy living. They glean from the Apostle the dictum, "He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). Regrettably, they overlook the path of diligent seeking, a path we shall elucidate shortly. Their misconception is manifest in their interpretation of "grace." Their authority, the Master of the Sentences, bifurcates the righteousness conferred through Christ's sacrifice. He posits, "First, Christ's death justifies us by nurturing love/charity in our hearts, rendering us just or righteous. Secondly,

Christ's death obliterates sin, the shackles in which the devil imprisoned us, preventing his dominion." This master confines God's grace merely to the impulse propelling virtuous deeds through the Holy Spirit's agency. Though inspired by St. Augustine, he diverges considerably and neglects a faithful replication. St. Augustine's sagacious insights are obscured by the Master's presentation, and St. Augustine's occasional foibles are distorted beyond recognition. The Sorbonne's teachings have deteriorated over time, culminating in the embrace of Pelagian error. Yet, we must not unquestioningly embrace St. Augustine's stance. Despite attributing righteousness exclusively to God and discarding human merit, he attributes grace to the sanctification fostering regeneration into a renewed life.

Turning our hearts toward the righteousness of faith, scripture beckons us to a realm distinct and profound. It directs us to shift our gaze from our deeds and focus on the unfathomable mercy of God and the flawless purity of Christ. The doctrine of justification unfolds in a divine sequence: from the outset, God, driven solely by His pure benevolence, receives the sinner, considering not a single aspect that might compel mercy except the sinner's wretchedness. Gazing upon the sinner, stripped and void of virtuous deeds, God finds reason to extend goodness. God's compassion awakens a stirring within the sinner, inspiring him to lay aside all personal achievements and entrust his salvation entirely to the mercy bestowed by God. This stirring is faith—the conduit through which one embraces salvation. By virtue of faith, the individual comprehends, through the gospel's teachings, that reconciliation with God is achieved. Sins forgiven, the sinner is justified through the righteousness offered by Christ. Regenerated by the Spirit, the believer finds solace not in his own good works, but in the assurance that his lasting righteousness resides solely in Christ's immaculate virtue. As we venture into this

exposition, let us arrange the elements in an order that facilitates comprehension, enabling us to apprehend these profound truths.

The connection between faith and the gospel, as elucidated earlier, resonates in this discourse. We affirm that faith justifies by embracing the righteousness proclaimed in the gospel. Should righteousness be presented through the gospel, then considerations of deeds become extraneous, an insight St. Paul frequently highlights, particularly in two notable instances. In his letter to the Romans, he juxtaposes the law and the gospel, stating, "The righteousness of the law is to obey its commands and live, but the righteousness of faith proclaims salvation to those who believe in their hearts and confess with their mouths that Jesus Christ is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead" (Romans 10:5–6, 9). This division is distinct—law ascribes righteousness to deeds, while the gospel bestows it freely, independent of deeds. This passage carries great import, addressing potential complications, unveiling that the righteousness bestowed through the gospel transcends legal prerequisites. St. Paul employs a similar approach in the Epistle to the Galatians, asserting, "It is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'the just shall live by faith.' Yet the law is not of faith, but 'the man who does them shall live by them'" (Galatians 3:11–12). This argument rests on the premise that deeds are not pivotal in this context. He contends that the law and faith are distinct because the law relies on deeds to justify, while faith justifies sans deeds. It is imperative to comprehend that one justified by faith attains this state independent of any deed-based merit, resting entirely outside the sphere of merit. As faith embraces the righteousness of Christ presented by the gospel, we find an avenue devoid of the law's requisites, anchored solely in the boundless mercy of God.

A subtle subterfuge emerges, suggesting that "ceremonial works are excluded, but not moral works." This assertion, drawn from Origen and early church fathers, is untenable and evidences a lack of mastery in dialectics, influenced by incessant school discourses. Can we surmise that St. Paul was irrational when he marshaled evidence for his claim, citing "he who does these things shall live by them" and "cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things" (Galatians 3:12, 10)? Their sanity dictates that they acknowledge that eternal life isn't promised merely to those adhering to rituals, nor is it solely transgressors of ceremonial law who face curses. Conceding that these passages relate to moral law, moral works are consequently excluded from the realm of justifying power. St. Paul's discourse reinforces this notion, asserting, "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). He affirms, "The law brings about wrath" (Romans 4:15) and "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse" (Galatians 3:10). His rationale leads us further, contending that the law fails to provide solace to conscience or confer righteousness. Through faith, righteousness is imputed, not as a wage for deeds, but as a divine gift (Romans 4:6, 11; 5:15). Furthermore, he asserts, "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith" (Romans 3:27–28). Affirming this stance, he elucidates, "For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise" (Galatians 3:18). This underscores that the inheritance is infused with the essence of freedom, embraced by faith and reliant on divine grace, freeing it from the law's stipulations. Let it be resolute that the authority of the law, in the realm of justification, is nullified comprehensively, rather than partially.

Should one find themselves perplexed by the apostle's addition of "the works of the law," alongside "the works," a lucid response

awaits. Works derive their value from God's approval rather than intrinsic merit. Who would dare boast of righteousness before God unless accepted by Him? Who would petition for recompense unless God had pledged it? Hence, it is God's benevolence that invests works with righteousness and assigns them a wage, if they merit any. The essence of works' value rests in their service as expressions of obedience to God. It is for this reason that the apostle, demonstrating that Abraham's justification could not be by works, points out that the law was instituted some four centuries subsequent to the establishment of the covenant of grace (Galatians 3:17). While some might deride this argument, presuming that good works predating the law exist, St. Paul discerns that works acquire value solely through God's acceptance. He thus presupposes that works could not have justified before the advent of the law's promises. Thus, to eradicate works' potential to justify, the apostle employs the expression "the works of the law," as this was the crux of the matter. Yet, he also occasionally, in straightforward terms, precludes all works, as exemplified in his assertion that "David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works" (Romans 4:6). In the face of these sophisticated arguments, the validity of the formulation "faith alone" remains unassailable as a universal principle.

In vain do they consider further nuances, asserting that we are justified by faith alone which manifests through love and charity. The implication here is that righteousness is sustained by love and charity. Certainly, we affirm in concurrence with St. Paul that the faith that justifies is inseparable from love and charity. However, the power of justification is not derived from love and charity; it does not hinge on them. Indeed, it justifies solely by ushering us into a participation in Christ's righteousness. Otherwise, St. Paul's argument in Romans 4:4–5, which asserts that righteousness is not

imputed as a debt but by grace, would crumble. Could his message be any clearer? Righteousness of faith emerges exclusively where deeds hold no claim to remuneration. The imputation of faith for righteousness hinges upon grace's bestowal of righteousness that is not owed to us.

Let us now scrutinize the veracity of the definition offered, asserting that the righteousness of faith encompasses nothing but reconciliation with God, realized through the remission of sins. This principle remains steadfast: God's wrath awaits those who persist as sinners. Isaiah's prophetic utterance conveys this truth: "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1–2). Evidently, sin forms a rift between humanity and God, a breach leading God to avert His gaze from the transgressor. This dynamic is inescapable, as God's righteousness precludes alignment with sin. Thus, St. Paul posits that one remains an adversary of God until reconciled by Christ's grace (Romans 5:10). The soul embraced by God's love is deemed justified, for God does not unite with the sinner without transforming them into a righteous being. This transformation is facilitated through the remission of sins. When assessing those reconciled to God through their deeds, one discovers they are sinners. Nonetheless, for God to receive them, they must be utterly cleansed and purified from sin. Evidently, the righteous recipients of God's grace are sanctified through purification, as God's forgiveness eradicates their transgressions. This righteousness may succinctly be called "forgiveness of sins."

St. Paul echoes both righteousness and forgiveness of sins in his affirmation that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the

word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19). He further encapsulates this message in the following summary: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). In this passage, St. Paul employs "righteousness" and "reconciliation" interchangeably, signifying their inherent interrelation. He elucidates the method for attaining this righteousness, highlighting the non-imputation of sins by God. Similarly, in Romans, St. Paul establishes that righteousness is imputed apart from works, referencing David's declaration that blessedness stems from the remission of iniquities and non-imputation of faults (Romans 4:6–8). It is evident that David employs "blessedness" to signify "righteousness," as he attributes it to the remission of sins. Thus, there is no necessity for an alternative definition. Accordingly, Zachariah, father of John the Baptist, defines salvation as entailing the remission of sins (Luke 1:77). Adhering to this framework, St. Paul concludes his discourse to the Antiochians concerning their salvation with the proclamation: "Through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified" (Acts 13:38–39). Through this coupling of "righteousness" and "forgiveness of sins," it becomes apparent that they are synonymous. Hence, St. Paul's consistent emphasis on the righteousness engendered by God's benevolence is well-grounded.

Indeed, it becomes evident that only through the righteousness of Christ are we justified in the presence of God. This signifies that an individual is not intrinsically righteous, but rather, righteousness is imputed to them through the communication of Christ's righteousness. This concept merits profound contemplation, as it dispels the illusion that an individual is justified by faith due to its role in receiving God's Spirit, which consequently effects their righteousness. This notion starkly contradicts the earlier exposition. It is undeniable that one seeking righteousness beyond themselves

inherently lacks their own righteousness. The apostle unequivocally elucidates this truth as he affirms, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Here, he positions our righteousness within Christ, not within ourselves. Our righteousness is not rightfully ours, but rather, we participate in Christ's righteousness. In possessing Christ, we are endowed with His entirety. This insight is corroborated by St. Paul's proclamation that "the righteousness of God might be fulfilled in us" (Romans 8:3–4), a fulfillment realized through imputation. This resonates with his previous assertion that "as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19).

To place our righteousness in Christ's obedience is to affirm that our righteousness stems from Christ's obedience, which is imputed to us and received as our own. In this light, St. Ambrose aptly references Jacob's blessing as an illustrative analogy. Just as Jacob, unworthy of his brother's birthright, donned his brother's robe, emitting a pleasing fragrance, and assumed his sibling's role to secure their father's blessing, so must we conceal ourselves within Christ, our elder brother. Clad in Christ's robe, we stand before our heavenly Father, bearing testimony to righteousness. This allegory embodies truth. To stand before God and attain salvation, we must emanate Christ's fragrant goodness, burying our flaws within His perfection.

Evidently, while the veracity of these assertions is evident from explicit scriptural references, their indispensability surfaces only upon unveiling the root of the controversy surrounding justification. Firstly, we must remember that we do not confront the question of earthly courtrooms, but of standing before God's celestial throne. We must refrain from gauging the righteousness required to satisfy God's judgment through our human standards. Astonishingly, people

often transgress these bounds. Regrettably, those who openly indulge in wickedness or harbor vices and impure desires brazenly champion the righteousness of works. Such behavior results from their disregard of God's righteousness; were they to comprehend it, they would refrain from mocking it. This scoffing and scorn toward God's righteousness is excessive, stemming from a failure to acknowledge its perfection. True righteousness deems nothing acceptable unless it is utterly pure, untainted by any blemish, and flawless in a manner rendering it impervious to criticism. Such immaculate purity remains unattainable by mortals and will forever elude them. While individuals might prattle endlessly in lecture halls about the merits of works' righteousness, standing before God's countenance necessitates the abandonment of these trifling debates. In His presence, matters are treated earnestly, not frivolously.

The focal point of our inquiry into true righteousness must remain attuned to God's judgment. We must contemplate how we can present ourselves before the heavenly Judge, poised to give an account of our lives. Hence, we must establish our righteousness before His throne, not in alignment with our preconceptions but in alignment with the depiction offered by Scripture. In contrast to human imagination, we must measure our righteousness against God's infinite righteousness. His brilliance eclipses the stars, His might dissolves mountains, His wrath undermines the earth, His wisdom shames human cleverness, His purity exposes all else as tarnished, and His righteousness is so profound that even angels fall short. He spares not the wicked; His vengeance penetrates the depths. Considering His judgment, who would dare approach His throne without trembling? The prophet's query resounds: "Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly" (Isaiah 33:14–15). Who, then, could meet this

criterion? Evidently, none would dare present themselves. Conversely, the haunting question echoes: "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). If God scrutinized transgressions, the world would surely perish! The words of Job further emphasize human unworthiness: "Shall a man be more righteous than his Maker? Or a man more pure than his Maker? If He puts no trust in His servants, if He charges His angels with error, how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before a moth!" (Job 4:17–19) and "Indeed, He puts no trust in His saints; yes, the heavens are not pure in His sight. How much less man, who is abominable and filthy, who drinks iniquity like water!" (Job 15:15–16).

In our quest for understanding, let us fix our gaze upon the throne of divine judgment, a sacred realm that beckons us to tremble rather than fostering an empty bravado. While it may be facile to measure ourselves in comparison to our fellow humans, our confidence is swiftly obliterated when we dare to juxtapose ourselves with the Almighty. Indeed, the contrast between our souls and God's exalted nature resembles that between our feeble bodies and the vast heavens. Just as one's vision may appear robust and acute in mundane surroundings, it pales into insignificance when faced with the radiant sun, as its brilliance renders the eyesight feeble in comparison. Thus, let us not be ensnared by hollow assurance. Even if we seem to surpass others in righteousness or deem ourselves virtuous, these achievements fade to nothingness when weighed against God's yardstick. In the words of Jesus, let us heed the rebuke: "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). So, let us not vainly

glory in human appraisal while God disdains such boasting from on high!

Conversely, how do God's devoted servants, enlightened by His Spirit, respond? Surely, with the words of David: "Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous" (Psalm 143:2). They echo the sentiment expressed by Job: "If one wished to contend with Him, he could not answer Him one time out of a thousand" (Job 9:2–3). Clearly, the essence of God's righteousness becomes evident – it disdains human efforts and convicts us of countless transgressions for which we lack defense. St. Paul, a chosen instrument of God, bore this truth in his heart as he confessed that even in possessing a clear conscience, he was not thereby justified (1 Corinthians 4:4). The brilliance of stars that shines brilliantly at night pales before the sun's radiance; similarly, our imagined human virtue wilts when juxtaposed with God's immaculate purity. A rigorous examination looms, delving into the depths of our hearts and unveiling the concealed thoughts, compelling our conscience to divulge even what it has long forgotten.

In this trial, the accuser, Satan, relentlessly pursues, marshaling every transgression he has incited. Amid this scrutiny, the outward splendor of good works diminishes, for their significance wanes. The sole criterion is the sincerity of the heart. Thus, all forms of hypocrisy – public pretense as well as the self-deception that occurs when one overestimates their worth – crumble and falter. Though pride and presumption may presently intoxicate, they will ultimately stumble. Those who overlook or disregard this spectacle may momentarily deceive themselves into attributing righteousness to their own merit, only to witness its annihilation under God's judgment. Just as a dream of wealth vanishes upon waking, so too will self-proclaimed righteousness dissolve. Contrarily, those who seek the true standard

of righteousness, mindful of God's presence, discern that human deeds, when evaluated earnestly, amount to nothing but refuse and abomination. Conventional notions of righteousness merely comprise repugnant iniquity before God; perceived integrity masks contamination; apparent glory shrouds shame.

Having contemplated God's perfection, we must now introspect without conceit, free from the allure of self-love. Our blindness in this realm is unsurprising, given our innate proclivity toward self-love, as Scripture reveals. Solomon aptly observes, "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes" and "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes" (Proverbs 21:2, 16:2). However, can this error serve as absolution? Quite the contrary, for he immediately adds, "The Lord weighs the hearts." God's scrutiny unveils concealed vices and secret impurities, even those buried in the depths. Let us not delude ourselves; deception leads only to our ruin. To appraise ourselves justly, we must continually redirect our conscience to the seat of God's judgment, for His illuminating light unveils the recesses of our corruption, too obscure for self-examination. By doing so, we will discern the truth within the sentence: significant deficiency exists for anyone to be justified before God, as we are marred by rottenness and repulsive vermin, consuming iniquity as if it were water (Job 15:16, 25:4). Can unclean seed produce purity? This is an impossibility. We resonate with Job's self-awareness: "Though I were righteous, my own mouth would condemn me; though I were blameless, it would prove me perverse" (Job 9:20). The prophet's lament, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6), applies universally. This indictment encompasses all recipients of redemption's grace. This stringent self-examination should not cease until it fills us with astonishment, priming us to receive the Lord's grace. Those who assume they can attain divine favor without relinquishing their

arrogance gravely deceive themselves. As the saying goes, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

Consider, then, the means through which our souls are humbled – to be emptied, rendered destitute, allowing room for the bounteousness of God's mercy. Yet, humility does not arise if any semblance of self-assurance lingers. It is not true humility if we harbor the notion that we possess any vestiges of worth. Alas, a perilous hypocrisy emerges when these two ideas converge: a sense of lowliness before God combined with a lingering regard for our righteousness. Beware, for it is deceitful to confess before God what we deny within our hearts, a sinful fabrication that conceals the truth. Our proper estimation of self emerges only when we cast aside any veneer of excellence and subjugate our very being. Thus, let us heed the prophet's proclamation: Salvation awaits the humble, while ruin befalls the haughty (Psalm 18:27). To access salvation, we must forsake pride, embracing genuine humility as our guiding light.

This humility transcends mere modesty, for it is not satisfied by the relinquishing of meager rights, or by refraining from self-elevation and disdain for others. Rather, it demands an authentic submission of the heart, devoid of pretense – a surrender rooted in the acute awareness of our destitution and wretchedness. This understanding aligns with God's Word, which consistently describes humility in such terms. Recall the words of Zephaniah: "I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord" (Zephaniah 3:12). Here, God unequivocally identifies the humble as those profoundly cognizant of their own poverty. Conversely, those prone to arrogance are equated with those who stray – a phenomenon often observed when prosperity lures individuals off course. God reserves His favor for the humble, granting them only hope in Him. Isaiah echoes this sentiment: "But

on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isaiah 66:2). Similarly, in Isaiah 57:15, God affirms that He dwells with the humble and afflicted in spirit, offering solace and revival to those who recognize their own insufficiency. Amidst this discourse, the term "affliction" signifies a wound deep enough to humble the heart, rendering the individual unable to rise. True exaltation is achieved solely through the embrace of this affliction, while resistance to such wounding subjects us to the humbling grip of God's mighty hand.

Our compassionate Teacher, not content with words alone, provides a vivid illustration of humility – a parable akin to a portrait. In this parable, Christ presents a tax collector who stands afar, too ashamed to raise his eyes or approach, his plea marked by earnest groans: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). Do not misconstrue these actions as mere affectations of modesty, for they reflect the genuine emotions of the heart. Contrarily, the Pharisee in this narrative boasts of his righteousness, thanking God that he stands apart from others – thieves, evildoers, adulterers – and faithfully fasts and tithes. Although the Pharisee attributes his righteousness to God's grace, his reliance on works leads him to leave God's presence loathsome (Luke 18:11–12). In stark contrast, the tax collector's recognition of his sinfulness justifies him. This parable illustrates God's delight in humility, which precludes His mercy from entering a heart laden with notions of its own grandeur. Christ Himself underscores this principle as He declares His mission, sent by the Father to "preach good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" (Isaiah 61:1–3). As a consequence, Christ invites only the burdened and laboring to receive His gracious gift (Matthew 11:28–30).

In our pursuit of Christ's divine call, let us expel all traces of arrogance and presumption. By "arrogance," I denote the conceit stemming from a deluded notion of righteousness, when one believes to possess qualities rendering them pleasing in God's eyes. "Presumption," on the other hand, signifies a dangerous complacency that can persist devoid of trust in deeds. Among sinners, some – intoxicated by the allure of their vices – remain oblivious to God's judgment, heedless and uninterested in the awaiting mercy. To pursue Christ unfettered, to be enriched by His blessings, we must vanquish such indifference and eliminate self-assurance. Before we can entrust ourselves to Christ, we must distrust our own capacities entirely. To embrace His genuine comfort, we must first grapple with our personal desolation. True acceptance of God's grace flourishes when, stripped of self-reliance, we anchor ourselves solely in His benevolence. As St. Augustine wisely proclaims, it is by abandoning self-conceit and forsaking our merits that we open ourselves to Christ's grace.

To expedite this journey, let us heed a succinct yet universal and certain guideline: he who renounces his self-importance, disavowing not just his righteousness – an illusory façade – but the pretense of virtue that beguiles us, stands poised to reap the harvest of God's mercy. The more one leans on oneself, the more they obstruct the flow of God's grace. Here, two pivotal considerations arise: the upholding of God's glory in its entirety, and the cultivation of consciences at peace in the face of divine judgment. Scripture consistently entreats us to praise God, emphasizing the importance of declaring His righteousness. The apostle underscores God's purpose in bestowing righteousness upon us through Christ: to showcase His righteousness, to proclaim Him as the One who justifies believers (Romans 3:25–26). Clearly, God's righteousness shines brightest when He alone is acknowledged as the source of

righteousness, when He imparts this gift to those who are undeserving. By eliminating any self-justifying grounds, God seeks to silence all mouths and establish Himself as the sole creditor (Romans 3:19).

In Ezekiel, God magnifies His name through our acknowledgment of our iniquities: "You will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good; and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight, for your iniquities and your abominations" (Ezekiel 20:43). God's magnification is contingent upon the humbling awareness of our own sins and the acknowledgment of unmerited divine mercy. Why, then, do we rashly seek to diminish even the slightest measure of praise due to God's boundless goodness? Jeremiah echoes this sentiment: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me" (Jeremiah 9:23–24). This proclamation highlights the dilution of God's glory when individuals take pride in themselves. True glorification of God springs forth only when we renounce self-glorification. The lesson is clear: those who extol themselves inherently undermine God's honor. St. Paul declares that individuals ultimately submit to God once every foundation for self-glorification crumbles (Romans 3:19). Therefore, Isaiah's pronouncement that Israel's righteousness shall stem from God is synonymous with Israel's exaltation and praise in Him (Isaiah 45:25).

Continuing this theme, Isaiah elucidates the process by which we praise God through an oath (Isaiah 45:24). This is not a mere confession, but a solemn affirmation, dispelling any vestiges of feigned humility. One must not profess to not boast in oneself when evaluating personal righteousness sans arrogance, for such an evaluation fosters confidence, inevitably breeding pride. Thus, let us

remember in our discourse on righteousness that the ultimate objective is the preservation of God's praise. As the apostle affirms, God poured forth His grace to demonstrate His righteousness and justify those with faith in Christ (Romans 3:24, 26). Likewise, in Ephesians, God's glory is upheld as salvation's purpose, reaffirmed by Paul: "He made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Ephesians 1:6). God's glory stands paramount, transcending human works, thereby negating any cause for boasting (Ephesians 2:8–9). In summation, any attribution of righteousness to oneself is sacrilegious, as it diminishes the splendor of God's righteousness.

To discover the path to a tranquil and joyful conscience before God, we must acknowledge that righteousness is bestowed upon us through God's boundless benevolence. Always bear in mind the wisdom of Solomon: "Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?'" (Proverbs 20:9). Truly, no one is exempt from the burden of countless blemishes. Should the most virtuous descend into the depths of their conscience, reckoning with their deeds, what outcome shall they face? Will their hearts find serenity and joy, as if in harmony with God? Or shall they be engulfed by the agony of torment, sensing that the weight of damnation resides within them, should their self-evaluation be anchored to their works? When the conscience gazes upon God, it either finds solace and unity with His judgment or is besieged by the terrors of hell. Our discussions about righteousness yield no profit unless our foundation is such that our soul stands unshaken before God's judgment. When our soul possesses the necessary assurance to appear before God without fear, and to await His judgment without uncertainty, then we can believe that we've embraced an authentic righteousness.

The apostle Paul ardently underscores this truth, and his words hold more weight than my own. He asserts: "For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect" (Romans 4:14). He contends that faith withers and the promise crumbles if righteousness is tethered to our merits and deeds or if it hinges upon legal observance. None can find genuine tranquility in such a stance, as there shall never be one who dares to affirm that they've fulfilled the law entirely – for indeed, no one accomplishes this by their actions alone. One needn't search far for evidence; each individual serves as a testament to this reality, upon viewing oneself with honesty. Inwardly, doubt gnaws away, replaced by despair as the weight of debts and the gulf between oneself and the law becomes apparent. Thus, faith diminishes and wanes. Genuine confidence, on the other hand, is founded on the firm and unwavering conviction of the heart, offering a steadfast anchor.

St. Paul further contends that the promise would crumble if its fulfillment rested upon human merit. In such a scenario, when would one ever attain the threshold deserving of God's grace? This second assertion stems from the first. The promise is fulfilled solely for those who receive it in faith. Ergo, if faith is diminished, the promise loses its potency. Hence, our inheritance is secured through faith, founded upon God's grace and the establishment of His promise. This promise is reinforced when anchored solely in God's mercy, for His mercy and truth are forever intertwined. The Lord remains faithful in fulfilling all His promises, a testament to His generous nature. Therefore, we must firmly grasp and anchor our hope in this, refraining from relying on our deeds for assistance.

In essence, the Scripture emphasizes that God's promises are meaningless without the assurance of a steadfast heart. Simultaneously, it proclaims that doubt and uncertainty render these

promises void. It further elucidates that wavering and trepidation are inevitable if these promises rest upon human deeds. Hence, it is imperative that righteousness be stripped away or that works be disregarded, replaced by unwavering faith. The essence of faith lies in closing one's eyes, directing one's ears towards God's promise alone. It demands the resolute focus on God's pledge, irrespective of human merit or value. This brings to mind Zechariah's exquisite prophecy – a time when the iniquities of the earth are purged, and each shall call their neighbor to the sanctuary of peace beneath their vine and fig tree (Zechariah 3:10). This promise reveals that true tranquility is only attained upon receiving the remission of sins.

To illuminate this notion further, let us scrutinize the degrees of human righteousness spanning an individual's life journey. Here, we discern four tiers. At the first level, those unacquainted with God are enmeshed in idolatry. At the second level, individuals acquainted with God's word and sacraments yet immersed in indulgent living, disavow the Lord through their actions despite professing Him verbally. At the third tier, hypocrites mask their corruption under the guise of virtue and wisdom. Finally, those regenerated by God's Spirit are wholeheartedly devoted to pursuing holiness and innocence.

Concerning the first category, when contemplating people in their natural state, one discerns no trace of goodness. A thorough examination reveals not a single virtue. Dismissing scripture's depiction of Adam's progeny would entail charging it with falsehood. These individuals possess hardened hearts (Jeremiah 17:9) and harbor wickedness from an early age (Genesis 8:21). Their thoughts remain futile (Psalm 94:11), devoid of reverence for God, void of understanding, and blind to His presence (Psalm 14:1). In essence, they are slaves to fleshly inclinations (Genesis 6:3), manifesting in

the vices St. Paul enumerates – lechery, impurity, indecency, excess, idolatry, corruption, enmity, discord, jealousy, anger, dissension, factions, envy, homicide, and all conceivable forms of wickedness and depravity (Galatians 5:19–21). What semblance of honor exists for them to cling to?

Among this multitude, there exist a few who exhibit a semblance of moral rectitude, gaining a reputation for holiness amongst people. Yet, since we understand that God does not favor external pomp, for such uprightness to hold any weight in justifying them, we must explore the source and essence of their actions. It is imperative to scrutinize the underlying sentiments from which their deeds spring. Though this topic offers a vast expanse for discourse, brevity shall guide our pursuit.

Firstly, let it be clear that I do not contest the fact that the virtues manifested in the lives of unbelievers and idolaters are bestowed by God. Neither am I so removed from discernment as to equate the rectitude, temperance, and fairness exhibited by figures like Titus and Trajan – noble Roman emperors – with the madness, excess, and cruelty displayed by Caligula, Nero, or Domitian – rulers who acted as untamed beasts. Likewise, I do not equate Tiberius's debauchery with Vespasian's self-restraint. To avoid cataloging each vice and virtue, I point out that a clear distinction between good and evil permeates even this static tableau. What order would persist in a world where virtue and vice merged indistinguishably? The Lord imprinted the demarcation between righteousness and wickedness within every human heart. This distinction is affirmed time and again through providence. God bestows earthly blessings on those who strive for human virtue. Not that this semblance and mirage of virtue merits His blessings, but it pleases Him to demonstrate His

love for true virtue in this manner, rewarding even external and hypocritical virtue with temporal recompense.

This affirmation leads us back to our earlier acknowledgment: that these so-called virtues, or more aptly, these semblances of virtue, are indeed divine gifts. All commendable traits originate from God. Yet, St. Augustine's assertion remains unassailable: "Although those estranged from the religion of one God might be admired for their virtue and wisdom, they are not only unworthy of reward, but also deserving of punishment, as they taint God's gifts with the impurity of their hearts. Despite being instruments of God in maintaining human order through righteousness, moderation, friendship, wisdom, temperance, and strength, they poorly execute these works of God. Their restraint from wrongdoing is motivated not by genuine virtue or righteousness, but rather by ambition, self-love, or other distorted considerations. As their works are tainted by impure intentions from their very inception, they do not deserve to be classified among virtues, any more than vices, which deceive due to a semblance of virtuousness. To put it succinctly, as the ultimate and perpetual goal of righteousness and virtue is to honor God, any deviation from this purpose forfeits the title of virtue. Since these individuals overlook God's ordained objective, their seemingly virtuous deeds, though righteous externally, are nonetheless sinful due to their perverse intentions."

Furthermore, if St. John's proclamation rings true, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:11–12), then every individual devoid of a connection with Christ, regardless of their deeds, endeavors, or pursuits throughout life, is doomed to destruction, chaos, and eternal judgment. Therefore, St. Augustine aptly likens the lives of such individuals to running along the wrong path. The faster they sprint away from the

correct path, the farther they stray from their goal, rendering their plight ever more pitiable. St. Augustine concludes that limping along the right path is preferable to sprinting off the course. It is irrefutable that these are barren trees, for sanctification is only possible through communion with Christ. These individuals may yield superficially attractive fruits with sweet aromas, yet they cannot produce genuine goodness. Evidently, whatever thoughts, contemplations, endeavors, and actions an individual undertakes before reconciling with God are accursed. Such endeavors hold no merit for justification and indeed invite certain damnation. The testimony of the apostle has already settled this matter – it is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6).

The profound truth gains further weight when we juxtapose God's grace with human nature. Scripture resoundingly proclaims that God finds no cause within a person that motivates Him to bestow goodness, instead, His benevolence always precedes. What could a lifeless person contribute to be rekindled? When God illumines a soul and imparts understanding of His truth, it is said that He revives the dead and forges a new creation (John 5:25–29). Frequently, God's generosity is illuminated under this context. Chiefly, the apostle underscores this – "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:4). Furthermore, while discussing the universal calling of the faithful using Abraham as an example, he asserts, "God gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did" (Romans 4:17). As beings of insignificance, what can we possibly offer? Hence, God unequivocally debunks all notions of presumption through the story of Job, declaring, "Who has preceded Me, that I should pay him? Everything under heaven is Mine" (Job 41:11). St. Paul, in expounding on this verse, employs it to

demonstrate that we can only offer God pure humility (Romans 11:35). Thus, the aforementioned citation emphasizes that our hope of salvation rests exclusively on God's grace and not our works. He reminds us that we are His creation, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). This can be paraphrased as follows: "Who among us can boast of righteousness preceding God's grace when our capacity to perform good emanates from His regeneration?" Indeed, as per our natural disposition, one might extract oil from a stone more effortlessly than extract a single virtuous act from us. It is truly remarkable that despite being condemned to such disgrace, some dare to attribute anything to themselves.

Let us humbly profess, echoing the words of the esteemed vessel of God, St. Paul: "We are called to a sacred calling, not by our deeds, but through His divine choice and boundless grace" (2 Timothy 1:9). Moreover, consider: "The kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, so that having been justified by His grace, we should become heirs of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-5, 7). In affirming this, we strip humanity of all righteousness, down to the last vestige, during the span when one remains unrenewed in hopeful anticipation of life through God's mercy. For if our deeds hold any merit for our justification, it would be erroneous to claim that we are justified by grace. The apostle was certainly not so forgetful in declaring the freeness of justification, for he undoubtedly recalled his argument from another context: that grace ceases to be grace when works gain prominence (Romans 11:6). What else could the Lord Jesus signify when He proclaims that He came to call sinners, not the righteous (Matthew 9:13)? If only

sinners find refuge in salvation, why do we futilely seek entry through our counterfeit righteousness?

A recurring reflection captivates my thoughts – the potential for me to undermine God's mercy by expending great effort in its defense, as if it were dubious or enigmatic. Yet, given our innate wickedness, which seldom yields to God's rightful claim unless necessitated, I find it obligatory to linger here longer than desired. However, as scripture's lucidity on this topic prevails, I will spar with its words rather than my own. Isaiah elucidates the process of redemption after detailing humanity's universal downfall. He articulates: "The Lord saw it, and it displeased Him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man and was amazed that there was no intercessor; therefore, His own arm brought salvation for Him, and His own righteousness, it sustained Him" (Isaiah 59:15–16). In light of this, where does human righteousness stand, if the prophet's words hold true – that no one assisted God in procuring salvation? Another prophet envisions the Lord speaking, aiming to reconcile a sinner with Himself: "I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord" (Hosea 2:19, 23). Shouldn't we infer that this covenant – God's primary union with us – hinges on His mercy, rendering it the sole foundation for our righteousness?

I wish to inquire of those who entertain the notion that an individual can approach God bearing merit: is there any righteousness that displeases God? If deeming this madness, then, can any good emanate from God's adversaries that pleases Him, given His aversion to them and their deeds? Reality attests that we all stand as mortal adversaries to God, enmeshed in overt hostility, until, justified, we find our way back into His grace (Romans 5:10–11; Colossians 1:21–

22). If the inception of God's love toward us is rooted in our justification, what righteousness through deeds could precede it? Thus, St. John, vigilant in admonishing us, affirms that we did not love God first (1 John 4:10), as taught earlier by our Lord through His prophet, declaring His love is voluntary, turning away His anger (Hosea 14:4). If God's inclination to love us stems from His benevolence, surely our deeds do not move Him. Such enlightenment escapes the common folk, who perceive that none deserve redemption through Christ, yet believe their efforts contribute to obtaining it. Conversely, though ransomed by Christ, we remain in perpetual darkness, foes of God, and heirs to His wrath until the Father's gracious summons assimilates us into communion with Christ. St. Paul avers that we are not cleansed and sanctified until the Holy Spirit effects this transformation in us (1 Corinthians 6:11). Echoing this sentiment, St. Peter expounds on the sanctification of the Holy Spirit, elucidating that it empowers us to obey and cleanses us with Christ's blood (1 Peter 1:2). As Christ's blood, mediated by the Spirit, purifies us, let us not err by presuming any righteousness before this purifying work, when we remain but sinners, void of Christ. With unshakable faith, let us affirm that the commencement of our salvation resembles a resurrection from death unto life.

The second and third categories delineated earlier both fall within this realm of nature. The guilty conscience inherent in both is evidence that they remain unregenerated by God's Spirit. Moreover, their lack of spiritual renewal signifies a dearth of faith. Consequently, it is evident that they remain unreconciled with God, and their justification lies beyond His judgment, as such good can only be realized through faith. Indeed, can any act performed by sinners estranged from God find favor in His judgment? It is incontrovertibly true that unbelievers, particularly hypocrites, bolstered by delusional confidence, believe that even though they

acknowledge their hearts are steeped in corruption and vice, their veneer of good deeds earns them recognition in God's eyes. This fallacious belief begets a perilous error: those who acknowledge their hearts' wickedness but refuse to confess the absence of righteousness ascribed some semblance of virtue to themselves. This self-deception is aptly countered by God through the words of the prophet Haggai, who queries: "If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?" To this, the priests respond, "No." Haggai's query continues: "If one who is unclean by a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" The priests affirm, "Yes." Haggai is then directed to proclaim: "So is this people, and so is this nation before Me, says the Lord, and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean" (Haggai 2:11–14). May this declaration find acceptance in our hearts, etching itself indelibly upon our consciousness.

None, no matter how steeped in wickedness their existence, can convince themselves to embrace what the Lord unequivocally proclaims. Even the most wicked individuals, should they fulfill a solitary obligation, do not waver in believing it ascribed to them as righteousness. Yet, resolutely, the Lord contends that the execution of a singular duty does not grant sanctification unless the heart's purification precedes it. Moreover, He attests that prior deeds of sinners bear the stain of impurity from their hearts. Beware, then, of attaching the label "righteousness" to acts tainted and condemned by God's pronouncement of pollution. How many illuminating parables illustrate this truth? Some might contend that God's commands are intrinsically holy. However, God reveals that works sanctified in His law might bear the taint of the wicked, for consecrated things are defiled by unclean hands. Isaiah elaborates this wisdom: "Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New

Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies – I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes" (Isaiah 1:13–16; also read 58:2–4). What does it signify that God fervently detests the observance of His law? Understand, He reviles not the pure and genuine adherence to His law. As universally taught, the foundation of this obedience lies in a heartfelt reverence for His name. Absent this foundation, offerings to Him are not only trifles but malodorous and repugnant refuse. The hypocrites, however, endeavor to prove their devotion to God through good deeds, while harboring perverse intentions within their hearts. In this manner, their actions kindle God's displeasure. For the sacrifices of the wicked repulse Him, whereas the prayers of the righteous alone find favor (Proverbs 15:8).

We can thus conclude, that among those moderately versed in scripture, a shared understanding persists: the works of individuals not sanctified by God's Spirit – however outwardly admirable – stand far from divine recognition as righteousness; rather, they dwell in the realm of sin. Hence, those who assert that works do not earn grace or favor, but instead please God after the person finds acceptance in His mercy, have spoken with eloquence and truth. We must diligently uphold this sequence, as illustrated within scripture's guidance. Consider Moses' account of God's regard for Abel and his offerings (Genesis 4:4); it becomes evident that God extends favor to individuals before considering their deeds. Thus, the cleansing of the heart must precede the performance of subsequent deeds, ensuring they receive God's favorable reception. A proclamation by the Holy

Spirit through St. Peter resonates – hearts are purified solely through faith (Acts 15:9). Thus, the bedrock lies in unwavering and living faith.

Now let us contemplate the righteousness attributed to those occupying the fourth realm. We acknowledge that when God reconciles us through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, pardoning our transgressions, a further grace accompanies this mercy. Namely, He takes abode within us through His Holy Spirit, who, in wielding His power, gradually quells the vile desires of our flesh. Through this process, we experience sanctification – a consecration to God characterized by genuine purity of life. Our hearts mold in obedience to His law, aspiring to serve His will and advance His glory. Despite this guidance by the Holy Spirit, traces of imperfection linger within us, providing ample cause for humility. Indeed, scripture asserts, "There is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin" (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

What, then, emerges as the righteousness derived from faithful actions? Primarily, the best of deeds we present bear some blemish, akin to wine tainted when mingled with its sediment. Imagine a servant of God selecting the noblest work from their lifetime. Scrutinizing its facets, they invariably discern traces of corruption, for our capacity for good falls short of the ideal, often hindered by profound frailty. If even the most virtuous act harbors visible flaws, how should we perceive our aggregate righteousness? Shall we deem these blemishes insignificant in the eyes of the Lord, before whom even the stars lack purity (Job 25:5)? Let us recognize that faithful endeavors, even at their zenith, merit only disgrace when viewed in isolation. Moreover, even if hypothetically, an unblemished work emerged – a feat beyond human capacity – the taint of inherent sin would nullify its grace and favor. Just as the prophet declares

(Ezekiel 18:24), a single sin suffices to obliterate all recollection of preceding righteousness. St. James aligns with this truth, proclaiming, "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). As this mortal existence remains plagued by sin, any righteousness accrued becomes vulnerable, eroded, and relinquished by ensuing transgressions, unfit for divine imputation.

Ultimately, in evaluating the righteousness of works, our focus ought not to be on individual actions, but rather on the law itself. Thus, should we seek righteousness within the law, the production of a single or even numerous deeds proves futile, for perpetual obedience is demanded. God, therefore, does not impute the forgiveness of sins as righteousness a solitary time, as some misguided notions suggest, enabling us to subsequently pursue righteousness within the law. Such a notion, if embraced, amounts to mere mockery, as God would tantalize us with a hollow aspiration – for in this temporal existence, where perfection remains elusive, the law casts judgment and condemnation upon those incapable of fulfilling perfect righteousness through deeds. Hence, what we initially established remains steadfast: whether evaluated by intrinsic value or endeavors undertaken, humanity, alongside our pursuits, consistently warrants death. Therefore, two tenets stand resolute. Firstly, no faithful soul can lay claim to a work beyond censure under God's rigorous judgment. Secondly, even if an irreproachable act were attained – an implausible feat – the entanglement of personal sin would nullify its grace and dignity.

The elaborate deceptions conjured by the Sorbonnists to sidestep this crucial truth offer no reprieve from its weighty reality. Their assertion that the value of good works in justifying an individual emanates from God's grace, which endorses them, crumbles when

scrutinized. They further propose that faults are counterbalanced by acts of supererogation. In response, I proclaim that the grace they term "acceptance" is naught but the boundless benevolence of the Heavenly Father, enveloping and embracing us in the mantle of Jesus Christ. By this act, He robes us in Christ's innocence, imputing it to us, thereby deeming us pure, holy, and innocent. For the righteousness of Christ must be laid bare before God's tribunal and presented on our behalf, given its perfection which solely withstands His scrutiny. Thus, adorned in Christ's righteousness, we secure perpetual forgiveness of sins through faith. His unblemished righteousness veils our stains and imperfections, rendering them non-imputable, concealed from God's judgment. This course prevails until, with the demise of our former selves, God's benevolence transports us, along with the new Adam, Jesus Christ, to an awaited rest, there to anticipate the resurrection. Grafted into heavenly glory, our transfigured bodies shall ascend. Should these tenets ring true, it becomes evident that no independent act possesses the power to endear us to God. Their favor, rather, emerges only through the cover of Christ's righteousness, ushering forth the pardon of our sins.

The sophists' refrain, echoing recompense through acts of supererogation, rests upon dubious ground. Do they not persistently reiterate a refuted notion, contending that partial adherence to the law results in corresponding righteousness by works? Here, they assert what sound judgment rejects. The Lord, in multiple declarations, testifies that perfect obedience alone constitutes true righteousness before Him. How audacious to seize upon feeble attempts at good works, amid a dearth of perfect obedience, and then seek to redeem our shortcomings through penance! Satisfactions, rigorously undermined, must not infiltrate our thoughts, not even in reverie. To those carelessly uttering such claims, the abhorrence of sin to God remains concealed; else they would comprehend that the

collective human righteousness fails to counterbalance a solitary sin. A single transgression led humanity's estrangement from God, rendering salvation unreachable and satisfaction ineffectual. Those clinging to the illusion of retaining such efficacy will never appease God, who finds displeasure in all emanating from His adversaries – and all sinners He imputes as such. Therefore, sins must first be concealed and pardoned before even a solitary act may be deemed worthy by God. Thus, the gratuitousness of sin's remission endures, while those propounding satisfactions blaspheme wickedly. Aligned with the apostle's example of disregarding the past and striving toward divine rewards, we advance in pursuit of the heavenly calling (Philippians 3:13–14).

How do the claims of acts of supererogation harmonize with Christ's statement: "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Luke 17:10)? Uttering words before God entails neither pretense nor falsehood, but rather an internal resolution grounded in certitude. The Lord directs us to judge rightly and grasp that our service is not voluntary, but rather an obligatory repayment of debt. This recognition aligns with truth – as God's serfs, we are bound to numerous services that, even with all our thoughts and efforts, cannot be wholly fulfilled. Hence, when He asserts, "When you have done all those things which you are commanded," it implies that, even were the world's righteousness encapsulated in one person, an excess would remain. Therefore, we, far from this ideal, dare not boast of having exceeded requisite measures. No one should posit that a distinction arises when one, who fails in part, exceeds requirements out of necessity. For our guiding principle mandates that any act related to honoring God or loving our neighbors must abide within God's law. Thus, when such

acts fall within the purview of the law, any pride in voluntary generosity is unwarranted, for necessity binds us.

Citing St. Paul's assertion, wherein he extols foregoing entitlements and exceeding duty by preaching the gospel to the Corinthians gratis (1 Corinthians 9:15ff), hardly lends credence to the concept of acts of supererogation. A closer examination reveals the rationale presented therein: this gesture aimed to avert causing stumbling among the weak (1 Corinthians 9:12). Mischief-makers ensnared the Corinthian community, propounding unsolicited efforts to curry favor for their perverse doctrines while sowing disdain for the gospel. St. Paul was thus compelled to confront either endangering Christ's teachings or quashing such devious tactics. If one believes Christian conduct lacks consequence in fomenting scandal, the apostle's action indeed surpasses obligation. However, if one acknowledges the prudent duty of a gospel steward, it is evident he merely fulfilled his role. Moreover, even absent this argument, the wisdom of Chrysostom endures – our offerings are akin to possessions held by a serf; according to the law of bondage, they belong to the master. Christ's parable echoes this sentiment – a servant returning home at dusk after toiling all day (Luke 17:7–10). While the servant may have exerted more effort than assigned, he merely fulfilled his obligation as dictated by his servitude, for he and his labor are the master's.

I abstain from exploring the realm of works of supererogation, the realm in which some seek divine approval. These, however, are mere trifles, diverging from God's command and disapproval. In His reckoning, they bear no significance whatsoever. It is thus incumbent upon us to remember what the prophet voices elsewhere: "Who has required this from your hand?" (Isaiah 1:12, 58:5). These Pharisaic aspirants would do well to recall the indictment they face in another place: "Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your

wages for what does not satisfy?" (Isaiah 55:2). Distinguished individuals, our scholars may indeed luxuriate in soft-seated classrooms, yet when the supreme Judge descends from the heavens upon His throne of judgment, the elaborate discourse they've woven will hold little value – evaporating like smoke. What warrants our pursuit here is understanding the confidence we carry to shield us in the face of that formidable judgment, not the drivel one may concoct or propagate within the cloisters of the Sorbonne.

In this juncture, two maladies must be expunged from our hearts. First, we must forsake any reliance on our works and, second, we must withhold any acclaim thereof. Scripture itself strips away our faith in works, proclaiming our righteousness mere refuse and filth before God, except it derives its fragrance from Jesus Christ's righteousness. Our own righteousness can provoke naught but God's wrath, unless upheld by His merciful kindness. Thus, Scripture leaves us with naught but the recourse to beg for mercy from our Judge, as did David in his confession: "Enter not into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous" (Psalm 143:2). Echoing this sentiment, Job's words resonate: "If I am wicked, woe to me; even if I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head" (Job 10:15). Job doesn't intend to submit to God willingly, rather than engaging in perilous contention with His sternness. He signifies his self-assuredness in his own righteousness, which inevitably fades before God. Once confidence is banished, all glory must also dissipate. For who can bestow righteousness's accolades upon their works, when tremors of reverence course through them in God's presence? Thus, our hearts attain true purification when they forsake all reliance on works and refrain from seeking cause for arrogance and pride therein. It's this very misstep that propels individuals toward the false and baseless confidence of grounding salvation in their works.

If we turn to the four causal types delineated by philosophers, not a single one aligns with works in the context of salvation. Throughout Scripture, the efficacious cause of our salvation lies in the mercy of our Heavenly Father and His gratuitous affection for us. As for the material cause, Christ, in His obedience, secures righteousness on our behalf. The instrumental cause, without question, is faith. St. John harmonizes these three in his declaration that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Finally, the ultimate cause, as the Apostle illustrates, is "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Ephesians 1:5–6). When we perceive that every facet of salvation lies outside ourselves, what room remains for confidence or glory in our works? Opponents of God's glory would struggle to quarrel against the efficacious and ultimate causes without forsaking all of Scripture. With respect to the material and instrumental causes, they equivocate – as if works share credit equally with faith and Christ's righteousness. Yet Scripture contradicts this notion as well, attesting simply that "Christ is our righteousness and life, and we acquire such goodness solely through faith" (Romans 3:26).

Saints often find solace and fortitude by recalling their innocence and integrity, sometimes presenting them in two distinct manners. Firstly, when juxtaposing their righteous cause against the wicked's sinister cause, hope for victory emerges not so much due to their righteousness's worthiness, but because their adversaries' depravity warrants such hope. Secondly, they recollect their integrity when contemplating their standing before God, eschewing comparison with others, and finding consolation and confidence in the purity of their conscience. We will revisit the first rationale later, but for now, we shall briefly address the second and explore its compatibility with our prior discussions. It befits saints, when constructing and

affirming their salvation, to anchor their vision entirely upon God's goodness, ignoring their works. They not only turn their gaze to His goodness as the origin of their blessedness, but also view it as its culmination, where they fully acquiesce and rest. Once this foundation, bolstered and solidified, is in place, they may also derive strength from considering their works – for these stand as evidence of God's habitation within them. However, such confidence in works is inexistent until the entirety of the heart's reliance rests on God's mercy. It serves no purpose in affirming that works justify or that they, in and of themselves, can imbue assurance within a person.

Hence, by dismissing reliance on works, we imply that the Christian soul should not seek salvation's refuge in the merit of works, but rather repose entirely upon the free promise of righteousness. Nevertheless, we do not prohibit the soul from finding solace and confirmation in all the indications of God's benevolent will. For when we reflect upon the array of gifts bestowed upon us by God, they appear as beams radiating from His countenance, illuminating the path to contemplate the sovereign brilliance of His goodness. How much more, then, should the good works granted to us serve this purpose, as they indicate the Spirit of adoption dwelling within us. Thus, when the saints fortify their faith through their innocence or derive joy from it, they merely gauge, through the fruits of their calling, God's adoption of them as His children. Solomon aptly pronounces, "In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence" (Proverbs 14:26). At times, in order to appeal to God, the saints invoke their innocence and sincerity as a testament to their conduct before His gaze (Genesis 24:20, 17:1, 2 Kings 20:3). These expressions do not lay the foundation upon which to build the conscience; rather, they only hold value as indicators of God's summons. This form of reverence towards God lacks the capacity to provide firm confidence. Every saint comprehends well that they

possess no complete integrity, except that which coexists with myriad imperfections and remnants of their human nature.

As they take cues from the fruits of their regeneration, the saints discern signs that the Holy Spirit dwells within them. This multitude of confirmatory signals provides a foundation upon which to rest in God's aid during moments of need. Such experiences foster the recognition of God as a compassionate Father in matters of great import. This understanding cannot be realized without first grasping the essence of God's goodness, a recognition solely precipitated by the promises of the Gospel. Should they begin assessing their standing through the lens of works rather than the promises of the Gospel, the result would be no less uncertain and frail. Works, when considered in isolation, project an aura of imperfection, invoking God's wrath as much as they exemplify His benevolence through the fledgling purity present within them. The saints, in truth, harbor no confidence in their works that attributes merit to them. They regard works as mere bestowals from God, acknowledgments of His goodness and symbols of His call. This assurance detracts nothing from the free righteousness obtained through Christ; rather, it hinges upon and draws support from it.

Furthermore, when Scripture avers that good works serve as the impetus for divine benevolence to His servants, it is essential to understand this within the framework established earlier. The inception and culmination of our salvation lie in the Father's love, the foundation in Christ's obedience, the instrument in the Holy Spirit's illumination – that is, faith – and the purpose in glorifying God's goodness. This perspective does not preclude God from embracing works as secondary causes. Why? Because, according to His customary dispensation, He employs the good works of those He predestined for eternal inheritance to usher them into their

possession. Thus, He designates what precedes in His dispensation as the cause of what follows. Hence, Scripture occasionally appears to imply that eternal life emerges from good works. This is not to assign them praise, but rather because God justifies those He has elected for glorification, the initial grace – akin to a precursor of the second – is denoted the cause. Nonetheless, when discerning the true cause, Scripture directs our focus not towards works, but guides us to dwell solely on God's mercy. What does the apostle's statement signify: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23)? Why doesn't he juxtapose righteousness with sin as he does life with death? Why does he abstain from attributing life's cause to righteousness, analogous to the manner in which he ascribes death's cause to sin? It is because he seeks to convey that death is a result of a person's deeds, while life solely rests upon God's mercy.

The primary intricacy of this matter has been discussed – that all righteousness crumbles before God when propped up by works. Righteousness is solely contained within God's mercy, Christ's communion, and faith. It is incumbent upon us to grasp this core principle, lest we become ensnared in a common misconception held not just by the masses, but by scholars as well. When deliberating whether faith or works justify, individuals cite passages seemingly attributing merit to works before God. Thus, they argue that justification by works is substantiated when they demonstrate that works hold some significance in God's view. Yet, we have convincingly demonstrated that righteousness through works firmly rests upon complete observance of the law. Consequently, no one can be justified by works unless they achieve a level of perfection immune to even the slightest fault.

Let us now approach another vital inquiry: Can works, though inadequate to justify an individual, procure favor from God? I am compelled to declare this regarding the term "merit": the initial attribution of merit to human works in relation to God's judgment was an unwise action, detrimental to the sincerity of faith. Although I am willing to eschew quarrels arising from mere words, I beseech Christians to maintain a sobriety that abstains from employing terms not found in scripture unnecessarily. These extraneous words breed stumbling blocks and yield little fruit. What purpose, I ask, did it serve to introduce the term "merits," when the worth of good works could have been articulated differently without causing offense? Regrettably, numerous stumbling blocks have emerged from this term, causing substantial harm to the world. Unquestionably, the word is imbued with pride, obscuring God's grace and fostering empty presumption. It is true that early church theologians commonly employed this term. Yet, I wish that God's favor had prevented them from inadvertently sowing seeds of error for posterity through this minuscule term. Although in certain instances, they attested not wishing to jeopardize truth by using this word, elsewhere St. Augustine remarked, "Let human merits, which were lost in Adam, be silenced here, and let God's grace reign – as it reigns through Jesus Christ." Similarly, St. Chrysostom asserted, "All our deeds resulting from God's free calling are akin to debts we repay to Him. Conversely, His blessings are born of grace, benevolence, and pure generosity."

Leaving semantics aside, let us instead focus on the essence of the matter: namely, what our works truly warrant. Scripture reveals that our works cannot withstand God's gaze, for they are tainted with filth and impurity. Moreover, it illustrates the merit that perfect obedience to the law would command, if such a feat were attainable. Scripture instructs us to consider ourselves "unprofitable servants"

even upon fulfilling all prescribed tasks (Luke 17:10). Even then, our actions remain obligatory services, demanding no grace from God in return. Yet, the Lord designates the works bestowed upon us as "our own," not only deeming them agreeable to Him but also pledging rewards for them (Matthew 16:27). It is our duty to be emboldened by these promises, avoiding weariness in doing good (Galatians 6:9) and refraining from ingratitude for such benevolence. Evidently, every facet meriting praise within our works is an outpouring of God's grace, with no virtue to be ascribed to ourselves. Upon recognizing this truth, not only will all confidence wane, but all notions of merit will dissolve as well.

In truth, we do not share praise for good works between God and ourselves, as sophists propose. Rather, we reserve it entirely for God. We merely acknowledge that human impurity taints and sullies works which, bestowed by God, would otherwise be pristine. Nothing proceeds from even the most exemplary individual without being marred by a blemish. Hence, God must assess even the most virtuous works, discovering within them His righteousness as well as human frailty.

Good works undoubtedly please God and are not futile for those who undertake them. In return, they receive abundant blessings from God. However, this is not a consequence of their deserving, but rather an outcome ordained by the Lord's inherent benevolence. What ingratitude, then, if, unsatisfied by God's magnanimity which bestows unwarranted wages upon works, we indulge in accursed ambition, asserting that divine generosity stems from the merit of our deeds? I implore you to consider the principles of common sense: if someone granted the usage of a field seeks to illegitimately claim ownership, does he not deserve to forfeit possession due to his ingratitude? Similarly, should a servant, once liberated from

servitude, reject acknowledgment of his condition and assert his innate freedom, does he not warrant a return to servile bondage? Thus, the proper usage of gifts entails refraining from overstepping the bounds of what has been given and refraining from depriving the bestower of the credit due to him. If such moderation is expected in our interactions with people, reflect on how much more we must exercise this restraint when dealing with God.

I acknowledge that sophists manipulate certain passages to support the presence of the term "merit" in scripture. They cite a verse from Ecclesiasticus: "Mercy will give each person a place according to his merits of his works" (Ecclesiasticus 16:14). They also refer to the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Do not forget beneficence and sharing, for such sacrifices merit God's grace" (Hebrews 13:16). Although I could dismiss Ecclesiasticus due to its non-canonical status, I abstain from that. Nonetheless, I dispute their faithfulness in quoting these verses. In the Greek version, the passage from Ecclesiasticus reads: "God will provide mercy for all; each will be rewarded according to his deeds." By examining the context and syntax, it is evident that this is the accurate interpretation, whereas the Latin translation contains errors. Regarding the Epistle to the Hebrews, their argument is equivocal. The Greek term employed by the apostle conveys that these sacrifices are merely pleasing to God. This alone should suffice to quell any inclinations towards excessive pride, provided we refrain from attributing value to works beyond what scripture warrants.

The doctrine of scripture underscores that our works bear numerous imperfections. It would be just for God to be angered by them, and thus they cannot serve as means to earn His grace, favor, or benevolence. Yet, due to His profound mercy, He does not scrutinize them rigorously; rather, He accepts them as virtuous and recompenses them with numerous blessings in the present and

future. While I could entertain the distinction some make, asserting that good works merit the graces God bestows upon us in the present life, while eternal salvation is solely the outcome of faith – given the Lord's promise of reward for our labors and victory's crown in heaven – attributing the present graces we receive from God to the merit of works, thereby diminishing the role of grace, contradicts the teachings of scripture. While Christ indeed proclaimed that "to the one who has, more will be given," and that "the faithful servant who proves reliable in small matters will be entrusted with greater responsibilities," He also emphasized that such growth and increase are gifts of His free kindness. Moreover, He proclaimed, "All who are thirsty, come to the water; and you who have no money, come and take wine and milk without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1). Therefore, all graces bestowed upon the faithful for their spiritual advancement stem from God's pure benevolence, just as eternal blessedness does. While these graces extend to our present life and the future glory that awaits us, they bear God's consideration of our works, affirming His boundless love by honoring not only us but the blessings we have received from His hand.

Had these aspects been expounded and elucidated in their proper sequence from the past, countless predicaments and disputes could have been averted. St. Paul underscored the imperative of preserving the foundation he laid among the Corinthians, which is none other than Jesus Christ – the sole foundation (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). Reflect on this foundation in Christ. Did He merely initiate our salvation, with its completion to be accomplished by our efforts? Did He merely pave the way for us to traverse, leaving us to tread the path by our own endeavors? By no means. As reiterated earlier, we uphold the foundation by recognizing and comprehending that He was bestowed upon us for righteousness.

Indeed, no one is genuinely rooted in Christ unless their righteousness is firmly founded in Him. The apostle does not assert that Christ was sent to assist us in attaining righteousness; rather, He was sent to be our righteousness. In other words, from eternity past, before the world's inception, we were elected in Him – not owing to any merit, but due to God's benevolent delight. Through His sacrificial death, we were redeemed from the condemnation of death and liberated from perdition. Through His precious blood, we were adopted by the Heavenly Father as His children and heirs, reconciled with God. Under His protective embrace, we are impervious to the threat of perishing. Our incorporation into Him grants us a glimpse of eternal life's splendor, as we enter the Kingdom of God through the lens of hope. Yet, this is not the culmination; even as we remain foolish within ourselves, we are made wise in Him before God. Despite our sinfulness, He stands as our righteousness. Amid our impurity, He remains our purity. In our weakness and lack of fortitude to confront the devil, His celestial and earthly authority to vanquish the forces of evil and dismantle the gates of hell is extended to us. In the midst of our mortality, He embodies our life. In essence, His infinite treasures are bestowed upon us, for we possess everything in Him and nothing within ourselves. Thus, to be God's sanctuaries, we must be established upon this foundation.

However, the world has long been instructed differently. The sophists have promulgated various moral deeds to render individuals pleasing to God before they are incorporated into Christ. Yet, Scripture contradicts these notions, declaring that "whoever does not have the Son does not have life" (1 John 5:12). How can such individuals engender life if they dwell in death? Similarly, the Scripture asserts that "whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23), and that good fruit cannot emerge from a corrupt tree. These malicious sophists have robbed Christ of His potency, relegating Him

to the role of merely securing initial grace, while they advocate for our success in seizing the opportunity to merit through our own efforts. What audacity! What impudence! Who would have anticipated that those professing to be Christians would so grievously diminish Christ's authority, almost trampling it underfoot? Scripture unequivocally attests that all who believe in Him are justified. Yet, this mob contends that Christ offers us nothing beyond opening a path for us to validate ourselves! If only they could grasp the depth of these declarations: "Whoever has the Son has life" (1 John 5:12); "Whoever believes has passed from death to life and is justified by His grace to inherit eternal life" (John 5:24; Titus 3:7); that Christ resides within them, uniting them with God; that they share in His life, already seated beside Him in the heavenly realm; that they have transitioned into the Kingdom of God and secured salvation (Ephesians 1:3, 2:5-6), along with countless parallel declarations. These verses do not solely affirm that the means of obtaining righteousness and salvation are found in Jesus Christ, but that these very blessings are granted to us through Him. Upon being incorporated into Christ through faith, we become children of God, heirs of heaven, participants in righteousness, possessors of life – and in contradiction to their fallacies – we obtain not only the opportunity to merit but the full merits of Christ, shared with us.

Thus, the Sorbonne's sophists, progenitors of falsehood, have dismantled the entire concept of faith-based justification, encapsulating the essence of all piety. While they ostensibly acknowledge that an individual is justified by formed faith, they subsequently assert that works strip faith of its capacity and power to justify. This renders their application of the term "faith" a mockery, for they cannot entirely suppress it due to its prominence in Scripture. Yet, their audacity extends further as they pilfer a portion of God's glory and attribute it to human endeavor, particularly in

extolling good works. Unable to attribute significant efficacy to good works, they resort to extracting these works from the realm of God's grace, an endeavor akin to extracting oil from stone. While they do not outright deny the preeminence of grace as the primary cause, they insist on incorporating free will into the equation – a free will from which they posit all merit emanates. This is not an isolated doctrine among the new sophists; even their eminent master, Peter Lombard, shares this sentiment (albeit to a lesser degree). Their failure to recognize St. Augustine's meticulous efforts to absolve humanity of even a modicum of praise for good works is a stunning blindness. As previously elucidated in the context of free will, St. Augustine vehemently asserts in multiple instances that our entire merit derives from grace, bestowed upon us entirely through grace and not earned through our abilities or moral standing.

Lombard's lack of enlightenment on this matter hardly comes as a shock, given his limited scriptural grasp. However, an unequivocal refutation against him and his adherents can be extracted from the words of St. Paul. After admonishing Christians against boasting, Paul delineates the reason for this prohibition: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). As none of our goodness arises independently; rather, it emerges solely through our regeneration by God, attributing even an iota of merit for good deeds to ourselves amounts to sacrilege. These sophists, despite their incessant discourse on good works, instruct consciences in a manner that withholds trust in God's favor toward their deeds. Conversely, we offer distinct comfort to the faithful through our teachings, affirming that their works are pleasing to God. We implore them not to embark upon any endeavor devoid of faith, which entails a steadfast certainty in their hearts that their actions will garner divine approval.

Hence, we must steadfastly remain anchored to this foundation, even if it requires the point of a needle or the division of a hair. For upon Him hinges the entirety of the church's edification. All of God's servants tasked with building His kingdom must, after laying this foundation, continue with instruction and exhortation. They emphasize that the Son of God manifested Himself to dismantle the devil's works, ensuring that those who belong to God abstain from sin (1 John 3:8-9). They remind that the past pursuit of worldly desires is sufficient (1 Peter 4:3) and urge God's elect to cleanse themselves of filth, becoming vessels of honor (2 Timothy 2:20-21). However, all these duties can be encapsulated in Christ's admonition to His disciples – a summons to renounce self and bear their crosses while following Him (Luke 9:23). By renouncing self, the root of all wickedness is severed, freeing individuals from self-serving desires. By embracing the cross, they adopt patience and gentleness. Christ's example encompasses these aspects and every facet of piety and sanctity. He submitted to His Father obediently, even unto death (Philippians 2:8), fully dedicated to fulfilling God's work with unwavering devotion. His efforts were directed at exalting God's glory (John 17:4), and He surrendered His life for His brethren (John 15:13), demonstrating goodness in the face of hostility.

In moments requiring solace, these faithful servants provide unique comforts. "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). "If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:11-12). We are molded in the likeness of His passion until we attain the likeness of His resurrection (Philippians 2:10-11). The Father has ordained that those chosen in Christ are molded in His image,

positioning Christ as the preeminent among His brethren (Romans 8:29). Therefore, adversity, death, present challenges, and impending difficulties cannot sever us from God's unwavering love in Christ (Romans 8:38-39); all events, in turn, contribute to our benefit and salvation. This perspective maintains that our justification before God stems not from our deeds, but from our regeneration and renewal, enabling us to transition from a realm of sin to one of righteousness, solidifying our calling and permitting us to be judged by our fruits (2 Peter 1:8, 10).

This doctrine dismantles the audacious claims of certain malevolent individuals who accuse us of abolishing good works and luring people away from them by teaching that neither justification nor salvation can be merited through works. Additionally, they assert that our proclamation of righteousness's foundation being grounded in the forgiveness of sins makes the path to righteousness too lenient. These accusations, however, are wholly debunked by the arguments presented thus far. Nonetheless, I will briefly address both claims.

They contend that the teaching of justification by faith undermines good works. Yet, it is precisely through this teaching that good works find their elevation and confirmation. We do not envision a faith devoid of good works or a justification untethered from them. The crux of the matter resides here: we recognize that faith and good works are inherently linked, while righteousness is located in faith, not works. The rationale behind this distinction is simple, contingent upon our contemplation of Christ, who is the object of our faith and the source of our strength. The question arises: why are we justified by faith? Because through faith, we apprehend Christ's righteousness, which serves as the sole means of reconciliation with God. However, one cannot lay hold of this righteousness without

simultaneously embracing sanctification. When it is affirmed that Christ is granted to us for redemption, wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30), it becomes evident that justification is inexorably linked to sanctification. These benefits are perpetually intertwined. As Christ enlightens us with wisdom, He redeems us; as He redeems us, He justifies us; as He justifies us, He sanctifies us. Although the focus here is on righteousness and sanctification, the linkage remains clear. Hence, Christ, encompassing both attributes inseparably, is the key. Do we seek to obtain righteousness through Christ? First, we must possess Christ. But possessing Christ necessitates partaking in His sanctification, as He cannot be divided. Since Christ never imparts His benefits without giving Himself, both elements are conveyed simultaneously – never one without the other. Hence, the assertion holds true: we are not justified by works, even though works play an essential role, for participation in Christ, our righteousness, inherently encompasses our sanctification.

It is imperative to disavow the falsehood that by removing the illusion of merit, we steer people away from a zeal for righteousness. The sophists' contention that individuals will cease to live righteously if they do not anticipate rewards is a grave self-deception. If the aim is merely to have people serve God for the sake of compensation, akin to mercenaries peddling their services, this approach holds no virtue. God seeks genuine honor and love, valuing a servant who remains unwavering in their service even when all hopes of rewards vanish. God desires sincere hearts, unswayed by personal gain. To inspire virtuous deeds, we must point them towards the purpose of their redemption and calling. Scripture effectively fulfills this role, affirming that "our consciences are cleansed from dead works by Christ's blood, so that we may serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14). We are liberated from the grip of our adversaries to tread the path of

righteousness and holiness all our days (Luke 1:71, 74-75). God's grace emerges, compelling us to forsake ungodliness and worldly desires, urging a life of temperance and devotion, while we await the glorious manifestation of our Savior (Titus 2:11-12). We are beckoned to walk in purity, forsaking perverse desires, as we are now temples of the Holy Spirit, set apart for divine sanctification (Ephesians 2:21-22). Our calling demands a life of purity, delivered from sin to embrace righteousness (Romans 6:18).

Is there a more compelling argument to kindle charity than that of St. John? We are to love one another as God has loved us, and the distinction between God's children and the offspring of darkness rests in their expression of love (1 John 4:7, 11; 3:10). Similarly, St. Paul invokes the image of Christ's body to exhort us to mutual assistance, emphasizing that as members of Christ, we are interconnected and must support one another (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12ff). St. John reminds us that those who hope for eternal life must consecrate themselves, for their God is holy (1 John 3:3). Christ Himself sets an example for us to follow (John 15:10), providing a profound incentive for holiness.

Let us consider these passages as a glimpse into the sea of exhortations found in Scripture. Each apostle fervently guides us, weaving admonishments, reproofs, and encouragements to foster our pursuit of righteousness, never uttering a word about merit. In fact, their exhortations hinge on the foundation of our salvation, firmly established on God's mercy, for we have not merited it. St. Paul, for instance, after expounding on the indispensability of Christ's grace for salvation, bases his exhortation on the bedrock of God's mercy (Romans 12:1). This very cause should suffice to motivate righteous living, allowing God's glory to radiate through us (Matthew 5:16). For those who might not be moved by a desire to

glorify God, remembrance of His benevolence should serve as an impetus. However, some Pharisees, obsessed with merit, coerce people into servile deeds. These sophists unjustly accuse us of failing to prompt good works since our approach differs from theirs. Yet, God seeks heartfelt devotion rather than constrained service – He esteems sacrifices emanating from a sincere will and discourages offerings rendered out of compulsion or sadness (2 Corinthians 9:7).

It is not my intention to reject or disdain the method employed by Scripture to rouse our slothfulness; it employs the prospect of rewards, distributed by God according to our deeds. Nevertheless, I refute the notion that this is the sole method of exhortation, let alone the principal one. Additionally, I dispute the necessity of commencing with this approach. Ultimately, this method does not endorse merits in the manner our opponents advocate, a notion we will explore further. Moreover, this approach will yield no fruit unless the fundamental truth is established: our justification rests solely on Christ's merit, which we participate in through faith, not the merit of our works. For none are inclined to live righteously until they have received and internalized this truth. The prophet adeptly illustrates this, affirming that reverence for God stems from knowledge of His mercy – the very foundation of genuine reverence (Psalm 130:4).

Accusing us of encouraging sin by preaching the free forgiveness of sins – the cornerstone of righteousness – is a frivolous and baseless slander. Our stance imbues this remission with such profound significance that no personal merit can compensate for it. It is invaluable, yet free to us due to Christ's unparalleled sacrifice, a sacrifice wrought by His precious and holy blood, the sole means by which God's judgment could be appeased. In espousing this teaching, we caution individuals that they are not to blame if this sacred blood

is not shed whenever they stumble into sin. We warn them that only this fountain can cleanse the filth of sin, and they must shun the illusion that good works alone suffice for purification. A faithful soul, echoing Solomon's words, exclaims, "I have washed my feet; how can I soil them?" (Song of Solomon 5:3).

It is now clear who diminishes the worth of the remission of sins and undermines righteousness. Our adversaries suggest that God can be appeased by trivial satisfactions, essentially filth and refuse. Contrary to this, we assert that the offense of sin is grave, far beyond the reach of paltry gestures. The severity of God's wrath demands more than mere trifles for remission. Hence, this privilege rests solely with the precious blood of Christ. They claim that righteousness can be regained by acts of satisfaction. We, on the other hand, contend that its value is far too great to be regained with such ease; true restoration comes only through the refuge of God's boundless mercy. The topic of sin remission has been extensively covered in the preceding chapter.

Let us now address the other arguments wielded by Satan's agents to tarnish or weaken justification by faith. It seems that they can no longer accuse us of opposing good works, for we affirm that works do not justify. Our intent is not to discourage virtuous actions or undervalue them, but rather to emphasize that salvation should not be attributed to works. Our assurance, our exaltation, and the solitary gateway to our salvation rest in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who grants us the status of God's children and heirs of the celestial realm. This is not by our merit, but by the benevolence of God. While they continue their onslaught with other arguments, let us repel their assaults.

Firstly, they present the legal promises that God made to those who abide by His law. They inquire whether these promises should be deemed ineffectual or productive. Declaring them futile would be unreasonable; hence, they assume they must bear some significance. From this, they deduce that justification cannot hinge on faith alone, citing instances such as: "If you listen to my commandments and keep them in order to observe them, the Lord will uphold His covenant with you as He swore to your ancestors, and He will love you, multiply you, and bless you" (Deuteronomy 7:12-13). Similarly, they refer to Jeremiah: "If you walk in accordance with my ways, without turning to foreign gods, and do what is right and just, and refrain from evil, I will stay with you" (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

I shall not enumerate myriad similar verses, as they can be addressed with a single resolution, considering their congruity. The essence is that Moses affirms that "blessing and curse, life and death are set before us in the law" (Deuteronomy 11:26).

Their contention is that either we must render these blessings passive and void, or we must acknowledge that justification does not hinge on faith alone. Our response clarifies that if one remains under the law and is barred from every blessing, the curse, which encompasses all transgressors, befalls them. God promises only to those who impeccably observe His law, an unattainable feat for anyone on earth. Thus, the law binds humanity to God's curse and wrath. Liberation necessitates breaking free from the law's grip, embracing a spiritual liberty. This is not the carnal freedom that leads to disobedience, debauchery, and unrestrained indulgence, but a spiritual freedom that comforts and uplifts troubled souls. This freedom reassures us that the curse and condemnation, which the law imposed, are annulled. By embracing faith, we grasp God's

mercy in Christ, providing certitude of sin's remission, freeing our conscience from the law's agonizing grip.

Hence, the law's promises would be futile without the gospel's solace, for fulfilling God's will, on which the promises depend, remains unachievable. When God extends assistance, it is not by enhancing our righteousness through kindness to bridge the gap in our works. Instead, He appoints His Christ as the sole agent for fulfilling righteousness. The apostle affirms that he and other Jews know that one cannot be justified by the law, hence they place their faith in Jesus Christ. Yet, the intent is not to be aided by faith in Christ for perfect righteousness but to be justified without works of the law (Galatians 2:15-16). Departing from the law to find righteousness in faith implies relinquishing the righteousness of works.

Thus, they may elaborate on the rewards proclaimed by the law for its observers, but they must acknowledge our depravity prevents us from reaping benefits until we obtain a distinct righteousness. Hence, David, after extolling the recompense that awaits God's servants, swiftly turns to acknowledge sins that render the reward null (Psalm 19:11-12). David aptly illustrates the potential bestowed by the law and the obstacles that preclude us from enjoying rewards. Similarly, after proclaiming that God's ways are good and true for those who fear Him, David adds, "Because of your name, Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great" (Psalm 25:11). We must understand that God's benevolence is revealed in the law, attainable through works; however, through works, we will never secure it.

"So, does this mean the legal promises are bestowed in vain, destined to fade?" I have already attested that I do not believe so. My assertion is that these promises do not reach us when linked to the merit of works. Hence, they are, in a way, annulled. The apostle

argues that the wonderful promise that God endowed us with beneficial precepts yielding life to the obedient (Romans 10:5; Galatians 3:12) is ineffectual if considered in isolation. The promise loses its significance, as it demands something that not even God's holiest servants can fulfill. Gospel promises, on the other hand, do not merely render us pleasing to God; they also transform our works into something pleasing to Him. Not only does God accept our offerings, but He also blesses them, honoring the commitment that these works reflect and acknowledging the blessings that should have been bestowed for complete obedience to His law.

Let us now consider the depths of understanding the recompense promised in the law to those who uphold righteousness and holiness. This recompense, bestowed upon the faithful's works, requires discerning the causes that render these works pleasing. Three causes contribute to this. Firstly, the Lord, setting aside the often shameful and seldom praiseworthy works of His servants, envelops and embraces them in His Christ. Through faith alone, devoid of reliance on works, He reconciles them unto Himself. Secondly, His benevolence and paternal munificence bestow a measure of value and regard upon their works, irrespective of their worthiness. Thirdly, He accepts these works in His mercy, overlooking their inherent imperfections. These works, tainted and blemished, would be deemed more vices than virtues. Hence, the sophists at Sorbonne err in asserting that by the kindness of God, works are not deemed worthy of meriting salvation due to their internal goodness. Yet, they overlook the essential requirement of free righteousness, founded on faith alone, preceding these works. Moreover, the forgiveness of sins is necessary to cleanse the works from their imperfections. Thus, these sophists acknowledge only one of the three pivotal causes that render the faithful's works acceptable to God, disregarding the principal factors.

They reference a verse from the Acts of the Apostles, where St. Peter's words, as recorded by St. Luke, resonate: "I now realize that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). From these words, they attempt to establish their argument: if one garners God's favor through good works, salvation results not from God's grace alone, but from divine mercy extended through a person's virtuous actions. However, harmonizing various scriptural verses necessitates contemplating a dual acceptance of individuals in God's presence. People, in their natural state, possess nothing compelling God to extend mercy except their sheer wretchedness. Considering that individuals, initially received by God, are devoid of virtue and laden with evil, it becomes difficult to assert that they merit God's call through any virtue. Thus, the notion of merit must be discarded, as the Lord's unfettered mercy is abundantly evident.

The same passage features Cornelius, and these sophists erroneously misinterpret his prayers and alms as indications that good works prepare one to receive God's grace. Cornelius, already enlightened by true wisdom, the fear of God, and sanctified by the Spirit of wisdom and righteousness, could not have paved the way to receiving grace through personal endeavor. His virtues stemmed entirely from God's mercy, demonstrating the inapplicability of personal efforts in preparing for grace. Scriptural verses invariably align with this truth: God receives individuals into His love not because they possess qualities that incline Him to mercy, but rather as He perceives their helplessness without His intervention. Consequently, the Lord extends mercy to save them from perdition.

This acceptance does not arise from human righteousness, but it is an unequivocal testament to God's compassion towards sinful and undeserving souls. Having rescued them from the brink of perdition,

God sanctifies them through adoption and reforms them into new beings, endowing them with the Holy Spirit's gifts. This very acceptance is the essence of St. Peter's words. Post their divine calling, the faithful find favor in God's eyes, even in their works. This favor, however, stems not from God's love for their works but from God's love for them. These works result from God's selection of honorable instruments, which He then adorns with true purity. The works gain the status of goodness as God, the benevolent Father, pardons their stains and blemishes.

In summation, St. Peter conveys that God cherishes His children in whom His image is reflected. Our previous discussions elucidated how our regeneration restores His image in us. As God loves and honors His image wherever it appears, the righteous and holy life of the faithful holds significance. Nonetheless, since the faithful continue to battle their sinful nature while dwelling in their mortal bodies, and their works are far from perfection, God's favor extends not to them or their works but to Christ. Thus, God's acceptance finds its roots in Christ rather than in human efforts.

In contemplating these verses, we must dig into their essence. Moses, addressing the Israelites, reveals, "The Lord your God keeps His covenant with a thousand generations and His mercy to those who love Him and keep His commandments" (Deut. 7:9). This passage became a familiar refrain among the people, echoing in Solomon's solemn prayer: "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way" (1 Kings 8:23). Nehemiah's prayer echoes a similar sentiment (Neh. 1:5). It's imperative to discern the distinction between such expressions and legal promises. While the law encompasses numerous promises, not all align with the core teachings of the

gospel. These promises primarily address retribution and reward contingent upon compliance. Yet, when it's mentioned that the Lord honors His promise of mercy to those who love Him, it underscores the character of God's servants who, having internalized the covenant, reflect its spirit. The intention is to highlight this reflection and not to elucidate God's motives for favor. It's essential to remember that God's promises of mercy, detailed in scripture, guide us toward reverent love and honor of Him. Whenever scripture alludes to God rewarding those who uphold His law, it underscores the ongoing identification of God's children through the indelible mark they bear.

Let us reflect on the premise that God has embraced us as His children, beckoning us to honor Him as our Father. To retain this adoption's rights, we must strive to embody the path our calling charts. Simultaneously, we must be resolute in acknowledging that the fulfillment of God's mercy isn't contingent upon the faithful's works. Instead, the Lord realizes the promise of salvation through those who answer their calling with upright living. Furthermore, the Lord identifies the authentic traits of His children through the graces bestowed by His Spirit. It's reminiscent of Psalm 15, where the citizens of Jerusalem are addressed: "Who may live on your holy mountain? The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous" (Ps. 15:1-2). Similarly, Isaiah poses: "Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning? The one who walks righteously and speaks what is right" (Isa. 33:14-15). Yet, these verses don't delineate the foundation that firmly anchors the faithful before God. Instead, they illuminate the manner in which God calls them into communion and perpetuates their place therein. Rejecting sin and embracing righteousness, God sanctifies individuals through His Spirit, reshaping them to reflect His own nature. Thus, the entryway into God's kingdom hinges on

His mercy and preservation. The approach, however, looks into regeneration and its fruits, as depicted in this Psalm and similar passages.

Resolving passages that ascribe the name of righteousness to good works and declare a person justified by them proves to be a more complex endeavor. Instances abound where God's commandments are referred to as justifications and righteousness. Moses, for instance, asserts, "Our righteousness will be if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the Lord our God" (Deut. 6:25). If one were to argue that this is a legal promise with an insurmountable condition, similar passages cannot be dismissed, such as Moses' assertion: "It shall be accounted to you for righteousness if you restore the pledge to its owner" (Deut. 24:13). The prophet, too, ascribes righteousness to Phinehas for his zealous actions (Ps. 106:30-31). Hence, our contemporaneous Pharisees may be prompted to challenge us. When we assert that righteousness of faith demands the renunciation of righteousness from works, they counter that if righteousness comes through works, the doctrine of justification by faith alone loses credibility.

Our response unveils a noteworthy truth: it's not astonishing that the commandments of the law are termed righteousness, as they indeed epitomize righteousness. We mustn't detract from the law the inherent perfection it encapsulates. While we, as debtors, remain unprofitable even if we fulfill the law's requirements, the law's attribute of righteousness remains intact. Though perfect righteousness resides within the law, it remains beyond our grasp. Yet, because God has honored the law with the title of righteousness and the commandments exemplify righteousness, it's not our prerogative to retract this recognition. We willingly acknowledge that obedience to the law denotes righteousness, and each command's

observance constitutes an element of righteousness. However, we vehemently contend that such righteousness cannot be found anywhere in the world. Consequently, we do not negate the law's righteousness due to its inadequacy, but rather due to the weakness of our flesh, its attainment remains elusive.

In navigating these verses, it's essential to address certain questions. An inquirer might contend that scripture, not only dubs God's precepts righteousness but also bestows the same term upon the faithful's works. An instance is seen when the narrative recounts that Zachariah and his wife adhered to all the righteousness of the Lord (Luke 1:6). In response, we ascertain that scripture assesses works through the lens of the law's nature, rather than the works' inherent state. It is indeed accurate that the Lord, via the law, delineates righteousness. However, this righteousness finds expression only when the entirety of the law is observed, for every transgression tarnishes it. Thus, from the law's perspective, each commandment is righteous. From a human vantage, however, individuals cannot lay claim to righteousness for adhering to one commandment while violating others, especially considering that obedience is tinged with imperfection. When the works of the saints are dubbed righteousness, it isn't due to their merit but because they aspire toward the perfect righteousness commanded by God. Yet, such perfection eludes humankind universally, leading us to conclude that a good work, in itself, doesn't warrant the label of righteousness.

Turning to the second type of scripture testimony—the crux of the matter—St. Paul wields an unwavering argument when he cites Moses: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3, 22; Gal. 3:6). Moreover, Phinehas' zeal is attributed as righteousness (Ps. 106:30-31), which St. Paul contends is rooted in faith. This correlation sparks a

dilemma: is righteousness attained through faith, works, or both? Our adversaries seize this as an opportunity to assert that, while faith is integral, righteousness isn't achieved solely through faith. Instead, faith must be supplemented with works to consummate righteousness. To those who reverence God, I earnestly implore a contemplative examination. As scripture serves as the sole yardstick for righteousness, it's imperative to reconcile its various expressions without ambiguity. St. Paul asserts with conviction that the righteousness of faith is a refuge for those bereft of their own righteousness. Consequently, whoever is justified by faith is exempt from the righteousness of works (Rom. 3:28; 4:6; Gal. 3:11). Conversely, recognizing the universality of the righteousness of faith among God's servants, he confidently concludes that no one is justified by works but by faith alone.

However, a distinction must be made between assessing the value of works per se and comprehending their significance after the establishment of the righteousness of faith. When evaluating works based on their inherent worth, we declare that they fail to merit standing before God's presence. Hence, none possess a claim to glory before God based on works. Consequently, everyone, devoid of works' assistance, is justified by faith alone. Our contention is that this righteousness emerges when a sinner, embraced in Christ's fellowship, experiences reconciliation through God's grace. Thus, the sinner, purified by Christ's blood, secures forgiveness and, enveloped in Christ's righteousness, stands unshaken before the judgment throne. Subsequent to the remission of sins, the valuation of works shifts from their merit. Christ's perfection conceals their imperfection; His purity cleanses their stains. The guilt of transgressions that once hindered righteous endeavors is vanquished. Hence, after eradicating the guilt, works assume a new

dimension, their impurity disregarded, and they are imputed as righteousness.

If anyone employs this discourse to impugn the righteousness of faith, I would pose a query: should a person be deemed righteous for a mere few works, while transgressing the law in countless other instances? This proposition is implausible. Furthermore, if a person's righteousness is ascribed to numerous works, should this person be found guilty in any respect, even for a solitary aspect? My opponent would hesitate to endorse this premise, as it's at odds with the verdict that those who fail to fulfill all precepts are cursed. Thus, I would further inquire whether a single work can be devoid of impurity or imperfection. How can a person's works remain untarnished before the eyes of God, who views the stars as imperfect and the angels as unrighteous? Thus, the responder is compelled to acknowledge that works harbor impurity, both from transgressions in other realms and their inherent imperfections. Consequently, they cannot merit the appellation of righteousness. The assertion that good works, half-virtuous, tainted, and unworthy in God's sight, are imputed as righteousness serves to undermine the doctrine of faith's righteousness, which produces and substantiates works' righteousness. This predicament resembles the creation of serpents that slay their own mother. Alas, our adversaries traverse this path, as they acknowledge the indispensability of justification by faith as the bedrock, origin, cause, substance, and essence of works' righteousness. Yet, they draw the unfounded conclusion that faith doesn't render justification, since good works are also imputed as righteousness.

Let us transcend these intricacies and instead acknowledge the truth: all righteousness inherent in works originates from and hinges upon justification by faith. Consequently, faith's righteousness isn't

diminished by works' righteousness; rather, the latter amplifies the former, revealing its potency. Furthermore, let us not misconstrue the aftermath of free justification, assuming that works ascend to the threshold of justifying a person, or even partially, in tandem with faith. If faith's righteousness ever wanes, the blemishes of works are laid bare, leading to condemnation. Embrace the notion that a person is justified by faith to a degree where both the individual and their works are regarded as righteous, not by merit, but by faith's imputation. Hence, St. Paul invokes David's proclamation: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them" (Ps. 32:1-2).

If someone seeks to marshal countless testimonies that seemingly extol blessedness within our works, as seen in passages like "Blessed is the one who fears God" (Psalm 113:1), "who shows compassion to the afflicted" (Proverbs 14:21), "who avoids the counsel of the wicked" (Psalm 1:1), "who withstands trials" (James 1:12), "who upholds righteousness and justice" (Psalm 106:3, 119:1), "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3), let it be known that these do not render St. Paul's assertions void. It is imperative to recognize that these virtues, though recounted, rarely exist in their entirety within an individual, making them insufficient for divine acceptance. Hence, one remains wretched until delivered from misery through the forgiveness of sins. As the diverse forms of blessedness enumerated in scripture perish without yielding their fruits, except one obtains blessedness through the remission of sins—serving as the bedrock for other blessings—it follows that this gratuitous blessedness is paramount, sovereign, and unique. Unless we desire to dismantle and obliterate it through blessings that solely rest upon it, let us safeguard its sanctity.

It isn't unwarranted for the faithful to be designated as "righteous" in scripture. Admittedly, this title is accorded due to their virtuous lives. Yet, since they earnestly pursue righteousness rather than achieve it, it is reasonable that this righteousness of works, in its limited capacity, remains subordinate to the righteousness of faith upon which it is founded and from which it derives its essence.

Our detractors press on, asserting that St. James blatantly contradicts our stance, creating a perceived impasse. He contends that Abraham's righteousness was realized through works, and further, that all of us are justified by works, not faith alone (James 2:21). To address this, it is prudent to investigate whether they intend to pit St. James against St. Paul. If they recognize St. James as an emissary of Christ, his pronouncements should harmonize with the voice of Christ speaking through St. Paul. The Holy Spirit, channeled through St. Paul, attests that Abraham attained righteousness through faith, not works. Likewise, the Spirit decrees that justification is achieved apart from works of the law. Concurrently, the Spirit speaks through St. James, asserting that our righteousness is firmly anchored in works, not solely faith. Assuredly, the Spirit cannot contradict itself. How, then, can these statements reconcile? Our adversaries thrive if they can dismantle justification by faith, a doctrine rooted deep within the heart. Yet, their pursuits show scant regard for solace in consciences. Note how they strive to erode the righteousness of faith, while offering no definitive compass for consciences. They may celebrate their triumph, but it's a victory that strips all assurance of righteousness. Though they attain this dismal victory, extinguishing the light of truth, they shall not prosper where God's truth stands steadfast.

Hence, I refute the notion that St. James' oft-quoted assertion supports their position. To untangle this, we must discern St. James'

intention and unveil our adversaries' self-deception. At that time, a sect emerged in the church—a recurring evil—displaying unbelief through disdain for faithful practices, all while masking their debauched lives under the veneer of "faith." St. James ridicules this folly. His objective is not to undermine authentic faith but to deride those who, exulting in a superficial semblance of faith, lead lives of licentiousness. This context highlights the shallowness of their "faith" and exposes its divergence from true faith. St. James uses the term "faith" to denote a superficial conviction, distinctly different from authentic faith. This is evident from his opening statement: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?" (James 2:14). He doesn't say "faith without deeds," but rather "claims to have faith." Moreover, he derides this counterfeit faith as inferior to even demonic knowledge, labeling it "dead" (James 2:17, 19, 26). This definition aligns with his assertion: "You believe that there is one God" (James 2:19). Certainly, if this faith boils down to mere belief in God's existence, its inability to justify is unsurprising. However, this doesn't undermine true Christian faith, which fundamentally diverges. True faith doesn't justify by spawning comprehension of divinity; rather, it justifies by uniting us with Jesus Christ, allowing us to partake in His righteousness. Authentic faith's potency rests in nurturing an unwavering certainty in God's mercy.

To grasp the essence, let us unearth the second fallacy. St. James appears to attribute a portion of our righteousness to works. However, for consistency with scripture and St. James' own words, we must interpret "justify" differently than how St. Paul employs it. St. Paul deems someone justified when their unrighteousness is pardoned, rendering them righteous. St. James' employment of this term calls for distinct interpretation. If St. James were referring to this definition, his citation of Moses' testimony regarding Abraham's

faith would be misplaced. St. James maintains that Abraham's righteousness was secured through works—specifically, his willingness to offer Isaac. Yet, this obedience occurred long after Abraham's initial justification by faith. Abraham's justification predates the birth of Ishmael and even Isaac. How, then, can obedience, manifested much later, claim credit for a righteousness that precedes it? St. James does not imply a reversal of order, and such a notion is inadmissible. Hence, when St. James speaks of Abraham being justified, he does not imply that Abraham merited righteousness. Instead, he underscores that those already justified by faith validate their righteousness through obedience and good deeds, rather than through a hollow façade of faith.

In essence, St. James does not dispute the means of justification; rather, he demands righteousness in the faithful that manifests through works. Just as St. Paul asserts that a person is justified apart from works, St. James contends that one who claims righteousness should not lack good deeds. Embracing this insight shall guide us beyond stumbling blocks. Our adversaries falter, chiefly due to their misinterpretation of St. James. They err in assuming he delineates the method of justification, when his true aim is to dismantle the baseless confidence of those who, under the pretense of faith, evade righteous living. Therefore, however they distort St. James' words, they inexorably extract two lessons: a superficial faith does not justify, and the genuine believer, not content with mere semblance, manifests righteousness through virtuous acts.

Similarly, their reliance on St. Paul's words in this context offers no respite. Consider his assertion that "those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (Romans 2:13). Avoiding evasion as proposed by St. Ambrose, which posits that law fulfillment implies faith in Christ, is more prudent. A direct path suffices. St. Paul assails the

pride of Jews who glorified in knowing the law while disregarding its observance. To admonish their vain conceit, he emphasizes that righteousness sought through the law necessitates adherence, not mere understanding. Of course, the righteousness of the law resides in virtuous deeds. Moreover, the pinnacle of righteousness lies in unwavering holiness and innocence.

However, their argument is yet to prove that we are justified by works unless one can proffer an individual who flawlessly fulfills the law. St. Paul's sequence of thought substantiates this claim. Condemning both Jews and Gentiles for unrighteousness, he addresses the former's trust in the law despite its neglect. He instructs that if righteousness is sought within the law, it must be grounded in deeds, not mere comprehension. Effectively, he challenges them to go beyond knowing and exhibit the works that substantiate the law's purpose. Regrettably, all fall short, stripping them of their self-proclaimed glory. Thus, an argument opposing the interpretation offered by our opponents emerges. Our assertion: the righteousness of the law, grounded in the perfection of good deeds—unattainable by anyone—is unattainable among humanity.

Another argument advanced by our detractors pertains to passages where the faithful unreservedly present their righteousness to God for assessment, yearning to receive their verdict based on their righteousness. For instance, David implores: "Judge me, Lord, according to my righteousness, and according to the innocence that is in me" (Psalm 7:9). Additionally: "Examine me, Lord, and prove me; test my heart and my mind. For Your lovingkindness is before my eyes, and I have walked in Your truth" (Psalm 26:2-3). And further: "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from

my God" (Psalm 18:20-21), among others. Moreover: "Judge me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity. I have also trusted in the Lord; I shall not slip" (Psalm 26:1).

I have previously discussed the faithful's seemingly innocent confidence in their works. These passages, considered within their context, should not pose great hindrance. Two distinct circumstances shape these prayers. The faithful seek not an all-encompassing evaluation of their lives to warrant absolution or condemnation; rather, they present specific instances for God's judgement. Furthermore, they attribute to their actions not righteousness as defined by God's perfection, but rather relative righteousness in comparison to the malevolence of their adversaries. Thus, these passages, when analyzed, shall not impede our understanding.

In these prayers, the saints petition God's judgement, not to assert their purity and innocence devoid of sin or to claim moral impeccability. Instead, grounded in trust in God's goodness and His role as defender of the vulnerable against injustice, they lay before Him a specific matter for judgement—a cause wherein they, though innocent, face affliction. Furthermore, as they stand before God's throne alongside their adversaries, they do not assert an innocence equivalent to His purity under meticulous scrutiny. Rather, recognizing that their sincerity and righteousness outshine the malice and deceit of their adversaries, they invoke God to adjudicate between them and the wicked. Thus, when David implores Saul, "May the Lord reward each man for his righteousness and his faithfulness" (1 Samuel 26:23), he doesn't mean God should examine each individually and mete out rewards according to merit. Instead, he protests his innocence relative to Saul's wickedness. Similarly, when St. Paul boasts of his conscience being clear and faithful conduct (2 Corinthians 1:12), he doesn't rest his case before God's

judgement on this basis. Instead, confronted by slanderous accusations, he defends his integrity against their malevolent discourse, for God's judgement transcends human perception.

Here we explore the sacred truth that, despite invoking God as witness and judge against the wickedness of hypocrites, the faithful, when standing before God alone, unite their voices in one solemn plea: "Lord, do not enter into judgment with Your servants, for no one living is righteous before Your presence" (Psalm 143:2). In embracing humility, they acknowledge that their works are insufficient. In earnest confession, they profess that His benevolence surpasses all life itself (Psalm 63:3).

Yet other verses akin to these raise concerns for some. Solomon declares that "he who walks in integrity walks securely, but he who perverts his ways will become known" (Proverbs 10:9). Likewise, he asserts, "In the way of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death" (Proverbs 12:28). Similarly, Ezekiel proclaims, "But when a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice and does the same abominations that the wicked person does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, for them he shall die" (Ezekiel 18:24). In our response, we do not intend to deny, hide, or obscure these truths. Yet, let one person step forth with such unwavering integrity! Should none be found who embodies this, two options remain: all must face God's judgement, or they must take refuge in His boundless mercy. In the interim, let it be known that the imperfect integrity of the faithful serves as a stepping stone towards eternal glory. Whence does this integrity arise, if not from the fact that, upon entering a covenant of grace, the Lord does not meticulously scrutinize works based on merit? Instead, He mercifully receives them, even though

unworthy. Not merely adhering to the scholastic notion that works derive value from God's acceptance, we assert that all works—stained by their own transgressions—derive worth solely because our Lord pardons them and wipes away their blemishes through His free righteousness.

These reflections render irrelevant the prayers occasionally found in St. Paul's writings, wherein he envisions an ideal perfection for the faithful, where they stand unblemished before the Lord's judgement (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 3:13). These very passages were employed by the Celestines, misguided in their early heretical beliefs, to argue that perfect righteousness can be attained in this mortal life. Following the wisdom of St. Augustine, we respond with prudence: though all the faithful should aspire to manifest purity before God, the most favorable and perfect state attainable in this life is a journey of daily progress. Purity is fully realized when, after shedding our sinful flesh, we are wholly united with our God.

Turning now to passages declaring God's recompense based on deeds, let us explore: "For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay each person according to what he has done" (Matthew 16:27). Also, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Corinthians 5:10). Moreover, "There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek" (Romans 2:9-10). Further, "And those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29). Also, "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from

the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34), and so on. To these, we add passages where eternal life is referred to as wages, as exemplified in "Disaster pursues sinners, but the righteous are rewarded with good" (Proverbs 13:21) and "Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself, but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded" (Proverbs 13:13). Similarly, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:12), and "For each one will be repaid according to his works" (Luke 6:23).

It is crucial to not misinterpret the term "wages" as making our deeds the cause of salvation. Firmly, we must grasp that the kingdom of heaven is not wages for servants, but the inheritance of children—those whom God has embraced as His own (Ephesians 1:5, 18). This inheritance isn't bestowed for any reason beyond adoption, a truth underscored in "But the son of the slave woman will not share the inheritance with the son of the free woman" (Galatians 4:30). Indeed, within the very passages promising eternal life as a wage for deeds, the Holy Spirit refers to it as an "inheritance," signifying its divine origin. Thus, while Christ enumerates the deeds He intends to reward when inviting His chosen ones to the heavenly kingdom, He simultaneously emphasizes their rightful inheritance (Matthew 25:34). Similarly, St. Paul encourages faithful servants to anticipate rewards from the Lord, but swiftly appends "the reward of inheritance" (Colossians 3:24).

We find Christ and His apostles meticulously guiding us away from attributing eternal blessedness to mere works, instead directing our hearts towards God's embracing adoption. A question may arise: "Why then do they speak of works in a similar context?" The answer lies within a single scriptural illustration. Before Isaac's birth, Abraham was promised a lineage that would bless all nations, with

descendants as countless as stars and sands (Genesis 15:4-5; 17:4ff). Much later, God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's obedient response led to this renewed promise: "By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Genesis 22:16-18). Consider this: Did Abraham earn this blessing through obedience, the very blessing previously promised before the command was issued?

Within these words, we find clarity and certainty. God rewards the works of the faithful with blessings He had already bestowed upon them prior to their actions, without needing any reason other than His boundless mercy. This is not deception or artifice; rather, it signifies that He willingly bestows upon works what He had already granted freely, irrespective of works. Why? God desires us to engage in good works, meditating on His promises, and through these works, draw closer to the blessed hope He has set before us in heaven. Thus, it is fitting that the fruit of His promises is bestowed upon these works—tools that guide us toward the fulfillment of hope. The Apostle succinctly expresses this when he commends the Colossians for nurturing love in anticipation of the hope stored up in heaven—a hope deeply rooted in Christ, not in works. Thus, their life's journey is a constant pursuit of this hope.

So that we do not perceive the rewards God promises as contingent on merit, He imparts a parable likening Himself to the master of a household who sends laborers into his vineyard at different hours—some early, some later. Yet, when evening falls, He compensates all

with equal wages (Matthew 20:1-16). The exposition of this parable by the early church doctor, St. Ambrose, succinctly captures its essence. "Through this parable," he says, "the Lord illustrates that the calling of all the faithful, though externally diverse, springs solely from His grace. Those who have worked only an hour represent those whom God, desiring to magnify the excellence of His grace, calls in the twilight of their lives, rewarding them according to His mercy—not for their labor, but showering them with the riches of His kindness. Just as He elected them without regard for works, those who toiled longer come to realize that their reward springs entirely from His grace, not as payment for their labor."

Hence, let us dismiss the notion that the rewards promised by the Holy Spirit hinge upon works' merits. Scripture offers no ground for us to elevate ourselves before God. Instead, it humbles us, curbs our pride, and crushes our self-importance. These promises serve to uplift our frailty, offering solace and support to our feeble spirits. Reflect, for a moment, on the formidable task of renouncing all beloved things and even ourselves—a challenge presented to us by Christ as His foremost lesson to His disciples. He maintains this discipline throughout their lives, ensuring their hearts remain detached from worldly desires or misplaced confidence in earthly treasures. He surrounds them in such a manner that, no matter which direction they turn, the bounds of this world yield nothing but despair. St. Paul thus asserts, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). Amid such trials, the Lord extends His hand, urging us to lift our heads and gaze upon the distant horizon. He pledges that our elusive happiness, hidden in this world, can be found in Him.

He terms it "wages," "salary," and "recompense," not to gauge works' merit, but to signal that it compensates for earthly suffering,

tribulation, and scorn. Therefore, it is apt to deem eternal life as "recompense," reflecting the Lord's shift of His servants from toil to rest, from affliction to comfort, from sorrow to joy, from want to abundance, from disgrace to glory. Ultimately, He transforms every adversity the faithful endure into immeasurable good. Additionally, recognizing holiness as the pathway—not the portal—into heavenly glory is suitable. It is through this way that God leads His chosen ones into the revelation of glory, for He takes delight in glorifying those He has sanctified (Romans 8:30).

Let us not harbor delusions of any correlation between merit and recompense. Those entangled in sophistry deceive themselves by neglecting the illuminated path we have elucidated. How absurd to divert our gaze from the destination God beckons us towards! It couldn't be clearer: wages are pledged to good works, not to swell our hearts with pride, but to fortify our frail flesh. To infer works' merit from this promise is to stray from the true path. Thus, when Scripture states that God, the just Judge, bestows the crown of righteousness upon His servants (2 Timothy 4:8), we respond not only echoing St. Augustine: "How could He, as a just Judge, grant a crown, unless He had already, as a merciful Father, bestowed grace? How could righteousness exist without preceding grace, which justifies the unrighteous? How could this crown be bestowed upon us if it were not a gift unowed, granted without expectation?" Indeed, we supplement St. Augustine's words with a poignant addendum: "How could He credit righteousness to our deeds without, through His benevolence, obscuring the inherent unrighteousness within them? How could He deem them worthy of reward unless, by His boundless goodness, He erases what merits punishment?" This augmentation emerges as St. Augustine was accustomed to term eternal life "grace," granted through God's free bestowal even when dispensed due to our works. Yet, Scripture's humility transcends this.

Not only does it caution us against boasting in our works—gifts freely granted by God—but it also underscores their perpetual blemishes, rendering them incapable of pleasing God when assessed against His exacting standards.

We encounter passages akin to the ones previously expounded. "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9). And, "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:17-19). Here, good works are likened to riches, foreshadowing their role in our future blessedness.

In response, we must consider these verses with an eye toward the destination the Holy Spirit envisions. If Christ's assertion holds true—that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21; Luke 12:34)—as the children of this age diligently gather earthly joys, it follows that the faithful, recognizing the fleeting nature of this life, should dispatch their desired possessions to the realm where eternity dwells. Mimicking those who leave one land to settle in another forever, we ought to ship our treasures ahead, willingly forgoing them for a brief span, rejoicing in the knowledge that their abundance will await us in the place where our journey culminates.

If we accept heaven as our homeland, the place where we truly belong, it is prudent to convey our treasures there rather than hoard them here only to abandon them upon our sudden departure. How

then do we ferry these riches? Through sharing and addressing the needs of the less fortunate. Whatever we selflessly bestow upon them, the Lord recognizes as gifts given to Him (Matthew 25:40). This yields the splendid promise: "Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his deed" (Proverbs 19:17). And, "The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). Indeed, each act of love we extend to our brethren is akin to entrusting it to God's care. As He is a steadfast guardian, He will one day return to us with abundant interest. "How then," you may inquire, "can acts of love be held in such esteem by God, equating them to riches entrusted to Him?" One need not fear to express this, given that Scripture resoundingly attests to it. However, should someone attempt to distort God's kindness to justify the value of works, these testimonies will not fortify their erroneous stance. These passages only affirm that God's astounding benevolence and generosity towards us serve as potent incentives for us to pursue good deeds. In this, He pledges that no act of goodness shall go unnoticed, even though they all fall short not only of recompense but also of His acceptance.

Further scrutiny is aimed at the Apostle's words. While comforting the Thessalonians in their struggles, he mentions that these trials are meant to make them worthy of God's kingdom, the kingdom for which they are suffering. "This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven" (2 Thessalonians 1:5-7). This sentiment echoes in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for His name in serving the

saints, as you still do" (Hebrews 6:10). Understand that St. Paul's first passage is not indicating merit's worth, but rather affirming that just as the Heavenly Father chose us as His children, He desires that we be conformed to the image of His firstborn Son (Romans 8:29). Thus, just as Christ suffered before ascending to His intended glory, we too must traverse a path of tribulations to enter the heavenly kingdom. Enduring sufferings for Christ's sake marks us with the seal that distinguishes His flock. Therefore, we are deemed worthy of the kingdom of God because we bear the marks of Jesus Christ—indicia of God's children. The same message resonates: "We carry in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." This is the molding of our passion, enabling us to share in His resurrection. The subsequent remark—that God is just in afflicting enemies and granting rest to the afflicted—is not aimed at establishing the merit of works. Instead, it reinforces the hope of salvation, implying that God will balance the scales, vindicating the oppressed and comforting the weary.

Another passage underscores that God does not overlook good works, almost implying His unjustness should He forget them. Here, we must interpret this as a wake-up call to rouse us from our lethargy. The Lord provides us this hope to motivate us; however, like other promises, this too would yield nothing if not preceded by His mercy, upon which the bedrock of our salvation stands. Armed with this covenant, we can confidently anticipate God's response to our works. The Apostle asserts that God is just, implying that He will honor His promises to us. Thus, this divine justice pertains more to the veracity of His promises than to the equitable recompense we deserve. St. Augustine's words resonate as a cherished beacon, one he often echoed, destined to leave a lasting imprint on our memory: "The Lord," he proclaimed, "is trustworthy, having bound Himself not by taking from us, but by freely promising us everything."

Certain Pharisees wield these Pauline passages: "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). And, "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). Also, "And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:14). Seeking to support that we are justified by love over faith due to its perceived superiority, their claim falls to an easy refutation. We have already elaborated elsewhere that the first passage does not pertain to genuine faith in any form. While the second, referencing true faith, rightly ranks love as greater—not for its merit, but its fruitfulness and expansive nature, serving multiple purposes, enduring ceaselessly as faith's application proves temporary. If we evaluate superiority, God's love undeniably takes precedence, yet St. Paul isn't navigating a hierarchy here. Rather, his objective is mutual edification through love in God.

Imagine, if we dare, the notion that love holds absolute superiority over faith. However, in the realm of sound reasoning and tranquil judgment, who would contend that such superiority translates to greater justification? The essence of faith's justifying power does not hinge on any work's intrinsic worth. Our justification rests solely upon the divine mercy and Christ's merit. The reason faith is attributed with justifying lies in its capacity to apprehend the righteousness offered through Christ. If we inquire of our adversaries in what sense they attribute justifying power to love, their response materializes as follows: "For love is a virtue pleasing to God, and through its meritorious force (as it is welcomed by divine benevolence), righteousness is credited to us." Their argument, as we discern, lacks a coherent foundation. Our assertion maintains that faith justifies not through the merit of its worth, but as a conduit for obtaining Christ's righteousness. Their stance, in contrast, forsakes God's mercy and omits any mention of Christ, the very cornerstone

upon which righteousness stands. They contend that justification occurs through love's supremacy, a claim akin to asserting that a king is more adept at cobbling than a cobbler, solely due to his regal dignity. This argument alone serves to illuminate the gaping chasm that isolates all Sorbonne schools from comprehending the essence of justification through faith.

Should a dissenting voice object to my usage of "faith" in varied contexts within St. Paul's writings, arguing against the necessity of such distinct interpretations in the same passage, a compelling rationale underpins such an approach. As all the gifts enumerated by St. Paul in some manner find their common thread in faith and hope, given their roots in the knowledge of God, he synthesizes them under these twin concepts while summarizing the chapter. In essence, he signals that the prophetic gifts, languages, interpretations, and knowledge all serve the purpose of leading us to the knowledge of God. In this transient existence, our comprehension of God is contingent on faith and hope. Therefore, when St. Paul names faith and hope, he implicitly encompasses all these gifts. In other words, he signifies: "Prophecy, languages, interpretations, and knowledge all converge towards the same goal, which is knowing God. In our temporal existence, we exclusively fathom God through faith and hope. Thus, these three remain: faith, hope, and love—summoning the entirety of diverse gifts under these three categories, with love occupying a paramount role."

Their third contention derives from the assertion that if love embodies perfection, it should correspondingly signify righteousness, as righteousness is a form of perfection. Let us ponder this premise. Even if we were to concede that St. Paul labels the harmonious assembly of an ordered church's constituents as perfection, and that an individual achieves spiritual perfection before

God through love, what new revelation emerges? My retort persists: we never truly attain the perfection of embodying love, allowing me to extrapolate that the prospect of perfection remains elusive to humanity, for we collectively fall far short of embodying perfect love.

Elucidating all the testimonies cherry-picked haphazardly by contentious disputants to undermine our position would be an exhaustive endeavor. Indeed, some allegations are so preposterous that addressing them would render me equally absurd. Consequently, I shall conclude this discourse, following an exposition of a remark by Christ—one that seems to satiate the cantankerous Sorbonnists. It emerges when He responds to a legal scholar's query concerning the requisites for salvation: "If you would enter life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17). Our adversaries triumphantly invoke this verse, asserting that the very proclaimer of grace directs us to secure our place in the kingdom of God through adherence to the commandments. However, let us not be beguiled by this excerpt, for Christ consistently tailored His responses to suit the context of His audience.

In this instance, a legal scholar beseeches Christ about the means to attain eternal bliss, inquiring not merely out of curiosity, but with the deliberate intent to glean instructions for salvation. The speaker's disposition, coupled with the query itself, prompted Christ's particular response. This legal scholar, swayed by an unfounded belief in legal righteousness, was deluded by the confidence of his works. Consequently, he posed a question aimed solely at uncovering the works of righteousness required for salvation. Thus, it was apropos to direct him back to the law, which presents an impeccable mirror of righteousness. We, too, vociferously proclaim that should one seek righteousness through works, adherence to the commandments is essential—a doctrine every Christian must grasp.

Without understanding the stark contrast between our lives and God's righteousness manifest in the law, one cannot fully appreciate the refuge Christ offers, whereby salvation is restored.

To synthesize: when embarking on the quest for salvation through works, adherence to the commandments becomes imperative, instructing us in the ways of impeccable righteousness. However, we must not halt there lest we falter midway. None of us possesses the capacity to impeccably obey the commandments. Since we all fall short of the law's righteousness, we require an alternate sanctuary, a distinct form of aid—faith in Christ. Consequently, Jesus redirects the legal scholar, well aware of his baseless reliance on works, to the law—prompting the scholar to recognize his own sinful state, one subject to condemnation. At another juncture, Christ consoles those humbled by their acknowledgment of sinfulness, offering them solace through a promise of His grace, without invoking the law: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

As our adversaries exhaust their efforts in contorting Scripture, they seek victory through artful wordplay and futile sophistry. They resort to equivocation, contending that faith is itself a "work," thereby challenging our distinction between faith and works as distinct entities. This line of reasoning, however, crumbles when scrutinized closely. For faith, while indeed aligning with God's will, does not bestow righteousness upon us through its intrinsic merit. Rather, it instills within us a certitude of Christ's righteousness, extended to us through the unfettered benevolence of the Heavenly Father as elucidated in the Gospel. I see no necessity to engage in refuting such frivolities; their frailty is apparent and self-evident.

Yet, it behooves me to address an objection that, though seemingly grounded in reason, could perplex the uninitiated. They posit: "If opposing elements are judged by the same criterion, with every sin accounted as unrighteousness, it follows that every good deed should be regarded as righteousness." The explanations offered by those who assert that human damnation primarily stems from unbelief and not specific transgressions fail to satisfy me. Admittedly, I concede that unbelief constitutes the wellspring and root of all iniquity, serving as the inception of forsaking and essentially renouncing God, thereby paving the way for all violations of His divine will. Nonetheless, their notion of placing virtuous deeds and transgressions on an even plane to evaluate human righteousness or unrighteousness warrants my rebuttal.

The righteousness of works necessitates unwavering adherence to the entirety of God's law, exemplified through unblemished obedience. Thus, one cannot attain righteousness through works unless they traverse the path of God's law unswervingly throughout their life. The slightest deviation casts them into the abyss of unrighteousness. Evidently, righteousness does not dwell in meager good deeds, but in the thorough and impeccable observance of God's divine will.

In stark contrast, a distinct logic governs the judgment of wickedness. A single transgression, such as fornication or theft, propels an individual into the realm of culpability, bearing the weight of death for offending God's majesty. Herein lies the sophistry of our opponents, who neglect the wisdom imparted by St. James: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder'" (James 2:10–11). Therefore, our assertion should not seem untenable when we affirm that death serves as the rightful

wages for each sin, for each transgression invokes God's righteous wrath and retribution. Yet, it would be a fallacious argument to reverse this principle, contending that a solitary virtuous deed could merit God's grace, while multiple transgressions provoke His wrath.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Of the Similarities and Differences between the Old and New Covenants

I have, as earnestly as I could, elucidated the essence of Christian doctrine – a profound understanding of the Almighty and ourselves, the path to our salvation. Today, we shall augment our discourse with a vital concept, one crucial for substantiating the veracity of the teachings we have imparted. It is imperative to grasp that, since the dawn of creation, all individuals whom the Divine has beckoned into the fold of His congregation have been graced with this wisdom, and they have found union with the Almighty through the tenets of this wisdom.

Even though the evidential citations we have compiled from both the sacred scriptures and the words of prophets amply substantiate the indisputable fact that no other paradigm of sanctity and religious devotion has ever existed among the people of God, it is noteworthy that theologians of repute have at times engaged in protracted debates regarding the distinctions between the Old and New Testaments. Such protracted discussions could, regrettably, sow seeds of doubt in the minds of the simple-hearted. Therefore, I deemed it fitting to dedicate a discrete chapter to more deeply explore this matter. Furthermore, this undertaking, though inherently beneficial, has become an imperative, owing to the persistence of certain Anabaptist dissenters who regard the Israelites as naught but a herd of swine. These individuals erroneously believe that our Lord's intent was solely to satiate the earthly desires of the Israelites, akin to nourishing animals at a trough, without any prospect of celestial immortality. Thus, in order to lead all the devout

faithful away from this pernicious fallacy and, concurrently, to provide solace to the unlettered souls who grapple with the perplexities stemming from the apparent disparities between the Old and New Covenants, let us undertake a succinct examination of the commonalities and disparities that exist within the covenants the Lord established with the people of Israel prior to Christ's advent and the covenant He has woven with us since the manifestation of Christ in the flesh.

These two ideas can be condensed into one word: the covenant established with our forefathers shares such profound similarities with our own that one might argue it to be essentially the same, differing only in its timing. Yet, because a succinct statement like this might not fully convey the depth of this concept, let us explore it more comprehensively for our mutual edification.

To elucidate the resemblance, or more accurately, the unity of these covenants, we need not revisit every detail we've previously examined at length. Instead, let us focus on three key aspects. Firstly, we must recognize that the Lord did not offer the Jewish people a mere pursuit of earthly happiness or wealth as their ultimate goal. Instead, He enfolded them in the embrace of hope for eternal life, a promise revealed and reaffirmed through visions, His divine law, and the teachings of the prophets. Secondly, the covenant that bound them to God did not rest upon their merits but solely upon His boundless mercy. Thirdly, they possessed an awareness of Christ as the Mediator who united them with God and made them recipients of His promises.

The second aspect should be quite clear to us, as we have already substantiated it with numerous testimonies from the prophets, emphasizing that all the goodness the Lord bestowed upon His

people stemmed from His sheer benevolence and compassion. We have also touched upon the third aspect intermittently. However, the first aspect deserves more thorough exploration, considering its intricacies and the debates surrounding it. Nonetheless, our approach should be comprehensive enough that any deficiencies in elucidating the other two aspects will also be briefly addressed.

The apostle leaves no room for doubt concerning these three points when he affirms, "Long ago, the Lord promised the gospel of Jesus Christ through the prophets in His holy scripture, a gospel He has now unveiled at the appointed time" (Rom. 1:2). Additionally, he attests, "The righteousness that comes by faith, as expounded in the gospel, was foretold in the law and through the words of the prophets" (Rom. 3:21). The gospel does not confine our hearts to the enjoyment of present worldly pleasures; rather, it elevates our spirits toward the anticipation of eternal life. It redirects our affections away from earthly delights by illuminating the heavenly hope that awaits us. St. Paul, in another passage, reinforces this idea: "Since you believed the gospel, you were marked by the Holy Spirit, a pledge of our future inheritance" (Eph. 1:13), and "We have heard of your faith in Christ and your love for fellow believers, prompted by the hope laid up for you in heaven, a hope you heard about through the gospel message" (Col. 1:4–5). Furthermore, he emphasizes, "The Lord has summoned us through His gospel to partake in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 2:14). Hence, it is rightfully termed the doctrine of salvation, the divine power that saves all who believe, and the gateway to heaven. If the gospel is a spiritual teaching that grants us entry into an incorruptible life, we should not entertain the notion that those to whom the gospel was promised and preached squandered their lives in hedonistic pursuits, neglecting the welfare of their souls.

It is essential to avoid misconstruing that the promises of the gospel, originally given by God through His prophets, were exclusively intended for the people of the New Testament. Immediately following his assertion about the gospel promised in the law, the apostle adds that all that the law encompasses is primarily directed at those under its jurisdiction (Rom. 3:19). I acknowledge that this may appear as a distinct concept. However, the apostle was not forgetful, for when he declared that all the law encompasses pertains to the Jews, he undoubtedly took into account what he had previously stated regarding the gospel's promise within the law. In this passage, he vividly demonstrates that the Old Testament predominantly concerned itself with the afterlife, as the promises of the gospel were encapsulated within it. Hence, it logically follows that the Old Testament firmly rests upon God's unfettered mercy and finds its unwavering foundation in Christ. The gospel message harmoniously resounds with the conviction that sinful souls find justification through God's paternal mercy, unearned and undeserved. The entire essence of God's mercy is encapsulated in Jesus Christ. Therefore, who among us would dare to separate the Jewish people, with whom we know the covenant of the gospel was established, and of which Christ is the cornerstone? Who would dare to distance them from the hope of salvation freely offered, given that they too received the teachings of faith that bestow upon us the gift of righteousness?

To avoid a protracted debate on a matter that is quite evident, let us draw our attention to a significant statement made by our Lord Jesus: "Abraham," He proclaims, "eagerly anticipated and rejoiced in the day of My coming" (John 8:56). The apostle underscores that what was said about Abraham extends to all faithful believers, affirming that Christ is unchanging, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). This declaration pertains not only to Christ's eternal

divinity but also to the knowledge of His divine power, which has always been graciously bestowed upon the faithful. This truth is reflected in the songs of the Virgin Mary and Zachariah, who hail the salvation unveiled in Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham and the patriarchs (Luke 1:55, 72–73). If, in the revelation of Christ, God fulfilled His ancient promise, it is undeniable that the essence of the Old Testament finds its culmination in Christ and eternal life.

Furthermore, the apostle not only equates the people of Israel with us in the grace of the covenant but also in the significance of the sacraments. Seeking to caution the Corinthians by citing the example of the Jews and dissuading them from falling into the same transgressions that incurred God's severe judgment on the Jews, the apostle prefaces his admonition with this declaration: "We have no special privilege or worthiness that can shield us from God's judgment, which befell them" (1 Corinthians 10:1ff). Hence, our Lord not only bestowed upon them the same blessings He grants us but also manifested His grace among them through the same signs and sacraments. To illustrate, it is as if the apostle says: "You might presume that you are immune to danger due to the promises associated with your baptism and the Lord's Supper. However, as you disregard God's goodness, you engage in immoral behavior. Consider this: the Jews partook in the same sacraments, yet the Lord did not withhold His strict judgment from them. They were baptized as they passed through the Red Sea and were sheltered by the cloud from the scorching sun." Some who oppose this teaching argue that their baptism was earthly, akin to our spiritual baptism by analogy or likeness. However, even if we concede this point, the apostle's argument remains compelling. He aimed to dispel the misguided confidence of Christians who believed themselves superior to the Jews due to their baptism. Furthermore, what immediately follows

this statement leaves no room for ambiguity: they partook of the same spiritual sustenance and drank the same spiritual drink, which the apostle elucidates as Christ Himself.

Nevertheless, some endeavor to challenge the authority of St. Paul by contrasting his statement with the words of Christ: "Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and they perished. Whoever partakes of My flesh will never die" (John 6:49–51). However, these two statements can be reconciled with ease. Jesus addressed an audience primarily concerned with satisfying their physical hunger, with little regard for the nourishment of their souls. He adapted His discourse to their limited understanding, drawing a comparison between the manna and His body in accordance with their worldly perspective. They sought a miraculous display of power similar to that of Moses, who provided manna from heaven to sustain the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 16). However, they failed to grasp the profound mystery St. Paul addresses. Christ, therefore, aimed to demonstrate that they should anticipate a far greater and more valuable blessing from Him than what their fathers received through Moses. He made this comparison to highlight the immeasurable preciousness of the spiritual sustenance He offers, one that leads to eternal life. Consequently, Jesus emphasized only the aspect of the manna that was relevant to their immediate needs. He left aside its deeper significance, intending to reveal a much greater grace by comparison, far surpassing what Moses had provided to the Israelites. St. Paul, recognizing that when the Lord sent manna from heaven, He not only intended to supply physical sustenance but also to convey a spiritual mystery, foreshadowing the eternal life to come through Christ, deemed it worthy of a comprehensive explanation (1 Corinthians 10:3). Hence, we can confidently assert that the same promises of eternal life presented to us today were not only conveyed

to the Jews but were also sealed and affirmed through truly spiritual sacraments.

If my dear readers are inclined to contemplate this revelation of God's spiritual covenant in the law and the prophets, which we have demonstrated to be contained there through the words of Jesus Christ and His apostles, I am more than willing to oblige. I do so with great enthusiasm, for it will serve to convince our adversaries beyond any equivocation. Let us commence with a demonstration that, though it may appear futile to the proud Anabaptists who dismiss all reasoning, holds great significance for those who seek wisdom and possess sound judgment. It is this: since God communicated Himself through His living Word to all those whom He ever received into His grace, it follows that He made them participants in eternal life. By "communication," I refer to a special and efficacious impartation of life through God's Word, which is a sure act of vivification or spiritual awakening of the soul. This is not the general and common communication that extends to all of creation in varying ways according to their natures, as it does not deliver them from corruption. Rather, the communication I speak of is unique, illuminating the souls of the faithful with the knowledge of God and connecting them with Him in some manner. Therefore, since individuals like Abraham, Isaac, Noah, Abel, Adam, and other forefathers clung to God through such illumination by His Word, it is undeniable that this Word served as their gateway into the eternal kingdom of God, for it constituted genuine participation in God—an attainment impossible without the grace of eternal life.

If this notion appears somewhat obscure, let us turn to the very essence of the covenant, which will not only satisfy those of peaceful disposition but also sufficiently convict the ignorance of those who attempt to contradict. The Lord consistently entered into this

covenant with His people: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 7:23, etc.). Under these words, the prophets themselves expounded that life, salvation, and the summation of all blessings are encompassed. It is not without reason that David frequently proclaims the blessedness of the people who have the Lord as their God, and those whom He has chosen as His inheritance (Psalm 144:15, 33:12). This blessedness does not pertain to earthly happiness but derives from the fact that He redeems from death, preserves eternally, and upholds in His mercy all those whom He has received into His people. The other prophets similarly declare, "You are our God; we shall not die" (Habakkuk 1:12). And: "The Lord is our king; he will save us" (Isaiah 33:22). And: "You are blessed, O Israel, because you have salvation in God" (Deuteronomy 33:29).

However, to avoid an excessive digression, we should find contentment in the exhortations scattered throughout Scripture. These affirm that nothing is lacking for us to possess an abundance of every good and the assurance of salvation, provided the Lord is our God. Indeed, this is right. For if the mere radiance of His countenance ensures a certain guarantee of salvation, how could God reveal Himself to people as their God without simultaneously unlocking the treasures of salvation? After all, He becomes our God on the condition that He dwells in our midst (Leviticus 26:11–13), as Moses testifies. However, one cannot have such a divine presence without also possessing life. If God had not elaborated further, they would have clear promises of spiritual life in these words: "I am your God." For He did not declare Himself the God of their bodies alone but primarily of their souls. If souls are not united with God through righteousness, they remain in death due to their estrangement from Him. Conversely, if they have this union, it will bring them life. There is more to it: He did not merely say that He would be their God but

also promised to be their God forever, allowing their hope, which does not rest in present circumstances, to extend into perpetuity. The significance of this temporal language is evident from the words of the faithful, who comfort themselves and reassure that God will never forsake them.

Furthermore, the second part of the covenant reinforces their conviction that God's blessing extends beyond earthly life. This is conveyed through the promise: "I will be the God of your offspring after you" (Genesis 17:7). If the Lord intended to demonstrate His favor by bestowing good upon their descendants, then His goodness to them must be grounded in an even stronger rationale. God is not like humans who transfer their love from the deceased to their children because they can no longer benefit the departed. In contrast, God's benevolence is unaffected by death; He does not withdraw His mercy from those for whose sake He has already extended it to their descendants for a thousand generations. Therefore, God aimed to showcase the boundless extent of His goodness, which His servants would continue to experience even after their deaths. This truth is vividly illustrated by the fact that God, long after their deaths, still calls Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For would this title not be utterly meaningless if they had perished? It would be as though He were saying, "I am the God of those who no longer exist." This is why the evangelists recount that the Sadducees were silenced by Christ, who employed this argument so effectively that they could not deny that Moses had testified to the resurrection of the dead in this passage (Matthew 22:29–32). They had also learned from Moses that all the saints are in God's hands (Deuteronomy 33:3), from which it was easy to conclude that they were not constrained by death since the One who possesses life and death had received them into His care and protection.

Now, let us consider the heart of this theological debate: whether the faithful of the Old Testament were instructed by God in a manner that made them aware of a better life beyond this earthly existence, prompting them to contemplate and prepare for it while viewing this transient life with detachment. Initially, their way of life served as a continuous exercise to remind them that they were the most wretched of individuals if their sole source of happiness was on this earthly plane.

Consider Adam, who bore the heavy burden of his lost happiness and toiled relentlessly to eke out a meager existence. His labor, intended to be a comfort, turned into a relentless struggle. From his two sons, one met a cruel fate at the hands of the other. Abel, cruelly cut down in the prime of his life, became a poignant symbol of human suffering. Noah, amidst the world's revelry and pleasures, spent a significant portion of his life constructing the ark in the face of great hardship and suffering. His deliverance from death became a greater affliction than death itself. The ark, his refuge, became a cramped and filthy abode, akin to a tomb, for nearly ten months. Could anything be more arduous than enduring such confinement in the midst of animal dung and filth, deprived of fresh air? After surviving these tribulations, he encountered new sorrow when his own son mocked him, leading him to pronounce a curse—a heavy burden for a man God had saved from the flood as a great mercy.

When God called Abraham, his life took a dramatic turn. He was uprooted from his homeland, separated from his family and friends, and stripped of the world's most desirable comforts. It was as if God intentionally sought to remove all earthly joys from him. As soon as he reached the land he was commanded to inhabit, famine drove him away. Seeking refuge in a foreign land, he was forced to abandon his wife to save his own life—a decision more painful than death itself.

Upon returning to his place of habitation, famine once again forced him to leave. How could one find happiness in a land where frequent deprivation and the threat of hunger loomed large? He was again compelled to leave his wife, this time in the land of Abimelech. After years of wandering in uncertainty, he faced turmoil and disputes among his servants, leading him to expel his own nephew, whom he regarded as a son. This separation must have felt like losing a limb or having part of his own being torn away. Shortly thereafter, he learned that his enemies had taken his nephew captive. In his old age, when the yearning for a child was most profound, he found himself without an heir, a heavy burden to bear. Eventually, he begot Ishmael, but not without strife and the bitter taunts of his wife Sarah, who blamed him for the troubles brought by her maidservant. Finally, in his twilight years, Isaac was born. Paradoxically, the joy of fathering a son was marred by Sarah's harsh treatment and the discord it sowed in his household. In the end, he was compelled to send away his firstborn son, casting him into the wilderness like a destitute soul. Could there be a greater sorrow than a father becoming the executioner of his own child? Even if the child had succumbed to illness, it would have been a poignant calamity for this elderly man, as it would seem as if he had been granted a child for a fleeting moment, only to have his joy doubled with grief upon losing his last hope of progeny. If a stranger had killed the child, the calamity would have been compounded. However, the darkest depths of despair are reached when a father's hand becomes the instrument of his child's demise. In sum, Abraham's life was marked by torment and suffering to such an extent that anyone seeking to depict a life of wretchedness in a painting would find no better subject.

Turning to Isaac, we find a life marked by fewer calamities but scarcely a taste of pleasure or joy. Instead, he endured hardships that

would not befall those leading blessed lives on this earth. Like his father, famine forced him to flee the land of Canaan. His beloved wife was taken from his side, and he was tormented and harassed by his neighbors, subjected to numerous trials wherever he ventured, even having to contend for access to water. His son Esau's wives brought further strife into his household, and the discord between his children brought him great distress, a situation he could only resolve by banishing the one he had blessed.

Now, let's turn our attention to Jacob, who serves as both a patron and a model of profound wretchedness. Even during his childhood at home, he was plagued by strife due to his brother's threats, eventually forced into exile, becoming a fugitive from both his relatives and his homeland. The banishment itself inflicted immense suffering upon him, but he endured further torment at the hands of his uncle Laban. Jacob found himself in a harsh and inhumane bondage for seven grueling years, only to be deceived into marrying the wrong woman. To claim the one he truly desired, he had to endure an additional period of servitude, subjected to scorching days and freezing nights, enduring rain, wind, and tempest, all without proper rest. His suffering in this state was compounded over twenty long years, aggravated by daily insults from his father-in-law. Even within his own household, strife, hatred, and rivalry among his wives tore his family apart. When God commanded him to return to his homeland, he was compelled to flee secretly, as if in shameful retreat, unable to evade the malevolence of his father-in-law, who pursued and accused him along the way. Jacob had to contend with many insults from someone he had every right to resent.

Yet, this was just the beginning of his miseries. As he approached his estranged brother, he faced the grim specter of death, expecting the worst from his once-hostile sibling. The anxiety gnawed at his heart

as he awaited his brother's arrival. However, upon meeting him, Jacob fell at his brother's feet, as though half-dead, until he discovered that his brother was more gracious than he had dared to hope. Upon entering his homeland, he suffered the heart-wrenching loss of his beloved wife Rachel, whom he cherished deeply, during childbirth. Later, he received the devastating news that the child born to Rachel, whom he loved above all others, had been devoured by a wild animal. This loss inflicted such deep wounds that, although he wept, he refused all comfort, planning to die in his grief, finding solace only in the prospect of joining his child in the grave. His anguish deepened further as he witnessed his daughter's abduction and defilement, and subsequently, the slaughter of a city by his sons in an act of vengeance. This not only made him detested by all the inhabitants but also placed him in imminent danger of death. The horrifying crime of his son Reuben followed, inflicting unimaginable pain. Having one's wife violated is among the most harrowing experiences, and when the perpetrator is one's own son, the suffering becomes unbearable. Soon after, another incestuous act polluted his family, a disgrace so profound that it could shatter even the most resolute and patient individual. In his twilight years, striving to provide for himself and his family, he sent his sons to a foreign land to procure grain. One of them ended up imprisoned, with Jacob fearing for his life, forcing him to send Benjamin, the son in whom he found the greatest delight, as ransom. In the midst of this endless stream of woes, Jacob had no respite to enjoy a single moment of ease. In fact, he declared to Pharaoh that his days had been few and full of trouble (Genesis 47:9). Thus, if he claimed his life had been constantly marked by hardship, either he was ungrateful toward God, or he was genuinely attesting to the misery he had endured. If his words held truth, it follows that his hope was not rooted in earthly matters.

Indeed, if we acknowledge that all the holy patriarchs anticipated a blessed life from God (which is beyond doubt), then it becomes evident that they were not only aware of it but also eagerly awaited a blessedness different from earthly existence. The apostle skillfully illuminates this truth: "By faith he [Abraham] lived as a stranger in the promised land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (Hebrews 11:9-10, 13-16). These venerable patriarchs would have been as unfeeling as blocks of wood had they persistently pursued promises that had no earthly fulfillment in sight. Their unwavering anticipation clearly pointed toward the fulfillment of these promises in a realm beyond this world.

The apostle aptly emphasizes that they are called pilgrims and strangers in this world, echoing the words of Moses himself (Genesis 47:9). Their status as strangers in the land of Canaan, despite God's promise designating them as heirs, underscores that God's pledge extended far beyond earthly boundaries. Notably, they possessed not a single piece of land in Canaan, except for the plots where they were laid to rest (Acts 7:5). This testifies to their unwavering hope of experiencing God's promise only after death. Jacob's insistence on being buried in Canaan, as exemplified by his solemn oath to his son Joseph, reinforces this belief (Genesis 47:29-30; 49:29-32; 50:4-14).

Joseph, too, adhered to this conviction, as he instructed that his remains be brought to Canaan approximately four hundred years after his passing (Genesis 50:24–25). In essence, their actions consistently revealed their contemplation of the blessedness of the afterlife. Why would Jacob have endured such hardship and danger to secure the birthright—a birthright that brought him no earthly benefit and drove him from his father's house—if he did not aspire to a higher blessing? His sentiments are evident in his dying declaration: "I will await your salvation, Lord" (Genesis 49:18). Knowing he was about to surrender his soul, his anticipation of salvation indicates that he viewed death as the threshold to a new life.

It's worth pondering why we engage in disputes regarding God's children when even someone opposing the truth shared the same sentiment and understanding. What did Balaam desire when he expressed his wish to die the death of the righteous and to have his end be like theirs (Numbers 23:10)? His heart seemed to resonate with what David would later articulate: the death of the saints is precious in the eyes of the Lord, while the death of the wicked is miserable (Psalms 116:15; 34:21). If death marked the ultimate end for all people, there would be no distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Thus, it is necessary to differentiate them based on the destinies prepared for each in the age to come.

We have yet to consider the words of Moses, who, in the view of those we critique, appeared to have no role other than leading the people of Israel to revere and honor God while promising them fertile lands and bountiful sustenance. However, if we refrain from deliberately extinguishing the light that shines, we can already discern a crystal-clear revelation of the spiritual covenant. When we turn our attention to the prophets, we find an even clearer vision of

eternal life and the kingdom of Christ. Let us begin with David, who, being among the earliest, speaks more cryptically about heavenly mysteries than his successors. Nonetheless, he steadfastly directs all his teachings toward this celestial objective. He underscores his valuation of earthly dwellings with the words: "I am a pilgrim and a stranger here, like all my fathers" (Psalms 39:12). Acknowledging the transitory nature of every mortal life, he ponders, "What is my expectation, Lord? My hope is directed to you." A person who, after confessing the temporal and fragile nature of earthly existence, clings to unwavering hope in God undoubtedly envisions his happiness beyond the confines of this world. David often invited the faithful to contemplate this profound truth when offering comfort. In another passage, after emphasizing the brevity and frailty of life, he adds, "But the mercy of the Lord is forever to those who fear Him" (Psalms 103:17). This aligns with his sentiments expressed elsewhere: "From the beginning you founded the earth, Lord, and the heavens are the works of your hands. They will perish and you remain; they will grow old like a robe and you will change them. But you always remain sure, and your years will never fail. The sons of your servants will live, and their posterity will be established before your face" (Psalms 102:25–28). Even as heaven and earth succumb to decay, the faithful's enduring presence before God underscores the intimate connection between their salvation and His eternal nature.

Indeed, this hope cannot stand firm if it is not anchored in the promise eloquently articulated by Isaiah: "The heavens," proclaims the Lord, "will dissipate like smoke, and the earth will wear out like a garment, and its inhabitants also will perish. But my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never fail" (Isaiah 51:6). In this passage, the notion of perpetuity is attributed to salvation and righteousness not because they inherently reside in God, but because He graciously imparts them to His people. To fully grasp the

meaning of the declarations made by David throughout his writings concerning the blessedness of the faithful, we must firmly connect them to the manifestation of heavenly glory. For example, when he declares, "The Lord guards the souls of the saints, He will deliver them from the hand of the sinner. Light has risen for the righteous and joy for those who are upright in heart. The righteousness of the good endures forever. Their strength will be exalted in glory; the desire of sinners will perish" (Psalms 97:10–11; 112:10), or proclaims, "The righteous will give praises to your name, the innocent will live with you" (Psalms 140:13), or asserts, "The righteous will be remembered forever" (Psalms 112:6), or affirms, "The Lord will ransom the souls of His servants" (Psalms 34:22), it becomes apparent that the Lord not only permits His servants to endure torment at the hands of the wicked but occasionally allows the wicked to subjugate and afflict them. At times, the righteous languish in darkness and misery, while the wicked shine brightly, unburdened by tribulations. The Lord does not always unveil the brilliance of His countenance to His faithful, granting them sustained joy.

This realization is what drives David to candidly acknowledge that when one fixates their gaze on the present state of this world, it becomes a severe temptation that threatens to undermine their faith. It can appear as if there are no rewards for righteousness in God's divine plan. Impiety flourishes and thrives, while the virtuous endure shame, poverty, derision, and various other forms of calamity. David candidly admits, "It just missed; my foot almost slipped and my steps almost went down, seeing the fortune of people who are devoid of sense and the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalms 73:2–3). He continues, recounting this inner struggle, and concludes, "I considered how I could think about these things, but it was only perplexity in my spirit until I entered into the sanctuary of the Lord and knew their end" (Psalms 73:16–17).

From David's honest confession, we glean a profound lesson: the holy fathers of the Old Testament were well aware that God often fulfilled His promises to His servants to a limited extent, if at all, in this world. This understanding led them to lift their hearts toward God's sanctuary, where they discovered what remained hidden from their earthly eyes but was securely held in their faith—the promise of a future divine judgment. This sanctuary represents the final judgment, our hope, and they were content to apprehend it through faith, even though they could not behold it with their eyes. Armed with this unwavering confidence, they never wavered in their belief that regardless of what transpired in this world, there would come a day when God's promises would be fulfilled. Their unwavering faith shines through in their bold declarations: "Lord, you will not allow the righteous to perish eternally, but you will plunge the wicked into the well of destruction" (Psalms 55:22–23). In this world, there is no well of destruction that swallows the wicked; it resides elsewhere, where the wicked find their temporal (earthly) end. They may experience a pleasant demise, free from prolonged suffering. But where do we find the unwavering fortitude of the saints whom David himself often portrays as not just undermined, but completely shattered and destroyed? To fortify his spirit, David must fix his gaze not on the uncertainties of this world, akin to a sea ravaged by various tempests, but rather on the promise of the Lord's final judgment, where the order of heaven and earth will be eternally established.

As he elucidates in another passage, "Fools rest on their abundance and are puffed up because of their great riches. Nevertheless, no one, however great he may be, can deliver his brother from death or pay God the price of his redemption" (Psalms 49:6–7). While both the wise and the foolish ultimately meet the same fate of death, the foolish delude themselves into thinking that they will live on this

earth forever, seeking earthly fame and recognition. Yet, "man will not live in honor, he will be like the beasts which perish." Such thinking is profoundly foolish, yet it finds many adherents. In the end, they will be gathered in hell like a flock of sheep, and death will rule over them. However, at the dawn of a new day—the day of the righteous—they will be subjected to the authority of the faithful, and their dominance will fade. "The grave will be their habitation" (Psalms 49:10–12). David's critique of the foolish who rest content in fleeting earthly pleasures underscores that the wise must seek a different form of happiness—one that transcends the material. Moreover, he provides a clearer glimpse of the mystery of the resurrection when he prophesies the downfall and desolation of the wicked while proclaiming the reign and glory of the faithful. When he speaks of "the dawn of the day," it is an allusion to the revelation of new life following the culmination of our current existence—an eternity bathed in the radiant glory of God's kingdom.

It was through reflections such as these that the faithful of that time found solace and bolstered their endurance. They would often remind themselves and one another that "God's wrath lasts only a minute but His mercy lasts a lifetime" (Psalms 30:5). How could they perceive their afflictions as a mere moment when they endured hardship throughout their lives? Where did they find evidence of God's enduring mercy, when they scarcely had the opportunity to savor it? Certainly, if their focus remained fixated on the earthly realm, they would have discovered no lasting evidence of God's mercy there. However, when they lifted their gaze toward the heavens, they recognized that the trials endured by the saints were as fleeting as a breath of wind, while the graces destined for them were eternal. Conversely, they foresaw that the destruction awaiting the wicked would have no end, even though the wicked perceived themselves as living in a dreamlike state of happiness. From these

convictions emerged familiar expressions among the faithful: "the memory of the righteous will be a blessing; the memory of the wicked will rot" (Proverbs 10:7). And, "The death of the saints is precious before the face of the Lord; the death of the sinner is very bad" (Psalms 116:15, 34:21). And again, "The Lord will guard the steps of His saints; the wicked will be destroyed in darkness" (1 Samuel 2:9). These phrases reflect the understanding that the fathers of the Old Testament possessed. Despite the miseries the faithful endured in this world, they were confident that their ultimate destiny was life and salvation. On the contrary, they recognized that the happiness of the wicked was an attractive and pleasant path that led to destruction. Consequently, they referred to the death of unbelievers as the destruction of the uncircumcised (Ezekiel 28:10, 31:18, 32:19, 25, 28–29, 32), signifying that the hope of resurrection had been denied to them. This perspective is exemplified by David, who could not conceive of a more severe curse for his enemies than praying that they would be blotted out from the book of life and not be counted among the righteous (Psalms 69:28).

Nevertheless, one particular statement from Job stands out: "I know," he asserts, "that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last day I will be resurrected from the earth and will see my Redeemer in this body. This hope is hidden in my bosom" (Job 19:25–27). Some have attempted to interpret this passage as referring to a time when Job hoped for greater kindness and favor from the Lord in his earthly life. To some extent, we can grant them this interpretation. However, whether they accept it or not, we cannot disregard the fact that Job could not have reached such a lofty hope if he had placed his faith solely in earthly matters. Thus, we must acknowledge that he directed his gaze toward the future promise of immortality, even as he anticipated his Redeemer emerging from the grave. Death constitutes a profound despair for those whose minds are solely

focused on the present life, yet Job's hope remained unwavering: "If He kills me," he declared, "still I will not cease to hope in Him."

If anyone stubbornly asserts that these utterances originated from only a select few individuals and, therefore, cannot be regarded as representative of common Jewish beliefs, we must promptly counter this argument. The individuals who spoke in this manner were appointed as teachers of the people by the Holy Spirit. In accordance with their divine commission, they openly communicated teachings meant to guide the entire community. Consequently, when we encounter such clear oracles from the Holy Spirit testifying to spiritual life within the Jewish community and providing them with unshakable hope, it would be an unreasonable obstinacy to confine the Jewish covenant solely to the material realm, where earthly happiness and possessions were the exclusive focus.

If we turn to the prophets who emerged in subsequent generations, we find even stronger and more abundant evidence to support our case. If the voices of David, Job, and Samuel did not present insurmountable challenges to our position, then the prophets—especially as the day of complete revelation drew nearer—provide even more compelling testimony. The Lord had strategically ordered the dispensation of His covenant of mercy so that, as the era of full disclosure approached, the brightness of His teachings would progressively intensify. This trajectory culminated in the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, often referred to as the "Sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4:2), who dispelled all shadows and fully illuminated the world. Therefore, we need not fear that the testimonies of the prophets will fail us in our quest to support our case.

Considering the abundant material at hand and my intention to be concise (for this could fill a substantial volume), I must exercise

restraint and avoid unnecessary prolixity. However, I do encourage my readers to employ the key I have provided, as it will unlock the deeper understanding within these texts. Whenever the prophets speak of the blessedness of the faithful—a concept scarcely manifest in this world—recall this critical distinction: the prophets employed earthly blessings as symbolic representations of God's goodness, intending to elevate the hearts of the people above the temporal and corruptible realm, directing their focus towards the contemplation and pursuit of spiritual life.

To illustrate, when the people of Israel found themselves exiled in Babylon, they perceived their banishment and desolation as a form of death. Consequently, they struggled to accept Ezekiel's promises of restoration, dismissing them as falsehoods. To address their skepticism and demonstrate His power, the Lord presented a vision to the prophet. In this vision, a field covered in scattered bones was imbued with life and strength through the divine power of His word alone (Ezekiel 37:1ff). This vision served to correct their unbelief and, in doing so, emphasized that God's grace extended beyond the restoration He promised, capable of resurrecting scattered bones with but a word. This sentence should be compared with a similar passage in Isaiah: "Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead" (Isaiah 26:19). Following this exhortation, the faithful are instructed: "Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by. For behold, the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain" (Isaiah 26:19–21).

Nevertheless, I do not intend to assert that all other passages must be interpreted solely within this framework. Some scriptures, without employing allegory or obscurity, directly proclaim the future immortality reserved for the faithful in God's kingdom, as we have previously noted. Of these, two passages stand out, the first from Isaiah: "For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord. And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh" (Isaiah 66:22–24). The second passage can be found in the book of Daniel: "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:1–2).

Concerning the other two points—that the patriarchs possessed Christ as a pledge and assurance of the promises made by God to them, and that they placed their utmost confidence in Him—I will not deeply investigate their validation, as their veracity is readily comprehensible and generally accepted. We can thus affirm that the Old Testament, or the covenant God established with the people of Israel, encompassed not only material blessings but also secure promises of spiritual and eternal life. The hope of this life was intended to be imprinted on the hearts of all those who genuinely entered into this covenant. This conviction cannot be shaken by any stratagems of the devil.

Therefore, let us firmly reject the misguided and perilous notion that God offered nothing to the Jews, or that they anticipated nothing beyond filling their physical needs, indulging in carnal pleasures, amassing wealth, attaining honor, bearing many offspring, and other earthly desires. In fact, Jesus Christ Himself promises nothing less than the kingdom of heaven to His faithful, where they will rest alongside Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matthew 8:11). St. Peter, addressing the Jews of his time, encouraged them by reminding them that they were heirs of the grace of the gospel, being the successors of the prophets and participants in the covenant God had established with Israel long ago (Acts 3:25). This was not a mere verbal testimony, as the Lord confirmed it through action. Upon His resurrection, He immediately included many saints in His resurrection, and they were seen in Jerusalem (Matthew 27:52–53). In doing so, He provided a concrete assurance that all that He had done or suffered to secure the salvation of humanity belonged not only to the faithful of the Old Testament but also to us. They possessed the same Spirit that we now have, by whom God regenerates His own for eternal life. Since we observe that God's Spirit, often referred to as the pledge of our inheritance (2 Corinthians 1:22), resides within us as a seed of immortality, how can we dare to deny the inheritance of eternal life to them? It is truly astonishing that the Sadducees, long ago, descended into such a profound madness as to deny both resurrection and the immortality of souls, despite these truths being so clearly delineated in the Scriptures.

The current state of profound spiritual ignorance prevalent among the Jewish people, characterized by their fervent anticipation of an earthly kingdom of Christ, should indeed astonish us. However, such a predicament was prophesied to befall them as a consequence of their rejection of Jesus Christ and His gospel. It was just and fitting

for God to afflict them with such spiritual blindness, for in extinguishing the light presented before them, they chose to embrace darkness instead. Although they diligently read the writings of Moses and continually meditate upon his words, a veil shrouds their ability to behold the brilliance of his message (2 Corinthians 3:14–15). This veil shall persist until they turn their gaze back to Christ, from whom they have, to the best of their abilities, averted their eyes.

Now, one might inquire, "Is there then no distinction between the Old and New Testaments? What can be said of the numerous passages that seemingly contrast them as fundamentally dissimilar?" To this, I respond that I wholeheartedly acknowledge these distinctions, provided they do not diminish the fundamental unity I have previously expounded upon. We shall explore these differences one by one, with the potential for an additional, if one is suggested. My objective is to demonstrate convincingly that all these distinctions ought to be attributed to varying methods employed by God in the dissemination of His teachings rather than disparities in their essence. In this manner, there shall be no impediment to recognizing the parity of promises in both the Old and New Testaments, with Christ serving as the unifying cornerstone of both.

The initial distinction we shall address concerns the following: while God perpetually desired that His people direct their thoughts towards the heavenly inheritance and anchor their hearts in it, He nonetheless, in His wisdom, employed earthly blessings as a means to fortify their hope in the unseen realm. He granted them a foretaste of the heavenly within the earthly. However, the advent of the gospel, which elucidated the grace of the future life, directs our contemplation solely to the pursuit and meditation of that eternal existence, sparing us the trials of the temporal blessings as experienced by the Israelites. Those who overlook God's design here

erroneously conclude that the ancient Israelites aspired no higher than the earthly comforts of the body. They observe that the land of Canaan is frequently cited as the supreme reward for those who uphold God's law. Additionally, they note that God's gravest threats to the Jews centered on their expulsion from the land He had bestowed upon them, dispersing them among foreign nations. Lastly, they perceive that Moses' enumeration of blessings and curses overwhelmingly converges on this objective. Consequently, they assert, without hesitation, that God separated the Jews not for their benefit but for the benefit of the Christian Church, providing an external symbol through which spiritual realities could be contemplated. However, this perspective ignores a fundamental truth conveyed by Scripture.

Hence, we must challenge this perspective, maintaining that in their possession of the earthly blessings, the Israelites beheld the future inheritance prepared for them in heaven. This shall be illuminated through the parable presented by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians. He likens the Jewish people to a minor under the care of a guardian, incapable of self-governance, a state akin to spiritual infancy (Galatians 4:1ff). Though he primarily addresses ceremonial matters in this passage, it is entirely appropriate to apply this principle to our current discussion. We perceive that the same inheritance was appointed to them as is to us, albeit their incapacity to fully enjoy it. They possessed a church identical to ours, yet it existed as though in its infancy. Therefore, the Lord instructed them, offering spiritual promises veiled beneath earthly blessings, which, when observed thoughtfully, should lead them to spiritual hope. Those who fail to grasp this concept are in grave error. Take, for instance, the land of Canaan. While it was indeed regarded by the Israelites as their supreme blessing, they did not fixate their affections upon it. Instead, they used the land as a means to lift their

gaze towards the true inheritance, which, at that time, remained beyond their sight. To prevent self-deception, God appended a loftier promise, signifying that the land was not the ultimate and chief good He intended for them. When God promised Abraham possession of the land of Canaan, the patriarch did not fixate upon its physical attributes but instead looked upwards, emboldened by the attached promise from God: "I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Genesis 15:1). Abraham recognized that the ultimate reward lay in God Himself, indicating that his expectations should extend beyond transient earthly rewards to an incorruptible heavenly one. The possession of Canaan was thus promised to him, not as an end in itself, but as a tangible token of God's benevolence and a symbol of the heavenly inheritance yet to be revealed.

Indeed, it is evident from the heartfelt words of the faithful that they possessed such a profound understanding. Take, for example, David, who, inspired by God's temporal blessings, contemplated His sovereign grace and declared, "My heart and my flesh may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:26). Likewise, he professed, "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup" (Psalm 16:5). And in his cry to the Lord, he proclaimed, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living" (Psalm 142:5). Those who dare to utter such words reveal their transcendence beyond the confines of this world and its temporal possessions. However, it is worth noting that the prophets often employed figurative language and imagery to convey the blessedness of the future age, all of which was divinely bestowed. Thus, when we encounter passages that describe the righteous inheriting the land and the wicked being expelled from it (Psalm 37:9, 28–29; Job 18:5ff; Proverbs 2:21–22), or verses that speak of Jerusalem's abundance in riches and Zion's overflow of blessings (frequently found in Isaiah), we must recognize that these depictions do not

correspond to the transient nature of mortal existence or to the earthly city of Jerusalem. Instead, they are emblematic of the true homeland of the faithful and the heavenly city, wherein God has prepared blessings and eternal life (Psalm 133:3).

In the Old Testament, the saints held a peculiar affection for mortal life, surpassing what we should exhibit today. Although they were well aware that they should not fixate on these earthly blessings as their ultimate objective, they regarded them with great affection because they understood that God was using them as symbols of His grace, solidifying their hope in a manner commensurate with their limited understanding. Therefore, as the Lord demonstrated His benevolence to the faithful through temporal blessings, He concurrently provided them with a glimpse of the spiritual blessedness they were destined for. Likewise, the corporeal punishments He meted out upon evildoers served as harbingers of the dreadful judgment awaiting the wicked. It is essential to comprehend that as God's benevolence was more prominently manifested in temporal matters during that era, so too were His punishments. Regrettably, many fail to recognize the parallels and the relationship between these punishments and rewards prevalent during that period, leading to a misguided perception of God's nature. This misperception may even lead to the erroneous notion that there exist distinct deities in the Old and New Testaments. However, all these stumbling blocks can be readily dispelled by comprehending God's divine plan: that during the period in which He concealed His covenant with the people of Israel beneath veiled forms, He sought to convey the eternal blessedness He promised them through earthly blessings, while simultaneously employing corporeal punishments to signify the dreadful fate awaiting the wicked.

The second distinction between the Old and New Testaments pertains to the use of images and figures. During the time when truth was obscured, the Old Testament relied on images to represent the truth, using shadows in place of substance. In contrast, the New Testament presents the truth itself, devoid of shadows. Virtually all passages comparing the Old and New Testaments should be interpreted through this lens. Nowhere is this more thoroughly expounded upon than in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The apostle addresses those who believed that the abolition of Mosaic ceremonies would lead to the eradication of all religion. To counter this fallacy, he begins with a prophetic statement about the priesthood of Jesus Christ, reasoning that the Levitical priesthood, which operated on a succession basis, would be supplanted since Christ was established as the eternal Priest. Furthermore, he establishes the superiority of this new priesthood by noting that it was established with an oath (Hebrews 7:11, 23, 20–21). The apostle asserts that with this change in the priesthood, there also occurs a transfer of the covenant (Hebrews 8:6–7). He emphasizes the necessity of this transformation due to the inherent weakness of the law, which could not lead to perfection (Hebrews 7:18). He subsequently explores the nature of this weakness, revealing that the law possessed only external righteousness incapable of rendering those who adhered to it perfect in conscience, as the blood of animals could neither expunge sins nor confer true holiness (Hebrews 9:9, 10:4). The apostle concludes that the law merely provided a shadow of the future blessings, not the living reality found in the gospel (Hebrews 10:1).

It is essential to recognize that the apostle's comparison of the Old and New Testaments does not pertain to the substance of the promises but rather addresses the manner in which God employed the ceremonies of the Old Testament as foreshadows of Christ. These

ceremonies, though seemingly mere accoutrements of the Old Testament, were instrumental in conveying the truths of God's plan. Therefore, when the apostle asserts that these ceremonies had to be abolished to make way for Jesus Christ, the Pledge and Mediator of a superior covenant, he is referring to the solemn pathway by which the Lord's Testament was ratified among the Jews—a pathway comprising sacrifices and various ceremonies. While these rituals possessed no intrinsic permanence or substance of their own, they bore the name of the things they represented, as is customary in Scripture when referring to sacraments in terms of the realities they symbolize. In summary, the Old Testament is designated as the solemn way through which the Lord's Testament was confirmed among the Jews, primarily embodied in sacrifices and ceremonies. Because these elements were inherently transitory and lacking in substance, the apostle asserts that they had to be terminated and set aside to make way for Jesus Christ, who serves as the Pledge and Mediator of a superior covenant, securing eternal sanctification for the elect and expunging the sins that persisted under the Old Testament.

Now, if one prefers, we can provide this definition: the Old Testament was the divine teaching bestowed upon the Jewish people, concealed within a framework of ceremonial observances that lacked intrinsic efficacy or a stable foundation. It was, in essence, temporal, suspended as it were until it found support and confirmation in its fulfillment through Christ's blood. In this light, Christ Himself referred to the cup He offered to His disciples during the Supper as the cup of the New Testament (Luke 22:20), signifying that the truth of God's covenant is fully realized when sealed in His blood. Hence, the covenant is renewed and made eternal.

This perspective helps elucidate St. Paul's assertion that the Jews were guided to Christ through the rudimentary teachings of the law, even before His physical manifestation (Galatians 3:23–26, 4:1–8). He acknowledges them as children of God and heirs, yet he likens them to children who require a guardian due to their spiritual immaturity. This arrangement was fitting, for before the advent of the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2), the revelation was not as clear, and understanding was less lucid. Consequently, the Lord imparted His divine wisdom to them in a manner befitting their limited capacity, allowing them only a distant glimpse. St. Paul employs the term "childhood" to emphasize their limited understanding, explaining that the Lord chose to instruct them during this phase through rituals akin to rudimentary elements, suitable for their youthful understanding. This distinction aligns with Jesus Christ's assertion that the law and the prophets were in effect until the time of John the Baptist, after which the kingdom of God was openly revealed (Matthew 11:13). Moses and the prophets of their time offered a foretaste of the wisdom that would one day be fully unveiled, presenting it from a distance. However, with the advent of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God was unveiled, as in Him resides the entirety of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3), soaring to the loftiest heights.

This does not contradict the fact that there may be scarcely anyone in the Christian church today who possesses the unwavering faith of Abraham or the profound understanding of the prophets, which continues to illuminate the world. In this discourse, we are not examining the specific graces bestowed by the Lord upon a select few. Instead, we focus on the divine order maintained during that era, which even encompassed the teachings of the prophets, despite their unique privileges compared to others of their time. Their preaching was shrouded in obscurity, like distant prophecies veiled

in symbols. Regardless of the revelations they received, they too were subject to the tutelage that extended to the entire community, rendering them akin to children. Indeed, during that era, no understanding was so lucid that it did not experience a measure of the era's inherent obscurity. This is precisely why Jesus Christ declared, "Many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Matthew 13:16–17). It is entirely reasonable that the presence of Jesus Christ would bestow upon the world a deeper comprehension of heavenly mysteries than was previously attainable.

Now, let us explore the third distinction, drawn from the words of Jeremiah: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

From this passage, St. Paul derived the basis for his comparison between the law and the gospel, labeling the law as "the letter" and the herald of death and condemnation, written on tablets of stone. Conversely, he referred to the gospel as the spiritual proclamation of life and righteousness, etched into hearts. Moreover, he maintained that the law should be annulled while the gospel would endure eternally (2 Corinthians 3:3, 3:6). St. Paul's primary intent was to

elucidate the prophet's meaning. Therefore, it suffices to contemplate the words of one to grasp the essence of both, notwithstanding some distinctions in their perspectives. St. Paul seems to express a stronger disapproval of the law compared to Jeremiah. However, this heightened criticism arises not from a consideration of the intrinsic nature of the law but rather due to the interference of certain individuals. These individuals, driven by zealous devotion to ceremonies, sought to obscure the clarity of the gospel, compelling St. Paul to confront their misguided fervor. Consequently, it is crucial to understand that St. Paul's evaluation is directed at this particular context.

To discern the concord between St. Paul and Jeremiah, one must focus solely on the aspects that are unique to the law. For instance, while the law occasionally contains promises of God's mercy, these promises are drawn from other sources and are not central to the law's nature. Both Jeremiah and St. Paul emphasize that the law's primary function is to prescribe what is righteous and good, to prohibit all wickedness, to promise rewards to the righteous, and to threaten sinners with God's judgment—without the capacity to transform or reform the inherent human perversity.

Now, let us unravel St. Paul's detailed comparison step by step. According to his exposition, the Old Testament is designated as "the letter" because it was promulgated without the efficacy of the Holy Spirit, whereas the New Testament is deemed "spiritual" because the Lord inscribed it upon the hearts of His people. This second comparison serves to elucidate the first: the Old Testament is associated with death because it can only ensnare all of humanity under the curse, whereas the New Testament, by delivering us from this curse, restores us to God's grace. St. Paul further asserts that the Old Testament constitutes a ministry of condemnation, revealing the

universal guilt of the offspring of Adam, while the New Testament functions as a ministry of righteousness, elucidating God's mercy through which we attain justification (2 Corinthians 3:7–9).

The final point pertains to the ceremonial aspects of the law, which were destined to fade with the passage of time. In contrast, the gospel, containing the substance, retains its enduring stability. Jeremiah indeed characterizes the moral law as a fragile covenant, but for a different reason: the ingratitude of the people resulted in its swift breach. However, this violation, stemming from an external failing, should not be attributed to the law's intrinsic nature. The ceremonies, due to their inherent fragility, were abolished with the advent of Christ, as they contained the very cause of their abrogation.

Now, we must understand that the distinction drawn between the letter and the spirit is not intended to belittle the Lord's bestowal of His law upon the Jews in the past. It is not meant to suggest that this divine teaching was bestowed upon them in vain or ineffectively, without converting anyone to His divine presence. Rather, this distinction is made by way of comparison, aiming to highlight the sheer abundance of grace that the Lord was pleased to unveil through the proclamation of the gospel, thereby honoring the sovereignty of His Christ. If we take into account the multitude that He gathered, drawing people from diverse nations into regeneration by His Spirit through the preaching of the gospel, we will discern that the number of those who genuinely received the teachings of the law with a sincere heart was so minute in comparison that no meaningful comparison can be made. However, it is essential to acknowledge that, when considering the people of Israel in isolation from the Christian church, there were indeed many who held genuine faith.

The fourth distinction is an outgrowth of the third, springing forth from it. Scripture designates the Old Testament as the covenant of bondage because it instilled fear and dread in the hearts of people. In contrast, the New Testament is termed the covenant of liberty because it bolsters believers' sense of security and confidence. St. Paul elucidates this concept in his Epistle to the Romans, proclaiming, "You have not received again the spirit of bondage into fear but the Spirit of adoption by which we cry 'Abba, Father!'" (Romans 8:15). This sentiment aligns with the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who describes how the faithful have transitioned from the visible mountain of Sinai, marked by fire, thunder, tempest, and lightning, which terrified the people and even Moses himself, where God did not communicate with them in a fearsome voice as He did then. Instead, they have approached the heavenly mountain of Zion and the city of the living God, accompanied by angels (Hebrews 12:18–19, 22), and so forth.

This concept, briefly alluded to in the passage from Romans, finds more extensive clarification in the Epistle to the Galatians, where St. Paul employs an allegory involving the two children of Abraham (Galatians 4:22ff). According to this allegory, Hagar, the maidservant, symbolizes Mount Sinai, where the Israelites received the law. On the other hand, Sarah, the mistress, represents Jerusalem, the source of the gospel. Just as Hagar's descendants were enslaved and incapable of inheriting, the descendants of Sarah are free and destined for inheritance. Consequently, it is the law that begets bondage, while it is the gospel that regenerates us into liberty.

In summary, the Old Testament was designed to instill fear in consciences, while the New Testament brings joy to them. The former covenant constrained and imprisoned consciences under the yoke of bondage, while the latter delivers and liberates them. If

anyone objects to this distinction, asserting that the fathers of the Old Testament possessed the same spirit of faith as we do, it must be clarified that they did not acquire this liberty and joy through the law. Instead, they found themselves ensnared and distressed by the law's constraints, seeking solace and refuge in the gospel. Hence, it becomes evident that this exemption from wretchedness was a unique fruit of the New Testament. Moreover, we deny that they enjoyed the same degree of freedom and assurance as us, for they too experienced a measure of the fear and bondage that the law engendered. Even though they were privileged to partake in the benefits bestowed by the gospel, they were still bound by the rites, burdens, and bonds of that era. Thus, when evaluating the Lord's disposition toward the people of Israel during that period, we rightfully classify them as being under the Testament of bondage.

The last three distinctions hinge upon comparisons between the law and the gospel. Therefore, in these distinctions, the Old Testament signifies the law, while the New Testament symbolizes the gospel. The initial distinction we delineated was the most comprehensive, encompassing the entire condition of the ancient fathers who lived under the law. Regarding St. Augustine's denial that the promises of that era fell within the scope of the Old Testament, his position is consistent with our own teaching. He was contemplating the passages from Jeremiah and St. Paul that we cited earlier, wherein the Old Testament is juxtaposed with the teachings of grace and mercy. St. Augustine aptly asserts that all the faithful who were regenerated by God from the beginning of the world and walked in accordance with His will in faith and love belong to the New Testament. They placed their hope not in carnal, earthly, or temporal goods but in spiritual, heavenly, and eternal ones. Specifically, they believed in the Mediator, through whom they were certain that the

Holy Spirit was bestowed upon them, and they obtained forgiveness whenever they sinned.

In essence, all the saints we encounter in scripture, elected by God from the beginning of the world, participated alongside us in the same blessings that lead to eternal salvation. There is only one distinction between the framework I presented and that of St. Augustine: I seek to differentiate between the clarity of the gospel and the obscurity that prevailed before, as affirmed by Christ's proclamation that the law and the prophets existed until John the Baptist, after which the kingdom of God began to be preached (Matthew 11:12–13; Luke 16:16). St. Augustine, on the other hand, was content to draw a distinction between the weakness of the law and the firmness of the gospel.

It is also important to note that the ancient fathers lived under the Old Testament in such a way that they did not cling to it but perpetually aspired toward the New Testament. They participated in it with genuine affection of heart. Any among them who were content with external shadows and failed to elevate their minds to Christ are condemned by the apostle for their blindness and cursed state. Indeed, what greater blindness could one imagine than to hope for the expiation of sins through the death of an animal or to seek purification of the soul through physical water cleansing, or to believe that God derived immense delight from insignificant ceremonies? All those who, without looking to Christ, diligently observed the external aspects of the law fell into such absurdity.

The fifth distinction worth noting revolves around the fact that, until the advent of Christ, God had set apart a specific people to whom He had entrusted the covenant of His grace. Moses, in his wisdom, conveys this when he says, "When the almighty God scattered the

people, when He divided the children of Adam, His people fell to Him in the division, Jacob was His inheritance" (Deuteronomy 32:8–9). In another passage, he speaks to the people, stating, "Behold, heaven and earth and all things contained in them belong to your God. Nevertheless, He joined Himself to your fathers and loved them, to choose their seed after them from among all the other peoples" (Deuteronomy 10:14–15). Therefore, our Lord bestowed upon this people the honor of making Himself known through them, as if He had a closer relationship with them than with others. He entrusted His covenant to them, manifested His divine presence among them, and elevated them above all others in various privileges. However, for the purpose of this discussion, we shall focus solely on one aspect: by communicating His Word to them, He united Himself with them in a unique way, to be acknowledged and considered as their God. Meanwhile, He permitted all other nations to tread the path of vanity and error, as if they were bereft of knowledge of Him. He did not provide them with the remedy that could assist them—namely, the proclamation of His Word. Thus, in that era, Israel was dubbed the favored child of God, while all other nations were considered as outsiders. Israel was known to God, taken under His protection and guardianship; other nations were left in their darkness. Israel was sanctified by God, but others were deemed profane. Israel enjoyed the privilege of God's presence, whereas it was denied to others.

However, when the appointed time arrived, ordained to restore all things—when the Mediator between God and humanity was revealed, tearing asunder the veil that had long confined God's mercy to one people—He proclaimed peace to those who were far away and to those who were near. In this way, He reconciled them all to God, uniting them into one body (Ephesians 2:14, 16–17, and elsewhere). Consequently, there is no longer a distinction between Jew and

Greek, circumcised and uncircumcised (Colossians 3:11). Instead, Christ is everything to everyone, and to Him, all the peoples of the earth have been bequeathed as an inheritance, with dominion extending from sea to sea, from east to west, without differentiation.

This is why the calling of the gentiles remains a significant hallmark, demonstrating the superiority of the New Testament over the Old. While numerous prophecies had foretold this development, the realization of these prophecies was deferred until the arrival of the Messiah. Even at the inception of His ministry, Jesus Christ refrained from immediately extending His message to the gentiles, postponing their calling until after He had fulfilled all that pertained to our redemption and completed His period of humility. He explained to the Canaanite woman that His mission was initially directed solely toward the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Furthermore, when He first dispatched His apostles, He restricted them from reaching beyond these boundaries (Matthew 15:24, 10:5–6). The time for this expansion had not yet arrived. What's more, despite the abundance of testimonies indicating the calling of the gentiles, when it was finally time to initiate this process, it seemed so novel and extraordinary to the apostles that they viewed it with trepidation, as if it were a monstrous proposition. They embraced this transformation with great difficulty, and understandably so. It did not appear logical that God, who had separated Israel from other nations for such a prolonged period, would suddenly, as if changing His mind, dissolve this distinction. While the prophets had indeed foretold this shift, the apostles could not have been so attuned to prophecy as to be unshaken by this significant development. The precedents God had previously set—calling only a few gentiles into His church and incorporating them into the family of Israel through circumcision—did not fully alleviate their doubts. The public calling of the gentiles, which occurred after Jesus Christ's ascension, not

only elevated them to the same level of honor as the Jews but, more strikingly, replaced the Jews in their previous position.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Understanding God's Predestination and Providence

The covenant of life is not proclaimed equally to all corners of the world, and even when it is proclaimed, it is not universally embraced. In this diversity, we encounter a profound mystery within God's divine plan. Undoubtedly, this diversity serves His divine purpose. It is evident that God's will determines who is offered salvation and who is not. This leads to profound and essential questions that can only be addressed by teaching believers about God's election and predestination. This topic comprises two fundamental aspects. First, we must grapple with the understanding of how some are predestined for salvation while others are destined for condemnation. Then, we shall explore how this world is governed through God's providence, as every event and occurrence rests upon His divine order.

However, before delving further into this subject, I must offer a preamble to two categories of people. The discussion surrounding predestination is inherently intricate, and human curiosity has the potential to obscure, complicate, and even render it perilous. Human understanding, driven by an insatiable desire to unveil all that God has kept hidden, often strays into treacherous territories. Witnessing many falling into the abyss of audacity and presumption, even

among those who are otherwise virtuous, it is necessary to guide them in their approach to this topic.

First and foremost, those who embark on the journey of comprehending predestination must recognize that they are entering the realm of divine wisdom. Overconfidence and audacity in this endeavor will only lead to a labyrinth without an exit. It is not reasonable to scrutinize the hidden aspects of God's plan, those intricacies He has chosen not to reveal, nor is it appropriate to subject His boundless wisdom, which should be adored rather than fully grasped, to human inquiry, even extending to the realm of His eternity.

God has communicated to us His will and secrets through His Word. He has shared all that He deemed pertinent and beneficial for us. When we grasp the understanding that God's Word is the exclusive path to gain lawful knowledge about Him and the sole source of illumination to perceive all that is permissible to behold, we will be naturally restrained and discouraged from recklessness. When we venture beyond the confines of Scripture, we traverse an uncertain path, shrouded in darkness, destined for error, stumbles, and pitfalls. We must always bear in mind that desiring knowledge beyond what is given to us in God's Word is not only imprudent but also perilous and potentially fatal. In moments of curiosity, let us remember the sage counsel that pursuing knowledge of God's majesty can result in our being crushed by His glory (Proverbs 25:27). A healthy way to deter us from audacity is the recognition that it leads to our destruction.

On the flip side, there are those who, in their quest to counteract this peril, seek to bury practically all mention of predestination. At the very least, they caution against attempting to understand it, deeming

it too hazardous. While this moderation is commendable—urging people to approach God's mysteries with great sobriety—descending too far into this cautionary stance is unprofitable for human spirits that are not easily restrained. Therefore, to strike a harmonious balance, we must return to God's Word, which provides us with a dependable guide for understanding. Scripture serves as the Holy Spirit's school, offering all that is salutary and useful to know and nothing unnecessary. We must be vigilant not to hinder the faithful from seeking what is contained in Scripture about predestination, lest we seem to deprive them of the good that God has shared or censure the Holy Spirit for revealing what some may want to suppress.

Hence, we should permit the Christian to open their eyes and intellect to the teachings addressed to them by God, with the condition that they exercise restraint. When they discern that God's holy revelation has reached its limit, they must close the path of inquiry. This moderation acts as a protective boundary. In our pursuit of knowledge, let us follow God and keep Him ever before us. Conversely, when He concludes His instruction, let us abstain from further inquiry. The dangers that concern those cautious individuals we mentioned are not of such significance that we should cease listening to God in all His revelations.

I openly acknowledge that the wicked and blasphemers often seize upon the topic of predestination as an opportunity for censure, ridicule, or mockery. However, if we were to fear their insolence, we would have to remain silent about the fundamental tenets of our faith. They do not spare even a single article from their blasphemies. A rebellious spirit will take offense when they hear that there are three persons within a single divine essence, just as they will when they learn that God foresaw the future of each person during

creation. These scoffers will not withhold their laughter upon hearing that the world was created scarcely five thousand years ago, questioning why God's power lay dormant for such an extended period. Should we then refrain from discussing the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit or remain silent about the creation of the world? God's truth, in this matter as in all others, is unwavering, unyielding, and unafraid of the blasphemy of the wicked.

As St. Augustine aptly argues in his treatise titled "On the Gift of Perseverance," false apostles could not shame St. Paul into altering his teachings, even when they censured and slandered him. Those who, even among the faithful, deem this debate perilous, asserting that it contradicts exhortations, weakens faith, and troubles hearts, make frivolous claims. St. Augustine himself acknowledges that he faced censure for what was perceived as excessive preaching on predestination. However, he effectively refuted these objections, as he was more than capable of doing. As for us, given the multitude of absurdities and objections raised against the teachings we are about to impart, it is prudent to address each one in turn.

For now, I beseech all people, universally, not to pry into matters that God has chosen to keep hidden, nor to neglect those He has revealed, out of fear of being condemned for excessive curiosity on one hand or ingratitude on the other. St. Augustine offers sage advice: we can safely follow Scripture, which accommodates itself to our lowly state, much like a mother stooping to the weakness of her child when teaching them to walk.

The early church fathers interpreted the terms "foreknowledge," "predestination," "election," and "providence" in various ways. To avoid unnecessary contention, we will adhere to the distinct meaning of each term. When we attribute "foreknowledge" to God, we affirm

that all things have eternally been within His purview and continue to be so. There is no past or future in His knowledge; all things are perpetually present to Him. He perceives them not as fragments or pieces, as we might recall things in our imagination, but truly, as if they were before His very eyes. This foreknowledge extends across the entire world and encompasses all creatures. "Predestination," on the other hand, refers to God's eternal plan, by which He has determined the destiny of each individual. God did not create all in the same condition; instead, He ordains some for eternal life and others for eternal damnation. Hence, according to the ultimate purpose for which a person is created, we declare them predestined for life or death. "Providence" signifies the divine order that God upholds in governing the world and orchestrating all things. We shall begin our discussion with predestination.

In accordance with the clear teachings of Scripture, we affirm that the Lord, in His eternal and unchanging counsel, has predestined some for salvation and others for destruction. We proclaim that He welcomes those whom He calls to salvation through His free mercy, without regard for their own merit. Conversely, the path to eternal life is closed to those whom He has destined for damnation, a decree executed through His secret and incomprehensible yet righteous and just judgment. Furthermore, we instruct that the calling of the elect serves as a demonstration and testimony of their election. Likewise, their justification serves as another indication of it, leading them to the ultimate glory that fulfills this divine purpose.

However, it's important to address the various objections and misconceptions that have arisen around predestination. I will briefly consider the reasons proposed by learned scholars, as well as those that may confuse the less informed or create doubts about the justice of God as we present it.

The prevailing belief among many is that God distinguishes among people based on the merits He foresees in each individual. According to this view, He adopts those into His fold whose nature He foresees as worthy of His grace, while leaving those destined for perdition due to their inclination toward wickedness or impiety. This common notion has found proponents not only among the general populace but also among eminent scholars throughout history. I concede this point openly to demonstrate that even if these scholars were cited against us, it would not significantly undermine our position. The truth of God shines so clearly in this matter that it cannot be obscured, and it remains firm and unshaken by any human authority.

St. Paul, in his teaching that we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), dispels any consideration of our own worthiness. Essentially, he asserts that because God found nothing worthy of His election in any of Adam's descendants, He turned His gaze toward His Christ to choose as members of His body those whom He wished to receive into eternal life. Therefore, it is firmly established among the faithful that God has adopted us in Christ to be His heirs because, in our own inherent nature, we were unworthy of such a lofty privilege. This sentiment is echoed in another passage where St. Paul urges the Colossians to give thanks to God for making them worthy to partake in the inheritance of the saints (Col. 1:12).

If God's election precedes the grace by which He enables us to become worthy of the future glory, what merit could He possibly find in us to motivate such a choice? Another passage reinforces this point: "God has chosen us before the foundation of the world, according to the good pleasure of His will, to be holy and without blemish before Him" (Eph. 1:4). By emphasizing God's good

pleasure, St. Paul negates any consideration of our merits. To put it differently, he essentially declares, "He chose us so that we may be holy, not because He foresaw that we would be holy." These two ideas are contradictory: that the faithful achieve holiness through election and that their holiness is the cause of their election.

Some attempt to employ sophistry, arguing that while God does not reward election based on prior merits, He bestows it due to future merits. However, when St. Paul states that we were chosen so that we might be holy, it signifies that all holiness originates with and commences from election. How can that which is produced by election serve as its cause? Moreover, the apostle reinforces this argument by adding that God chose us "according to the purpose of His will, which He set forth in Christ" (Eph. 1:9). This indicates that God considered nothing outside of Himself when making this divine decision. Thus, when St. Paul promptly continues, "to the praise of His glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6), it becomes evident that the exaltation of God's grace in our election rests on its being a free act. Consequently, our election would not be free if God, in electing His own, took into account their future deeds. This aligns with Christ's statement to His disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16), which not only excludes any merit preceding their election but also affirms that they possess nothing of themselves except what God, in His mercy, has provided for them. Let us interpret St. Paul's words in this manner: "Who has first given something to God, so that God should repay him?" (Romans 11:35). St. Paul's intention here is to emphasize that God's goodness precedes us in such a manner that it discovers nothing within us, whether in the past or the future, that would merit this goodness as our own.

Furthermore, in the Epistle to the Romans, where he commences this argument from a loftier standpoint and explores it more comprehensively, he addresses the state of the elect and the reprobate through the example of Jacob and Esau in this manner: "Before they were born, and before they had done either good or evil, in order that God's plan might remain according to His election, it was said—not on the basis of works but of God's calling—'the elder will serve the younger,' as it is written: 'I have hated Esau and have loved Jacob'" (Romans 9:11–13). What do they assert to obscure these words—those who attribute some place in our election to works, whether preceding or future? Doing so entirely contradicts what the apostle affirms: that the distinction between the two brothers does not rely on any consideration of their works but on God's pure calling, because God determined His course of action with them before their birth. This clever argument, employed by the scholastics, would not have escaped St. Paul's notice if it had possessed any basis. However, because he understood that God cannot foresee any intrinsic goodness in a person except that which He intends to bestow through the grace of His election, he dismisses the misguided notion of making good works the cause and source of election.

From the apostle's teachings, we can conclude that the salvation of the faithful rests upon God's good pleasure in election and that this grace is not achieved through any works but flows from His gratuitous kindness. We are given something akin to a mirror or painting to illustrate this. Esau and Jacob, being brothers begotten by the same parents and in the same birth, were still in their mother's womb, unborn, and identical in every way. Nevertheless, God's judgment sets them apart, as He chooses one and rejects the other. While there was only one birthright that could have elevated one above the other, even this is disregarded, and what was denied to

the firstborn is granted to the second. On numerous occasions, it seems that God has intentionally rejected the firstborn to remove all grounds for boasting in the flesh. He rejected Ishmael and favored Isaac; He lowered Manasseh and elevated Ephraim.

If someone responds, "We should not draw conclusions about eternal life from these lesser and worldly matters, and it is ludicrous to suggest that one who has been elevated to the honor of the firstborn has been adopted into heavenly inheritance" (there are many who do not hesitate to criticize even St. Paul, claiming that he has misinterpreted Scripture in this manner), I would reply that the apostle did not speak carelessly, nor did he intend to distort the testimonies of Scripture. Instead, he perceived something that such individuals fail to grasp. He understood that God intended to use a corporeal sign as a representation of Jacob's spiritual election, which was otherwise concealed within His divine plan. For if we do not link Jacob's receiving of the birthright to his future life, the blessing he obtained would be utterly nonsensical, as it brought him nothing but misery and calamity. Since St. Paul recognized that God used this external blessing to signify the eternal blessing He had prepared for His servant in the heavenly kingdom, he had no hesitation in utilizing this external proof to demonstrate Jacob's election by God. Therefore, Jacob was elected, and Esau was rejected, even though they did not differ in merit. If one asks for the reason, St. Paul provides it thus: "It is said in Moses: 'I will have pity on the one whom I will pity, and I will be merciful to the one to whom I give mercy'" (Romans 9:15). What does this mean?

Undoubtedly, the Lord makes it abundantly clear that He does not find any merit in us that would compel Him to do us good. Instead, He extends His mercy entirely from His own grace. Thus, the salvation of His people is His own work. Since God has anchored our

salvation in Himself alone, why do you revert to yourself? Since He designates His mercy alone as the sole reason, why do you partially turn your attention to your own merits? Because He desires to focus your entire attention solely on His goodness, why do you direct it towards your works?

However, someone may say, "St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, and Origen have written that God dispenses His grace to individuals based on His foreknowledge of how each person will use it." I admit that St. Augustine initially held this view, but after gaining a deeper understanding of Scripture, he not only renounced it as false but vehemently refuted it. Particularly when addressing the Pelagians, who persisted in this error, he employed these words: "Who would not be astonished that the apostle overlooked this profound subtlety? After presenting the case of Esau and Jacob, a scenario quite foreign to the topic at hand, and raising the question, 'What then? Is there iniquity in God?' he should have simply responded that God foresaw the merits of each one, if he wanted to deal with the matter briefly. Yet he does not say that; instead, he attributes everything to God's judgment and mercy." Let the testimony of St. Augustine carry weight among those who readily invoke the authority of the fathers!

Let us, for a moment, set aside the words of the fathers and focus on the essence of the matter. St. Paul posed a profoundly challenging question: whether God acts justly by bestowing His grace only upon those He chooses. He could have easily answered this question by asserting that God takes into account one's works. So why did he not do so? Why did he continue in such a way as to leave us with the same dilemma? The reason is clear: he should not have said that because the Holy Spirit, speaking through him, did not allow him to forget anything. He straightforwardly replies that God admits His elect into grace simply because it pleases Him and that He bestows

mercy upon them because it pleases Him. This testimony from Moses, which he cites, "I will have pity on whom I have pity and I will give mercy to whom I give mercy" (Exodus 33:19), is equivalent to saying that God is moved by no other cause except His own will. That is why St. Augustine's statement in another context remains true: "God's grace did not find anyone it should elect but makes those He elects what they should be."

I am not concerned with Thomas Aquinas' subtlety: "Although the foreknowledge of merits cannot be named as a cause of predestination on God's part, nevertheless we can call it that on our part, as when it is said that God has predestined His elect to receive glory for their merits because He willed to give them the grace by which they merit this glory." On the contrary, because God intends for us to consider nothing other than His pure goodness in our election, it is a perverse inclination to seek to consider something more. If I were to engage in subtle argumentation, I would have ample material to refute Thomas' sophistry. He argues that glory is in some way predetermined for the elect based on their merits, as God first gives them the grace to merit glory. But what if I were to counter that the grace of the Holy Spirit, which our Lord bestows upon His own, serves their election and follows rather than precedes it, as it is conferred upon those to whom the inheritance of life had already been assigned? This is the order God maintains: justification occurs after election. Consequently, God's predestination, in which He chooses to call His own to salvation, is the cause of His decision to justify them, rather than the other way around. But let us set aside all these debates, as they are superfluous among those who believe they possess enough wisdom from God's Word. As an early church doctor wisely said, "those who attribute the cause of election to merits seek to know more than is necessary."

Now, let us consider the reprobate, whom St. Paul also addresses in this passage (Romans 9:17ff). Just as Jacob, without having earned any good works, is received into grace, Esau, having committed no offense, is rejected by God. If we turn our thoughts toward works, we would be contradicting the apostle, as if he had not observed what is evident to us. Clearly, he did not overlook this, for he explicitly highlights that when they had done neither good nor evil, one was chosen while the other was rejected. From this, he deduces that the foundation of predestination is not rooted in works. Furthermore, when he posed the question of whether God is unjust, he did not argue that God recompensed Esau based on his wickedness (which would have been the most straightforward and certain defense of God's equity). Instead, he offered a completely different solution: God raises up the reprobate in order to manifest His glory in them. Finally, he concludes that God is merciful to whom He pleases and hardens whom He pleases; it is clear how he attributes both to God's good pleasure. Thus, if we cannot attribute any reason why God accepts His elect other than His own pleasure, then we likewise cannot attribute any reason why He rejects the others apart from His will. When it is said that God hardens or shows mercy according to His pleasure, it serves as a warning not to seek any external cause for His actions.

Now, when human understanding encounters these concepts, its unruliness often leads to dissent and agitation, as if a battle trumpet had sounded. Carnal individuals, driven by madness, argue against God as if they could subject Him to their reproaches in a court of law! They initially question why God would be angry with His creatures who had not provoked Him through any offense. They deem it more fitting for a tyrant than a just judge to destroy whomever He pleases purely out of His own will. Consequently, they believe people have a valid reason to complain about God if, by His sovereign will and

without any merit of their own, they are predestined to eternal death. Should such thoughts ever enter the minds of the faithful, they should be adequately armed to rebuff them. We must realize the temerity in attempting to explore the causes of God's will, for His will is, and rightfully should be, the cause of all that transpires. If His will has a cause, it must precede His will itself, which would imply that His will is subordinate to that cause—an idea we must not entertain. God's will is the supreme and sovereign standard of righteousness, and everything He wills should be considered righteous because He wills it. Therefore, when someone inquires, "Why does God do this?" we must respond, "Because He willed it." If they inquire further, asking, "Why did He will it?" they seek something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found. Let human audacity restrain itself and refrain from seeking the nonexistent, lest it fail to discover what does exist. This restraint will serve as a beneficial deterrent for those who aspire to contemplate God's secrets with reverence.

In the face of the wicked who openly blaspheme against God, the Lord can defend Himself perfectly well through His righteousness. We need not serve as His advocates when He, by removing all ambiguity from their consciences, will press and convict them until they can find no escape. Nevertheless, so that we do not bear the brunt of their mockery of His holy name, He equips us with the weapons of His Word to withstand their fury. So, if someone challenges us with the question, "Why has God predestined some to damnation who had never merited it since they did not yet exist?" we should counter with a question of our own: "What does God owe to people if He assesses them based on their nature?" Since we are all corrupted and tainted by vices, God can only regard us with disdain. This is not the result of tyrannical cruelty but rather reasonable equity. If all people, by their inherent nature, stand guilty of condemnation to death, what wrongdoing, I ask you, can those

whom God has predestined to death complain of? Let all descendants of Adam step forward to contest and dispute with their Creator concerning the fact that, before their birth, His providence had set them apart for perpetual wretchedness. When, however, God leads them to acknowledge their own sinful state, what grounds do they have for protest? If they all emerge from a corrupt mass (Romans 9:21), why should it astonish anyone that they are inclined toward damnation? Therefore, they should not accuse God of injustice since, by His eternal judgment, they are ordained to a condemnation to which their very nature inclines them.

Yet someone may inquire: "Have they not been predestined by God's decree to this corruption which, you say, is the cause of their destruction? If that is the case, when they perish in their corruption, it is nothing more than bearing the calamity into which Adam fell by God's will, dragging all his descendants along with him. Is God not unjust to play so cruelly with His creatures?" In response, I acknowledge that it was by God's will that all children of Adam fell into the misery to which they are now bound. As I mentioned earlier, we must always return to God's pleasure alone, and He keeps the source of that pleasure concealed within Himself. However, it does not follow that one can speak ill of God. We must align ourselves with St. Paul in this regard: "O man, who are you to argue a case with God? Does the pot ask the Potter who made it why He made it this way? Does the Potter not have power to make from the same earth a vessel for honor and another for dishonor?" (Romans 9:20–21). Some may deny that God's righteousness is defended in this manner, but their objections amount to mere evasion, a tactic often employed by those who lack a proper excuse. To them, it may seem that this argument merely states that God's power cannot be thwarted in doing as He pleases.

I assert that this is something entirely different. What more firm and solid reasoning can we offer than to encourage contemplation of who God is? For how could the Judge of the world commit any wrongdoing? If it is His nature to act righteously, He naturally loves righteousness and detests all sin. Therefore, when faced with such questions, the apostle did not seek refuge as if he were caught in an embarrassing situation; rather, he aimed to demonstrate that God's righteousness is too lofty and excellent to be confined to human standards or grasped by human understanding. He admits that God's judgments possess a depth that can engulf the understanding of the entire world should they attempt to explore such depths. However, it would be highly unreasonable to subject God's works to the condition that, if we cannot comprehend the reason, we dare to censure them. Should a Manichean, Celestine, or any other heretic come to insult God's providence, we must, as St. Paul did, assert that there is no need to provide a reason, for it far surpasses our understanding due to its magnitude. What folly is there in expecting God's power to be so limited that it can only do what our finite minds can grasp? I echo St. Augustine's view that God created some individuals whom He foresaw would be eternally lost, and He did this because it pleased Him. Now, why it pleased Him is not for us to inquire about, as we cannot comprehend it.

On the other hand, it is not fitting for us to argue about whether God's will is just or not. When speaking of His will, we must understand it as an infallible standard of righteousness. Does one hesitate to discern sin where righteousness is clearly evident? Therefore, we should not be ashamed to silence the mouths of the wicked in the manner of St. Paul. When they dare to bark like dogs, our response should be: "Who are you, poor souls, to bring charges against God merely because He has not lowered the grandeur of His works to your limited understanding? Are you suggesting that what

He does is sinful because it is concealed from us?" Further discussion would be fruitless, as we would not satisfy their insolence. God requires no defense other than what He has provided through His Spirit, spoken through the mouth of St. Paul. Moreover, we learn how to speak correctly when we speak in accordance with God's will.

There's another objection raised, not so much to censure God, but rather to blame the sinner. While it's true that the sinner cannot justify themselves without dishonoring the Judge, let's examine this objection. "Why," they ask, "does God consider as vice those things which He has made necessary through His predestination? What could the sinner do? Resist God's decrees? But that would be in vain, and they couldn't do it at all. So it's not right for God to punish them for things for which His predestination is the principal cause."

Here, I won't rely on the common defense offered by ecclesiastical scholars, stating that God's foreknowledge doesn't prevent a person from being considered a sinner since God foresees their vices, which are not His own. Those who raise these objections would not be satisfied with such an answer. They might say, "If God wanted to, He could prevent the evils He foresees. Because He doesn't, it appears that God intentionally created people in such a way that they would behave as they do. If they were created in a manner that forces them to act as they do, then we cannot blame them for things they cannot avoid, especially when they are constrained by God's will."

Let's consider how to address this difficulty. First, we must accept what Solomon tells us: "God created everything for Himself, even the wicked for the day of their destruction" (Proverbs 16:4). Therefore, since God is in control of all things and can grant life or death at His will, He arranges and ordains by His plan that some are indeed destined for eternal damnation from the moment of their birth, all

for the purpose of glorifying His name through their destruction. While some might argue that God does not impose necessity through His providence, but instead, seeing how wicked people are, He creates them for such a condition, this perspective is incomplete. Early church scholars occasionally employed this solution, albeit hesitantly. The Sorbonne scholars rely on it almost exclusively, as if there were no counterarguments. Personally, I would agree that foreknowledge alone does not impose necessity on creatures, although not everyone may concur with this viewpoint. Some argue that foreknowledge is the cause of everything. However, Laurentius Valla offers a subtler distinction, demonstrating that this argument is invalid since life and death result from God's will rather than His foreknowledge. If God merely foresaw what would happen to people without arranging or ordaining it according to His good pleasure, then one might have reason to discuss the necessity produced by God's foreknowledge. But since He only foresees future events because He has determined for them to occur, it is irrational to dispute and argue about the effects of His foreknowledge when it is evident that everything unfolds according to His plan and arrangement. It is undeniable that when God created man, He foresaw the ultimate outcome and did so because He had ordained it in His plan. If someone criticizes God's foreknowledge in this context, they do so rashly. After all, why should God be reproached for not remaining ignorant of things that were destined to happen?

Therefore, if there is any legitimate or reasonable complaint, it should be directed toward God's providence. What I say should not be surprising: God not only foresaw the fall of the first man and the subsequent destruction of all his descendants through that fall, but He also willed it. Just as it is part of His wisdom to possess foreknowledge of all future events, it is also within His power to rule and govern all things according to His will. Here, some turn to the

distinction between God's will and permission, arguing that the wicked perish because God permits it, not because He wills it. But why should we say He permits it unless He wills it? While some may suggest that it is primarily through permission, rather than God's ordination, that people bring damnation upon themselves, it is unreasonable to think that God did not ordain the conditions for the fate of His chief and noblest creatures. I do not hesitate, then, to affirm with St. Augustine that God's will is the necessity behind all things, and what He has ordained and willed must inevitably occur, just as all that He has foreseen will undoubtedly happen.

Now, if the Pelagians, Manicheans, Anabaptists, or Epicureans (as we deal with this matter, we encounter these four sects) seek to excuse themselves through the necessity imposed by God's predestination, they are not providing a unique argument. For if predestination is nothing more than the arrangement and dispensation of divine righteousness, which remains irreproachable even though hidden, then it is certain that those not worthy of being predestined to a different end are destined for their destruction. Furthermore, their perdition proceeds from God's predestination in such a way that the cause and the matter are always found within them. The first man fell because God judged it expedient, although we know nothing about the reasons behind this judgment. However, it is certain that He did so only because He saw that it would bring glory to His name. Therefore, when we speak of God's glory, we must also consider His righteousness, for what deserves praise must be equitable. Man fell as ordained by God but fell due to his own vices. Just before this, the Lord had declared that everything He had made was very good. So whence came human perversity except from man turning away from his God? To ensure that this perversity is not attributed to His creation, the Lord had affirmed the goodness of

everything He had created. Therefore, through their own wickedness, humans corrupted the good nature they had received from the Lord.

Through his fall, he dragged all his descendants into destruction with him. Therefore, let us reflect on the corrupt nature of people as the evident cause of their damnation, rather than attempting to find it in God's predestination, where it remains hidden and utterly incomprehensible. Let us not be disturbed by submitting our minds to God's infinite wisdom, even if it means yielding to His wisdom in many mysteries. In matters that are neither lawful nor possible to fully understand, ignorance is a form of wisdom, and the desire to know them is a kind of folly.

Someone may argue that I haven't provided a reason to counter the blasphemous excuse by Pelagians and others (who claim they cannot escape the necessity of sin) that I condemn. I acknowledge that there may never be a way to completely silence impiety and blasphemy. However, it seems to me that I have presented enough to remove not only any reasonable basis for complaint but also any pretext. The reprobate seek to justify their sins by claiming they cannot escape the necessity of sin, especially since it originates from God's ordinance and will. I deny that this can excuse them because God's ordinance, despite our ignorance, is equitable and just. From this, we can conclude that they suffer no punishment other than that which is imposed by God's righteous judgment. Furthermore, it is perverse of them to attempt to probe into God's secrets, which are beyond human reach, in search of the origin of their damnation while neglecting the corruption of their nature, which is its true source. The fact that this corruption should not be attributed to God is evident from His declaration that His creation was good. Even though, by God's eternal providence, humanity was created to experience the misery they now face, they brought this misery upon

themselves through their own degeneration from the pure nature God originally bestowed upon them.

God's adversaries raise another objection to tarnish His predestination. When we speak of those whom the Lord separates from the universal human condition to make them heirs of His kingdom, we declare that God chooses them solely based on His good pleasure. They argue that this implies God is partial, something Scripture consistently denies. So, they reason, either Scripture contradicts itself, or God must consider the merits of those He elects. However, Scripture's assertion of God not being a respecter of persons has a different meaning than what they assume. It refers not to individuals but to external factors related to a person's appearance or circumstances that may receive favor or disfavor, such as wealth, honor, nobility, social status, nationality, physical appearance, and other similar things. St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. James all use this phrase to emphasize that God does not discriminate based on these factors. Therefore, when we say that God elects those He pleases solely by His good pleasure, without considering their merits, and rejects others, we do not contradict Scripture.

To address their concerns more thoroughly, consider this: they ask why, out of two people with identical merits, God chooses one and leaves the other. I counter by asking whether, in the one who is chosen, they believe there is anything that inclines God's heart to love them. If they admit there is nothing, then it follows that God's choice is not based on personal attributes but on His mercy alone, which He is free to extend to whomever and whenever He wishes. Hence, when God chooses one and rejects another, it does not result from His consideration of the individual but from His unmerited mercy. Thus, it is false and wicked to accuse God of unjust partiality because His predestination does not treat everyone in the same

manner. Those who demand that if all are guilty, all should be equally punished are essentially asking God to withhold His mercy. They imply that when God desires to show mercy, He must completely abandon His role as Judge. By wishing that, if all have sinned, all should be punished alike, they seek to strip God of His capacity for mercy or only allow Him to extend it under the condition of renouncing His role as a just Judge.

Therefore, the words of St. Augustine are entirely fitting: "Since the entire human race fell into condemnation in Adam, those whom the Lord elevates to honor are not the agents of their own righteousness but the recipients of God's mercy. As for those who are reprobated, they do not have to be called to anything other than God's judgment, and this does not constitute injustice on His part." Furthermore, he states, "That God renders punishment to those He has reprobated, which is their due, and gives grace to those He has chosen, which is not their due, can be shown to be fair and irreproachable by the example of a creditor; it is lawful for him to remit the debt to one and demand it from another. Likewise, the Lord can bestow His grace on whomever He pleases out of His mercy and withhold it from others as a just Judge, all in accordance with His divine will. By granting grace to some undeserving souls and not to others, He illustrates both His free grace and the justice that all deserve."

The adversaries of divine truth put forth another objection to challenge the doctrine of predestination. They claim that when predestination is established, all concern and effort towards living a righteous life is rendered futile. They argue, "If one learns that death or life has already been determined for them by God's unchangeable plan, why should they bother with how they live? Since God's predestination cannot be affected by their actions, they may indulge their desires recklessly." While this objection is not entirely

unfounded, it is exploited by some who disparage God's predestination, using it as an excuse to disregard moral guidance and warnings, saying, "God knows what He has planned for us; if He has chosen to save us, we will be saved in His time, and if He has destined us for damnation, our efforts to save ourselves are in vain!"

However, Scripture instructs us differently, urging God's children to approach this mystery with reverence and humility, rather than impudent curiosity. Scripture does not reveal predestination to encourage arrogance or to entice us to pry into God's inaccessible secrets with unwarranted audacity. Instead, it teaches us to approach God's judgment with humility and reverence while magnifying His mercy. The faithful should strive for this goal. The impious sentiments of those who dismiss all warnings and remonstrances, using predestination as an excuse for licentiousness, are soundly refuted by St. Paul. They argue that they have no reason to live righteously because, if they are among the elect, their vices will not impede their salvation. St. Paul, on the contrary, teaches that the purpose of our election is that we should lead a holy and blameless life (Ephesians 1:4). If the very purpose of our election is to live a sanctified life, it should motivate us to pursue holiness rather than providing an excuse for complacency. The distinction between these two perspectives is crucial: neglecting to do good because of election's sufficiency for salvation versus recognizing that election is the very reason to engage in good deeds. How strikingly different these two positions are! It is evident that those who misuse predestination in such a manner gravely distort the proper order of predestination.

As for the second aspect, concerning those who argue that someone reprobated by God wastes their efforts in striving for purity and innocence, they are convicted of blatant falsehood. From where does

such effort originate if not from God's election? Those reprobated, being vessels prepared for dishonor, persistently provoke God's wrath through countless transgressions, thus confirming God's predetermined judgment against them. Far from futile resistance, their actions only reinforce the divine decree.

To gain better clarity on this matter, let us consider the concept of the calling of the elect, as well as the hardening and blinding of the reprobate.

Election, which the Lord keeps hidden within Himself, is ultimately revealed through His calling. I often refer to calling as the testimony of election. "For those whom He has chosen, He has predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son; those whom He has predestined, He has called; and those whom He has called, He has justified, in order to one day glorify them" (Romans 8:29-30). Although the Lord has already adopted the elect as His children, they do not fully experience this great gift until He calls them. Thus, when they are called, they begin to partake in the blessings of their election. This is why St. Paul refers to the Spirit received by the elect as the Spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15). It is also described as the Seal and Pledge of their future inheritance, as it confirms and seals within their hearts the assurance of their adoption. The Lord chooses those whom He elects as His children and determines to be their Father. Through His calling, He welcomes them into His family and shares Himself with them.

Scripture connects calling with election to emphasize that we should find nothing in it except God's boundless mercy. If we inquire about who God calls and why, Scripture provides a straightforward answer: He calls those whom He has elected. Therefore, when we examine election, we see that mercy alone permeates every aspect of it. This

aligns with the words of St. Augustine, which I would rather use than my own to refute common misconceptions: "If the apostle merely intended to say that one's willingness and effort are ineffective without the Lord's mercy, we could reverse the argument and claim that God's mercy alone is ineffectual without human will and effort. Since this interpretation is clearly absurd, we must understand that the apostle intended to attribute everything to God's mercy, leaving nothing to our will or effort." Take note of these words from the esteemed Augustine. I care little for the subtleties that others bring forth, arguing that St. Paul would not have spoken in such a manner if there were no role for human will and effort. St. Paul was addressing those who divided salvation between God's grace and human will and effort. They asserted that neither human desire nor human striving could achieve anything unless aided by God's grace. But if God grants His assistance, both human will and effort contribute to acquiring salvation. To counter this equivocation, I prefer to rely on St. Augustine's words, which emphasize that St. Paul attributed everything to God's mercy without leaving room for human will or effort.

What more do the prophets do than continually preach God's free calling? We can discern this aspect of calling in the very substance of the message. It firmly rests upon the proclamation of the Word and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Let us take a moment to understand to whom the Lord offers His Word. He declares, "I was found by those who did not seek me; I have appeared to those who were not asking for me; I have said to those who were not calling on my name: 'Here I am'" (Isaiah 65:1). To ensure that the Jews do not believe that this grace is exclusive to the Gentiles, the Lord reminds them of where He found their forefather, Abraham. He drew him into His love from the depths of idolatry, where Abraham and his kin were engulfed (Joshua 24:2-3). When God, by His Word, illumines

those who have done nothing to deserve it, He provides a clear sign of His unmerited goodness. Yet, to prevent the flesh from boasting in its responsiveness when called, He asserts that we have no ears to hear or eyes to see unless He has granted them to us—not according to our merit, but according to His election. An example of this can be found in the book of Acts, where both Jews and Gentiles hear St. Paul's preaching together. When all received the same teaching, it is noted that those whom God had preordained for eternal life believed (Acts 13:48). Is it not evident that this calling, in which election reigns throughout, is free?

This testimony not only refutes those who claim that individuals are God's partners, cooperatively fulfilling their calling but also those who suggest that election is uncertain and pending confirmation through calling. While it is true that calling confirms election, we should understand this confirmation as a testament or seal. However, it is erroneous to assert that election lacks efficacy until the Gospel is received, gaining strength through it.

Those who teach that the power and steadfastness of election hinge on the faith that connects us to election are mistaken. Instead, we should maintain a proper order by seeking certainty in our election through reliable indicators. The devil's temptation to cast doubt on the faith of believers by making them anxious about their election and leading them to seek it through incomprehensible paths is perilous. I refer to this as "seeking outside the way." It occurs when individuals strive to unravel the divine wisdom's inscrutable secrets, seeking to determine God's judgment from the dawn of eternity. In doing so, they plunge into a deep abyss, ensnaring themselves in traps from which escape is impossible, entering a dark abyss from which there is no return. This is a fitting illustration of how one can misinterpret predestination. The human spirit cannot be ensnared

by a more perilous fall than when conscience is tossed, and the peace and communion it should have with God are disrupted. This topic is like an ocean, and one must exercise caution, especially regarding this perilous reef, which one cannot approach without danger.

However, despite the potential dangers of navigating this topic, it can be approached safely, peacefully, and even joyfully unless one willingly places themselves in harm's way. Those who venture into God's eternal plan without His Word to ascertain their election risk descending into a deadly abyss. Conversely, those who rightly seek it, following the scriptural order, derive profound comfort from it. Therefore, let our approach be as follows: let us begin and end with God's calling. The Lord intends this to serve as a sign and assurance for us in comprehending all that is rightfully knowable about His divine plan. To emphasize the strength and certainty of this testimony, let us inquire further into its clarity.

To begin our contemplation, let us understand that if we seek God's paternal mercy and benevolence towards us, our gaze must be firmly fixed upon Christ. It is upon Him alone that the Father's good pleasure rests (Matthew 3:17). Should we desire salvation, life, and immortality, we must look nowhere else, for He alone is the source of life, the gateway to salvation, and the heir of the heavenly kingdom. Now, what is the aim of election if not to adopt us as God's children, granting us salvation and immortality through His grace and love? No matter where we turn or how closely we scrutinize it, we will discover that the purpose of our election does not extend beyond this. This is why it is said that those whom God has chosen to be His children are chosen in Christ (Ephesians 1:4). It is because He could not love us apart from Christ, nor could He honor us with His inheritance without first making us participants in Him. If we are elected in Christ, we will not find the assurance of our election in

ourselves or even in God the Father, if we envision Him in isolation from His Son. Thus, Christ becomes the mirror in which we rightly contemplate our election and find it without deception. Because He is the one into whom the heavenly Father has ordained to incorporate those whom He intended from all eternity to be His children, we have a sufficiently firm and clear testimony that we are inscribed in the book of life when we share in Christ.

Moreover, Christ sufficiently imparts Himself to us through the preaching of the gospel, bearing witness that the Father has given Him to us so that all His blessings may be ours. He is the assurance that all who receive Him in true faith will be considered the Father's children. If we desire anything beyond being God's children and heirs, we would be attempting to ascend higher than Christ Himself. But if becoming God's children and heirs is our ultimate goal, is it not utter folly to seek outside of Christ what we have already obtained in Him and can find nowhere else but in Him alone? Additionally, as Christ is the eternal Wisdom of the Father, the unchanging Truth, and the immutable Plan, we need not fear that His words will ever deviate from the Father's will. Instead, He faithfully reveals to us what the Father's will has been from the beginning and will be for all eternity.

Furthermore, our confidence is greatly strengthened by the connection between the firmness of our election and our calling. It is stated that those whom Christ has enlightened with knowledge of Himself and introduced into His church, He receives under His protection and care. It is also proclaimed that all those received by Christ have been entrusted to Him by the Father, who has placed them under His guardianship, leading them to eternal life (John 6:37-40, 17:2, 12). What more could we ask for? The Lord Jesus loudly proclaims that the Father has entrusted to Him all those He

desires to save. When we seek to know if God cares for our salvation, we need only inquire if He has entrusted it to Christ, whom He has appointed as the sole Guardian of all His own. If we doubt whether Christ has taken us under His tutelage and safeguard, He dispels our doubts by presenting Himself as the Shepherd, assuring us that we will be counted among His sheep if we listen to His voice. Therefore, let us receive Christ with open hearts, for He offers Himself to us with great kindness and welcomes us into His fold. There is no doubt that He will keep us securely in His flock and guard us as His own.

Yet, someone may raise concerns about the future, expressing worries about their own frailty. St. Paul cautions that God calls those He has elected (Romans 8:30), and the Lord Jesus Himself acknowledges that many are called but few are chosen (Matthew 22:14). In another instance, St. Paul advises us not to be overly confident: "Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). He also warns against arrogance, saying, "So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you" (Romans 11:20-21). Experience shows that faith and calling alone are insufficient, as perseverance is also required, and perseverance is not granted to all. In response, Christ has freed us from this entanglement. The promises made to us are undoubtedly meant for the future. "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37). "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40). "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:27-29). What Christ teaches

us here is to be assured of eternal salvation because we have been claimed by Him.

Someone might object by pointing out that it is a daily occurrence for those who appeared to belong to Christ to fall away. Even in the place where Christ declares that none of those given to Him by the Father will be lost, there is an exception made for the son of perdition (John 17:12). This is true; however, it is equally certain that such individuals never adhered to Christ with the kind of heartfelt confidence that would assure them of their election. As St. John states, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us" (1 John 2:19). I do not deny that they may have exhibited signs similar to those of the elect, but they did not possess the solid foundation of election that the faithful derive from the Gospel. Therefore, let us not allow these examples to unduly trouble us, preventing us from securely placing our trust in the promises of the Lord Jesus. In His declarations, He affirms that the Father has given Him all those who receive Him in true faith and that none of them will perish, for He is their Guardian and Protector. As for the issue of Judas, we shall address it separately in due course.

Regarding St. Paul's words, let us understand that he does not discourage us from seeking security, but rather, he warns against a worldly indifference that breeds pride, arrogance, and contempt for others. Such an attitude extinguishes humility and reverence for God, leading to forgetfulness of His grace. In this context, St. Paul addresses the Gentiles, urging them not to mistreat the Jews arrogantly and inhumanely, as the Jews had been replaced (Romans 9ff). St. Paul does not call for a fear that paralyzes us but rather one that, in teaching us to humbly revere God's grace, does not diminish our confidence in Him, as he emphasizes elsewhere.

As for Christ's statement that many are called but few are chosen, it requires a nuanced understanding. To grasp it correctly, we must recognize that there are two types of calling. The first is a universal calling that involves the external proclamation of the gospel, where the Lord invites all people without distinction. This includes those to whom He presents the gospel as both a fragrance of life and a cause for more severe condemnation (2 Corinthians 2:15–16). The second is a special calling that is extended primarily to faithful believers. Here, the internal light of the Holy Spirit takes root in their hearts. Occasionally, this special calling is also extended to those whom God briefly illumines but later, due to their ingratitude, abandons and allows to fall into greater spiritual blindness.

In Christ's parable, He likens God to a king who prepares a grand banquet. The king sends servants to invite a multitude (Matthew 22:1–14). Yet, few promise to attend, each citing their excuses. Consequently, the king is compelled to invite anyone they encounter in the streets. Up to this point, the parable pertains to the external calling. Then, Christ adds that God, like a host who welcomes his guests, goes from table to table to celebrate with all those He has received warmly. If He finds someone lacking the proper attire, He insists that they cannot dishonor His feast and must be cast out. This part of the parable applies to those who profess faith and are received into the Church but are not adorned with Christ's sanctification. It is said that eventually, the Lord will not tolerate such individuals who only bring shame to the Church. In accordance with their wicked deeds, He will cast them out. Thus, from a large number of people who are called, only a few are elected. However, it is not from this general calling that we should encourage the faithful to determine their election. The initial calling refers to the wicked. The second calling, accompanied by the Spirit of regeneration, serves as the pledge and seal of the future inheritance, marking our hearts

until the day of resurrection. Christ's earlier exception, stating that none of His sheep will perish except Judas, addresses this point.

Concerning Judas, he was not counted among Christ's sheep because he truly belonged to them but because he held the position of one. When the Lord speaks of electing him among the apostles, it pertains to his role: "I have chosen you twelve," He says, "and one of you is a devil" (John 6:70). Christ appointed Judas as an apostle, but when discussing election for salvation, He distinguishes him from the elect, as seen in His statement: "I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen" (John 13:18). Failure to distinguish the meaning of "election" in these passages can lead to confusion, but with proper discernment, clarity emerges. St. Gregory's assertion that we are certain of our calling but uncertain of our election is flawed. He encouraged fear and trembling regarding the latter, based on the reasoning that "we know what we are today but do not know what we will be tomorrow." However, due to his emphasis on works as the basis for election, he succeeded in generating fear and insecurity but failed to direct believers towards confidence in God's goodness. Indeed, as we have previously asserted, predestination, when contemplated correctly, does not undermine faith; instead, it fortifies it.

The elect are not all gathered into Christ's flock by His calling from their mothers' wombs or at the same time. Instead, God dispenses His grace to them as He pleases. Before they turn to this sovereign Shepherd, they wander aimlessly like others, scattered amid the chaos of this world. They differ in no way from the rest of humanity, except that God, in His special mercy, preserves them to prevent their plunge into eternal destruction. Therefore, when we observe them, we see a part of Adam's race, which is inherently tainted by its sinful origin. Their avoidance of utter godlessness does not result

from any innate goodness but stems from the Lord's watchful eye over their salvation and His outstretched hand, leading them toward it.

Regarding those who believe that the elect possess an inherent seed of election within them from birth, providing a perpetual inclination towards the fear of God, their position lacks scriptural support and contradicts human experience. They may cite examples to argue that some of the elect were not entirely devoid of religious inclinations before their illumination. They might mention St. Paul's blamelessness in his Pharisaical zeal and Cornelius the centurion's favor with God due to his prayers (Acts 10:1–2). While we can concede the case of St. Paul, we must challenge their assertion about Cornelius. In truth, Cornelius had already experienced regeneration and illumination to a degree that he only lacked a clearer revelation of the gospel. However, these examples do not prove their point. Even if they presented a dozen such examples, would it follow that all the elect possess the same spiritual disposition? This argument is as flawed as asserting that the integrity of Socrates, Aristides, Xenocrates, Scipio, Curius, Camillus, and other pagans implies that all idolaters exhibit lives of holiness and integrity.

Moreover, their argument holds no weight in light of scriptural evidence. When St. Paul describes the state of the Ephesians before their regeneration, he does not find any trace of this supposed seed of election. He declares that they were "dead in trespasses and sins," walking according to the world and the devil, fulfilling the desires of the flesh, and being naturally children of wrath (Ephesians 2:1–3). He further emphasizes their past state of hopelessness and godlessness in this world (Ephesians 2:12). Perhaps they argue that these references pertain to ignorance of the truth, a condition they concede the faithful were bound by before their calling. However,

this is an audacious claim, as St. Paul uses this idea to admonish the Ephesians to abstain from lying and stealing. Let us grant this argument for a moment; how will they respond to other passages? St. Paul, addressing the Corinthians, categorically states that idolaters, fornicators, adulterers, the effeminate, sodomites, thieves, and the greedy will not inherit the kingdom of God. He continues to explain that some of them used to be entangled in these vices before they knew Christ but were cleansed by His blood and delivered by His Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:9–11). To the Romans, he asks what fruit they had from their former lives, implying shame (Romans 6:19, 21). What seed of election, we must ask, was bearing fruit in those who, living entirely wicked and depraved lives, abandoned themselves to the most detestable vices?

Had the apostle intended to speak in the manner of these contemporary theologians, he should have admonished them to be grateful to God for sparing them from such misery. St. Peter, in his epistle, should have urged his readers to thank God for endowing them with a seed of holiness from the beginning. However, both St. Paul and St. Peter adopt a different tone. St. Paul warns the Corinthians about their past indulgence in sin and St. Peter exhorts his audience not to continue in those sins (1 Peter 4:3). If we seek examples, what seed of election did Rahab possess when she lived a sinful life (Joshua 2:1; James 2:25)? Likewise, Manasseh, who spilled the blood of prophets to the extent that Jerusalem "vomited" blood (2 Kings 21:16)? What about the repentant thief on the cross as he neared death (Luke 23:40–43)? Therefore, we should dismiss these unsubstantiated notions conceived by curious minds outside of scripture. Instead, let us stand firmly on what scripture contains: that we all were like lost sheep, each wandering astray in our own way toward destruction. The Lord, in His own time and as it pleases Him, rescues whom He chooses from the abyss of damnation, not

immediately but in His appointed time, preserving them from falling into irremediable blasphemy.

Just as the Lord, through the power of His calling, leads His elect to the salvation preordained for them in His eternal plan, He also has a purpose for judgment on the reprobate. He carries out His predetermined intentions for them. Those whom He created for damnation and eternal death, destined to be instruments of His wrath and examples of His severity, either lose the ability to hear His word or, through the preaching of His word, become further blinded and hardened. Countless examples support the former. Let us choose a notable one from more than four thousand years before Christ's coming. The Lord concealed the light of His saving teaching from all people during that time. If someone suggests that God withheld this grace because He deemed them unworthy, their successors were not more deserving. Why, then, did He grant this grace to some and not to others? Anyone attempting to find a loftier reason than God's hidden and secret plan will torment themselves in vain. There is no need for equivocations to defend God's glory; asserting that no one perishes without deserving it and that God, through His free kindness, delivers some from damnation is sufficient to uphold His honor. Therefore, when the Lord withholds the light of His truth from those He has reprobated, leaving them in blindness, He is, in fact, fulfilling His divine predestination.

Now, concerning the second part of this matter, we witness it daily, and numerous examples in scripture attest to it. Consider one hundred people who listen to the same sermon: twenty receive it with the obedience of faith, while the rest either pay no attention, mock, or outright reject and condemn it. Some may argue that this diversity arises from the wickedness and perversity of individuals. However, this explanation falls short. For the same wickedness

characterizes the understanding of all unless the Lord, through His grace, corrects it in some. So why does He extend His grace to some and not to others? St. Luke offers insight into those whom He calls, stating that God had preordained them to life (Acts 13:48). What then shall we think of the others except that they serve as instruments of His wrath, bringing shame upon themselves? Thus, let us not shy away from speaking as St. Augustine did: "God could indeed convert the will of all the wicked to good since He is all-powerful. There is no doubt about that. Why then does He not do it? Because He does not want to do it. Why does He not want to do it? That is hidden within Him." We should not seek to understand it more than is fitting.

It is more fitting to adopt this perspective than to equivocate with St. Chrysostom, who suggests that God draws those who call upon Him and extends His hand to help, implying that the difference lies not in God's judgment but in people's wills. However, this argument fails to address the fact that the Lord sends His word to some, knowing that it will only increase their blindness. Why did He send numerous messages to Pharaoh? Did He hope to soften Pharaoh's heart by sending one embassy after another? Before embarking on this mission, God already knew the outcome and foretold it to Moses: "Go," He said, "and tell him my will. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go" (Exodus 4:21). Similarly, when God appoints Ezekiel, He warns him that He is sending him to a rebellious and stubborn people, so that Ezekiel would not be surprised by their blindness and deafness (Ezekiel 2:3, 12:2). God also foretells to Jeremiah that his preaching will consume and scatter the people like straw (Jeremiah 1:10). Moreover, the prophecy in Isaiah makes this even more explicit, as the Lord sends Isaiah with the charge: "Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart

of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Isaiah 6:9–10). God directs His word toward them to render them more deaf, to darken their sight, and to dull their understanding, offering them a remedy but ensuring they will not be healed.

St. John cites this prophecy, explaining that the Jews could not believe in Christ's teaching because God's curse rested upon them (John 12:39–40). Therefore, we cannot question that when God chooses not to enlighten someone, He presents His teaching to them in a way that prevents them from profiting from it and leads them further into astonishment and stupidity. For Christ testifies that He only explains the parables to His apostles, imparting to them the grace to comprehend the mysteries of His kingdom, while withholding this grace from others (Matthew 13:11). So, what does the Lord intend in teaching those whom He knows will not understand? To understand this, we must consider the source of their vice and accept that we may not fully comprehend God's wisdom.

However, because certain passages in scripture may seem to suggest that the wicked perish only by resisting God's calling, we must briefly address this to show that these passages are not in contradiction to the points made earlier. Some opponents cite passages from St. Paul, such as "God wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4) and "He has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (Romans 11:32). Moreover, God's declaration through the prophet Ezekiel, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 18:23), is often invoked. Regarding the first passage from St. Paul, it must be understood in

its context. He was not speaking of all individuals but rather of all social ranks. Timothy was instructed to offer solemn prayers, even for kings and rulers. Since it might seem unusual to pray for such seemingly hopeless individuals, given their resistance to the Christian faith and active suppression of Christ's message, St. Paul added that such prayers are pleasing to God because He desires the salvation of people from all social classes. Thus, the meaning is not that God ensures the salvation of every individual but rather that He opens the path of salvation to people from all backgrounds.

Other testimonies do not reveal the secret judgments of the Lord but instead proclaim that forgiveness is prepared for all sinners who seek it through genuine repentance. If someone remains obstinate in interpreting the passage that states God desires to have mercy on all, I would counter that elsewhere it is written, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Psalm 115:3). Thus, we must interpret this passage in a way that aligns with the idea that "he has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy" (Romans 9:15) and that He does not extend it to all indiscriminately.

Someone might argue, "If that's the case, there's little certainty in the gospel promises, which, by testifying to God's will, seem to proclaim something contradictory to His secret determination." To this, I would respond with a firm no. Although the promises of salvation are universal, they do not contradict the predestination of the reprobate when we consider their fulfillment. We know that God's promises are effective when we receive them through faith; when faith is absent, these promises lose their power. Therefore, these promises align with God's eternal election. God promises salvation to all without distinction, but in reality, His mercy is received only by those He has illumined through faith. Those whom He has predestined to salvation experience the certainty of these promises, ensuring that

there is no contradiction between God's eternal election and the offer of His grace to the faithful. Why, then, does He say "all people"? This is so that troubled consciences may find solace in the knowledge that, among sinners, there is no distinction when they come to Him in faith. Conversely, this serves as a reminder to the wicked that they cannot claim ignorance as an excuse for their wretchedness, as they reject God's mercy through ingratitude. Thus, when God's mercy is presented to both the faithful and unbelievers through the gospel, it is faith, illuminated by God, that distinguishes between them. The faithful experience the efficacy of the gospel, while unbelievers derive no benefit from it. God's illumination aligns with His eternal election.

Now, we must consider the topic of God's providence, which governs the entire world. While a proper understanding of providence bolsters our faith, there are few who grasp and meditate on it correctly.

Most people envision providence (much like predestination) as merely God's foreknowledge, failing to recognize that everything is guided by His will and ordinance. Others acknowledge some form of divine governance, but it tends to be a vague and general oversight that sustains the world and its components. It does not extend to directing the actions of each creature. Some posit that this so-called "universal" providence does not hinder creatures from acting randomly, nor does it interfere with human free will. They compartmentalize the divine and human spheres, imagining that God merely imparts the capacity for movement to individuals while allowing them to plan their actions freely. In essence, the prevailing opinion is that God's power governs the world but not through deliberate providence; rather, individuals themselves determine everything that must be done. We can disregard the views of

Epicureans, who depict God as passive and uninvolved in anything, as well as those who assign Him control only over celestial matters, leaving earthly affairs to chance. Such notions are absurd and rejected by all reasonable beings.

The prevalent perspective on God's universal providence, which grants power but not direction, is widely accepted. However, even though it may appear plausible, it lacks truth and is untenable. By ascribing to God only a blind and unconsidered impetus, it strips Him of His primary role, which is to wisely guide and arrange all things toward their intended ends. This perspective reduces God to a mere figurehead, exerting nominal control over the world, rather than a God who actively governs and directs all creation with wisdom. But what is governance if not presiding over matters in a manner that brings order and purpose to everything? Scripture consistently reveals God's particular providence, leaving no room for doubt. The apostle asserts that "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), and Christ affirms that "my Father is always at his work to this very day" (John 5:17). While these passages demonstrate that the Lord continually labors and sustains all His creations, they are often associated with universal providence. Yet, there are unequivocal testimonies that leave no room for such equivocation. The prophet Jeremiah exclaims, "I know, Lord, that a person's way is not in his power, nor can he direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). Similarly, Solomon declares, "A person's steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand their own way?" (Proverbs 20:24). Hence, those who contend that God merely pushes individuals according to their natural inclinations, allowing them to direct their actions freely, miss the point entirely. If that were true, individuals would indeed have control over their own destinies.

Perhaps someone might argue, "No, because he cannot do anything without God's power." However, it is evident that both the prophet and Solomon did not intend to attribute merely power to God; they also acknowledged His election and providence in executing everything according to His will. Therefore, this objection does not resolve the question. Solomon, in particular, reproves the recklessness of those who embark on their projects without considering God, as if they were not guided by His hand. He asserts, "The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps" (Proverbs 16:1). It is indeed a foolish madness to suggest that people can plan to do something without God, when they cannot even speak without His guidance. Moreover, to emphasize that nothing occurs in this world without God's ordination, Scripture explicitly attributes to Him even those events that seem most random. For example, what could be more seemingly random than when a branch falls from a tree, striking and killing a passerby? Yet, God declares that He has given that individual into the hands of the one who cast the branch to kill him (Exodus 21:13). Similarly, when it comes to casting lots, which many attribute to the whims of chance, the Lord refutes this notion and asserts that the outcome belongs to Him. He does not say that He empowers someone to cast lots and then withdraws His influence, but rather, He ascribes what may seem fortuitous to His providence—the falling of the lot (Proverbs 16:33).

Critics who wish to tarnish this teaching often liken it to the Stoic doctrine of necessity, labeling it as paradoxical. St. Augustine faced a similar reproach. However, our stance is not one of contention over words; rather, it arises from a desire to avoid the use of the word "fate" employed by Stoics, which St. Paul teaches us to shun as a novelty. Additionally, our opponents' attempt to vilify God's truth by associating it with this term is unwarranted. Our perspective is misrepresented and maliciously attributed to us. We do not

subscribe to the idea of necessity as understood by the Stoics, where everything is bound by an inherent, perpetual connection. Instead, we acknowledge God as the Master and Ruler of all things. We believe that God, in His wisdom, predetermined from the beginning what He would do, and now, through His power, He carries out all that He has decreed. From this perspective, we maintain that God governs not only the heavens, the earth, and all irrational creatures through His providence but also human intentions and wills, directing them toward His intended purposes. Someone may ask, "Does nothing then happen by chance or spontaneously?" To which I reply, it is as Basil the Great wisely said: "Fortune" and "chance" are terms of the pagans, and their meaning should not find a place in the heart of a believer. Since all prosperity is regarded as God's blessing and adversity as His curse, there is no room for fortune in the lives of people.

However, due to the limitations of human understanding in the face of God's immense providence, I will offer a distinction to provide comfort. We can say that, while all things occur by God's ordinance, they appear as if governed by chance from our perspective. This is not because we believe that chance arbitrarily dictates the events of life (for such a belief should be far from a Christian heart). Instead, it stems from the fact that the order, reason, purpose, and necessity behind most events are concealed within God's plan and beyond the grasp of human perception. Therefore, from our limited understanding, events that undoubtedly stem from God's will may appear as if governed by chance. Consider this example: imagine a person walking through a forest with a trusted companion but, due to an error, strays into the path of robbers who take his life. While this death was foreknown by God and decreed within His will, to our understanding, it seems entirely accidental. How should a Christian approach such a situation? Indeed, they may perceive the event as

accidental in nature, but they should have no doubt that God's providence guided these circumstances to fulfill His purpose. The same rationale applies to future events: since the outcomes of many events are uncertain to us, we hold them in suspense, as if they could transpire in different ways. Nevertheless, we firmly maintain that nothing will occur that God has not ordained.

Therefore, when contemplating God's providence, we must avoid falling into the misguided beliefs of those who speak wildly and confuse the distinctions between heaven and earth. They argue, "If God has predetermined the time of our death, we cannot escape it, and our efforts to protect ourselves will be in vain." Consequently, some individuals hesitate to embark on journeys when they hear of potential danger from robbers. Others consult physicians and pharmacists when they fall ill. Still, others abstain from heavy meals to maintain their health. Some fear residing in decrepit houses. In essence, all seek means to shape their destinies. These remedies are viewed as futile attempts to override God's will or as evidence that not everything is subject to His providence. This perspective is incompatible with the belief that life and death, health and sickness, peace and war, wealth and poverty are all orchestrated by God, while also suggesting that human efforts can alter or obtain these outcomes.

Furthermore, critics argue that the prayers of the faithful, in which they beseech God to fulfill what He has eternally planned, are not only unnecessary but also misguided. In summary, they dismiss all deliberation about future matters as contradictory to God's providence, which, without calling us to counsel, has already predetermined what must be done. They attribute all actions, even those committed by wicked individuals, to God's providence, claiming that they are merely instruments of His plan. If a wicked

person kills a righteous one, they argue that it aligns with God's divine plan. If someone engages in theft or immoral acts, they claim that this is God's will because He foresaw it. If a child allows their father to perish without providing assistance, they argue that the child could not resist God's ordained plan. Consequently, they transform all vices into virtues because they serve the ordinance of God.

As for future events, King Solomon wisely reconciles God's providence with the precautionary measures we can take. He ridicules the presumption of those who, acting as if they are not guided by God's hand, boldly embark on all manner of endeavors solely at their own whims. However, in another instance, he imparts a different wisdom: "The human heart plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps" (Proverbs 16:9). Here, he signifies that God's eternal decree does not hinder us from prudently taking care of ourselves within His good will and organizing our affairs accordingly. The reasoning behind this is quite evident. The same One who has limited our lifespan has entrusted its care to us, providing us with the means to preserve it and endowing us with the ability to anticipate and mitigate dangers. Therefore, our duty becomes apparent. If the Lord has granted us the gift of life to steward, let us cherish and protect it. If He has equipped us with the means to do so, let us employ them. When He reveals to us potential hazards, let us not recklessly and without purpose thrust ourselves into harm's way. And when He offers us remedies, let us not spurn them.

"But," someone might argue, "no danger can harm us if it is not decreed to harm us; and if it is, no remedy can counter it." Yet, consider this: what if the dangers are not insurmountable because the Lord has provided remedies to overcome them? Reflect on whether your argument aligns with the order of divine providence.

You contend that we need not be vigilant against dangers, for we can escape them without any precautions, provided they are not invincible. Conversely, the Lord commands you to be vigilant precisely because He desires your deliverance.

These misguided individuals fail to recognize that God has inspired in people the effort to reflect and safeguard themselves. Through these efforts, they serve God's providence by preserving their lives. Conversely, those who act carelessly and with contempt bring upon themselves the misfortunes that God permits. Why does it transpire that a prudent individual, by putting their affairs in order, averts an impending calamity, while a fool, through recklessness, meets their demise? The explanation lies in the fact that folly and prudence serve as instruments of God's providence in each case. The Lord intended to conceal future events from us so that we might move forward without foreknowledge, diligently employing the remedies He has provided against dangers until we have either overcome them or they have overcome us.

When it comes to events that have already occurred, these individuals harbor misconceptions about God's providence. We assert that everything is founded upon God's providence, so there is no act of theft, lawlessness, or murder in which God's will does not play a role. They question, "Why then should a robber, who has punished someone God intended to chastise through poverty, be punished? Why should a murderer, who has taken the life of someone whose time was ordained by God, be held accountable? In short, if all these individuals are carrying out God's will, why should they face punishment?" Yet, I refute their claim that these individuals serve God's will. We do not argue that someone, acting from a wicked heart, dedicates themselves to serving God, as their intentions are driven solely by evil desires. Those who obey God are

those who, enlightened by His will, follow His calling. And where does God communicate His will to us if not through His Word? Thus, in all our actions, we must consider God's will as revealed in His Word. God requires of us only what He commands. If we act contrary to His precepts, it is not obedience but rather obstinacy and transgression. They may counter, "We would not have acted if it were not God's will." I concede this point; however, did we engage in these actions to please Him? He has not commanded us to commit them. Instead, we commit these transgressions without considering what God requires, carried away by our own excesses and knowingly defying Him. In this manner, we indeed serve His just ordinance by committing evil, as He, in His infinite wisdom, knows how to employ even wicked instruments to achieve good.

Consider how flawed their argument is. They seek to absolve criminals of their crimes and grant them freedom because their actions are part of God's plan. However, I assert that robbers, murderers, and wrongdoers are instruments of God's providence whom the Lord employs to execute the judgments He has decreed. Yet, I deny that, for this reason, they can claim any exoneration. Why? Do they intend to implicate God in their iniquities or to cloak their perversity in His righteousness? They can do neither. Their consciences accuse them, for they find all the evil within themselves and none of it in God, except His rightful and lawful use of their wickedness. "Nevertheless, He works through them," some may argue. Just as a foul odor emanates from a decaying corpse, although it results from the sun's rays, anyone can clearly see that the sun's rays do not smell foul. Similarly, since the essence and guilt of evil reside within an evildoer, why would God bear any stain or defilement from employing evil according to His will? Therefore, let us reject this insolent argument, which can only bark at God's righteousness from a distance but cannot harm it in the least.

These misconceptions can be best and succinctly refuted by elucidating the principles we must uphold to properly comprehend and adhere to God's providence. Thus, the heart of a Christian, unwavering in the belief that nothing occurs by chance, but that all things are orchestrated by God's providence, should consider this as the paramount cause of all that unfolds. Concurrently, it should not overlook the subordinate causes within their proper context. Moreover, the Christian should harbor no doubt that God's providence safeguards their preservation and ensures that nothing transpires without bearing potential for their good and salvation.

God's providence extends to all aspects of life, primarily concerning humans but also encompassing other creatures. The Christian should find solace in the conviction that God's providence reigns universally. Regarding humanity, regardless of their moral standing, their plans, desires, strength, capabilities, and endeavors all fall under God's jurisdiction. He molds them as He pleases and reproves them as He sees fit. Several explicit promises corroborate God's watchful providence and its role in preserving the faithful. For instance, it is written: "Cast your burdens on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved" (Psalm 55:22; 1 Peter 5:7). And: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty" (Psalm 91:1). Also: "For thus said the Lord of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye" (Zechariah 2:8). Furthermore: "In that day, the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people" (Isaiah 28:5). And: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

The narratives of the Bible, especially, aim to illustrate how diligently God guards His servants, preventing them from stumbling even on a stone. Although I previously criticized the notion of a universal providence that does not extend to individual creatures, we must, above all, acknowledge this special care He bestows upon us. Thus, after asserting that not a single sparrow falls to the ground without God's will, Christ immediately applies this to reassure us that, since we are more valuable than sparrows, He watches over us even more closely, to the extent that not a hair of our heads will fall without His consent (Matthew 10:29-30; cf. 6:26). What more can we ask for if not even a single hair can fall without God's will?

In light of this knowledge, we should inherently recognize God's goodness in times of prosperity and display patience during adversity. It should also instill in us a particular sense of confidence in the future. Thus, when our desires are fulfilled, whether through the kindness of others or God's other creations, we attribute it to Him, understanding that He has turned their hearts to favor us, employing them as instruments of His benevolence. In times of abundance, we do not doubt that it is God's blessing alone that has brought it forth. These teachings will discourage ingratitude within us. Conversely, when adversity befalls us, our immediate instinct will be to lift our hearts to God, the only one who can mold our hearts to exhibit patience and tranquility.

Had Joseph dwelled solely on meditating upon his brothers' treachery and the cruelty they had inflicted upon him, he would never have cultivated brotherly sentiments towards them. Yet, because he shifted his focus to God, setting aside their transgressions, he was inclined towards gentleness and kindness, even comforting them with these words: "And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for

God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors" (Genesis 45:5-7). If Job had fixated on the Chaldeans who had struck him, vengeance would have consumed him. However, because he recognized God's hand in the matter, he found solace in these profound words: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). Likewise, King David, if he had dwelled exclusively on the ill will of Shimei, who persecuted him with insults and stones, might have stirred his followers to retaliate. But because he understood that Shimei's actions were not without God's influence, he calmed his followers instead of inciting them: "Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look on the wrong done to me, and that the Lord will repay me with good for his cursing today" (2 Samuel 16:11-12).

When we seek solace from anger and impatience, there exists no better remedy than contemplating God's providence. We shall not have erred grievously if we learn to do so in a manner that continually directs our reflections towards this profound realization: "It is the Lord's will, and thus, we must endure it with patience." Not merely because resisting is unlawful, but because nothing transpires except that which is both just and necessary in His sight. This is precisely why Scripture diligently emphasizes this principle, as Amos proclaims that there is no affliction in the city that the Lord has not orchestrated (Amos 3:6). Jeremiah, in turn, admonishes those who believe that calamity befalls without God's divine command (Lamentations 3:38). If the hardships we endure originate from fellow humans, it is elucidated that God has consecrated these

individuals to execute His divine purpose. Thus, they are described as nets, swords, and axes—implements that He skillfully wields (Isaiah 13:3; Ezekiel 12:13, 17:20; Psalm 17:13; Isaiah 10:15)—instruments of His righteous judgment, drawn forth at His mere beckoning (Isaiah 13:5; Jeremiah 1:15). This is evident in the case of Pilate and Herod, who conspired to put Christ to death. They are portrayed as collaborators in fulfilling God's predetermined plan (Acts 4:27-28). Similarly, Scripture attributes the killing of Christ to the Jews in accordance with the heavenly Father's divine decree (Acts 2:23). Consequently, they fulfilled everything that had been prophesied concerning Him. It is reiterated in the Gospel that the soldiers who crucified Him executed all that was foretold in the Scriptures (Acts 3:18). These examples underscore the purpose that when individuals wrong us through their malevolence, we must not lose sight of God and acknowledge with certainty that even though they act wickedly, it is only by His righteous ordinance that these events transpire, sanctioned and directed by His will. Should adversity befall us and human agency is not involved, Scripture informs us that barrenness of the earth, famine, illnesses, and other seemingly chance occurrences are the result of God's curses or chastisements (Leviticus 26:14ff, 23ff; Deuteronomy 28:15ff).

However, this should not deter us from recognizing the lesser causes in the equation. While we firmly believe that those who extend us goodness are instruments of God's benevolence, we should not dismiss them as if they merit no gratitude due to their humanity. Instead, we should acknowledge the debt we owe them and willingly express our thanks. We ought to endeavor to reciprocate this kindness to the best of our ability, seizing every opportunity to do so. In summary, we honor God by recognizing Him as the ultimate source of all goodness, while simultaneously honoring human beings as His agents and dispensers of His blessings. We must recognize

that He has placed us in their debt by demonstrating His kindness through them. If we suffer harm due to our neglect or indifference, we should indeed attribute it to God's will, but we should not cease to acknowledge our own fault in the matter. If a family member or friend for whom we are responsible passes away without proper care, although we understand that they have reached the end of their life, we should not consider their death as any less our fault, for our negligence or omission of duty contributed to it. Consequently, if deceit or deliberate malevolence is involved in acts of homicide or robbery, we should not absolve these crimes on the pretext of God's providence. Instead, we should scrutinize the act with an understanding of God's righteousness and human iniquity, both of which are plainly evident.

Regarding future events, our primary focus should be on the lesser causes we have discussed. We believe that it is a blessing from God when He provides us with the means to sustain and preserve ourselves. Consequently, we should reflect on what actions we must take within our means, and not hesitate to seek assistance from those who appear suitable when the opportunity arises. Recognizing that God presents us with all creatures capable of benefiting us, we should employ them as lawful instruments of His providence. Since we are uncertain about the outcome of our endeavors, but have unwavering confidence in God's providence to provide for our good, we should aim for what we perceive to be advantageous or beneficial, to the best of our understanding. However, in our planning, we should not rely solely on our own wisdom, but rather commit ourselves to God's wisdom, trusting it to guide us correctly. Ultimately, our confidence should not rest solely on human aids and means, for whether we possess them or not, our minds should remain steadfastly fixed on God's providence alone, undistracted by current circumstances.

Herein lies a profound source of comfort for the faithful. Human existence is besieged by countless adversities. Even within the confines of our own bodies, we bear the weight of innumerable afflictions. Our bodies are susceptible to a myriad of illnesses, and we unwittingly nurture their causes within us. Wherever we go, we carry with us the potential for harm; our lives are enshrouded in constant peril. A boat journey is merely one step away from disaster. A horse's misstep can lead to a broken neck. Even traversing the streets exposes us to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. Handling a sword, or even having one nearby, presents the risk of injury. The creatures and untamed animals we encounter are equipped to pose a threat. Even a delightful garden, teeming with pleasures, may conceal hidden dangers like serpents. The very homes in which we reside are susceptible to fires, threatening us with poverty by day and danger by night. Our possessions, vulnerable to hail, frost, drought, and other calamities, serve as harbingers of scarcity and, consequently, famine. Poisonings, ambushes, and violent occurrences constantly test human life, both within the sanctuary of our homes and in the outside world. In light of these persistent adversities, one may wonder whether human existence is nothing more than wretchedness, as individuals struggle to cling to life amidst languor and distress, perpetually haunted by the specter of death.

Someone may argue, "But these occurrences are rare, or at least they do not befall everyone simultaneously, and furthermore, they never happen all at once." I concede this point, but it is essential to heed the examples of others, reminding us that these adversities can befall us as well. We must not consider our lives exempt from any of these tribulations, for perpetually living in such trepidation and anxiety would be a wretched existence indeed. Moreover, living in such a manner would be tantamount to slandering God, insinuating that He

had forsaken His noblest creatures to the whims of fortune. However, my intention here is not to dwell on the misery one would endure if they lived as though at the mercy of chance. On the contrary, when God's providence shines in the heart of a believer, they will not only be liberated from the fear and distress that once burdened them but will also be free from doubt. Just as we have a rightful fear of fortune, we also have ample reason to boldly entrust ourselves to God. It is a remarkable consolation to comprehend that the Lord holds all things within His power, governs them by His will, and directs them by His wisdom, to the extent that nothing can occur unless He has ordained it. Furthermore, He has welcomed us under His protection and entrusted us to the care of His angels. Therefore, there is no water, fire, sword, or any peril that can harm us without His consent. As the Psalm proclaims, "He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield. You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday" (Psalm 91:3–6, 36:7), and so forth. It is from such assurances that the saints derive their unwavering confidence, declaring, "The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me? Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war may rise against me, in this I will be confident" (Psalm 118:6, 27:3, 23:4).

Where does this unshakeable assurance, which can never be taken from the faithful, originate? It arises from the belief that even when the world appears to be whimsically turned upside down, God is working to lead them. The faithful anticipate that God's actions are always redemptive and beneficial for them. When confronted by the devil or the wicked, they have every reason to take solace in

remembering God's providence. Without this remembrance, despair would be their only recourse. However, when they recognize that the devil and all the forces of wickedness are held in check by God's hand, like a bridle, to the extent that they cannot conceive, plan, execute, or even lift a finger for evil except as God commands, they find ample consolation. Since it is God alone who arms their madness and directs it according to His will, He possesses the power to restrain them so that they do not act according to their unchecked desires. Thus, even when adversaries like Rezin and the king of Israel conspire to unleash destruction upon the land of Judah, they are akin to smoldering embers that produce only a wisp of smoke (Isaiah 7:4). In sum, it is the greatest misery for a person not to comprehend God's providence, whereas it is an extraordinary blessing for them to have a deep understanding of it.

We have covered enough regarding God's providence and predestination to provide guidance and comfort to the faithful. However, it is important to acknowledge that our discussions can never satisfy the insatiable curiosity of some, and it would not be prudent to expend our efforts in that direction. There are certain passages in Scripture that may appear to suggest that God's plan is not immutable, as we have previously described, and that He alters it based on changing circumstances. For instance, there are instances where God's "repentance" is mentioned, such as when it is stated that He repented of creating humanity, regretted making Saul king, or changed His intended punishment for His people upon witnessing their repentance (Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:11; Jeremiah 18:8, 10). Additionally, we read about God abolishing or amending His decrees. For example, He initially decreed the destruction of Nineveh within forty days, but upon the city's repentance, He relented and showed mercy (Jonah 3:4, 10). Through the words of Isaiah, He had foretold Hezekiah's imminent death, but in response to Hezekiah's

tearful prayers, God postponed it (Isaiah 38:1, 3–4; 2 Kings 20:1, 3ff; 2 Chronicles 32:24–26).

Some individuals may use these passages to argue that God has not established His actions towards humanity through an eternal decree but instead ordains His actions day by day and hour by hour, based on what He deems good and just, in accordance with each individual's merits. In the case of the term "repentance," we must maintain a fixed understanding that repentance is inconceivable for God, just as ignorance, error, or weakness are. Since no one, through their own knowledge and will, can cause God to repent, the assertion that "God repents" implies either that He did not foresee the events or that He was incapable of preventing them, or that He acted hastily without due consideration in forming His plan. Such an interpretation contradicts the meaning intended by the Holy Spirit. In fact, when God is described as repenting, it is a way of emphasizing that He does not repent, for He is not a man (1 Samuel 15:29). It is certain, therefore, that God's governance over all human affairs is steadfast, unchanging, and devoid of any need for repentance. To underscore His unwavering constancy, even His adversaries are compelled to bear witness. Balaam, despite his own intentions, could not refrain from declaring that God is not like a man who lies or changes His mind; hence, everything God proclaims is bound to be fulfilled (Numbers 23:19).

"What then does this word 'repentance' mean?" someone might inquire. In response, I explain that it carries the same meaning as all other forms of human description used to depict God. Since our feebleness falls far short of His greatness, the language employed to describe Him must be tailored to our capacity for understanding. God portrays Himself not as He exists in His divine essence but rather as we perceive or feel Him to be. While He is devoid of any

perturbing emotions, we attribute anger to Him when dealing with sinners. However, when we hear that God is angry, we should not envision turmoil within Him. Instead, this manner of speaking arises from our own sensibilities, as He appears to act sternly in exercising His judgment. Similarly, when we encounter the term "penitence" concerning God, we should regard it as signifying a change in His actions. Just as people alter their deeds to rectify what displeases them, the alteration in God's works is signified by the word "penitence." Nonetheless, His divine plan remains unchanged, His will unaltered, and His affections unwavering. What He foresaw, approved, and ordained from all eternity, He steadfastly pursues without alteration, even though human perception may suggest a sudden change. Consequently, when Scripture recounts the remission of the calamity foretold by Jonah to the Ninevites or the extension of Hezekiah's life following the message of impending death, it does not indicate that God nullified His decrees. Those who believe so are misled, for such proclamations, though expressed plainly, contain an implicit condition, as discernible from their intended purpose.

Why did God send Jonah to the Ninevites to prophesy the city's destruction? Why did He inform Hezekiah of his impending death through Isaiah? God could have brought about their destruction without prior notice. The aim was not to forewarn them of impending doom but rather to prevent their demise and lead them to a better path so that judgment might be averted. Thus, Jonah's prophecy of Nineveh's destruction after forty days was issued to ensure it did not occur. Similarly, Hezekiah's loss of hope for a longer life was intended to grant him an extended lifespan. Consequently, it is evident that God employed such threats to prompt repentance in those He had warned, thereby sparing them from the judgment they deserved for their sins. Given this, it is natural to infer an implied

condition, even if unexpressed in these declarations. This is further affirmed through analogous examples. When reproaching King Abimelech for taking Abraham's wife, the Lord used these words: "Behold, you shall die because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife" (Genesis 20:3). After Abimelech offered his defense, the Lord responded as follows: "Return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours" (Genesis 20:7). It is clear how the initial statement employs greater intensity to instill fear in Abimelech's heart, leading him to fulfill his duty. Subsequently, the Lord clarifies His intention. Other passages share the same underlying meaning, reinforcing the notion that God does not alter His original plan by breaking what He had previously made known.

In fact, God paves the way for His eternal plan and ordinance by leading those He wishes to pardon toward repentance. He achieves this by forewarning them of the consequences they would face if they persist in their vices. He changes His will even less so His word, except that He does not spell out His intentions syllable by syllable. Nevertheless, His intent is readily comprehensible. Thus, the declaration of Isaiah remains steadfast: "The Lord of hosts has purposed it, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?" (Isaiah 14:27).

CHAPTER NINE

Of Prayer, Where the Prayer of Our Lord Is Explained

Through our prior discourse, we have laid bare the stark reality of human frailty and insufficiency. Behold, we stand bereft, lacking in all that leads to salvation. It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to transcend our limited selves and seek succor beyond the confines of our mortal coil. We have expounded that our Lord, in His boundless benevolence, extends Himself to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. In Him, we find solace for our wretchedness, abundance for our destitution, and access to the heavenly reservoir of His treasures. It is thus imperative that we place our faith solely in His beloved Son, nurture our anticipation in His divine presence, and anchor our hope firmly in His grace.

This wisdom, concealed and esoteric, eludes the grasp of syllogistic reasoning, reserving its illumination for those fortunate souls whose eyes have been unveiled by our Lord's radiant light. Faith teaches us that every facet of goodness we lack within ourselves resides in God and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Son, the Father has poured forth the plenitude of His blessings and affluence, that we may draw unreservedly from this copious wellspring. Now, the onus is upon us to seek Him, to beseech Him in earnest through prayer, petitioning for the abundance we have come to acknowledge exists therein. To do otherwise would be a grievous oversight—to comprehend God as the Supreme Benefactor, the Originator, and Bestower of all goodness, yet refrain from addressing Him, from soliciting His bountiful grace, would be to squander an invaluable treasure concealed beneath the earth, the existence of which has been unveiled to us. Thus, we must dig deeper into this subject, one which heretofore we have merely touched upon in passing.

It is through the profound practice of prayer that we gain access to the vast spiritual riches bestowed upon us by the Almighty. Prayer serves as the sacred conduit through which humanity engages in a

profound dialogue with God. This communion, akin to entering the hallowed sanctuary of heaven, allows us to beseech Him concerning His promises. Through prayer, we implore the Lord to demonstrate, in times of dire need, the veracity of His Word, thereby dispelling all doubt and revealing the truth within His sacred utterances.

We must acknowledge that God does not unveil His divine intentions without also issuing a solemn directive to seek His benevolence through prayer. Thus, we assert with unwavering confidence that by means of prayer, we dig into the hidden treasures of faith illuminated by the Gospel. The multifaceted significance and manifold benefits of this practice are beyond verbal expression.

It is paramount to comprehend that the Lord Himself emphasizes the pivotal role of invoking His name, declaring that our steadfast assurance of salvation is firmly anchored in this sacred act (Joel 2:32). Through prayer, we attain an intimate connection with His providence, which vigilantly watches over us. We harness His omnipotent strength to safeguard and console us in our moments of frailty and destitution. His infinite grace welcomes us even in the midst of our sins. In brief, prayer bestows upon our souls a profound sense of serenity.

One may interject, questioning the necessity of articulating our needs before an omniscient God who is well aware of our every circumstance and requirement. Is it not superfluous to beseech Him through prayer, a practice typically reserved for those who seek favor from those ignorant of their predicaments or even asleep? However, this perspective fails to grasp the divine purpose behind our Lord's instruction to pray. He ordained this practice not for His own benefit but out of profound consideration for our welfare.

While God remains ever watchful and vigilant, intervening on our behalf even in moments when we are oblivious to the perils that surround us, our continuous supplication is essential. It ignites within our hearts an unquenchable yearning to seek, love, and honor Him. Through prayer, we establish a steadfast habit of seeking refuge in Him as our ultimate Protector. Our hearts remain unswayed by desires we dare not confess, as we lay bare our innermost thoughts before His omniscient gaze. This practice also prepares us to receive His blessings with genuine gratitude and recognition, reminding us that these gifts emanate from His benevolent hand (Psalm 145:15ff). Moreover, by engaging in prayer, we deepen our awareness of His providence, strengthening our belief that He not only promises never to forsake us but also encourages us to seek His assistance in times of need.

For these compelling reasons, the Father of all mercy, despite His perpetual vigilance and unwavering attentiveness, occasionally appears as if asleep or inactive. This apparent inactivity serves as a call to action, an impetus for us to beseech Him, as our own indolence and forgetfulness require this prompting. To dissuade us from prayer by contending that it is redundant to solicit the providence of God, which watches over all without needing our entreaties, is a misguided argument. Contrarily, the Lord attests that He will draw near to all who genuinely call upon His name (Psalm 145:18). It is also folly to suggest that we need not ask for the blessings that the Lord is eager to bestow upon us, as prayer serves as a reminder that these gifts stem from His boundless generosity.

To embark on the journey of prayer with utmost efficacy, we must cultivate the mindset and disposition befitting those who commune with the Divine. Our thoughts must be untethered from worldly concerns and distractions that could divert our gaze from God. Our

entire being should be devoted to the act of prayer, and our spirits should ascend as high as possible above the mundane.

It is essential, however, to acknowledge that our minds need not be entirely devoid of earthly concerns, for the fervor of prayer is often kindled by anxiety and distress. Indeed, many of God's devout servants have bemoaned their plights and beseeched the Lord from the depths of despair (Psalm 130:1). What we mean by elevating our spirits above ourselves is refraining from presenting before the Lord the fleeting whims and frivolities of our feeble understanding. Instead, we should strive for a purity of thought and intention worthy of God.

Regrettably, many fail in this regard. Shamelessly, they make God a witness to their foolishness, audaciously laying before His throne even the most base desires that have taken root in their fantasies. Some display such audacity that they dare to confess before God their darkest and most vile impulses, which they would hesitate to reveal to their fellow human beings.

In a similar vein, the heart must ardently strive for the same goal and embark upon the same path. Just as the mind must be wholly dedicated to God, so must the affections find their ultimate delight in Him. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that human capability falls significantly short of such perfection. In truth, it falls far beneath this ideal, and it is often vanquished and left wanting unless fortified by the Spirit of God. When we, in our frailty, falter in the art of righteous prayer, God's Spirit steps in, interceding on our behalf with indescribable yearnings (Romans 8:23, 26). Not that He literally prays or groans, but His presence stirs within us, igniting the confidence, desires, and sighs that our feeble nature alone could not conceive. It is not said to absolve us from the duty of prayer, allowing

us to recline in indolence or apathy—a notion some blasphemously advocate, suggesting that we should idly await the Spirit's initiative while our minds wander elsewhere. Quite the contrary, this revelation should serve as a compelling reason for us to yearn and implore for such divine assistance, fueling our disdain for our own lethargy and indifference.

A second rule to observe is this: we must divest ourselves of all thoughts of personal glory, strip away every vestige of self-importance, and relinquish all self-reliance. In our humility and abasement, we must exalt God, offering Him praise that stems from our unwavering recognition of His sovereignty. Any attempt to attribute even the slightest achievement to ourselves, motivated by foolish arrogance, will crumble in His presence. Numerous examples of this profound humility can be found among God's devoted servants. Even the most holy among them, when standing before the Lord, are humbled and lowered in stature. Daniel, highly regarded in the eyes of God, exemplifies this humility in his prayer: "We do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name" (Daniel 9:18-19). Isaiah echoes this sentiment, speaking on behalf of the people: "Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities. But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and

remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people" (Isaiah 64:5-9). These faithful souls do not rely on any merit of their own but trust solely in the belief that they belong to God, never doubting that He will extend His protective embrace to them. Jeremiah voices a similar sentiment when he declares, "Though our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for your name's sake" (Jeremiah 14:7).

Indeed, it is not uncommon for saints to reference their righteousness in prayer to secure God's favor more readily. David, for instance, asserts, "Preserve my life, for I am godly" (Psalm 86:2). Hezekiah, in his plea to God, says, "Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight" (Isaiah 38:3). In employing such language, they aim not to suggest that the value of their prayers hinges on the merit of their deeds. Rather, they affirm their status as God's children, to whom He has pledged His favor. Scripture attests that God's eyes are upon the righteous and His ears are open to their cries (Psalm 34:15). Likewise, the apostle John assures us that we receive what we ask for by keeping His commandments (1 John 3:22). These declarations do not imply that prayer's efficacy hinges on the merit of one's actions but serve to foster the confidence of those with pure and unfeigned consciences—an expectation that should be universal among the faithful. The protests of the saints, in which they recall their purity or sincerity, align with these promises, ensuring that the blessings all of God's servants rightfully anticipate are granted unto them.

Moreover, when the faithful compare themselves to their adversaries, beseeching God to deliver them from the malice of their enemies, it is not surprising that they cite their righteousness and the sincerity of their hearts. This serves to implore God's intervention in

their favor, appealing to the justice of their cause. In no way do we diminish the importance of a good conscience before God, which allows one to take solace in the promises with which the Lord comforts His true servants. However, we emphasize that all confidence in obtaining from God what we ask for is founded solely upon His divine mercy, without any consideration of our own merit.

The third rule we must observe pertains to the authenticity of our prayers. When we seek something beneficial for ourselves, we must approach God with genuine humility and acknowledge our inherent poverty without pretense. To ask for forgiveness of sins without recognizing our own sinful nature, or to do so without contemplating the gravity of our transgressions, is an affront to God Himself. Such hypocrisy is abhorrent in His eyes, yet regrettably, it pervades the world. Many a soul, while fulfilling their religious duties, entreats God for blessings they believe will come from sources other than His divine grace or that they already possess without His intervention. Above all, when we pray for God's glory, we must do so with fervent zeal and sincere desire. When we beseech Him to hallow His name, our hearts must genuinely long for sanctification. By following this rule, we purge Christian prayer of all pretense and deception, as it is paramount to approach God with absolute truthfulness. For He promises that "He will be near to all who call upon Him in truth" (Psalm 145:18), and He declares that "those who seek Him with all their heart will find Him" (Jeremiah 29:13).

The fourth rule for effective prayer is to approach God with unwavering hope of receiving what we ask for. This hope is not a tranquil confidence that removes all anxiety from our hearts, as such serenity is reserved for those who possess everything they desire and are free from unfulfilled yearnings. On the contrary, this hope serves as a virtuous spur for the faithful, propelling them to call upon God

even in times of pressing need and turmoil, reducing them to nothing in their own eyes. Amidst such trials, God's benevolence continues to shine upon them. Thus, the prayer of the faithful is characterized by two intertwined emotions: a heartfelt lament for the trials they endure and an apprehensive concern for the future. Nevertheless, they maintain an unwavering trust in the Lord, confident that He will come to their aid and comfort the afflicted. It is imperative that faithful prayer embodies these dual sentiments—sighs and groans for the trials that besiege them, coupled with trepidation and concern for the future—while resting securely in the knowledge that the Lord will reveal Himself and provide solace to the oppressed. God is deeply displeased by our lack of faith when we request His grace without expecting to receive it.

Therefore, our Lord Jesus imparted this guideline for our prayers: have faith that everything we ask for will be granted and that it will come to pass according to our hope (Mark 11:24). Conversely, those who lack confidence in His promises and question His truthfulness, invoking Him without certainty regarding whether their pleas will be heard, will reap no benefit, as stated by St. James. He even likens them to waves of the sea, driven about by the wind (James 1:6-8). Moreover, since the Lord frequently proclaims that "it will be done to each one according to his faith" (Matthew 9:22, 9:29; Mark 10:52; Luke 7:50), He underscores that without faith, our prayers are in vain. In essence, it is faith that secures all that is granted through our prayers, as emphasized by St. Paul's statement: "How will they call upon one in whom they have not believed?" (Romans 10:14). He concludes that God cannot be genuinely invoked except by those who have been introduced to His goodness and mercy through the preaching of the gospel.

When we couple this assurance of faith with an acute awareness of our wretchedness, poverty, sins, and imperfections, we affirm that our hope does not stem from self-righteousness. Instead, it arises from a recognition of our unworthiness, fostering a sense of humility rather than fear. We should not allow this awareness to deter us from approaching God; rather, it should serve as a catalyst for our prayers. As exemplified by the prophet who prays for God to heal his soul because of his sins (Psalm 41:4), the consciousness of our wretchedness serves as a constant reminder, urging us to pray fervently.

In addition to the prodding of our awareness of misery, our benevolent Father offers two more compelling motives to spur us toward prayer. First is His explicit commandment to pray (Luke 11:9). Second is His promise that we will obtain everything we ask for. The commandment is unequivocal, frequently reiterated in phrases such as "Ask, come to me, seek me, return to me, call upon me in the day of your need," among others (John 16:23-24; Matthew 7:7, 11:28; Zechariah 1:3; Psalm 50:15). Furthermore, it is enshrined in the third precept of the law, which forbids taking God's name in vain (Exodus 20:7). Since we are forbidden to misuse His name, we are equally commanded to honor it in prayer, giving Him all glory for power, goodness, help, and comfort, and requesting and expecting these blessings from Him. Thus, if we fail to draw near to Him, ask Him, and seek His assistance in all our needs, we are transgressing His commandment and provoking His wrath, no less than if we fashioned idols or worshipped other gods. Disregarding one of His commandments is as offensive as disregarding any other, for each bears equal weight. Therefore, nothing should deter us from obeying God's precept, which commands us to pray. Those who invoke Him, make requests of Him, and extol His name derive immense consolation from the understanding that, in doing so, they obey His

command and align with His will. This knowledge should serve as an antidote to all doubts, for there is nothing more pleasing to God than obedience.

The faithful find great solace in God's promises, upon which their confidence in receiving what they ask is firmly anchored. The Lord beckons to us through numerous sweet promises: "Ask," He declares, "and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). The prophet Jeremiah echoes this sentiment, proclaiming, "You will call upon me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me" (Jeremiah 29:12-13). Likewise, in Psalm 50:15, we are assured, "He will cry to me, and I will hear him. I will be with him in tribulation; I will deliver and honor him." While these examples suffice to illustrate the point, there are numerous similar passages. Yet, there are a few essential ones that must be etched in our minds, such as, "The Lord is near to those who call upon Him, provided that they call upon Him in truth" (Psalm 145:18) and "Before they cry, I will hear them; when they are still speaking, I will hear them" (Isaiah 65:24). Above all, the promise that stands out most prominently is found in the passage that speaks of God's fearsome vengeance, proclaiming, "whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32). Rest assured, armed with such assurances, we possess ample help to obtain our requests. It is not the merit or eloquence of our prayers that secures their fulfillment, but rather our hope hinges entirely upon these promises and relies solely upon them.

Therefore, we should take comfort in knowing that we will be heard, just as St. Peter, St. Paul, and all the other saints were, provided we approach God with the same unwavering and steadfast faith. Although we may be inferior to them in various ways, we share with them the same command to pray and the same promise to be heard.

When we invoke God with pure hearts, He does not assess the value of our prayers based on our status but rather on the faith with which we obey His command and trust in His promise. With this in mind, David declared, "Behold, Lord, you have promised your servant to build his house; for this reason, your servant has today taken heart and found occasion to ask of you. Now, Lord, you are God, and your promises are trustworthy. You have promised your servants to do good to them; begin, then, to fulfill your word by blessing the house of your servant" (2 Samuel 7:27-29; 1 Chronicles 17:23ff). The Israelites also heeded this promise, grounding their requests in the memory of the covenant made with Abraham. They followed in the footsteps of their forefathers, particularly Jacob. Despite acknowledging that he was unworthy of the numerous blessings he had received from the Lord, Jacob boldly beseeched Him to fulfill the promise given to him (Genesis 32:10-12).

Nonetheless, every individual is unworthy to stand before God and present themselves in His presence. To alleviate the shame inherent within us, our Heavenly Father has granted us His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to serve as our Mediator and Advocate (1 Timothy 2:5; 1 John 2:1). Through Christ's guidance, we can approach God with confidence, knowing that we have such an Intercessor, before whom the Father denies nothing, and that God's throne is one of both majesty and grace. In the name of such a Mediator and Intercessor, we can approach God's throne with full assurance, seeking mercy, grace, help, and all our needs (Hebrews 8:6, 9:15, 4:16). Thus, as we are commanded to call upon God and given the promise that those who invoke Him will be heard, and particularly as we are explicitly commanded to call upon God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have the promise that all our requests made in His name will be fulfilled. "Up till now," He tells us, "You have not asked anything in my name; ask, and you will receive. From now on, you will ask in my

name, and what you ask, I will do, in order that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13, 16:24).

It is beyond doubt that those who call upon God in any other name than that of Jesus Christ disobey God's command and oppose His will. They lack the promise of receiving anything, for as St. Paul asserts, in Jesus Christ, all of God's promises are "yes," and through Jesus Christ, they are made "amen" (2 Corinthians 1:20). In other words, all God's promises are assured, steadfast, and certain in Jesus Christ. He is the singular path and the sole entrance to God that we possess. Those who seek God through any other means will find only His wrath, terror, and judgment at His throne. Furthermore, as God has specially appointed Christ to be our Leader and Guide, those who deviate from Him attempt to erase God's mark.

Consequently, Jesus Christ is established as the sole Mediator, and it is through His intercession that the Father is appeased and moved by our prayers. While we leave the saints their intercessions, through which they recommend each other's salvation, we must ensure that they always depend solely on the intercession of Jesus Christ and do not diminish His role (1 Timothy 2:1ff). These prayers, stemming from the love and unity that binds us as members, are intimately connected to our Head, Jesus Christ. By offering them in the name of Christ, we acknowledge that no one can be aided by anyone's prayers except through Jesus Christ, the Intercessor. Just as Jesus Christ's intercession does not hinder us from supporting one another through prayers, it is imperative that all the church's intercessions are directed and connected to His intercession alone.

It is essential to debunk the fallacies propagated by the sophists who claim that Christ serves as the Mediator of redemption while the faithful become mediators of intercession. This notion falsely

suggests that Christ, having executed a temporal mediation, has relinquished the eternal and everlasting office of mediation to His servants. Such an attempt to allocate a mere fraction of the honor due to Christ is an affront to His true glory. We must adhere to the simplicity of Scripture and turn a deaf ear to these deceivers. When the apostle John proclaims, "if someone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, that is, Jesus Christ" (1 John 2:1), he does not imply that Christ was formerly an Advocate for us, but rather attributes to Him the perpetual role of Intercessor. Furthermore, the apostle Paul emphatically states that, "seated at the right hand of the Father, He still intercedes for us" (Romans 8:34). When he later refers to Jesus as "the unique Mediator between God and people" (1 Timothy 2:5), he does so with the understanding of the preceding prayers he mentioned (1 Timothy 2:1-2). While we may not envision Christ offering humble supplications on His knees, we must comprehend, as the apostle does, that He stands before God's presence in a manner whereby the power of His sacrifice holds perpetual value for intercession. He alone, having entered the heavenly sanctuary, can present the prayers of those unable to approach God closely.

As for the departed saints who now reside with Christ, if we attribute to them a form of prayer, we must not assume that their method of prayer differs from Christ, who is the exclusive way. Nor should we believe that their petitions are accepted by God under any other name. Scripture unequivocally directs us away from all others and redirects us solely to Christ. This is because our Heavenly Father desires that everything should be gathered together in Him. It was sheer foolishness, bordering on madness, to suggest access through the saints in a manner that distracts us from Christ. Regrettably, this practice has occurred and continues wherever the papacy prevails. To gain favor with God, they invoke the merits of the saints and beseech God in their names, effectively sidelining Jesus Christ. In

essence, they usurp the unique office of intercession, which, as we have argued, belongs exclusively to Christ. Who is the entity, whether angel or devil, that has ever revealed a syllable about the intercession of the saints as it has been fabricated? Scripture offers no support for such practices, so why invent them? Those who turn to such secondary means, not sanctioned by God's Word, reveal their deep-seated distrust. Upon examining the conscience of those who rely on saintly intercession, it becomes evident that they do so because they are either confused, as if lacking Christ, or because they consider Him too austere.

In their doubt, they unwittingly dishonor Christ, stripping Him of His rightful title as the sole Mediator. This title, granted to Him by the Father as a special privilege, should not be assigned elsewhere. By doing so, they obscure the glory of His incarnation, nullify His sacrifice on the cross, and undermine the significance of all His works and sufferings, which ultimately serve the purpose of establishing Him as the exclusive Mediator. Moreover, they reject God's benevolence, as He revealed Himself as a Father to them, but He can only be their Father when they recognize Jesus Christ as their Brother. This recognition hinges on the belief that He harbors a fraternal affection for them, as tender and kind as any in the world. Scripture thus presents Him uniquely to us, sends us to Him, and implores us to fix our gaze upon Him. "He is," as St. Ambrose aptly put it, "our mouth by which we speak to the Father, our eye by which we see the Father, our right hand by which we offer ourselves to the Father." Without His mediation, we have no access to God—neither us nor all the saints.

Unfortunately, folly has run rampant in this matter, and the unmistakable nature of superstition has become evident. Once people began to focus on the saints as intercessors, they gradually

assigned each saint specific duties, supplicating one for particular needs and another for diverse affairs. Each individual has even chosen their favored saint, placing themselves under the saint's protection as if under God's shelter. This practice mirrors what the prophet reproved in the Israelites when they "set up gods according to the number of the cities" (Jeremiah 2:28). Today, it seems that people assign saints according to the multitude of roles, with each person having their own designated saints. However, if saints truly adhere to God's will and direct their desires accordingly, anyone who calls upon them for prayers unrelated to the coming of God's kingdom has a misguided and carnal understanding of their role, bordering on an insult. Such practices expose the common fallacy of believing that saints incline toward individuals based on the degree of honor bestowed upon them. Some individuals have gone so far as to commit a grievous sacrilege by invoking the saints not as patrons or advocates but as rulers of their salvation. This reveals the depths to which people plunge when they deviate from the boundaries set by God's Word.

When certain individuals labor to establish that the intercession of the saints finds its foundation in scripture, their efforts are in vain. They argue, "The prayers of the angels are often mentioned," and further claim, "There is testimony that the prayers of the faithful are carried by their hands before God's face." While I concede this point, if they wish to liken departed saints to angels, they must prove that these saints, like the angels, are spirits appointed to secure our salvation, charged with the commission of guiding us in all our ways, surrounding us, offering admonitions, and ceaselessly watching over us for our preservation. All of these attributes are ascribed to angels, not to saints.

Furthermore, they reference what the Lord said to Jeremiah: "If Moses and Samuel were before me to implore me, my heart would not be favorable to this people" (Jeremiah 15:1). They argue that God's choice of Moses and Samuel, who were already deceased, as examples implies that the dead pray for the living. However, I counter their argument by suggesting that if Moses and Samuel were not then praying for the people of Israel, then the dead do not pray for the living. Why assume that anyone else would be interceding when Moses, who excelled in this regard, was not? This undermines their own argument. They engage in futile subtleties, only to be ensnared by the very arguments they thought would protect them.

Nonetheless, it is fallacious to interpret this scripture beyond its plain meaning. Our Lord's intention was merely to convey that even the presence of a Moses or a Samuel as advocates would not alter His unfavorable disposition toward the people because of the prayers these leaders had once made. The same sense can be derived from a similar passage in Ezekiel: "Surely if these three persons," says the Lord, "Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in the city, they would not deliver son or daughter by their righteousness but only their own souls" (Ezekiel 14:14, 20). The implication is that if they were resurrected and lived in the city. Let us therefore set aside those about whom scripture explicitly testifies that they have completed their earthly journeys. This is why St. Paul, when speaking of David, does not suggest that he aids his successors through prayers but merely states that he served his generation (Acts 13:36).

Someone may ask, "Are you stripping them of all compassion, considering their fervent love and empathy throughout their lives?" My response is that I have no desire to scrutinize their actions or thoughts. It is improbable that they vacillate with varying desires; it is likely that they steadfastly seek God's kingdom. This kingdom is

founded not only on the condemnation of the wicked but also on the salvation of the faithful.

Moreover, even if we were to concede that saints pray for us in some way, it does not logically follow that they should be invoked. This conclusion cannot be drawn from the fact that people on earth commend themselves to each other's prayers. Earthly prayers serve to nurture charity among people as they share their needs and accept the needs of others. The faithful engage in this practice as a result of God's command and the promises associated with it, which are the two fundamental aspects of prayer. In the case of prayers to or by the departed, these reasons are absent. The Lord left no means of communication between us and the departed when He separated them from our earthly company (Ecclesiastes 9:5-6), nor did He provide any means for communication from them to us, as far as we can discern. If someone asserts that it is impossible for the departed not to maintain the same charity they had while alive, given their unity in faith with us, I would inquire as to who has revealed that they possess such acute hearing that they can attend to our words or such keen vision that they can perceive our needs. It is true that sophists in their schools prattle about how "the radiance of God's countenance is so great that, in beholding it as in a mirror, the saints can perceive what transpires here below." Yet, affirming this with such boldness, in the absence of scriptural support, amounts to venturing into the realm of God's secret judgments without His word and disregarding the scriptural warnings that human wisdom opposes God's wisdom. Scripture consistently denounces the vanity of our senses and subjects all human reason to God's will alone.

These individuals distort the testimonies they cite to bolster their falsehoods. They claim, "Jacob, in his final words, asked that his name and the names of his fathers Abraham and Isaac be invoked

upon his successors" (Genesis 48:15ff). First, let us understand the nature of this invocation among the Israelites. They were not invoking their fathers for help but merely asking God to remember His servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This example does not support those who address the saints with their words. However, because these individuals, akin to lifeless blocks of wood, are ignorant and unfeeling, they fail to grasp the purpose and significance of invoking Jacob's name in this manner. To understand it fully, we must note that this form of invocation is found elsewhere in scripture. Isaiah, for instance, states that the names of men will be invoked upon women (Isaiah 4:1), signifying that women recognize the men as their husbands and are under their guidance and authority. Therefore, invoking the name of Abraham upon the Israelites means acknowledging him as the progenitor of their lineage and maintaining the solemn memory of his name as their father. Jacob did not invoke their names out of concern for preserving his fame. Instead, he believed that the happiness of his descendants hinged on their enjoyment of the covenant God had made with Abraham. His desire for them was that they might be included in the line of Abraham's children and recognized as his offspring. Consequently, he sought to pass on this covenant to them, ensuring their succession in it. When the successors offer their prayers in memory of their ancestors, they do not seek intercession from the deceased but rather remind the Lord of the promise He made to be gracious and generous to them on account of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In our spiritual journey, we can discern how the faithful have not solely relied on the merits of their forefathers. The prophet, speaking in the name of the entire church, affirms, "Lord God, you are our Father, and Abraham has not known us, and Israel has ignored us. You, Lord, are our Father and Redeemer" (Isaiah 63:16). However,

he does not stop there but continues with the heartfelt plea: "Lord, turn your goodness toward us for the love of your servants" (Isaiah 63:17). The faithful do not seek intercession from the saints but remember the blessings of the covenant. Now, considering that we have the Lord Jesus, in whose hand the eternal covenant of mercy was not only made but also confirmed, whose name should we invoke in our prayers?

Some may be swayed by the argument that the prayers of the saints have often been answered. Why is this so? Simply because they prayed. "They have hoped in you," declares the prophet, "and they have been preserved; they have cried and have not been shamed" (Psalm 22:4–5). Let us, therefore, follow their example in prayer, so that, like them, our petitions may be heard. Yet, it is unreasonable to argue that only those who have already been answered will receive God's ear. St. James provides a more compelling perspective: "Elijah," he says, "was a person like us, and he prayed that it might not rain, and for three and a half years there was no rain on the earth; again he prayed, and the heaven gave its rain and the earth its fruit" (James 5:17–18). Does he suggest that Elijah possessed a unique privilege to which we should turn? No, quite the opposite. He demonstrates the enduring power of pure and righteous prayer to encourage us to pray in the same manner. We fail to fully grasp God's generosity and kindness in answering the prayers of His saints unless, through their experiences of being heard, we are fortified in our unwavering confidence in His promises. God has not declared that His ears are inclined to hear only a select few; rather, they are open to all who call upon His name.

Prayer, as we understand it, comprises two essential components: petition and thanksgiving. All the various forms of prayer listed by St. Paul ultimately distill down to these two fundamental aspects (1

Timothy 2:1). Through petition, we lay our hearts and desires before God, initially seeking only those things that advance His glory and subsequently those that are also beneficial and necessary for us. In contrast, thanksgiving is our recognition of God's blessings and our acknowledgment of them, offering praise for all things and attributing all goodness to His benevolence. David succinctly encompasses these aspects in a single verse, assuming the voice of our Lord: "Call upon me in the day of your need, and I will deliver you, and you will glorify me" (Psalm 50:15).

We should habitually engage in both forms of prayer. Our profound need and insufficiency confront us on all fronts, compelling even the holiest among us to turn to God in humble supplication, regardless of the hour. Moreover, we are continually showered with God's abundant blessings, witnessing the marvels of His work, which are so great, excellent, and boundless that we never lack cause to extol, glorify, and thank Him in all circumstances and for all things. To elaborate further, as previously demonstrated, our sole hope and true good rest in God. Therefore, for our well-being, both individually and collectively, we must constantly commend ourselves and all that is ours to Him (James 4:14–15). Furthermore, all our intentions, words, and actions should be conceived, spoken, and undertaken under His guidance and will, relying on His help. For our Lord pronounces a curse upon those who make plans or take actions in self-reliance or in dependence on others, those who initiate endeavors outside His will, and those who do so without seeking His guidance or seeking His help (Isaiah 30:1ff, 31:1ff).

As we have discussed earlier, it is incumbent upon us to believe and acknowledge that God is the source of all goodness. Consequently, we must receive every blessing as a gift from His hand, all the while offering continuous thanksgiving. Indeed, there is no virtuous way to

utilize the countless blessings He ceaselessly bestows upon us if we do not accompany our use of these gifts with ceaseless praise and gratitude. St. Paul, when he asserts that all of God's good gifts are sanctified to us by the word and prayer (1 Timothy 4:5), highlights the vital importance of faith, signifying that without faith and prayer, these blessings remain unsanctified to us. By "the word," he refers to faith, which hinges on believing in this very word. Hence, without prayer and faith, none of God's good gifts are sanctified to us. It is for this reason that David offers sage guidance. After receiving a fresh blessing from God, he proclaims that a new song has been placed upon his lips (Psalm 40:3). In doing so, he underscores that our silence is tainted with ingratitude should we overlook any of His graces without rendering praise. For with every act of kindness He bestows upon us, He provides us with a cause to extol Him.

This perspective aligns with another exhortation from St. Paul, who admonishes us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This implies that, as much as is possible, our desires ought to continually ascend to God. We should desire every good from Him and offer praise for each blessing (1 Timothy 2:1, 8). This exhortation encompasses both individual and collective prayer. While public prayers cannot be unending, they should follow the prescribed order established by the consensus of the church. Certain hours are designated, not as a requirement of God's favor, but for human convenience, ensuring the benefit of all. St. Paul emphasizes the importance of orderly and harmonious conduct within the church (1 Corinthians 14:40). Nevertheless, each congregation should encourage itself to engage in prayer more frequently, especially in times of pressing need.

It is important to clarify that this passage does not serve to endorse superstitious practices involving the excessive repetition of prayers,

which our Lord explicitly discourages (Matthew 6:7). Christ does not discourage lengthy or frequent prayer, nor fervent supplication. Instead, He cautions against the misguided notion that by bombarding God with empty verbosity, we can compel Him to grant our requests. God is not swayed by meaningless chatter, as humans often are.

The essence of prayer, as previously mentioned, lies in elevating our spirits and directing them towards God. Prayer seeks His glory, confesses His praise, and implores His assistance in times of need. This underscores that prayer primarily resides in the heart and spirit. Indeed, prayer is fundamentally an inward desire, an inner turning and addressing of God, who comprehends the secrets of our hearts. It is for this reason that when Jesus, our Lord, provides a guideline for prayer, He instructs us to enter our private chambers, close the door, and pray to our heavenly Father in secret, confident that He, who discerns our most hidden thoughts, will hear us (Matthew 6:6). Christ, by this teaching, encourages us to seek a place of solitude that aids us in turning our attention wholly to God with our thoughts and emotions. He assures us that God draws near to the inward expressions of our hearts. Our physical bodies should indeed be temples for God, but the Lord intends to convey that prayer is an intimate matter that primarily engages the heart and spirit, necessitating tranquility free from carnal distractions and earthly cares. Thus, it is not without reason that Jesus Himself, when dedicating Himself to prayer, withdrew from the crowds. However, He did this to set an example for us, encouraging us not to dismiss such aids that enable our hearts to be elevated in prayer.

Nevertheless, even as He withdrew for private prayer, Jesus did not refrain from praying in the midst of the multitude when the occasion demanded it. Likewise, we should have no qualms about raising our

hands to heaven in any place (1 Timothy 2:8), especially when circumstances require it. Given that God's Word establishes the practice of communal prayer among the faithful, it is necessary to designate places for such gatherings. Those who abstain from joining God's people in prayer within these designated places cannot justify their actions by appealing to the notion of praying in their inner chambers to fulfill God's command. The One who promises to answer all that is asked when two or three are gathered in His name (Matthew 18:20) testifies clearly that He values communal prayer. These visible prayers should be devoid of ambition or the desire for personal glory, instead springing forth from true and pure affection within the depths of the heart.

It is crucial, as we embrace the lawful use of temples, to guard against the misconception that these edifices are the true abodes of God or places where the Lord grants us a more attentive ear, as has been believed for many years. We must not attribute some secret holiness to these structures that supposedly enhances the efficacy of our prayers before God. Such notions, which persist, must be relinquished. Let it be a matter for the Jews or gentiles, for our calling is to invoke the Lord in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24), irrespective of location. While it is true that God once commanded the temple's dedication for the offering of prayers and sacrifices, this pertained to a time when the truth was veiled in symbols and shadows. With the truth now revealed to us so palpably, we are no longer confined to a physical temple. It is important to remember that God did not ordain the temple as a means to confine His presence within its walls. Rather, He established it as a tool to encourage contemplation of the true temple. Consequently, those who believe that God dwells in temples crafted by human hands were sternly admonished by St. Stephen (Isaiah 66:1; Acts 7:49).

Similarly, it is evident that speaking and singing, when employed in prayer, hold no value in the eyes of God unless they spring forth from the depths of the heart and genuine affection. In fact, mere vocalization without heartfelt devotion can provoke His wrath. Such hollow utterances and rituals amount to a mockery of His majesty and an abuse of His holy name, as articulated by His prophet: "These people come near to me with their mouth and glorify me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They have worshiped me by human order and teachings. Therefore I will make this people a great wonder and a great and terrifying miracle. For the wisdom of all their sages will perish and the understanding of their wise ones and elders will be brought to nothing" (Isaiah 29:13-14; Matthew 15:8-9). It is not that we discredit the use of words or songs; quite the opposite, we hold them in high regard, provided they spring from the depths of the heart and serve to magnify our devotion. In this way, they aid the fragile human intention and keep our thoughts focused on God. Given that all our bodily members should glorify God in their unique capacities, it is fitting for the tongue, which was created expressly by God for the proclamation and magnification of His name, to articulate prayers and songs. This is particularly relevant in public prayers within Christian assemblies. In these collective acts of worship, we demonstrate our unity in faith and spirit, praising Him with one voice and encouraging one another through our shared confession of faith.

This brings us to a critical point: public prayers should not be offered in Greek among Latin-speaking communities, or in Latin among French or English-speaking congregations (as has been the historical practice). Instead, they should be conducted in the common language of the people, ensuring that the entire assembly comprehends the prayer. Public prayers are meant to edify the entire church, and edification is unattainable when the language used

remains unintelligible to the congregation. Even those who lack concern for love and charity should heed the authority of St. Paul, whose words are unambiguous: "If you give thanks with a sound which is not understood, how will the one who is ignorant say 'amen' to your blessing, since he does not understand what you say? For you give thanks well but the other is not edified" (1 Corinthians 14:16-17). It is truly astonishing to observe the unfounded presumption of the papal tradition in this regard. In contravention of the apostle's directive, they persist in singing and reciting prayers in a foreign, incomprehensible tongue, often not even understanding the words themselves. They neither comprehend nor desire understanding from others. St. Paul, however, urges us to follow a different path: "What shall I do then? I will pray with my voice, I will pray with my mind. I will sing with my voice, I will sing with understanding" (1 Corinthians 14:15). In this passage, he employs the word "spirit" where we have used "voice," but the meaning remains consistent, referring to the sound produced by the breath in the throat and the resonance of the air.

Nevertheless, we must always remember that the tongue, devoid of heartfelt devotion, can only displease God in both individual and public prayer. Furthermore, the ardor and intensity of our will should be so great that it surpasses anything that can be expressed through words. Ultimately, in individual prayer, the tongue is not essential, except as a means for initiating prayer when the mind is not sufficiently moved on its own. It is through intense emotion that the mind spurs the tongue to action. Occasionally, the best prayers emerge without the need for spoken words, as the depth of feeling prompts the tongue and other bodily members to express themselves without ostentation. An example can be found in Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who silently murmured her prayers using her lips, yearning for communion with God (1 Samuel 1:13). Believers often

experience a similar phenomenon during their prayers, where cries and vocalizations emerge spontaneously, unbidden by conscious thought. As for the external postures and bodily gestures, such as kneeling and uncovering the head, they are exercises meant to foster a deeper sense of reverence toward God.

Now, let us embark on a journey to learn not only the act of praying but also the method and template that our heavenly Father has bequeathed to us through His most beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). In the gift of prayer, we can discern an immense benevolence and tenderness. Beyond encouraging and urging us to return to Him in all our times of need, much like children who naturally turn to their fathers when faced with difficulties, God acknowledges our limitations. He understands that we may struggle to grasp the full extent of our poverty and misery or discern what is worthy to request from Him, what is beneficial, and what is essential. Therefore, He graciously offers a remedy for our ignorance and supplements what our spirits lack. He provides us with a model of prayer, akin to a vivid painting, in which He visibly encapsulates all that is lawful to wish and seek from Him, all that can serve our well-being, and all that we need to beseech Him for. In this, we find solace of a singular kind. We witness and are assured that our supplication is neither unlawful nor untimely nor foreign to Him when, by adhering to His guideline, we pray in essence through His very words. Plato, recognizing the inadequacy of people's desires and petitions to God, which often, if granted, would lead to their detriment, advocates the best form of prayer. He suggests that we should ask God to do us good, whether we explicitly request it or not, and to divert harm from us when we have inadvertently desired it. In this, he demonstrates a degree of insight, as a pagan, into the peril of seeking from God what our sinful desires dictate. He also aptly illustrates our wretchedness in the sense that

we cannot, without risk, open our mouths to request anything from God unless the Holy Spirit guides us in formulating our prayers.

This prayer, or rather the guideline for praying, comprises six petitions. I do not concur with those who divide it into seven segments, as the evangelist combines the phrases "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" into a single petition. It is as if he were saying, "Do not permit us to be ensnared by temptation, but rather grant us assistance in our frailty and rescue us from the danger of succumbing." Indeed, the early church fathers concur with this interpretation. It is evident, therefore, that the addition in St. Matthew's account, which some have interpreted as a seventh petition, serves as an elucidation of the sixth and should be linked to it. While each part of this prayer centers on the glory of God, it is essential to recognize that the initial three petitions are primarily intended to exalt God's glory. In these petitions, our concern should be God's honor alone, devoid of any self-centered affection, purpose, or intention. Nevertheless, even in this selfless devotion, we find immense benefit and profit, for when God's name is sanctified, as we pray, it also contributes to our sanctification. Nevertheless, as previously emphasized, we should not anticipate any personal gain from this. Even if all benefits were to be denied to us, and nothing returned to us, we should continue to desire and seek, through prayer, the sanctification of God's name and other similar aspects that pertain to His glory. We find examples of this in Moses and St. Paul, who fervently desired their own destruction if it would result in the exaltation of God's glory and the expansion of His reign, even at their own detriment (Exodus 32:32; Romans 9:3). Conversely, when we request our daily sustenance, while the petition concerns our well-being, our primary objective should still be the glory of God. If this request does not align with His glory, we should refrain from

making it or desiring it. With this foundation laid, let us commence our exploration of the prayer.

Our Father who is in heaven

As we embark on this sacred prayer, let us remember a fundamental principle we have previously discussed: all our prayers must be presented and addressed to God in the name of Jesus Christ. None can find favor in His sight under any other name. When we address God as our Father, we invoke His name through Jesus Christ, for we could not rightfully call God our Father without the grace of adoption through Jesus Christ. Christ, as the true, natural, and rightful Son of God, has been given to us as our Brother. Through this divine adoption, we become recipients of what Christ possesses by nature. To receive this great blessing, all that is required is a steadfast faith, as St. John beautifully states: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). It is because of this divine adoption that we have the privilege to call God our Father, and He welcomes this address with open arms. Through His great kindness, He eradicates any doubt or mistrust that may linger in our hearts.

There is no love that can compare to the love of a father, which is why God chose this name to convey His infinite love and charity to us. Through this name, we understand the depth of His love for us. However, we must recognize that His love surpasses even the most profound love that earthly fathers can have for their children. He is the embodiment of goodness and mercy, surpassing all humanity. Even in a scenario where every earthly father abandoned and forsook their children, God would never leave us, for He cannot deny His own nature (2 Timothy 2:13). His promise, given through His Son, our Redeemer, assures us of His boundless goodness: "If you then,

who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11). The words of the prophet Isaiah further affirm His unwavering love: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

As His children, we should never seek refuge in anyone other than our heavenly Father, for doing so would dishonor Him, suggesting either poverty and powerlessness or harshness and cruelty on His part. We should never allow our sins to deter us from addressing Him. While our offenses may have provoked Him, He is still a good and kind Father. Among humanity, a son can be the most effective advocate with his father, even when he has wronged him. By humbly and obediently acknowledging his transgressions and seeking his father's mercy, he can secure forgiveness, as a father's heart cannot resist such pleas. Therefore, we should confidently believe that our Father of mercy and God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3) will hear the cries and groans of His children who pray to Him. He invites and encourages us to pray for ourselves, rather than relying on intermediaries to petition Him on our behalf.

The parable of the prodigal son illustrates this profound fatherly mercy. In the story, the father does not wait for his son to verbally request forgiveness; instead, he recognizes his wayward child from afar and rushes to embrace him, showering him with comfort and grace. Through this parable, God teaches us to anticipate even greater grace, gentleness, and kindness from Him. He is not merely a Father; He is infinitely good and compassionate. Thus, even when we, His children, approach Him with humility, confessing our ingratitude, rebellion, and shortcomings, He responds with boundless compassion. To emphasize that He is the Father of all

Christians, God encourages us not only to call Him "Father" but also explicitly directs us to address Him as "our Father." In doing so, He underscores that we are His children, despite our unworthiness. We boldly declare, "Father, you are kind to your children and ready to forgive them. We are confident that you are our Father, overflowing with fatherly affection and goodwill toward us, regardless of our sins, imperfections, or limitations."

As we address God as "our Father," it serves as a profound reminder of the unity and brotherly affection that ought to bind us together. We are all children of one Father, and this common origin calls us to cultivate a deep sense of fraternity among ourselves. Our heavenly Father, from whom all goodness flows, is the source of every blessing we receive. Therefore, we should never allow divisions or separations to prevent us from wholeheartedly and generously sharing our blessings with one another in times of need. When we exhibit a readiness to support and assist one another, there is no better way to be of service to our brothers and sisters.

In times of favor and divine benevolence, when God's countenance shines upon us, we lack nothing. However, we also owe this to our Father. Just as someone who genuinely loves and desires the well-being and honor of the head of a household naturally extends that care to the entire family, so should we, as children of our heavenly Father, show the same affection to His people, His house, and His inheritance. God has bestowed such honor upon His people that He describes them as the fullness of His unique Son (Ephesians 1:23). Thus, we should be compelled by love and devotion to care for and serve one another in the same manner that a family looks out for its own members.

The Christian's prayer, therefore, should be characterized by a sense of unity and inclusiveness. It should encompass all those who are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. This includes not only those we are currently aware of, but also every individual on Earth. While we may not be privy to God's divine plan for each person, we should desire and hope for their well-being. It is vital to maintain a special fondness and affection, above all others, for the members of the household of faith, as emphasized by St. Paul (Galatians 6:10). These individuals are, to the best of our judgment, the genuine faithful and servants of God. In summary, all our prayers should possess a communal dimension, recognizing the community within God's kingdom and household.

However, this should not hinder us from offering specific prayers, both for ourselves and for others. Even in these individual petitions, our hearts should remain firmly fixed on the benefit and preservation of the larger community. Although such prayers may be articulated individually, they must be underpinned by a communal spirit. To illustrate this concept, consider the commandment to assist the poor in their time of need. While this directive is general in nature, individuals who exhibit mercy and generosity by providing for those they are aware of and can identify as being in need are indeed fulfilling it. It is impossible to support every person in need, either because of our limited knowledge or our finite resources. Similarly, when we pray, we can and should offer specific petitions for ourselves and others. However, our affection should always be tethered to the well-being of the larger community, ensuring that our prayers are infused with a communal spirit.

To further clarify this concept, consider the following metaphor. God's commandment to aid the poor is all-encompassing. Yet, those who, out of compassion, offer their possessions to those they

personally know are in need are obediently following this commandment, even though they cannot assist everyone in need due to limitations in knowledge or resources. Similarly, in our prayers, we can intercede specifically for those individuals and needs that God has brought to our attention. While these prayers may be couched in individual terms, they are still rooted in a communal spirit and concern. In this way, we fulfill our Christian duty to support and care for our brothers and sisters, even those who may be distant from us in various ways.

The prayer's continuation brings us to the phrase, "who is in heaven." Here, we must not misconstrue it to mean that God is confined or limited within the bounds of heaven. Solomon wisely declared that the heavens themselves cannot contain Him (1 Kings 8:27). Through His prophet, God has proclaimed that "heaven is His throne and the earth His footstool" (Isaiah 66:1; Acts 7:49; Acts 17:24), emphasizing His omnipresence, His presence filling all things and being beyond containment. He is not confined to any specific location but is omnipresent.

However, our human limitations and the frailty of our spirits prevent us from fully comprehending God's glory, power, sublimity, and greatness. In our finite understanding, we grasp at the heavens as the highest and most majestic concept within our reach. God accommodates our limitations by using "heaven" to illustrate these divine attributes. He employs this imagery to bridge the gap between His infinite nature and our finite understanding. It reminds us that, although He is present everywhere, our perception and understanding can only glimpse His greatness through the symbolism of heaven.

This divine description also serves to underscore God's immutability and incorruptibility. It signifies His exemption from any form of decay or alteration. The use of "who is in heaven" signals that He stands above and beyond the constraints of earthly change. It encourages us to ascend beyond the physical realm when we seek Him, lifting our hearts and spirits to transcend the limits of our senses.

Therefore, when we contemplate God, we should not reduce Him to a carnal or earthly image. We must refrain from subjecting Him to the confines of worldly reasoning or attempting to understand Him solely through our feelings. Instead, we ought to recognize His eternal, unchanging nature. He never falters, never wavers in His benevolence, and never abandons His own. He is the Supreme Governor and Master of all creation. His virtue, power, and majesty extend throughout the universe. He is the Lord of all goodness, ready to bestow His gifts upon us, and the Ruler over all evil, shielding us from its harm.

The First Petition:

Your Name Be Sanctified

In the opening petition, we utter the words, "Your name be sanctified." Here, we invoke the name of God, which holds great significance among humankind. This name should rightly reflect His divine attributes—His power, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, and truth. When we speak of His name being sanctified, we are not implying any change within God Himself, for He is immutable. Instead, we beseech that His majesty, which shines forth through His attributes, be regarded as holy, truly recognized for what it is, and magnified as befitting the God of all creation.

Our first request is that God's name align with His works, ensuring that no human ingratitude or ignorance obscures His greatness or diminishes His recognition. We desire that all His deeds, a testament to His glory, stand revealed in their true splendor. In doing so, we fulfill the words of the prophet: "Lord, your praise is manifested throughout the earth in accordance with your renown" (Psalm 48:10). This means that whether God punishes or pardons, fulfills His promises, or acts justly, His glory should shine undiminished. We yearn for His praise to be etched in every heart and echoed in every language. Furthermore, we aim to obliterate all impiety that tarnishes or diminishes the sanctity of His name, allowing His majesty to shine ever brighter. In essence, this petition encompasses gratitude. By sanctifying God's name, we acknowledge His role as the source of all goodness, attributing all to Him, and recognizing His grace and blessings, which render Him worthy of sanctification.

The Second Petition:

Your Kingdom Come

God's kingdom encompasses two aspects. Firstly, it signifies His reign as He governs and guides His own through the agency of His Holy Spirit, manifesting His goodness and the riches of His mercy in all their deeds and words. Simultaneously, it entails the judgment and ultimate demise of those who reject Him as their God and Lord, thereby revealing that no power can withstand His divine authority. These manifestations occur daily before our eyes, as our Lord empowers His word, causing it to flourish and reign even in the face of adversity, scorn, and worldly disdain. Therefore, we discern that His kingdom is already established in this world. In fact, Christ Himself proclaims that the kingdom of God resides within us (Luke 17:21). He intermittently refers to the Church as the kingdom of

heaven, where He reigns (Matthew 13:24), and the gospel's proclamation by which He asserts His dominion (1 Corinthians 1:21). Nonetheless, His kingdom is not of this world, primarily because it is spiritual rather than earthly, characterized by spiritual values, and, secondarily, because it is incorruptible and eternal (John 17:14-18; 18:36).

In our supplication, "Your kingdom come," we implore that each day, our Lord may augment the number of His subjects and the faithful who bring Him glory in every conceivable way. We beseech Him to abundantly dispense His graces to those He has already called into His kingdom, enabling Him to live and reign more expansively within them. Our ultimate aspiration is that He, having perfectly united us to Himself, may wholly fill us. We also yearn for His light and truth to shine more brilliantly, dispelling the darkness and lies propagated by the devil and his followers. By praying for the arrival of God's kingdom, we are, in essence, praying for its eventual culmination and fulfillment, which will occur on the day of His judgment when all truths are unveiled. On that day, He alone will be exalted and become all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28), as He gathers His own into glory and humbles, subdues, and vanquishes the dominion of the devil.

The Third Petition:

Your Will Be Done on Earth as in Heaven

In this petition, we earnestly seek that, just as nothing transpires in heaven without God's ordination, He may subject the earth to His rule, eradicating all stubbornness and rebellion. We yearn for Him to govern and regulate all things according to His will, to guide the course and outcome of all events, and to employ all His creatures as He pleases. Furthermore, we implore Him to subdue even the wicked

desires of the devil and the reprobate, who strive to evade His commandments and resist them to the utmost. We desire that they be rendered incapable of acting contrary to His good will. By praying in this manner, we renounce our sinful desires, abandoning them to God, and earnestly request that He shape events not according to our will but in accordance with His omniscience and divine pleasure. Specifically, we beseech Him not merely to annul the effects of our sinful desires that oppose His will but also to create within us new hearts and wills, inclined solely toward His desires (Ezekiel 36:26-27). In essence, we pray that our own wills may be replaced by His Spirit, guiding us to love what pleases Him and to abhor and fear everything that displeases Him.

These are the first three petitions of this prayer, focusing solely on God's honor without any regard for personal gain or profit. Nevertheless, such benefits will naturally ensue, even though they are not the primary cause or objective motivating our petitions. Although these events will come to pass and be realized in due course, even if we do not contemplate, desire, or request them, it is imperative that we harbor such desires and make such petitions. By doing so, we affirm our allegiance to God, proclaiming ourselves as His servants and children, who seek to promote His honor as our Lord and Father to the best of our abilities. Those who lack such affection and do not aspire to advance God's glory by praying for His name to be sanctified, His kingdom to come, and His will to be done, should not be counted among the ranks of God's children and servants. While these events will occur despite them, these same events will serve as their judgment and condemnation.

The Fourth Petition:

Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

With the fourth petition, we turn to the remaining three petitions, where we seek from God the provisions that sustain us and cater to our needs. In this initial petition, we implore God for all that our physical bodies require to navigate the affairs of this world. This encompasses not only our sustenance and clothing but also all things that God, in His wisdom, deems good and beneficial for us to use in peace and tranquility. In essence, through this plea, we place ourselves under His care and divine providence, relying on Him to nourish, support, and safeguard us.

Our gracious Father does not overlook even the needs of our physical bodies. Instead, He lovingly takes them under His protection, allowing our faith to manifest even in the simplest and humblest matters. We learn to anticipate receiving all that we require from Him, down to a single morsel of bread or a solitary drop of water.

Human nature, however, tends to fret more about the body than the soul. Some individuals, despite trusting God with their souls, continue to be anxious about their physical well-being. They persistently worry about what they will eat and wear, fearing deprivation if they do not amass an abundance of provisions, such as wheat, wine, and other goods. This shadow of our transient existence often holds greater value for us than eternal life. Conversely, those who possess unwavering trust in God, casting aside all concerns about their bodies, can confidently await even greater blessings, such as salvation and eternal life. Overcoming the unbelief deeply ingrained in human nature is a significant spiritual feat. Praying for these basic necessities allows us to do so and helps us grow in faith.

Some may attempt to transpose this petition onto the superessential bread, but this interpretation does not align well with the intentions of Jesus Christ (Matthew 6:11). Thus, we beseech our Father for our

daily sustenance. When we use the words "daily" and "today," or, as mentioned in another Gospel, "from day to day" (Luke 11:3), we convey the importance of refraining from an excessive and immoderate desire for worldly goods and transient things. We should only ask for what is sufficient for our daily needs, trusting our Father to provide for us today and every day that follows. Even if our storehouses and cellars overflow with abundance, we must continue to seek our daily bread. This emphasizes that all possessions hold no value unless the Lord blesses them with productivity and grants us their use, hour by hour.

Despite human pride's resistance to this truth, the Lord provides a significant example by feeding His people with manna in the wilderness. He intends to remind us that life does not depend solely on physical sustenance but also on every word that proceeds from His mouth (Deuteronomy 8:3). This underscores that it is His divine power that sustains our lives and strengthens us, even though He dispenses this power through corporeal elements. Conversely, He demonstrates the same lesson when He withholds the nourishment of bread, causing those who partake to suffer from famine, or when He denies access to water, leading to thirst and desolation (Ezekiel 4:16; 14:13).

For those who harbor discontent and avarice, desiring more than can be counted, or for those who rely on their abundance and trust in their riches, yet still recite this petition and make this request to God, they do so in vain. The former ask for something they do not truly want and even detest—merely their daily bread. They attempt to conceal their wicked and greedy inclinations, failing to present their whole hearts in sincere prayer. Authentic prayer should open one's heart, revealing its entirety. The latter group, believing they already possess what they ask for, seeks it insincerely. Therefore, when we

say "our," it highlights God's grace and kindness, which make something "ours" when it was never owed to us (Deuteronomy 8:18). Nevertheless, I do not strongly dispute those who interpret this term to signify bread obtained through just labor, acquired without harming others and without deception, as anything acquired unjustly can never truly be "ours."

The phrase "Give us" signifies that regardless of the source or means by which we obtain our bread, it remains a pure and free gift from God, even if acquired through our own toil, abilities, or endeavors.

The Fifth Petition:

Forgive Us Our Debts as We Forgive Our Debtors

In the fifth petition, we humbly request the forgiveness of our sins, a necessity that transcends any person's station in life. We use the term "debts" to refer to sins because we owe the punishment for our transgressions to God's justice, a debt we cannot absolve on our own. Only through His merciful pardon can we be liberated from this obligation. This remission is a gracious act on His part, freeing us from our debt without any payment or satisfaction required from us. This divine forgiveness is granted freely by His mercy, secured through the offering of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who once sacrificed Himself to the Father to satisfy our debt (Romans 3:23–26).

Those who believe they can satisfy God through their works, merits, or other means, and thereby earn remission for their sins, are mistaken. Such individuals have no part in this free remission. When they invoke God with these words, they unknowingly accuse themselves and bear witness against their own actions. By presenting their merits and satisfactions to God and seeking recompense for the

remission of their sins, they do not seek His grace and mercy; instead, they invoke His justice.

We ask for this remission to be granted to us in the same manner that we extend forgiveness to our debtors. In other words, we request that God pardon us in the same way we forgive those who wrong us, insult us, or offend us in word or deed. It is not within our power to forgive or remit the guilt of sin, a prerogative reserved solely for God (Isaiah 43:25). However, the forgiveness we can extend is a willingness to remove all anger, hatred, and vengeful desires from our hearts. It entails forgetting every harm or offense inflicted upon us, harboring no ill will against anyone.

Hence, we should not beseech God for forgiveness of our sins if we do not, in turn, forgive those who have wronged us. If we retain hatred in our hearts, harbor vengeful thoughts, seek harm for our enemies, or fail to make every effort to reconcile with those who have offended us, we effectively ask God not to grant us remission of our sins through this prayer. We are essentially requesting that He treat us as we treat others, and if we do not extend forgiveness to others, what can we expect but more severe condemnation?

Finally, we must understand that the condition, "that He will forgive us as we forgive our debtors," is not added because our forgiveness of others merits God's forgiveness of us. Instead, this condition serves to strengthen the weakness of our faith. It reassures us that we are forgiven by God as certainly as we have forgiven others when our hearts are devoid of anger, resentment, ill will, and vengeance. God includes this condition to emphasize that He excludes from His family those who persist in unforgiveness, retaining hatred and anger in their hearts while asking Him to pardon their sins. He

imposes this condition to prevent those who are unwilling to forgive from invoking Him as their Father.

The Sixth Petition:

Lead Us Not into Temptation but Deliver Us from Evil

The sixth petition addresses the multitude of temptations that assail us, each stemming from diverse sources. These temptations include the wicked notions that arise in our minds, enticing us to transgress God's law. They are fueled by our own sinful desires or the devil's malevolent influence (James 1:14; Matthew 4:1ff; 1 Thessalonians 3:5). Some temptations arise from objects or situations that, while inherently neutral, are manipulated by the devil to lure us away from God. Among these temptations, there are those that appear appealing, like wealth, power, and honors, dazzling our perception with a deceptive facade of goodness and allure. Then there are the temptations on the other side, such as poverty, shame, scorn, and afflictions, which, due to their harshness and difficulty, discourage and dishearten us, causing us to lose confidence, hope, and ultimately, our connection with God.

In this sixth petition, we implore our Heavenly Father not to allow us to succumb to these relentless temptations that assail us from within and without. Instead, we beseech Him to sustain and fortify us with His mighty hand, enabling us to stand firm against the assaults of the malevolent adversary. We pray for the strength to overcome the thoughts introduced into our minds by the evil one and to transform both right and left-sided temptations into opportunities for spiritual growth. This petition is not a plea to avoid feeling temptation; rather, it serves to rouse us, prick our conscience, and motivate us to remain vigilant and alert (James 1:2ff). David himself wished to be tested by the Lord (Psalm 26:1), and God, in His wisdom, does not cease to

challenge His servants to refine their faith, increase their spiritual fortitude, and mortify and purify their flesh through trials (Genesis 22:1; Deuteronomy 8:2–3, 16; 13:3).

However, it is crucial to recognize that God and the devil approach temptation differently. The devil's aim is to destroy, damn, confound, and obliterate us, and his attacks are often covert and sudden, aimed at catching us off guard. Conversely, God uses temptation to test His servants, strengthen them, and refine their character, burning away impurities and mortifying their sinful flesh. He never tempts us beyond what we can endure and always provides a way out, ensuring we can withstand every trial (1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Peter 2:9).

It is also worth noting that the term "evil" can refer to both the devil and sin. Satan is the adversary who seeks our destruction, using sin as the weapon to crush and murder us. Therefore, when we ask to be delivered from evil, we encompass not only liberation from the devil's grasp but also freedom from sin's dominion.

This petition encompasses more than it initially appears. When we request deliverance from Satan and sin, we are essentially asking for the continuous increase of God's grace in our lives. As we grow in grace, we can better resist temptation and achieve victory over all evil. We must remember that resisting the devil and his cunning tactics is not within our natural abilities. To trust in our own strength against such a formidable adversary is futile and dangerous. Those who rely on their free will and believe in their innate power fail to comprehend the true nature of the enemy they face. The devil is a formidable adversary, cunning and well-armed.

Therefore, we pray for deliverance from the devil's power, acknowledging that we would be easily overcome and devoured if the Lord were not by our side. Our victory lies not in our strength but in

His. While others may place their trust in their own abilities, we find assurance in the presence of the Lord as our Helper and Defender. We understand that, by God's strength alone, we can stand firm and accomplish all that is within our capacity.

In closing, the last three petitions underscore the essence of communal prayer among Christians, as they collectively entrust themselves and their concerns to God. These petitions affirm that our prayers should be directed toward the mutual edification and benefit of the Church, as well as the broader advancement of the fellowship of believers. In seeking these petitions, individuals do not request personal blessings but instead approach God together, asking for daily sustenance, forgiveness of sins, and protection from temptation and evil.

Although not explicitly found in the Latin books, the following reason is so fitting within this context that it must not be omitted.

For yours is the kingdom, the power,
and the glory to the ages of ages. Amen.

With the words, "For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory to the ages of ages. Amen," we find the firm and tranquil anchor of our faith. If the efficacy of our prayers were dependent on our own merit, who among us would dare to approach God with our petitions? We are not only wretched and unworthy but also devoid of anything that could make us valuable in God's eyes. Despite our inherent deficiencies, we can approach God in prayer with unwavering confidence because the kingdom, the power, and the glory eternally belong to our Heavenly Father.

In conclusion, we utter the word "amen." This expression signifies both the fervor of our desire to receive all the petitions we've presented to God and the assurance that our requests are granted and will assuredly come to fruition. God, who is unerring in His promises, has pledged to fulfill what we've asked of Him.

In this comprehensive prayer, we find everything we should and can seek from God. It serves as a guiding light and a framework for our prayers, bestowed upon us by our compassionate Teacher, Jesus Christ, who was appointed by the Father to be our guide. He is the eternal Wisdom of God and, as a man, serves as God's great Ambassador and Messenger to humanity (Isaiah 9:6). This prayer is so flawless and complete that any addition not aligned with its content stands contrary to God's will and will remain unanswered. In this prayer, God has revealed His pleasure, our necessities, and His intentions for us. Those who desire to ask for something outside the scope of this prayer not only presume to supplement God's infinite wisdom, but they also deviate from God's will and forfeit the efficacy of their prayers. True faith cannot exist when faith does not rest upon God's Word. These additions, devoid of God's Word and in direct contradiction to it, hinder true prayer.

Tertullian aptly described this prayer as "lawful prayer," signifying its rightful place. It implies that other forms of prayer are illegitimate. However, we must not mistake this to mean that we are bound to use only these exact words and this particular structure in our prayers. Scripture provides numerous prayers, each distinct in wording, yet united in spirit and deeply beneficial. Moreover, the Holy Spirit continually prompts the faithful with diverse forms of prayer.

Our aim is to emphasize that we should seek, expect, and request nothing outside the scope of this prayer. While our words may differ, the essence of our petitions should remain unchanged. All prayers in Scripture and those offered by the faithful find their connection to this foundational prayer. Though the words may vary, the underlying sense remains constant. No other prayer can match the perfection encompassed by this one. It contains all that one could desire in the praise of God and all that is necessary for personal benefit. Every aspect of our relationship with God, every petition for His guidance, provision, and mercy, finds its embodiment in this prayer. It is the quintessential model of prayer, a testament to God's wisdom and our dependence on it. In summary, let us remember that these teachings emanate from God's own wisdom, instructing us in what His wisdom deems worthy and guiding us toward what is necessary for our spiritual journey.

Prayer, an essential expression of our connection with the Divine, requires constant dedication. As previously emphasized, we must maintain a ceaseless dialogue with God, keeping our hearts lifted towards Him. However, our frailty often necessitates more structured times of prayer to stir our sluggish spirits. It is beneficial to establish specific hours dedicated to prayer, such as upon waking in the morning, before commencing daily tasks, at meal times, and before retiring to rest. Yet, we must not fall into the trap of rigidly adhering to these hours as though they were mere superstitious observances. Our devotion should not be confined to these moments alone, nor should we presume that fulfilling these designated times absolves us of further responsibility. Rather, they serve as a discipline to invigorate our prayer life and ignite our spiritual fervor. Above all, we should remain vigilant that in times of confusion or distress, we immediately turn to God in prayer, seeking His guidance. Likewise, we must not let moments of prosperity, either

personal or witnessed in others, pass without offering praise and thanksgiving to God, acknowledging His power and goodness.

In our prayers, it is imperative not to constrain God to specific circumstances or to dictate the manner, time, or place of His response. Just as this prayer instructs us to surrender our will to God's divine providence, we should adopt the same approach in all our petitions. Before seeking His intervention in our own needs, we ought to pray fervently for His will to be done. By submitting our desires to His divine authority, we acknowledge Him as our Master and the Director of our hearts' affections.

When our hearts are molded in such obedience, we will naturally learn the art of persevering in prayer. We will patiently await the Lord's timing, surrendering our desires to His sovereign will. We will find comfort in knowing that even if God does not immediately respond in a manner we comprehend, He remains present with us. He will eventually demonstrate that He has not ignored our prayers, despite initial appearances of rejection. This knowledge should sustain us, preventing discouragement and despair that may arise when our immediate wishes are not fulfilled. Some, driven by fervent zeal, abandon prayer altogether if God does not answer their petitions promptly. We must exercise moderation, fostering perseverance as advised in Scripture.

Furthermore, we should guard against testing God or provoking Him with impatience and incessant demands. There are those who approach Him as if making a contractual agreement, imposing their terms upon Him, and seeking to subject Him to their desires. When He does not comply with these self-imposed conditions, they grow angry, resentful, and disillusioned. Curiously, He may grant their desires out of anger, rather than favor. The example of the children

of Israel, who received quail from God in His wrath, illustrates this point (Numbers 11:18, 33).

Even if, after considerable waiting, our senses fail to discern the results of our prayers, faith assures us of the goodness that God bestows. Frequently, our Lord promises to address our afflictions once we have laid them before Him. In times of poverty, He grants abundance, and in moments of suffering, He provides solace. Even when we seem to lack everything, God will never abandon us. He remains our constant companion, fulfilling the expectations and patience of His faithful. He is our ultimate source of all good things, and in His judgment, He will fully reveal His kingdom to us.

Patience is indispensable for the faithful, as God often tests them through challenging experiences. He not only subjects them to difficulties but also places them in extreme conditions for an extended period before revealing His mercy. During these times, when affliction seems unrelenting and comfort elusive, one thought uplifts the faithful: that God sees them and will ultimately bring a favorable outcome to their suffering. They cling to this assurance, ensuring that even amid affliction, their hearts remain steadfast in prayer. Without this perseverance, their endurance would falter, for the Lord does not always employ easy experiences to test His faithful. He tests them rigorously, occasionally subjecting them to severe adversity. Nevertheless, He assures them that their suffering will ultimately yield a harvest of His gentleness. As the faithful endure hardships and trials, they are not abandoned. God is present with them, and their prayers, though seemingly unanswered, continue to ascend towards Him.

CHAPTER TEN

Of the Sacraments

In our journey of faith, it is imperative that we explore the significance of sacraments. We require clear instruction on their purpose and the manner in which they should be embraced.

First and foremost, we must grasp the essence of what a sacrament represents. It serves as an outward symbol through which our Lord conveys His benevolence towards us. Sacraments are intended to fortify and affirm the frailty of our faith. In essence, they bear witness to God's grace, revealed through external signs. It is vital to recognize that sacraments are never detached from God's preceding word. Instead, they are an integral component appended to the word, designed to elucidate and validate it, reinforcing our belief. This is not to suggest that God's word lacks inherent strength or requires further validation, as it is the epitome of divine truth, unassailable in its certainty. The purpose of sacraments is to bolster our trust in God's word. Our faith, often feeble and faltering, necessitates multifaceted support, enveloping it from all angles. Given our inherent ignorance and preoccupation with worldly concerns, we struggle to conceive or envision spiritual matters. In the realm of sacraments, our compassionate Lord accommodates our limited comprehension. He guides us toward the spiritual realm, even through material elements, allowing us to contemplate the spiritual within the corporeal. These elements do not inherently possess spiritual properties but are designated and marked by God to convey this profound significance.

Let us disregard the contentions of some who argue with a seemingly clever ruse: "Either we are already familiar with God's preceding word, rendering the sacrament redundant, or we are ignorant of it, and the sacrament, without this preceding knowledge, is rendered powerless." Such arguments are swiftly dismissed. Consider this: seals affixed to letters and official documents, on their own, hold no significance. If the parchment were devoid of content, the seals would serve no purpose, standing as empty symbols. However, when attached to words, seals assume a vital role. Similarly, sacraments function as seals, certifying, confirming, and reinforcing the scriptural content. These individuals may not assert that this metaphor is a recent invention or a subjective creation. The Apostle Paul himself employs it when describing the sacrament of circumcision, using the Greek word "sphragida," which translates to "seal." In this context, he elucidates that circumcision was not bestowed upon Abraham to attain righteousness but served as a seal of the covenant, thereby affirming the righteousness that had already been imputed to him through faith (Romans 4:11).

It is evident that promises often reinforce one another, with the clearer promise offering greater reassurance to our faith. Sacraments, uniquely, present these promises in a vivid and tangible form, transcending mere words. We need not be troubled by comparisons between sacraments and seals affixed to official documents, which some may raise. While both sacraments and seals employ elements of this earthly realm, sacraments do not seal God's spiritual promises in the same manner as seals do human contracts or transient matters. When a faithful person encounters a sacrament, their gaze extends beyond the external elements, and they elevate themselves to contemplate the profound mysteries concealed therein. This reflection bridges the gap between the material and the spiritual, connecting the carnal image to the spiritual truth.

Our Lord often likens His promises to covenants and agreements, while referring to sacraments as marks or signs of these agreements. This analogy can be understood by drawing a parallel with human agreements. In ancient times, individuals would seal their agreements by sacrificing a sow. But what significance would a lifeless sow hold if it were not accompanied by the words of the agreement? The act of slaughtering a sow, in itself, does not necessarily imply a deeper mystery. Similarly, the act of shaking hands alone holds little weight, for individuals may shake hands even with adversaries. Yet, when the terms of friendship and agreement are clearly articulated beforehand, the handshake serves as a confirmation, reinforcing the agreement's validity. Thus, sacraments serve as exercises for us, enhancing our certainty in God's word and promises. Given our human frailty, they are presented to us through tangible elements, catering to our weaknesses and guiding us as mentors would guide young children. In this sense, St. Augustine aptly labels sacraments as "visible words," as they portray God's promises, akin to a painting, making them visibly tangible.

We can employ additional metaphors to comprehend the full extent of sacraments' significance. Consider them as the pillars of our faith. Just as a building relies on its foundation and is further fortified by supporting pillars, our faith rests upon God's word as its foundation. Yet, with the addition of sacraments, faith finds firmer ground, and its foundations are strengthened. Alternatively, view sacraments as mirrors in which we can gaze upon God's boundless riches and grace, generously bestowed upon us. Through sacraments, God reveals Himself to us in a manner that our limited senses can comprehend. They testify to His benevolent intentions and allow us to witness His divine will.

Those who contend that sacraments do not serve as testimonies to God's grace make an inadequate argument. They claim that sacraments are often received by the wicked, who do not perceive God's favor despite their participation. By this logic, one could argue that the gospel itself is not a testimony of God's grace since it is heard by many who reject it. Similarly, Jesus Christ Himself was seen and known by numerous individuals, yet only a few accepted Him. Analogously, when examining the official documents sealed by princes, a significant portion of the populace may disregard them, even though they acknowledge the authoritative seal affixed by the ruler. Some may dismiss these documents as irrelevant to their lives, while others may even curse them. Thus, we can assert that, in His holy word and sacraments, the Lord extends His mercy and gracious intentions to all. However, only those who receive both the word and the sacraments with unwavering faith truly grasp and accept His divine grace. Just as Jesus Christ was offered by the Father for the salvation of all but was not universally recognized and embraced, so it is with His sacraments. St. Augustine captured this sentiment when he stated, "The power of the word which is in the sacrament lies not in the fact that it is pronounced but in the fact that it is believed and accepted."

In conclusion, let us firmly affirm that sacraments are indeed testimonies of God's grace and serve as seals of His favor, etching His benevolence into our hearts. Arguments to the contrary lack substance and conviction. Some claim that if one's faith is genuine, it cannot be improved upon, for true faith rests unshakably upon God's mercy. Such individuals would do well to echo the apostles' plea, "Lord, increase our faith" (Luke 17:5), rather than boast of possessing a perfection of faith that no human being has ever attained or will attain in this earthly life. Let them ponder upon the nature of the faith expressed by the individual who uttered, "I

believe, Lord; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). This faith, though in its infancy, was genuine and could still be fortified by reducing unbelief. Ultimately, they can be challenged by none other than their own conscience. If they acknowledge their status as sinners (a fact that cannot be denied), they must attribute the weakness of their faith to their own imperfections.

It is recounted: "Philip answered the eunuch that if he believed with all his heart it was lawful for him to be baptized" (Acts 8[37]). The question then emerges: What significance should be attributed to the sacrament of baptism in this context, where faith reigns supreme, encompassing the entire core of one's being? I, in response, inquire of those who pose this query: Do they not perceive a substantial portion of their heart to be bereft, a barren terrain devoid of faith's presence? Do they not acknowledge within themselves a continual augmentation of faith's presence, akin to a sapling flourishing day by day? A heathen once boasted of aging gracefully in the pursuit of knowledge. Thus, we Christians stand in stark contrast, condemned to spiritual destitution if we age devoid of any advancement. The faith of a Christian ought to traverse various stages, each contributing to its maturation, as articulated in Ephesians 4[13]. Consequently, in this context, to "believe with all one's heart" does not signify an unwavering fixation upon Jesus Christ, but rather to embrace Him with a virtuous heart and genuine ardor. It is not to be satiated with His presence, but to yearn and thirst for Him, to sigh for Him with fervent affection. In the language of scripture, to act "with the whole heart" signifies a sincere and unpretentious endeavor, exemplified in passages such as "With my whole heart I have sought you" and "I will praise you with my whole heart" (Ps. 119[10], 111[1], 138[1]), among others. Conversely, when reproving hypocrites and deceivers, scripture often censures them for

possessing "a heart and a heart," denoting a duality of purpose (Ps. 112[2]).

Subsequently, they contend: "If faith were augmented by the sacraments, the Holy Spirit, whose purpose and power it is to initiate, affirm, and perfect faith, would be bestowed in vain." To these assertions, I concede that faith indeed stands as the exclusive handiwork of the Holy Spirit, whose illumination grants us knowledge of God and the vast treasures of His benevolence. Without His light, our spirits remain shrouded in blindness, perceiving nothing, and devoid of spiritual vitality. However, it is imperative to recognize that for the single grace of God they contemplate, we discern threefold manifestations. Firstly, our Lord imparts instruction through His word. Secondly, He bolsters us through His sacraments. Thirdly, by the illumination of His Holy Spirit, He illumines our understanding, enabling the word and sacraments to penetrate our hearts. Without His intervention, these elements would merely resonate in our ears and register in our eyes but remain impotent and inconsequential.

Therefore, I beseech my readers to apprehend that when I attribute the function of strengthening and amplifying faith to the sacraments, it is not due to an inherent and enduring power they possess but by virtue of their divine institution. Furthermore, their efficacy materializes only when the inner Master of souls imbues them with His power, without which they are as futile as sunlight to the blind or resounding voices to deaf ears. Thus, I draw a crucial distinction between the Spirit and the sacraments, recognizing that the true potency resides in the Spirit, and the sacraments merely serve as instruments wielded by the Lord on our behalf. These instruments, though ineffective and futile on their own, are laden with efficacy when employed in conjunction with the Spirit's agency. It is now

evident how, in my perspective, faith is fortified by the sacraments—much like how the eyes perceive through the radiance of the sun, and the ears resonate with the sound of the voice. Certainly, light serves no purpose for the eyes unless they possess the inherent capacity to see and receive it, nor does sound hold meaning for the ears unless they are naturally endowed with the ability to hear. If, as is indisputable amongst us, the Holy Spirit's work in begetting, sustaining, preserving, and establishing faith is analogous to sight for the eye and hearing for the ear, it logically ensues that the sacraments, without the Spirit's intervention, offer no benefit. Nonetheless, this does not obstruct faith's consolidation and augmentation in hearts that the Spirit has enlightened.

This line of reasoning also obviates the objections habitually raised: "By attributing the augmentation or affirmation of faith to earthly entities, you impugn the sanctity of God's Spirit, who alone merits recognition as the Author of faith." Our doctrine does not diminish His rightful glory, for the faith that He is said to confirm and strengthen is none other than our spirit, illuminated by His guidance, rendering it receptive to the affirmation presented through the sacraments. Perhaps a parable will elucidate this further: When endeavoring to persuade someone to take a particular course of action, one must consider all the rational incentives that might incline that individual toward the proposed idea, compelling them to acquiesce. Yet, despite these efforts, nothing transpires unless the individual in question possesses a keen and active intellect, capable of comprehending the cogency of the proffered reasons. Moreover, their disposition must be amenable to instruction and receptive to virtuous guidance. Finally, they must hold an opinion of the speaker's integrity and wisdom sufficient to inspire partial confidence, motivating them to form a tentative judgment and accept the offered counsel. Indeed, there are those with obdurate minds,

impervious to all reasoning. When the speaker's integrity is suspect or their authority is scorned, even those predisposed to compliance will remain impervious. Conversely, when all these elements coalesce, they create the conditions for the counsel, which might otherwise be disregarded, to be embraced willingly.

The divine work of the Holy Spirit unfolds in the following manner. To prevent the word from falling upon deaf ears or the sacraments from being presented in vain, He reveals the presence of God speaking within them. He tenderly softens the hardness of our hearts, making us receptive to the obedience owed to His word. Ultimately, He conveys both the words and the sacraments to the ears of our spirits. Thus, it is undeniable that both the word and the sacraments reinforce our faith by revealing our Heavenly Father's benevolent disposition through the faculties of our eyes. The steadfastness of our faith, as well as our strength, resides in comprehending this goodwill. The Spirit further strengthens faith by imprinting this affirmation upon our hearts, rendering it efficacious. The Lord Jesus aptly illustrates this quality in external word when He likens it to "seed" (Matthew 13:18–23). Just as seed, when sown in an uncultivated land, yields no fruit, whereas in a well-tilled field, it flourishes abundantly, God's word operates similarly. It remains unproductive in an obstinate and unreceptive mind, much like seed scattered upon the seashore's sands. However, when it encounters a soul prepared by the Holy Spirit, it becomes fertile, bearing fruit aplenty. Hence, if we acknowledge the analogy between seed and word, as we do for wheat, which flourishes from the seed, it follows logically that faith takes its inception, growth, and culmination from the word.

The sacraments serve as confirmations of our faith in such a way that at times, when God desires to test the certainty of the promises

embedded in the sacraments, He temporarily withholds the sacraments themselves. For example, when He banished Adam and deprived him of the gift of immortality, He declared, "Let Adam not partake of the fruit of life so that he may not live forever" (Genesis 3[22]). What does this signify? Could this fruit have reinstated Adam's lost incorruptibility? Certainly not. Rather, it is as if God proclaimed, "Let the emblem of My promise, capable of instilling hope for immortality, be withdrawn, so that vain confidence may be dispelled." Likewise, the apostle, when exhorting the Ephesians to remember their former alienation from the promises and their exclusion from the company of Israel, without God or Christ, states that they had not partaken in circumcision (Ephesians 2[11–12]). Here, he signifies their exclusion from the promise due to their lack of the covenant's mark.

They raise another objection: "By attributing power to creatures in this manner, one diminishes God's glory." A simple response suffices: we do not invest creatures with power but acknowledge that God employs suitable means and instruments according to His divine will, so that all things may ultimately serve His glory, for He is the Lord and Master of all creation. In the same manner that He sustains our physical bodies with bread and sustenance, illuminates the world through the sun, and imparts warmth through fire, these entities, apart from His benevolent grace, remain inert. Similarly, He nurtures and sustains spiritual faith through sacraments, which serve no other purpose than to visually represent God's promises to us. Just as we should not place undue reliance on other creatures destined for our use, nor elevate them as the source of our blessings, our faith should not fixate upon the sacraments, nor should we transfer God's glory to them. Instead, we should renounce all earthly dependencies, directing our faith and confession toward the One who is the Originator of the sacraments and all other blessings.

The argument that they derive a pretext for their error from the term "sacrament" itself is misleading. They assert that, although the word "sacrament" has various interpretations by approved authors, there is only one fitting definition, pertaining to signs, wherein "sacrament" signifies the solemn oath taken by a soldier before his prince or captain upon joining a military unit. Just as new soldiers, through this oath, pledge their allegiance to their leader and commit themselves to him, affirming their role as his soldiers, we, too, through our signs, acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Captain and declare ourselves as warriors under His banner. They employ metaphors to elucidate this point, such as distinguishing French and English soldiers by the white and red crosses they wear, analogous to the Romans' distinctive clothing that set them apart from the Greeks. Moreover, different Roman ranks were identified by their individual signs, such as senatorial horsemen in purple attire and round shoes, and commoner horsemen with a ring. Nevertheless, I can confidently assert that the early church fathers, who designated our signs as "sacraments," did not adopt this meaning from the Latin writers. Instead, they devised this new interpretation for the term "sacrament" to designate sacred signs, often synonymous with "mystery" in the Latin translation of scripture. While we acknowledge the analogies they present, we cannot permit their assertions to establish the primary definition, particularly when they overlook the multifaceted nature of the sacraments.

To dig deeper, it might be argued that they assigned this meaning to "sacrament" for the same reason and analogy as they did for the term "faith." Although "faith" properly denotes the truthfulness in keeping one's promise, they adopted the word to signify the certainty or unwavering persuasion one holds regarding this truth. Similarly, "sacrament" represents the oath by which soldiers pledge themselves to their captain. Yet, we refrain from delving into such subtleties, as

we can present numerous and more lucid arguments demonstrating that the early church fathers intended nothing more than to convey that these signs are symbolic representations of holy and spiritual matters, a connotation frequently associated with the term "mystery" in the Latin scripture translation. While we acknowledge their use of analogies, we cannot endorse any interpretation that deviates from this fundamental understanding.

Let us ponder the significance of the sacraments, keeping in mind their primary purpose: to nurture and fortify our faith in God. A secondary consideration is that they bear witness to our confession of faith before fellow human beings. In line with this perspective, the analogies mentioned earlier hold true and are indeed apt.

However, as we caution against those who diminish the sacraments' efficacy and render them obsolete, there are also those who attribute to them mysterious powers not bestowed by God. This error ensnares the unsuspecting and naive, leading them to seek God's gifts and graces where they cannot be found, gradually diverting them from Him to the pursuit of empty illusions. The schools of the sophists collectively affirm that the sacraments of the new law, those currently employed by the Christian church, justify and bestow grace, as long as mortal sin does not obstruct this process. It is challenging to overstate the peril posed by this belief, especially considering its longstanding acceptance to the great detriment of the church. Even more concerning is its diabolical nature, for it promises righteousness without faith, creating confusion and damnation in consciences. By positioning the sacrament as the source of righteousness, it entangles the human mind in the superstition that righteousness hinges on a material thing rather than on God, a conclusion to which human understanding naturally inclines. Alas,

we need not look far to find ample evidence of these twin vices in our midst.

What is a sacrament without faith but a threat to the very essence of the church? One should anticipate nothing beyond what the promise entails—a declaration of God's wrath upon unbelievers as well as an offer of His grace to the faithful. Therefore, anyone who believes they can derive from the sacraments a different blessing than what faith affords them through the Word gravely deceives themselves. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that confidence in salvation does not hinge upon participation in the sacraments, as if righteousness were exclusively bound to them. We know that righteousness resides solely in Jesus Christ and is imparted to us not only through the preaching of the gospel but also through the testimony of the sacraments. Moreover, it can exist entirely without sacramental testimony, as articulated by St. Augustine: "The visible sign often appears without the invisible sanctification, and the sanctification without the visible sign."

Therefore, let us remain steadfast in the understanding that the sacraments serve no purpose other than that of God's Word, which presents and offers Jesus Christ to us, along with the treasures of His heavenly grace. They provide no benefit except to those who receive them in faith. Moreover, we must be vigilant not to fall into the error of exalting the sacraments beyond their rightful place. Instead, we should maintain a balanced perspective, neither according them undue respect nor denying them their due significance.

The term "sacrament," as previously mentioned, encompasses all the signs established by God throughout history to assure people of the truth of His promises. These signs have taken various forms—sometimes natural, at other times miraculous. For instance, when

God gave the tree of life to Adam and Eve, it served as a pledge of immortality, assuring them that as long as they partook of its fruit, they would possess that gift (Genesis 2[16–17], 3[3, 22]). Similarly, God presented the rainbow to Noah as a sign and symbol to him and his descendants, signifying His commitment to never again destroy the earth through a flood (Genesis 9[12–13]). These objects, the tree and the rainbow, became sacraments not because the tree had the power to grant immortality, or the rainbow the ability to halt the waters. Instead, they became signs and seals of God's promises, having been marked and designated as such by His word. Prior to this divine designation, the tree was just a tree, and the rainbow a simple meteorological phenomenon. Yet, after God's word marked them, they assumed a new significance. To this day, the rainbow serves as a reminder of God's promise to Noah, and whenever we see it, we recall that promise: that the earth will never again be destroyed by a flood.

Therefore, if a skeptical philosopher were to suggest that the colors of the rainbow arise naturally from the reflection of the sun's rays and the opposing cloud, we would concede the point. However, we could correct their ignorance by reminding them that God, the Lord of nature, employs all elements according to His will to serve His glory. He marks and designates these elements as signs and seals of His promises. Even though silver in its raw form and minted into coinage consists of the same metal, the former holds no intrinsic value, while the latter, transformed into currency through minting and endowed with a fixed value, assumes a new significance. Could not God, by His word, mark and designate His creatures as signs and sacraments, endowing them with a new purpose beyond their original, elemental nature?

Let us explore further the second kind of sacraments—those of the miraculous variety. These were performed by God to bolster, console, and strengthen the faith of His people. To illustrate this, consider when God, to assure Gideon of victory, made the ground wet while keeping the surrounding earth dry and, conversely, when He wet the earth while leaving Gideon's fleece dry (Judges 6[36–40]). Another instance is when God caused the sun to move back ten degrees on the sundial to guarantee Hezekiah's health (2 Kings 20[9–11]; Isaiah 38[7–8]). These acts, executed to support and reinforce the faith of these individuals, can also be regarded as sacraments in their own right.

However, for our current discussion, let us focus specifically on the sacraments established by our Lord, which He intended to be ordinary in His Church. These sacraments are conveyed not merely through signs but through ceremonies or, if one prefers, the signs themselves are integral to the ceremonies. Moreover, they serve as emblems of our commitment, publicly binding us to God and pledging our faith. St. Chrysostom aptly characterizes them as "treaties through which the written bond of our debt is canceled, and at the same time obligations by which we become debtors to live in a pure and holy manner." Through these sacraments, our Lord forgives the entire debt of sin and transgression that burdens us, while we, in turn, pledge ourselves to serve Him in holiness and purity of life. Consequently, we may define these sacraments as ceremonies through which the Lord trains His people first to nurture, practice, and fortify their faith internally within their hearts and subsequently to manifest their faith publicly before others.

These sacraments themselves have evolved over time, reflecting the different epochs in which the Lord chose to reveal Himself in distinct ways. For instance, circumcision was prescribed for Abraham and his

descendants (Genesis 17[10ff]). Later, under the Mosaic Law, rituals involving washings and sacrifices were introduced (found in Leviticus). These constituted the sacraments of the Jewish faith until the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. At that point, the former sacraments were abolished, and two new ones, baptism and the Lord's Supper (Matthew 28[19], 26[26–28]), were instituted, which the Christian Church now observes. However, the fundamental purpose of these earlier Jewish sacraments remains consistent with that of our present sacraments: to point to Jesus Christ and lead people to Him, or rather, to represent Him like images and make Him known. While the former sacraments foreshadowed the promised Christ during the period of anticipation, our present sacraments bear witness to and teach that He has already been given and revealed.

To fully grasp these concepts, let us examine each one individually. Firstly, for the Jews, circumcision served as a reminder that human nature, originating from human seed, is inherently corrupt and requires purification through circumcision—the removal and cutting away of impurity. Additionally, circumcision symbolized the promise given to Abraham regarding the blessed seed through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed, and from whom they should expect their own blessings (Genesis 22[18]). This blessed seed, as St. Paul elucidates, was Jesus Christ, in whom they could place their hope to regain what was lost in Adam (Galatians 3[16]). Thus, circumcision functioned for them as a seal of the righteousness of faith, confirming and strengthening their faith (Romans 4[11]). We will explore the comparison between circumcision and baptism at a later point.

The washings and purifications among the Jews served to demonstrate their inherent impurity, defilement, and corruption due

to their sinful nature. These rituals simultaneously promised a future purification, cleansing, and washing (Hebrews 9[11–14]). This future cleansing came to fruition in Jesus Christ (1 John 1[7]; Revelation 5), through His blood, which purifies and disinfects us, and His wounds, which bring healing (Isaiah 53[5]; 1 Peter 2[24]). As for the sacrifices, they served a dual purpose: to convict the Jews of their sins and iniquities and to teach them that satisfaction needed to be made to satisfy God's righteousness. Moreover, they indicated the existence of a great High Priest, Bishop, and Mediator who would bridge the gap between God and humanity, satisfying God's righteousness through the shedding of blood and the offering of an acceptable Sacrifice for the remission of sins. This great Priest was Jesus Christ, the bloodshed was His own, and He Himself became the Sacrifice. By offering Himself to the Father in perfect obedience, even to the point of death (Philippians 2[7–8]), He nullified the disobedience of humanity that had provoked God's wrath (Romans 5[19]).

Now, let us consider our two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper, which present Jesus Christ to us in a much clearer light since He has already been revealed to humanity. Baptism testifies to our purification and cleansing, while the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, signifies our redemption. In the water of baptism, we find a symbol of cleansing, while in the wine of the Eucharist, we see a symbol of satisfaction. Both of these aspects are embodied in Jesus Christ, who, as St. John tells us, came through water and blood, signifying purification and redemption: "There are three that testify: the Spirit, the water, and the blood" (1 John 5[6–8]). Through water and blood, we receive the testimony of our purification and redemption. The Holy Spirit, the ultimate Witness, firmly establishes this testimony within us, enabling us to believe, understand, and know it. This profound mystery becomes evident when we recall that, from Jesus

Christ's sacred side as He hung on the cross, both blood and water flowed (John 19[34]). St. Augustine aptly remarked that Jesus Christ's side serves as the source and fountain from which our sacraments flow. We will explore this further in the subsequent discussion.

Furthermore, we must firmly reject the significant distinction drawn by the scholars between the sacraments of the Old Testament and those of the New, suggesting that the former were but a mere shadow of God's grace while the latter truly convey it. The Apostle Paul does not elevate one over the other; instead, he teaches that our forefathers in the Old Testament partook of the same spiritual sustenance as us. He explains that this spiritual nourishment was, in fact, Christ Himself (1 Corinthians 10[2–3]). Who would dare to diminish the significance of a sign that revealed the genuine communion with Jesus Christ to the Jewish people? To comprehend this better, we should consider the context and reason the apostle presents in that passage. He provides these examples of God's strictness and severity towards the Jews to prevent anyone from disregarding God's righteousness under the pretext of His grace. In doing so, he establishes their equality with us.

One might refer to what the apostle says to the Romans regarding circumcision, where it appears that he places it in a lesser position compared to baptism. However, this interpretation is inaccurate (Romans 2[25ff]). The same principles that apply to circumcision can justifiably be applied to baptism, and indeed, they are articulated as such. First, by St. Paul, when he emphasizes that external washing holds no significance unless the heart is purified internally and remains pure until the end (1 Corinthians 10[5]). Second, by St. Peter, who testifies that the essence of baptism lies not in external purification but in a clean conscience (1 Peter 3[21]). Nonetheless, as

I intend to further explore this topic in the context where I plan to compare baptism with circumcision, I will only briefly touch upon it here.

Perhaps these misguided scholars have fallen into this error due to the exaggerated praises of the sacraments found in the writings of the early Church fathers. They may have been misled by statements such as those of St. Augustine, who asserted that the sacraments of the Old Law merely promised salvation, while ours actually provide it. However, it should be recognized that such expressions were hyperbolic, signifying excessive praise. Regrettably, these scholars have taken them out of context and disseminated their own hyperbolic conclusions, entirely divorced from the original intent of the early Church fathers. In this context, St. Augustine sought to convey only what he had written elsewhere: that the sacraments of the Mosaic Law foreshadowed Jesus Christ, whereas ours proclaim His presence. It is as if he suggested that the Old Testament had a symbolic presentation of Him when they awaited His arrival, while ours present Him as present and bestowed upon us. A closer examination of this passage, as well as another homily where he openly acknowledges that the sacraments of the Jews differed in outward form from ours but were similar in signifying the same spiritual power and efficacy, underscores this interpretation.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Significance of Baptism

Baptism, a divine gift bestowed upon us by God, serves two fundamental purposes. Firstly, it is intended to bolster our faith in Him, and secondly, it serves as a public declaration of our commitment to Him. Let us explore these two purposes and the reasons behind the institution of baptism.

Regarding the first purpose, baptism imparts three vital aspects to our faith, each deserving our careful consideration. First and foremost, God has designated baptism as a symbol and seal of our purification. To elucidate further, baptism serves as a message from God, a declaration, confirmation, and assurance that all our sins have been forgiven, covered, eradicated, and blotted out—never again to be brought into His presence, remembered by Him, or held against us. This divine act of baptism is an assurance that God desires all who believe to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38). Therefore, anyone who asserts that baptism merely functions as a symbol and sign by which we publicly proclaim our faith, likening it to a soldier wearing the uniform of his sovereign to profess allegiance, fails to grasp the primary purpose of baptism. Baptism should be received with the promise that all who believe and are baptized shall be saved (Mark 16:16).

Baptism, as elucidated by St. Paul, holds deep spiritual significance. It serves as a sacred covenant between the Church and our heavenly spouse, Jesus Christ, establishing a bond rooted in faith and devotion.

In Ephesians 5:26], St. Paul highlights that the Church is sanctified and purified by Jesus Christ, her divine spouse, through the sacrament of baptism, where water and the word of life converge. Likewise, in Titus 3:5], St. Paul emphasizes that through God's mercy, we are saved by the washing of regeneration and the renewal

of the Holy Spirit. St. Peter echoes this sentiment when he proclaims, "baptism saves us" (1 Peter 3[21]). These passages, however, do not suggest that water possesses the power to cleanse, regenerate, or renew. Instead, they signify that in the sacrament of baptism, individuals receive the assurance of these divine graces.

St. Paul employs the phrase "the word of life" in conjunction with "the baptism of water" to illustrate that baptism represents the declaration and sealing of God's grace. It signifies that through the Gospel, our purification and sanctification are proclaimed, while baptism itself serves as the visible confirmation and seal of this declaration. St. Peter further underscores this point by clarifying that baptism is not a mere cleansing of bodily filth but the cultivation of a good conscience before God, stemming from faith. Baptism does not promise a cleansing by water; rather, it symbolically represents purification through the blood of Christ, as water's image mirrors the cleansing and purifying qualities of Christ's blood. Therefore, one should not assert that we are purified by the water itself; instead, baptism assures us that Christ's blood is our true and sole means of purification.

It is crucial to dispel the misconception that baptism is solely a remedy for past sins, requiring subsequent sins to be addressed by different means. Historically, some erroneously delayed baptism until the end of their lives, hoping to secure full forgiveness for all their transgressions. The early church fathers condemned this practice in their letters. Instead, we must understand that baptism, whenever it occurs, cleanses and purifies us for our entire lives. Whenever we stumble into sin, we should turn to the memory of our baptism, finding solace and reassurance in the belief that we are perpetually assured of the forgiveness of our sins. Baptism does not lose its efficacy after its initial administration; rather, it endures

perpetually, unaffected by subsequent transgressions. Jesus Christ's purity is offered to us in baptism, and it remains eternally powerful, cleansing us of all impurities.

This teaching, however, should not be misconstrued as an endorsement of sin. It is not an invitation to sin with impunity in the future. Instead, it serves as a source of comfort for those who, when faced with sin, despair and grieve their wrongdoing, seeking solace and refuge to avoid falling into confusion and despair. St. Paul explains that Jesus Christ has become the atoning sacrifice for the remission of past sins (Romans 3[25]). This does not imply that we do not continually receive forgiveness of sins through Him until death. Rather, it signifies that God extends His mercy to sinners who, burdened by their guilty consciences and seeking the physician, receive His mercy. Conversely, those who sin recklessly, expecting to act without consequence, provoke God's wrath and judgment upon themselves.

Baptism brings us the second comfort: it reveals our participation in Jesus Christ's death and our newfound life in Him. St. Paul elucidates this by stating that "we are baptized into His death, buried with Him in the likeness of His death, in order that we may walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3–4). St. Paul does not merely exhort us to emulate Christ; rather, he emphasizes that through baptism, we are engrafted into Christ's death, becoming participants in it. Just as a graft draws nourishment from the root into which it is inserted, those who receive baptism with genuine faith will experience the profound impact of Jesus Christ's death in mortifying their sinful desires and His resurrection in vivifying their spirits. Thus, St. Paul urges that, as Christians, "we should be dead to sin and alive to righteousness" (Romans 6:11). This argument is reiterated in Colossians 2:11–12], where St. Paul speaks of being circumcised and

stripped of the old self through baptism, symbolizing the washing of regeneration and renewal.

Ultimately, baptism offers our faith the assurance that we are not only engrafted into Jesus Christ's death and life but are also made participants in all His blessings. It is through this sacred covenant that Jesus Christ consecrated and sanctified baptism within His body (Matthew 3:3–17), creating a firm bond between us and Him. St. Paul affirms that we are God's children because, through baptism, we have clothed ourselves with Christ (Galatians 3:27). Therefore, we recognize that the fulfillment of baptism lies in Christ alone, making Him the primary object and goal toward which baptism is directed. While the apostles baptized in the name of Jesus, they invoked the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit because the purification in Christ's blood stems from the Father's desire to pour out His mercy and reconcile us to Himself. In baptism, we are regenerated through the sanctification of the Holy Spirit, resulting in a new spiritual nature. As such, the cause of our purification and regeneration rests with God the Father, the substance with the Son, and the efficacy with the Holy Spirit.

St. John and the apostles administered baptism with the intent of repentance and the remission of sins. In this context, "penitence" denotes "regeneration," and "the remission of sins" equates to "cleansing" (Matthew 3:6ff; Luke 3:3ff; John 3:22–23, 4:1–2; Acts 2:38, 41). The fact that both St. John and the apostles baptized for repentance and the forgiveness of sins underscores the uniformity of their baptism. Baptism remains consistent despite different hands administering it because it is rooted in the same doctrine. St. John and the apostles shared a common teaching – they baptized for penitence, and they baptized for the remission of sins. St. John's proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the

sins of the world affirmed Jesus' role as the acceptable Sacrifice, Propitiator, and Savior. The apostles could add nothing more to this confession, for it is comprehensive and complete.

Thus, there is no reason to be perplexed by the early church fathers' struggle to distinguish between various forms of baptism. Their authority should not overshadow the clarity of Scripture. St. Chrysostom's denial that the remission of sins was included in St. John's baptism contradicts St. Luke's affirmation that "John preached the baptism of penitence and remission of sins" (Luke 3:3). Those who seek to differentiate between the two baptisms in Scripture will find that the main distinction lies in the naming: St. John baptized in anticipation of the One who would come, while the apostles baptized in the name of the One who had already manifested Himself. However, this difference does not establish any disparity in the baptisms' effects. Even after Jesus' ascension, the Samaritans received baptism in the name of Jesus but did not experience greater spiritual abundance than the faithful had before, until Peter and John laid hands on them (Acts 8:16–17).

The notion that John's baptism merely prepared the way for Christ's baptism arises from a misinterpretation of Scripture. Acts 19:4–5, which mentions individuals who received John's baptism and were subsequently baptized by St. Paul, has been misconstrued. We will address this misunderstanding in due course. As for John's statement that Jesus Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16), it is an analogy that distinguishes their roles. John portrayed himself as the minister of water, while Jesus was the giver of the Holy Spirit, signifying this through the visible miracle when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles as tongues of fire (Acts 2:3). The apostles and contemporary baptizers

alike serve as ministers of the external sign, with Jesus Christ being the author of the inward grace.

These allegorical aspects of mortification and purification were presented through symbolism to the Israelites. St. Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 10:2 that "they were baptized in the cloud and the sea." The Red Sea crossing provides an image of mortification, as God led them through it, delivering them from Pharaoh's cruel bondage and drowning their pursuers, symbolizing their liberation from the bondage of sin. Similarly, baptism symbolizes that through God's power, we are freed from the captivity of sin, analogous to the deliverance from Egypt, despite Satan's continued efforts to trouble and test us. Just as the drowned Egyptians did not remain submerged but were cast onto the banks of the sea, causing fear among the Israelites, our enemy threatens us, displays his weapons, and makes us feel his presence, but he cannot triumph over us.

The cloud, on the other hand, serves as an emblem of purification. In the wilderness, the Lord covered the Israelites with a cloud, providing relief from the harsh and intense sun (Numbers 9:15–23). In the same vein, baptism signifies that we are sheltered and preserved through the blood of Jesus Christ, shielding us from the severity of God's judgment, which is akin to an unbearable fire and heat.

The erroneous teaching that baptism frees us from original sin and the corruption inherited from Adam, restoring us to the same original righteousness and purity as Adam, is fundamentally flawed. Those who hold this view misunderstand the nature of original sin, original righteousness, and the grace of baptism. Original sin corrupts and distorts our nature, making us deserving of God's wrath and damnation, and it leads to the production of sinful works, often

referred to as "the works of the flesh" in Scripture. These two aspects must be considered separately.

We must first acknowledge that due to the corruption deeply rooted within our nature, we stand justly condemned before God. In His eyes, nothing less than righteousness, innocence, and purity are acceptable. This condemnation applies even to infants, who carry with them the stain of sin from birth. While they may not have committed sinful acts, the very essence of their being is tainted. Thus, they are inherently displeasing to God. Baptism, however, assures the faithful that this condemnation is lifted. As we have discussed, the Lord's promise through this sacred act grants us full and complete forgiveness of sins, including both guilt and punishment. Through His mercy, we receive a form of righteousness attainable in this earthly life, achieved solely through imputation. By His grace, the Lord deems us righteous and innocent.

Secondly, we must consider that this corruption within us remains active, continuously bearing fruit, as described in Romans 7:5. It manifests as "the works of the flesh," resembling a perpetually burning furnace emitting sparks or a ceaseless source of water. Wicked desires do not vanish or become extinct in individuals until, liberated from their earthly bodies through death, they are stripped of these desires entirely. Baptism indeed promises the drowning and mortification of our "Pharaoh" and sinful nature. However, it does not obliterate them to the point of nonexistence or complete cessation of their troubling influence. As long as we remain imprisoned in our mortal bodies, traces of sin will persist. Yet, by clinging to God's promise in baptism through faith, we prevent these remnants from reigning over us. It is essential not to deceive ourselves or become complacent in sin upon learning that sin continually dwells within us. This truth is not meant to encourage

sinner to remain in their sins but rather to embolden those who grapple with sinful desires. They should persist, maintaining hope and viewing themselves as still on the path of sanctification. When they sense their sinful desires diminishing day by day, it signifies progress toward their ultimate goal – the complete destruction of their sinful nature, which will be perfected in the life to come.

Baptism also serves as a public declaration. It is a visible mark and sign affirming our desire to be counted among God's people. Through baptism, we declare our consent to serve one God and align ourselves with the Christian faith. It is our public proclamation of faith, intended not only to glorify God within our hearts but also with our words and actions. Every aspect of our lives should be dedicated to God's glory, leaving nothing devoid of His praise. St. Paul alluded to this when he questioned the Corinthians about their baptism in the name of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:13). He essentially asked if they had dedicated themselves to Him, professed Him as their Savior and Master, and pledged their faith publicly, rendering them unable to confess anyone other than Christ alone without denying their baptismal confession.

Now that we've explored the purpose and cause behind the Lord's institution of baptism, we can understand how to receive and utilize it. Baptism is given to us for the purpose of comforting, consoling, and strengthening our faith. We must receive it as a divine gift, firmly believing that God Himself is speaking to us through this sign. He purifies us, cleanses us, erases the memory of our sins, makes us participants in His Son's death, defeats the devil's forces and our sinful desires, and clothes us with His Son. These divine workings occur inwardly within our souls, just as we observe our bodies being outwardly washed, immersed, and surrounded by water. This analogy of a visible sign leading to spiritual transformation is a

reliable guide for understanding the sacraments. It is essential to remember that these graces are not confined to the sacraments or bestowed through their power. Instead, the sacraments serve as a testament to the Lord's intent to bestow these graces upon us. A prime example is Cornelius, the centurion, who received remission of sins and visible manifestations of the Holy Spirit before being baptized (Acts 10:48). His baptism did not provide further remission; rather, it served as a more certain exercise of his faith.

A question may arise: "If sins are not cleansed by baptism, why did Ananias tell St. Paul that he would wash away his sins through baptism (Acts 22:16)?" To this, we must understand that we receive and obtain what we believe God grants us, whether we begin to recognize it at that moment or whether, having known it before, we gain a more certain possession of it. Ananias' words merely conveyed this message to Paul: "To be assured of the remission of your sins, Paul, be baptized. The Lord promises forgiveness of sins in baptism; accept it and find reassurance." In essence, we gain from this sacrament precisely as much as our faith allows. Lack of faith serves as a witness against us, accusing us before God of not believing in the promise given through baptism. Since baptism is a sign and symbol of our confession, it is our duty to bear witness through it that we place our trust in God's mercy. Our purity stems from the forgiveness of sins made possible through Jesus Christ. By entering God's church, we declare our commitment to unity, faith, and love among all believers. As St. Paul emphasized, "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

It is vital to comprehend that the worth of the sacrament is neither augmented nor diminished by the administrator. In human affairs, when a letter is sent, it matters not who the messenger is, provided the handwriting and signature are known. Similarly, we need only

recognize the hand and mark of the Lord in His sacraments, regardless of the messenger delivering them. This refutes the erroneous beliefs of the Donatists, who equated the sacrament's power and worth with the worth of the minister.

Today, the Anabaptists resemble the Donatists. They dispute the validity of our baptism because it was administered by unbelievers and idolaters within the papal kingdom. They insist on rebaptism, a notion we can strongly counter by understanding that we were baptized not in the name of any person but in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, baptism is not dependent on a person but originates from God, regardless of the administrator. Despite the ignorance and scorn of those who baptized us, they did not baptize us into the realm of their ignorance and impiety. Instead, they baptized us into the faith of Jesus Christ, invoking God's name, not their own. If the baptism comes from God, it undoubtedly carries the promise of remission of sins, mortification of the flesh, spiritual renewal, and participation in Christ.

Furthermore, Anabaptists inquire about the quality of our faith in the years following baptism to argue that our baptism was in vain and did not sanctify us due to our lack of faith in the promised word. We admit that we were blinded and unbelieving for an extended period, failing to grasp the promise bestowed upon us in baptism. However, because this promise originates from God, it remained steadfast and true, waiting for us to embrace it through faith. It may have been dormant due to our unbelief, but the promise did not vanish. We firmly hold that, "By baptism, God promises the remission of sins, and undoubtedly extends this promise to all believers. This promise was extended to us through baptism; let us now lay hold of it through faith! Though it lay concealed for a long time because of our unbelief, let us now unearth it through faith."

Thus, when the Lord called the Jewish people to repentance, He did not command those who had been circumcised by the hands of sinners and sacrilegious individuals, and had lived for some time in impiety, to undergo circumcision again. He demanded only a change of heart. Although His covenant with them had been violated, the sign of the covenant, as He had established it, remained firm and inviolable. He received them upon the condition of their repentance, reconfirming the covenant made through circumcision, even though it had been administered by wicked priests and broken by their iniquity.

Critics have raised objections, contending that St. Paul rebaptized those who had previously received John's baptism (Acts 19:3-5). Their argument is as follows: "If, as you claim, John's baptism was the same as ours today, then those individuals, having previously been taught incorrectly, were instructed in the correct faith by St. Paul and subsequently rebaptized in it. Therefore, your baptism, which was administered without true teaching, should be deemed worthless, and you ought to be rebaptized in the true faith you have just now discovered." Some suggest that it was a misguided imitator of St. John who had initially baptized these individuals in vain superstitions rather than in truth. They speculate that this is why the people confessed their ignorance of the Holy Spirit, believing that St. John would not have left them uninformed. However, it seems unlikely that even the Jews who were not baptized would have no knowledge of the Spirit, which had been frequently mentioned in Scripture. When they replied that they did not know if there is a Spirit, it should be understood as their admission that they knew nothing about the graces of the Holy Spirit being imparted to Christ's disciples, which was what St. Paul inquired about.

I concur that the first baptism they received was indeed the true baptism of St. John, the same as that of Jesus Christ. However, I dispute the notion that they were rebaptized. So, what do these words mean: "they were baptized in the name of Jesus"? Some explain it as meaning that "they were merely instructed in the pure and proper teaching by St. Paul." Yet, I prefer to interpret it more straightforwardly, suggesting that it refers to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In Scripture, these graces are often referred to as baptism. For instance, it is said that on the day of Pentecost, the apostles remembered the Lord's words about the baptism of the Spirit and fire (Acts 1:5). St. Peter recalled that the outpouring of graces he witnessed in Cornelius and his household brought to mind the same words (Acts 11:16). This is not contradictory to the fact that it is written, "when he laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit descended on them" (Acts 8:17). St. Luke was not describing two separate events but utilizing a narrative style familiar to the Hebrews, summarizing initially and then explaining further. This is evident from the structure of the text itself, which states, "When he had heard these things, he baptized them in the name of Jesus; and when St. Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit descended upon them." The latter part clarifies what this baptism was. If the initial baptism had been invalidated due to the ignorance of those who received it, necessitating a second baptism, then the apostles themselves should have been the first to be rebaptized. After all, they lacked a deep understanding of the true teaching for three years following their baptism. In our own time, how many baptisms would be needed to rectify the ignorance that our Lord corrects daily?

We must now address the attack on our practice of baptizing infants. Some contend that it was not instituted by God but was either a recent invention or emerged years after the apostles. It is our duty to strengthen the consciences of the vulnerable in this matter and

refute the false objections raised by those who seek to undermine God's truth in the hearts of the uninitiated, who may struggle to respond to the deceptions and equivocations of such individuals. They commonly present an argument that may appear plausible at first glance: "We desire nothing more than for God's word to be kept and maintained in its entirety, without any additions or subtractions. Those who first introduced infant baptism did so without any commandment from His word." We concede that this reasoning would be sufficient if they could demonstrate that infant baptism originated from human invention rather than God's ordinance. However, when we have clearly proven that they inaccurately and unjustly label this practice as a "human tradition," which is firmly grounded in God's word, their pretext crumbles.

We should remember the rule given by St. Paul to guide our understanding of Scripture. He instructs us to follow the proportion and harmony of faith when expounding Scripture (Romans 12:6). In essence, he directs us to relate everything we learn from Scripture to the teaching of faith, drawing the explanation of every spiritual teaching from that foundation. If we adhere to this foundation, which should be constant for Christians and prevalent throughout God's word, we will easily comprehend that infant baptism is not administered without the Lord's will and institution. Furthermore, it will help us resolve the difficulties encountered by some due to their failure to observe this essential rule.

Regarding this specific matter, it should be understood among the faithful that the proper understanding of the signs or sacraments left and ordained by the Lord for His Church does not rest solely on external ceremonies. Rather, it primarily hinges on the promises and spiritual mysteries that these ceremonies symbolize. Therefore, to truly understand baptism and its significance, we must not focus

solely on the external water and rituals but elevate our thoughts to the promises of God associated with it and the spiritual realities it signifies. When we grasp these spiritual aspects, we will truly comprehend the essence and value of baptism and the purpose behind the use of water in this sacred rite. We need not further consider this matter, as it is evident and frequently demonstrated in Scripture, leaving no room for doubt or obscurity among Christians.

To grasp the true essence of baptism, we must explore the promises it embodies. In Scripture, we learn that baptism signifies several key aspects: firstly, the remission and purification of our sins through the shedding of Jesus Christ's blood; secondly, the mortification or putting to death of our sinful nature, achieved through our participation in His death, leading us to a new life characterized by innocence, holiness, and purity. It's vital to understand that the visible and material aspects of baptism serve as representations of these higher and more profound truths. To fully comprehend these truths, we must turn to God's Word, where the power of the sacrament lies. These words reveal that baptism symbolizes the purification of our sins, the mortification of our sinful nature, and our spiritual rebirth as children of God. Furthermore, all these aspects find their source and foundation in Jesus Christ. In summary, baptism declares these profound truths and signifies our commitment to the Lord as our God and our inclusion among His people.

Before the institution of baptism, circumcision served as the corresponding sign for God's people in the Old Testament. To understand the connection and distinctions between these two signs, we must examine them closely. When God ordained circumcision for Abraham, He initially promised, "I will be your God and the God of your descendants" (Genesis 17:7). In this promise lay the assurance

of eternal life, as Jesus Christ later explained, drawing from the fact that Abraham's God was referred to as the "God of the living" to demonstrate the reality of immortality and the resurrection of the faithful. This is why, in Ephesians 2:11-12, St. Paul, addressing the Ephesians, showed them how they were once estranged from God due to their lack of circumcision, rendering them "without Christ, strangers to the promises, without God and without hope." This was because circumcision served as a witness to all these aspects.

The initial step toward God and eternal life involves the remission of our sins, and therefore, this promise aligns with the promise of our purification and cleansing in baptism. Additionally, God instructed Abraham to walk before Him in integrity and innocence, which essentially equates to mortification, enabling him to be raised to newness of life (Genesis 17:1). To leave no doubt regarding the connection between circumcision and mortification, Moses explicitly stated this connection in Deuteronomy 10, urging the people of Israel to "circumcise their hearts" (Deuteronomy 10:15-16). Moses emphasized that this inner circumcision was the work of God's grace within us. These truths were reiterated by the prophets so often that they need no extensive discussion.

To summarize, circumcision held spiritual promises for the fathers similar to those of baptism for us. Both signs represented the remission of sins and the mortification of the flesh, leading to righteousness. Furthermore, both signs had Christ as their foundation. This is why Christ was promised to Abraham, and in Him, the blessing of all the earth and its peoples was assured. Now, we can readily distinguish the similarities and differences between these two signs. The promises, which serve as the essence of the sacraments, are the same in both—God's mercy, the remission of sins, and eternal life. The concepts they represent—our purification

and mortification—are identical. Christ serves as the foundation for both, confirming and fulfilling their promises. The only distinction lies in the external ceremony, which constitutes the lesser part of the sacraments. The primary significance of the sacraments rests on the Word of God and the truths they symbolize. Therefore, we can conclude that, apart from external and visible differences, everything related to circumcision is also applicable to baptism. We arrive at this deduction using the rule that Scripture must be measured according to the proportion and likeness of faith, which always considers the promises. This truth becomes apparent as baptism follows the same pattern as circumcision, albeit with an external distinction. Circumcision marked the entrance into the community of God's people for the Jews, signifying their acceptance by God and their declaration of God as their Lord. Similarly, baptism ushers us into the community of the Lord's church, recognizing us as His people and signifying our desire to declare Him as our God. Thus, it is evident that baptism has succeeded circumcision.

When someone asks whether baptism should be administered to little children as a part of God's divine ordinance, it is imperative that we do not merely focus on the outward act of water and visible ritual. Instead, we should examine the spiritual mystery within, seeking a profound answer. By considering this spiritual mystery, there should be no doubt that baptism rightfully includes children. For when our Lord ordained circumcision for children long ago, He clearly demonstrated His intent to include them in all that was signified by it. To suggest otherwise would imply that this institution was a deception, a mere semblance, an idea that cannot be entertained by the faithful. The Lord explicitly stated that circumcision given to a child would serve as a confirmation of the covenant spoken of. Therefore, if the covenant remains unchanged, the children of Christians are undoubtedly participants in it, just as

the children of Jews were under the Old Testament. If they partake in the promises signified by the sacrament, why withhold the sacrament itself when it is merely a symbol and representation? If we are to distinguish between the external sign and the Word, which holds greater significance? It is evident that the sign serves the Word, indicating its lesser value. Baptism's Word is addressed to little children, so why turn them away from the sign that is closely connected to the Word? Even this argument alone should suffice to silence those who oppose baptizing children.

Scripture itself provides us with a more profound understanding of this truth. The covenant the Lord established with Abraham, declaring, "I want to be his God and the God of his descendants" (Genesis 17:7), exists among Christians today no less than it did among the Jewish people. The Word of this covenant is addressed to Christians today no less than it was to the Old Testament fathers. To claim that the coming of Jesus Christ would diminish God's grace and mercy is a terrible blasphemy. The children of Jews were referred to as a "holy tribe" because they were heirs of this covenant and set apart from the children of unbelievers and idolaters. Likewise, the children of Christians are called "holy" for the same reason, even if they are born to a faithful father or mother, as scripture testifies (1 Corinthians 7:14). After promising this covenant, the Lord wanted it to be witnessed and sealed for little children through the external sacrament. What excuse, then, do we have today to withhold this witness and seal, when the reason for confirming the covenant remains valid and eternal?

It may be argued that circumcision was the only sacrament ordained for confirming the covenant, and since circumcision is abolished, there is no other means of witness. However, this argument overlooks the enduring reason for confirming the covenant, which is

common to us and the Jews. The only difference lies in the external method: they had circumcision, while we have baptism. To suggest that Christ's coming reduced God's grace and mercy, thereby removing the witness given to our children, is a dishonor to Jesus Christ. Christ came to amplify and multiply His Father's grace, not to diminish it. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that God's grace should not be less evident or less assured for us than it was for the Jews under the shadows of the law.

This is exemplified when our Lord Jesus, desiring to demonstrate His mission to amplify God's grace, warmly received children presented to Him. He reproached His disciples for attempting to hinder this, recognizing that those to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs should not be discouraged from approaching Him—the way to that very kingdom (Matthew 19:13-15). Some may argue that embracing children does not equate to baptizing them, for it is not explicitly stated that He baptized them; rather, He received them, embraced them, and prayed for them. They contend that we should follow this example by praying for children rather than baptizing them. However, a more thorough examination of scripture is required. It is not a trivial matter that Jesus wanted children to be presented to Him, adding the reason: "For to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." Subsequently, He manifested His will through His actions by embracing and praying for them.

If it is reasonable to bring children to Jesus Christ, why should we not administer baptism to them, the external sign by which Jesus Christ reveals to us the communion we have with Him? If the kingdom of heaven belongs to them, why deny them the sign that practically ushers them into the church, signifying their inheritance in the kingdom of God? It would be wicked indeed to turn away those whom our Lord called to Himself, to withhold from them what He

grants them, or to close the door on them when He opens it. Moreover, if we consider separating what Jesus Christ did from baptism, which should be regarded as more significant? That Jesus Christ received them, laid His hands on them in a sign of sanctification, and prayed for them, indicating that they were His, or that, through baptism, we testify that they belong to His covenant?

The objections raised by those opposing the practice of baptizing children are indeed quite feeble. To argue that the children mentioned were grown rather than infants, merely because Jesus Christ instructs the disciples to let them come, is contrary to the clear indication in scripture. These children were explicitly described as little ones or infants who needed to be carried. Thus, the word "come" should be interpreted as "approach." It is evident how those who stubbornly resist the truth tirelessly search for grounds to equivocate even in every syllable! Furthermore, the objection that the kingdom of heaven does not belong to children but to those resembling them is also a mere evasion. If this were the case, what would be the rationale behind our Lord's call for children to approach Him? When He says, "Let the children come to me," there is no doubt that He refers to those of tender age. To affirm His reasonableness, He adds, "For to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." This implies that they are included in the kingdom, and the word "such" should be understood as signifying that the kingdom of heaven belongs to them and those like them.

It is now apparent that the practice of baptizing little children was not hastily invented by human beings, as it has clear scriptural support. The objection that there is no scriptural evidence of any child being baptized by the apostles, although not explicitly shown, does not imply that they did not baptize children. They were never excluded when the baptism of a household is mentioned. Using this

argument, one could assert that women should not partake in the Lord's Supper, as scripture does not explicitly state that they communed during the time of the apostles. However, in both cases, we follow the rule of faith and assess whether these ordinances are suited for women and children. Thus, we find that baptism is intended for little children no less than for adults. Rejecting them would contradict the Lord's intention. The Anabaptists' claim that infant baptism originated long after the apostles is a baseless lie, for from the earliest days of the church, infant baptism was practiced.

Now, let us explore the benefits that accrue to the faithful through the observance of baptizing their children and to the children themselves who receive baptism at such an age. Some dismiss this practice as pointless, a grave misconception. Even if they only mock the ordinance established by the Lord, which is of equal importance to circumcision, it is still reason enough to reprove their imprudent condemnation of what cannot be perceived with their physical senses. Yet the Lord has graciously revealed the clear significance of His institution to counter their arrogance. This sign given to little children serves as a seal to confirm and ratify the promise made by our Lord. It magnifies and glorifies His name and comforts the faithful, reassuring them of God's care not only for them but also for their children and descendants to the thousandth generation. We must not claim that the promise alone is sufficient to guarantee our children's salvation because God, aware of the frailty of our faith, sought to strengthen it.

Hence, those who confidently rest upon the promise that God is merciful to their descendants are obligated to present their children to receive the sign of this mercy. Through this, they find moral comfort and fortitude, observing the Lord's covenant visibly marked on their children's bodies. Baptized children are recognized as

members of the Christian church, and when they reach maturity, they are more inclined to serve the Lord who revealed Himself as their Father before they knew Him. Lastly, we must heed the warning that if we disdain to mark our children with the sign of the covenant, the Lord may take vengeance, for in such disdain, we reject the blessings He offers us (Genesis 17:14).

Now, let us address the arguments by which the evil spirit attempts to deceive many under the pretense of adhering strictly to "God's word." We must assess the strength of Satan's efforts to undermine this holy ordinance of the Lord, which has always been reverently upheld in His church. Those who oppose the clear word of God in this matter are driven by the devil to find distinctions between circumcision and baptism, desperately seeking to sever all connections between them. They claim that there are significant differences between these two signs. To support their case, they argue that circumcision symbolizes mortification rather than baptism. We readily concede this point, for it aligns with our argument. In fact, let us use no other terms than to state that both circumcision and baptism symbolize mortification. Consequently, we conclude that baptism has succeeded circumcision, as it signifies the same thing for Christians as circumcision did for Jews.

In their second assertion, those who oppose the baptism of infants reveal their misguided understanding, as they not only misinterpret one passage but distort the entirety of Scripture. They portray the Jews as a carnal and unspiritual people, suggesting that God's covenant with them was solely for earthly, temporal life and that the promises given were only for present, perishable goods. If we were to accept this perspective, it would lead us to believe that the Jewish nation was like a herd of swine that our Lord nourished in a stable, only to abandon them to eternal damnation afterward. Whenever

circumcision and the promises associated with it are mentioned, they dismiss them as literal signs and carnal promises. Indeed, if circumcision is considered a literal sign, then so is baptism. In the second chapter of Colossians, the Apostle Paul does not distinguish one as more spiritual than the other. He states, "In Christ, we are circumcised with the circumcision not made with hands" [Colossians 2:11], referring to the removal of the sins dwelling in our flesh, which is Christ's circumcision. He further explains that "we have been buried with Christ in baptism" [Colossians 2:12]. This passage clearly indicates that the fulfillment of baptism is equivalent to the fulfillment of circumcision, as both symbols convey the same spiritual truth. Paul aims to demonstrate that baptism serves Christians in the same way that circumcision served the Jews. Since we have already established that the promises and mysteries represented by these two signs do not differ in any way, there is no need to dwell on this point. We encourage the faithful to consider whether a sign that embodies only spiritual and heavenly significance should be labeled as carnal and literal.

While they may present certain passages to support their argument, we can address their objections with just three words. It is undeniable that the primary promises God gave to His people in the Old Testament, on which the covenant rested firmly, were spiritual and related to eternal life. The Old Testament fathers understood these promises in a spiritual sense, giving them hope for future glory and filling their hearts with affectionate delight. However, we do not deny that God also expressed His goodwill with other physical and earthly promises to confirm these spiritual ones. For example, after promising immortal blessedness to His servant Abraham, God added the promise of the land of Canaan to manifest His grace and favor [Genesis 17:8]. Similarly, we should interpret all the earthly blessings bestowed upon the Jewish people in this manner—spiritual promises

always serving as the foundation and essence to which all else is connected. The distinction they attempt to make between the children of the Old Testament and those of the New is that, back then, the children of Abraham were his physical descendants, whereas now they are those who follow his faith. Consequently, they argue that physically circumcised children in the past symbolized spiritually regenerated children born of God's Word. While there is some truth in this notion, it misguides those who lack the discernment to consider what lies beyond the surface of what they read. It is true that, for a time, the physical descendants of Abraham represented the spiritual children who, through faith, were incorporated into his lineage. Although we may be called his children without a physical relationship, it would be erroneous to assert, as some do, that our Lord did not promise His spiritual blessings to the physical seed of Abraham.

The correct understanding that Scripture guides us toward is as follows: the Lord promised Abraham that "from him would come forth the seed in which all the nations of the earth would be blessed and sanctified." He assured Abraham that "He would be his God and the God of his seed" [Romans 4:13, 17]. All who receive Jesus Christ through faith are heirs of this promise and are thus called children of Abraham. After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God was proclaimed universally, offering entry to all peoples and nations. In Christ's words, "the faithful may come from east and west to have a place in the heavenly kingdom in the company of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" [Matthew 8:11]. Yet, during the preceding period, the Lord had consistently extended His mercy to the Jews, referring to them as His kingdom, His chosen people, and His own possession. To convey this grace to the Jewish nation, the Lord ordained circumcision as a sign. Circumcision served as a sign to them that

God declared Himself their God, receiving them under His protection and guiding them toward eternal life.

Thus, when the Apostle Paul seeks to demonstrate that the Gentiles are children of Abraham like the Jews, he states, "Abraham was justified by faith before being circumcised; then he received circumcision as the seal of his righteousness in order that he might be father of all those uncircumcised believers and also the father of the circumcised; not of those who are merely circumcised but of those who follow the faith which he had" [Romans 4:10–12]. Paul equates and dignifies them equally. During the time appointed by the Lord, Abraham was the father of the faithful who were circumcised. When the dividing wall, as the apostle says, was broken down to grant access to the kingdom of God to those previously excluded, he became the father of those who, though uncircumcised, followed the faith. For baptism now serves as circumcision for them. When Paul explicitly states that he is not the father of those who have nothing but circumcision, he aims to dismantle the Jews' baseless confidence in external ceremonies. The same can be said of baptism, to refute the error of those who perceive it as nothing more than water.

Let us consider the profound message the Apostle Paul conveys when he declares that the true children of Abraham are not those born of flesh but only those born of the promise. At first glance, it might appear that he intends to diminish the significance of physical descent from Abraham. However, we must carefully discern the Apostle's intention here. In Romans chapter nine, Paul seeks to demonstrate to the Jews that God's grace is not limited to the seed of Abraham. He brings forward the examples of Ishmael and Esau, both descendants of Abraham, who were nevertheless cast out as strangers, while the blessing was bestowed upon Isaac and Jacob [Romans 9:6–13]. The purpose is to emphasize that salvation

depends on God's mercy, which He bestows upon whomever He pleases. Consequently, the Jews have no reason to boast of being God's chosen people unless they obey His Word [Romans 9:14–18]. However, Paul does not cease to recognize the importance of the covenant made with Abraham for him and his descendants. In Romans chapter eleven, he emphasizes that this covenant should not be despised, and the Jews remain the rightful heirs of the gospel, except for their ingratitude [Romans 11]. Even in their unbelief, he continues to refer to them as "holy" due to their holy lineage. He compares us, who are like grafted branches, to the natural branches that are the Jewish people [Romans 11:16]. This is why the gospel was initially presented to them, as the firstborn children in the Lord's house, deserving of such a privilege until they rejected it. Nevertheless, we must not scorn them, regardless of their rebellion, and hold onto hope that the Lord's goodness remains upon them because of His promise. Paul affirms that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable [Romans 11:28–29]. This highlights the immense importance of the promise given to Abraham and his heirs.

While the Lord's election alone determines who will inherit the heavenly kingdom, God chose to bestow His mercy in a special way upon Abraham's descendants and sealed it with circumcision. A similar reasoning applies to Christians today. Just as St. Paul states that the Jews are sanctified by their ancestry, he also asserts that the children of Christians are sanctified through their parents [1 Corinthians 7:14]. Therefore, they ought to be set apart from others who remain impure. It is evident that the claim that circumcised children served as an image of spiritual children regenerated by God's Word is false. St. Paul did not depart from this understanding when he stated that "Jesus Christ was a minister to the Jewish nation to confirm the promises made to their fathers" [Romans 15:8], signifying that Jesus Christ came to draw this nation to salvation to

fulfill His Father's truth. Even after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, St. Paul acknowledged the literal fulfillment of the promise. Similarly, St. Peter proclaimed in Acts chapter two that the promise belonged to the Jews and their children. He referred to them as children, signifying that they were heirs of the testament [Acts 2:39; 3:25]. The passage we previously cited from St. Paul underscores this point, as he regards circumcision administered to young children as a witness to their spiritual communion with Christ [Ephesians 2:11–12]. Therefore, the promise given to Abraham's descendants remains unaltered. We cannot claim that this promise has been abolished without undermining God's law, which Christ did not destroy but established, turning us toward goodness and salvation.

The other distinctions they attempt to draw between circumcision and baptism are utterly nonsensical and contradictory. First, they assert that baptism marks the beginning of the Christian journey, while circumcision occurs on the eighth day when mortification is complete. Yet, they immediately claim that circumcision symbolizes the mortification of sin, while baptism signifies burial after we are dead. Such contradictory arguments are the product of a bewildered mind. In truth, the first difference they propose is entirely imaginary and not an appropriate allegorical interpretation of the eighth day. A more accurate explanation, in line with the early church fathers, would suggest that circumcision on the eighth day symbolizes the renewal of life through Christ's resurrection, which also occurred on the eighth day. Alternatively, it could signify that circumcision of the heart must be continuous throughout one's earthly existence. However, it is likely that, during that time, the Lord considered the physical weakness of infants. By imprinting His covenant on their bodies, He may have used this duration to assure parents that their infant's life was not in danger. The second difference they present is equally unreliable. To claim that we are buried through baptism after

mortification is a fallacy. Instead, we are baptized in preparation for being put to death or mortified, as clearly stated in Scripture [Romans 6:4].

Lastly, they raise an objection suggesting that if circumcision serves as the foundation of baptism, then girls ought not to be baptized, as only males were circumcised. However, this argument reveals a misunderstanding of the appropriateness of circumcision. Circumcision, as a sign of the sanctification of the seed of Israel, undoubtedly applied to females as well as males. It was not administered to females solely because of the limitations imposed by nature. When the Lord ordained circumcision for males, He encompassed females under the males, recognizing that they could not receive circumcision in their own bodies but participated in the circumcision of males in some way. Thus, we should discard these baseless objections and instead focus on the similarities that remain between baptism and circumcision concerning the inner mystery, promises, use, and efficacy.

The Anabaptists contend that baptism should not be administered to little children who are not yet capable of understanding the spiritual regeneration symbolized by it. They argue that since baptism signifies spiritual rebirth, which is impossible at such a young age, children should remain as children of Adam until they mature for a second birth. This argument contradicts the truth of God's Word. Leaving children as children of Adam means leaving them in a state of spiritual death, as we are told that in Adam, we all face death. Conversely, Jesus Christ invites children to come to Him because He is life. He desires to make them participants in Himself, leading them from death to life. Therefore, those who oppose His will by claiming that children will remain in death are in error. Scripture affirms that we must be in Christ to escape the bondage of death.

"Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" [1 Corinthians 15:50], so we must undergo regeneration, which requires that we be in Christ. In summary, Jesus Christ's words are trustworthy when He declares Himself as the source of life. Hence, we must be in Him to be delivered from the dominion of death.

Some may question how infants, who lack knowledge of good and evil, can be regenerated. We must recognize that God's work, although hidden and incomprehensible to us, is not hindered by our limitations. Children, born in corruption and as sinners, must be purified and justified before entering the heavenly kingdom, where nothing impure may enter. Jesus Himself proclaimed that "we must all be born again to enter His kingdom" [John 3:3]. God's sanctification of John the Baptist from his mother's womb serves as a clear example of His power to sanctify infants [Luke 1:15]. Some may argue that this was a unique event, but our purpose is not to claim that it always occurs but to demonstrate the unwarranted restriction placed on God's power concerning infants. The argument that truth recognizes no other regeneration than that which is accomplished by the incorruptible seed of God's Word [1 Peter 1:23] is misguided. St. Peter's statement was directed to those who had already been taught the gospel, for whom God's Word is undoubtedly the seed of spiritual regeneration. It does not preclude God from working differently, as evidenced by the inner transformation of many who have never heard the gospel but were touched by God to come to know His name.

Moreover, to claim that children cannot be regenerated because faith comes through hearing [Romans 10:14] ignores the fact that St. Paul refers to the ordinary means by which God grants faith to His people. This does not preclude God from working in extraordinary ways, touching individuals inwardly and leading them to the knowledge of

His name without hearing the Word preached. While it may seem contrary to the nature of children who, according to Moses, cannot yet distinguish between good and evil [Deuteronomy 1:39], we should not limit God's power by assuming He cannot do for children what He accomplishes in them later. Although we do not assert that children possess faith, we seek to highlight the rashness and presumption of those who make unfounded claims, affirming and denying what they please without considering the multitude of reasons that can be offered to address their objections.

But they persist, asserting, "Baptism is the sacrament of penitence and faith, as scripture teaches us. Since a little child cannot possess penitence and faith, it is inappropriate to administer the sacrament to them, as it would render its meaning void." These arguments, however, oppose God's ordinance more than they challenge us. It is evident from numerous scriptural testimonies, particularly Jeremiah 4:4, that circumcision was a sign of penitence. St. Paul even calls it a sacrament of the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:13). Let them inquire of God why He ordained it for little children. For if there was a sound rationale for circumcising infants, there is no more reason to consider it inappropriate for baptism. If they seek their usual excuses, claiming that children (young in age) were a representation of true regenerate children, they have already been refuted in this regard. Thus, our Lord wanted circumcision, a sacrament of faith and penitence, to be administered to children, and there is nothing improper about baptizing them, unless these detractors wish to censure God for enacting such an ordinance. However, God's truth, wisdom, and righteousness are evident in all His actions, enough to confound their folly, falsehood, and wickedness. Even though children at the time might not comprehend the meaning of circumcision, they were circumcised in the flesh as a sign of inner

mortification of their corrupted nature, intending to grasp its significance when they reached an age of understanding.

By this reasoning, we can address the arguments presented by these opponents concerning the meaning of baptism. When St. Paul calls it "the washing of regeneration and renewal" (Titus 3:5), they claim that it should only be given to those capable of being regenerated and renewed. However, circumcision serves as a sign of regeneration and renewal, and thus it should be administered only to those who have already experienced it, according to their argument. This would render God's ordinance to circumcise infants senseless and irrational. Therefore, all the arguments that attack circumcision should not be accepted to condemn baptism.

They cannot falsely claim that what the Lord instituted must be accepted without question as good and holy, without seeking further understanding. Instead, they should answer this question: "Did God have good reasons to institute circumcision for little children, or not?" If it was rightly instituted, and they cannot allege that it was foolish, the same applies to baptism. Our response to this argument is as follows: Children who receive the sign of regeneration and renewal, and who pass away before reaching an age of understanding, will be regenerated and renewed by the Holy Spirit according to God's hidden and incomprehensible power, if they are among the Lord's chosen ones. If they reach an age where they can be instructed in the doctrine of baptism, they will come to understand how they should meditate upon and practice this regeneration, which they have borne the mark of since childhood.

We must also interpret what St. Paul teaches in the sixth chapter of Romans and the second chapter of Colossians, where he speaks of being "buried with Christ through baptism" (Romans 6:4; Colossians

2:12). He does not suggest that this should precede baptism but rather explains the doctrine of baptism, which can be taught and learned both before and after receiving the sign. Similarly, Moses and the prophets reminded the people of Israel that circumcision signified the same thing, even though they were circumcised in their youth. Therefore, if they conclude that everything symbolized in baptism should precede it, their argument is flawed, especially since these letters were written to people who had already been baptized. The same applies to what St. Paul writes to the Galatians: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). This is true, but for what purpose? To live in Him hereafter, not because they had lived in Him previously. Although adults should not receive the sign without first comprehending its significance, the rationale differs for little children, as will be explained later. Thus, all these arguments they present lack reason and understanding.

Let us briefly address the other arguments, which can be easily resolved. They claim that baptism signifies the remission of our sins, which is a significant misunderstanding. What would become of the blood of Jesus Christ, which alone provides complete and total purification? Nevertheless, granting them this fault, which is common among them to lend credibility to their argument, we may state it as derived from scripture. Baptism is a testimony of the remission of our sins, and we agree with this. We contend that this is precisely why it should be applied to little children since, being sinners, they require pardon and cleansing from their blemishes. Therefore, if the Lord has declared His willingness to be merciful to them at this age, why would we withhold from them the sign, which is but a small part of the reality? In this way, we turn their argument against them. Baptism is a sign of the remission of sins, and children

receive remission of their sins. Therefore, it is fitting that the sign, which should accompany the reality, be conferred upon them.

They refer to Ephesians 5:26, which states that "our Lord cleansed His church by the washing of water with the word." However, this argument also works against them. From this, we can deduce that if our Lord desires to purify His church and testify to it through the sign of baptism, then little children, being part of the church as they are counted among God's people and belong to the kingdom of heaven, should receive the testimony of their purification just like the rest of the church. St. Paul includes the entire church without exception when he asserts that our Lord purified it through baptism. Concerning their reference to 1 Corinthians 12:13, in which St. Paul states that "we were all baptized into one body," the same reasoning applies. If little children belong to the body of Christ, as previously explained, it is appropriate for them to be baptized and joined with their fellow members. These examples demonstrate how they contend against us with numerous passages, amassing them without sense, reason, or understanding!

Furthermore, they attempt to show from scripture's practice that only adults capable of having faith and repentance should receive baptism. They cite Acts 2:37-38, where St. Peter, questioned by those seeking conversion to the Lord, replied, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Similarly, when the eunuch inquired whether he could be baptized, St. Philip answered, "If you believe with all your heart, you may" (Acts 8:36-37). If we were to follow this literal interpretation, we would find that the first passage suggests repentance alone is sufficient, as faith is not mentioned. Conversely, in the second passage, it appears that faith alone is adequate, as repentance is not

required. They may argue that one passage complements the other, and thus they must be combined for a proper understanding.

In our quest to harmonize scripture, it is essential to consider other passages that can shed light on this matter, as the correct interpretation of scripture often depends on the context. It is evident that those who seek guidance on how to mend their ways and return to the Lord are of an age of understanding. We do not advocate the baptism of individuals like them unless they have first demonstrated their faith and repentance—such evidence as can be expected of them as human beings. However, the case of little children born to Christian parents should be treated differently. We do not invent this distinction based on our whims, but we have a firm basis in scripture for such differentiation. We observe that in the past, those who joined the people of Israel to serve the living God had to receive circumcision only after receiving the law and being instructed in the covenant of the Lord. Nature did not automatically include them in the Jewish nation to which this sacrament pertained. Just as the Lord did not circumcise Abraham without explaining the covenant He intended to confirm through circumcision, once Abraham believed the promise, the sacrament was ordained for him (Genesis 17:1–14). Why did Abraham not receive the sign until after he believed, whereas his son Isaac received it before comprehending its meaning? This was because, for a grown person who was not already a participant in the covenant, understanding its nature was a prerequisite for entry. However, the little child born to him, as the heir of the covenant through the promise given to the father, was rightly eligible to receive the sign without understanding its significance.

To put it more succinctly, children of believers who are participants in God's covenant without understanding should not be excluded

from receiving the sign. They can receive it without full comprehension. Although Abraham was instructed before receiving circumcision, this did not hinder children born after him from being circumcised without prior instruction, which they received later. This is the reason our Lord declared that children born from the tribe of Israel were begotten for Him as His own children (Ezekiel 16:20, 23:37), considering Himself the Father of all the children of those to whom He had promised to be their God and the God of their descendants. An unbelieving child born to unbelievers is alien to the covenant until attaining the knowledge of God. Therefore, it is reasonable that the sign is not administered to such a child, as it would be inappropriate. St. Paul likewise asserts that the Gentiles "in the time of their idolatry were without covenant or testament" (Ephesians 2:12). Thus, the matter becomes adequately clear: adults who wish to come to our Lord should not receive baptism without faith and repentance, as these are the prerequisites for entering the covenant symbolized by baptism. However, children descended from Christians, to whom the inheritance belongs through the promise, are eligible for baptism solely on this basis. The same principle applies to those who confessed their sins and offenses in preparation for baptism by John. In these cases, we do not observe any model other than the one we wish to uphold. If a Jew, Turk, or pagan were to come seeking baptism, we would not administer it to them without proper instruction and a satisfactory confession.

To argue further that the nature of baptism requires immediate regeneration, these opponents turn to John 3:5, where it is stated: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." They argue, "See how our Lord calls baptism 'regeneration.' If children are incapable of regeneration, how can they be fit to receive baptism, which cannot exist without regeneration?" However, we must not allow them to misinterpret

scripture with their flawed explanations. In this passage, the Lord Jesus Christ does not mention baptism but employs a metaphor and analogy drawn from physical elements to convey spiritual and heavenly truths. This becomes evident when He immediately addresses Nicodemus, to whom He was speaking, stating that He had only discussed earthly matters thus far (John 3:12). Although His discourse pertained to profound and spiritual concepts, He expressed them in physical terms due to Nicodemus's limited understanding. Thus, in using the metaphor of water and the Spirit, Christ aimed to convey that one must be transformed from a carnal nature inclined to the earth to a lighter, more refined nature after abandoning worldly inclinations.

Moreover, there is another reason their interpretation should not be accepted. If all who have not been baptized are excluded from the kingdom of God, as they claim, what then would be said of a young child who, though rightly instructed in our faith, passed away before being baptized? Our Lord declares that whoever believes in the Son possesses eternal life, escaping condemnation and transitioning from death to life (John 5:24). Nowhere does He condemn those who have not been baptized. We do not interpret this as a dismissal of baptism, but we wish to demonstrate that it is not so crucial that someone legitimately hindered from receiving it would be condemned for the lack thereof. On the contrary, according to their interpretation, all such individuals would be condemned without exception, even if they possessed the faith that grants us Jesus Christ. In contrast, they condemn all little children to whom they deny baptism, which they assert is necessary for salvation. Let them reconcile their position with Christ's statement that the kingdom of heaven belongs to children! Even if we concede all their arguments, their conclusion that children cannot be regenerated is false and based on irrational and erroneous reasoning. As previously explained, without

regeneration, both children and adults cannot enter the kingdom of God. Since children who pass away as infants are heirs of the kingdom of God, it follows that they must have been previously regenerated.

To further their argument, they invoke the words of St. Peter, who proclaimed that "baptism, which corresponds to the figure of Noah's ark, is given to us for salvation: not the external washing of dirt from the flesh but the response of a good conscience toward God, which is by faith in Christ's resurrection" (1 Peter 3:21). They contend that if the truth of baptism is tied to a good conscience before God, then children, lacking this, receive a vain and meaningless baptism. They persistently hold that truth must invariably precede the sign in every case. We have previously addressed and refuted this misconception. Circumcision, although administered to infants, was indeed a sacrament of the righteousness of faith, a sign of penitence and regeneration. If these elements were incompatible, God would not have ordained such a sacrament. By emphasizing the spiritual substance of circumcision and still assigning it to infants, He made it clear that it was given to them in anticipation of the future. Therefore, when we administer baptism to infants, we must focus on the present truth, which is that it seals and confirms God's covenant upon them. The full understanding of its significance will come to them at the time appointed by the Lord.

Above all, they wield the passages from Matthew and Mark as their primary defense: "Go, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20), and "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). They argue that our Lord commands instruction before baptism and emphasizes that faith should precede baptism, citing Christ's example of being

baptized at the age of thirty. However, they err in many ways in this regard. It is a grave error to assert that baptism was first instituted at that moment; it existed throughout the entirety of Jesus Christ's ministry. Baptism was instituted before it was practiced, so how can it be claimed that the first institution occurred much later? Therefore, it is futile to attempt to locate the initial ordinance of baptism in these passages in order to confine our understanding of baptism to them.

Setting aside this error, let us assess the strength of their arguments. Their case relies heavily on the order and arrangement of words, asserting that one must instruct before baptizing and believe before receiving baptism because it is stated: "Instruct and baptize" (Matthew 28:19) and "Whoever believes and is baptized" (Mark 16:16). By the same logic, one could argue that baptism must precede teaching people to observe Jesus's commandments, as it is written: "Baptize, teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). What if we apply their interpretation to the passage from John they cited earlier, which associates baptism with water and the Spirit (John 3:5)? Would it not indicate that baptism should precede spiritual regeneration since water is mentioned first? Their argument begins to unravel.

However, let us not conclude here, for we possess a more certain and robust response to uphold the truth. The primary command that our Lord imparts to His disciples is to proclaim the gospel, to which He adds the ministry of baptizing as an integral part of their commission and primary responsibility. Baptism is only discussed here in conjunction with teaching and preaching, as a more extensive examination will reveal. The Lord commissions His apostles to instruct the people of all nations on earth. But which people? It is evident that He refers exclusively to those capable of receiving

instruction. He subsequently declares that such individuals, after being instructed, should be baptized. Following this line of thought, He states that those who believe and are baptized will be saved. Is there any mention of little children in either part of this discourse? Therefore, the argument that grown people must be instructed and believe before being baptized, and that baptism does not apply to little children, finds no support in these passages. To exclude little children from baptism based on this pretext distorts the words of the Lord.

In order to illustrate their ignorance more vividly, let us use a metaphor. Consider St. Paul's statement, "Whoever does not work, let him not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). If someone were to deduce from this that little children should not be fed, would they not be subject to ridicule? Why? Because they take a statement made about one group and apply it indiscriminately to all. Similarly, in this matter, these individuals make the same error. They extend what is specifically stated about adults to little ones, transforming it into a universal rule. As for our Lord's example, it provides no support for their position whatsoever. He delayed His own baptism until the age of thirty because that marked the commencement of His ministry when He sought to establish baptism more firmly, although it had already begun through the ministry of St. John. Since He intended to incorporate baptism into His teachings, He sanctified it in His own life from the outset to lend it greater authority.

They attempt to bolster their argument by referencing the example in Acts 19, where St. Paul re-baptizes certain disciples in Ephesus who had previously received baptism from St. John the Baptist. Their contention is that if the initial baptism of these disciples was rendered ineffective due to their lack of knowledge, how much more is this true for the baptism of infants who possess no understanding?

However, if we were to accept their interpretation, each of us would require repeated baptisms, for who among us does not acknowledge daily their great ignorance and shortcomings? Such a notion is plainly absurd. Therefore, let us seek the correct interpretation of this passage.

Some argue that the statement indicating St. Paul baptized them in the name of Jesus simply signifies instruction. While this interpretation aligns with the language of Scripture, I propose a more appropriate explanation, which I hope to demonstrate convincingly. It is not uncommon for Scripture to refer to the reception of visible graces of the Holy Spirit, such as those bestowed during that period, as "baptism." We find this usage in passages like when the Lord "baptized" His disciples by sending His Spirit to confer these graces upon them (Acts 1:5). In light of the narrative presented here, St. Paul inquires whether these disciples have received the gifts of the Spirit, to which they respond in the negative. He then baptizes them in the name of Jesus—not with water but in a manner reminiscent of how the apostles themselves experienced baptism on the day of Pentecost. This interpretation is further supported by the subsequent event: "And when he laid his hands upon them, the Spirit descended upon them." This makes it clear that the "baptism" mentioned here refers to the laying on of hands through which the Holy Spirit was imparted.

They may object, drawing a parallel between this and the Lord's Supper, which we do not administer to children. However, Scripture unmistakably highlights the distinctions between these sacraments. Baptism serves as our initial entry into recognition as members of the Church and our acknowledgment as God's children, marking the sign of our regeneration and spiritual birth. Conversely, the Lord's Supper was established for those who have moved beyond infancy

and are capable of consuming solid spiritual nourishment. This distinction is plainly articulated by the Lord Himself. His word makes no age-based distinctions regarding baptism but strictly limits the participation in the Lord's Supper to those who can discern the significance of His body, examine themselves, and proclaim His death. Thus, little children are incapable of fulfilling these requirements. Moreover, Scripture specifies, "Let each one test himself, then let him eat of this bread and drink of this cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28), indicating that testing must precede partaking. This is unfeasible for children. The passage also warns against partaking "unworthily, not discerning the Lord's body," which would bring condemnation (1 Corinthians 11:29). Administering it to children would expose them to judgment and condemnation, which is unreasonable. Lastly, "Do this in remembrance of me. Therefore every time that you take this bread and drink this cup, you announce the Lord's death" (1 Corinthians 11:24–26). How could children announce the Lord's death when they cannot even speak? These distinctions are clearly outlined in Scripture, underscoring the significant difference between these two sacraments. Similar distinctions were also observed in the Old Testament with signs analogous to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Circumcision, which corresponded to baptism, was administered to infants, while the Passover lamb, representing the Lord's Supper, was reserved for children old enough to inquire about its significance (Exodus 12:26–27). If these individuals had any grasp of the Lord's Word, they would recognize these clear distinctions.

In conclusion, we have sufficiently demonstrated the unwarranted and thoughtless nature of their opposition to the practices of the Lord's Church. Their efforts only serve to ignite unnecessary controversies and debates, undermining the sacred observance that has been faithfully upheld by the faithful since the time of the

apostles. We trust that all devoted servants of God, upon reading this treatise, will find their concerns addressed and will discern that the attacks aimed at overturning this holy ordinance are mere schemes of the devil. These schemes aim to diminish the comfort that the Lord intended to bestow upon us through His promise and obscure the magnificence of His name. The glory of His name is magnified as He visibly testifies to us through the sign of baptism that, out of His love for us, He cares for our descendants and becomes the God of our children. When we consider that the Lord assumes the role of a good family father for us, extending His providence not only over us but also over our offspring after our passing, we have every reason to rejoice, just as David did. In this rejoicing, God is glorified in a unique way.

Satan endeavors to rob our children of the blessings conferred through baptism. By obscuring this sacred act, he seeks to lead us into forgetfulness regarding the promise the Lord has made concerning our offspring. The Lord has instituted baptism as a testimony to affirm His intentions of bestowing grace upon our children. Should this testimony be removed from our sight, it could lead us down a perilous path, one paved with ingratitude and forgetfulness of the Lord's boundless mercy toward us. Consequently, we might neglect the vital task of nurturing our children in the fear of God, discipline of His law, and the knowledge of His gospel.

Understanding that the Lord has received our children into His covenant community, incorporating them as members of His church from their very birth, serves as a potent catalyst. This knowledge ought to inspire us to cultivate within them true piety and unwavering obedience to God. We must recognize that our children have been graciously granted entrance, through His promise, into

the community of those whom He acknowledges as members of His household—His Christian church. Therefore, let us not spurn this profound kindness of the Lord but, with unwavering faith, present our children boldly before Him, for He has extended to them the privilege of belonging to His cherished household.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Significance of the Lord's Supper

Another sacred sacrament bestowed upon and established for the Christian church is the consecrated bread, representing the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the consecrated wine, symbolizing His blood, as was customarily referred to in the early church. It is known as the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. In this sacred rite, we are spiritually nourished and sustained by the benevolence of our Lord. Conversely, we express our gratitude to Him for His abundant grace.

The purpose and aim of the Lord's Supper are distinctly conveyed through the promise it imparts to us. It serves to confirm and assure us that the body of our Lord Jesus Christ was once offered on our behalf in a manner that makes it now and forevermore our possession. Likewise, His blood was poured out for us once and continues to be eternally ours. This solemn act refutes the erroneous beliefs of those who dare to deny that sacraments serve as expressions of faith and are bestowed to uphold, elevate, console, and augment our faith.

The divine words of our Lord resonate with profound meaning: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). These words encapsulate a promise, a testament of His boundless grace. Wherever there exists a promise, faith finds a solid foundation upon which to rest and from which to derive joy and solace. From this sacrament, our souls can draw immense sweetness and the fruits of consolation. Through it, we come to realize that Jesus Christ is so intimately united with us, and we with Him, that we can rightfully claim His possessions as our own, and conversely, all that is ours becomes His. Thus, we boldly dare to assure ourselves that eternal life belongs to us, and just as surely as Jesus Christ Himself cannot fail to reach the kingdom of heaven, neither can we. On the other hand, our sins cannot condemn us any more than they can condemn Him, for they are no longer ours but His. This is not because any wrongdoing is imputed to Him, but because He willingly assumed the role of our guarantor and acted as the faithful debtor. It is the remarkable exchange He has orchestrated through His boundless benevolence: by embracing our poverty, He has bequeathed to us His riches; by bearing our frailty, He has fortified us with His strength; by taking on our mortality, He has bestowed upon us His immortality; by descending to the earthly realm, He has paved the way to heaven; by identifying Himself as the Son of Man, He has elevated us to the status of children of God.

All these promises are vividly articulated in this sacrament, and we must be unwaveringly convinced that they are as truly presented to us as if Jesus Christ Himself were physically present before our eyes, tangible and within reach. For His words here are unerring: "Take, eat, and drink. This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for the remission of your sins" (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25). By commanding us to take, He signifies His belonging to us. By urging us to eat and drink, He

manifests His unity with us. When He proclaims, "This is my body given for you, this is my blood shed for you," He demonstrates and teaches us that these elements belong to us, even more than to Him, for He has offered them and left them not for His own benefit but out of His love for us and for our advantage.

It is crucial to observe that the paramount and virtually complete strength and essence of this sacrament resides in the words: "Given for you, shed for you." Without these words, the distribution of Jesus Christ's body and blood would offer us little benefit. These words underscore that the body and blood are not merely His but, more significantly, ours. He has entrusted them not for His sake but for our salvation. As we have mentioned earlier, the main function of sacraments is to guide us from physical elements to spiritual realities through metaphorical representation. When we see bread as a symbol of Jesus Christ's body, we should immediately grasp the analogy: just as bread sustains and preserves our physical life, Jesus Christ's body nourishes and sustains our spiritual life. Likewise, when wine represents His blood, we should think of all the benefits that wine bestows on our physical well-being, helping us understand how much more Jesus Christ's blood does for us spiritually, confirming, comforting, refreshing, and bringing us joy. Thus, we recognize that what is attributed to bread and wine in this analogy aligns perfectly with the spiritual nourishment they provide.

Therefore, it is essential to comprehend that the primary purpose of the sacrament is not merely to present Jesus Christ's body to us but to authenticate and affirm the promise He conveys – that His flesh is truly sustenance, and His blood truly refreshment for our eternal life (John 6:54-55). He emphatically declares Himself to be the bread of life, promising that whoever partakes of it shall live eternally (John 6:48, 51). To achieve this, the sacrament directs us to the cross of

Jesus Christ, where this promise was unequivocally demonstrated and wholly fulfilled. Jesus Christ's identification as the bread of life is not attributed to the sacrament itself (as some have erroneously interpreted); rather, it is because He was given to us as the bread of life by the Father and demonstrated Himself as such when, by participating in our human mortality, He allowed us to partake in His divine immortality. He offered Himself as a sacrifice, assuming our curse to shower us with His blessings. In His death, He vanquished and obliterated death itself, and through His resurrection, He raised our corruptible flesh, with which He had adorned Himself, into glory and incorruptibility. His proclamation in John attests to this truth: "The bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (John 6:51). There is no doubt that He was signifying His body as sustenance for our spiritual life because He willingly surrendered it to be crucified for the redemption of the world. He offered it as sustenance once when He handed Himself over to be crucified for the redemption of the world, and He continues to do so daily when, through the proclamation of His gospel, He offers Himself to us, making us participants because He was crucified on our behalf.

It is paramount to understand that the sacrament does not transform Jesus Christ into the bread of life, by which we are sustained and continuously nourished. Instead, it offers us a glimpse and a taste of this life-giving bread. In essence, it reassures us that all that Jesus Christ has accomplished and endured was for the purpose of granting us life and reviving our spirits. This renewal of life is eternal; through it, we are perpetually nourished, upheld, and preserved in existence. Just as Jesus Christ could not be the bread of life for us if He had not been born and died for our sake, if He had not risen for us, so, now, He could not be the bread of life if the fruits

and efficacy of His birth, death, and resurrection were not eternally enduring.

If the true power of the sacrament had been earnestly explored and contemplated, as was proper, many disputes could have been avoided – disputes that have greatly perturbed the church, both in the distant past and more recently. These disputes often arise when restless and inquisitive individuals seek to define the manner in which Jesus Christ's body is present in the bread, as if such a contentious debate over the mechanics of consumption were the crux of the matter. It is indeed a misunderstanding to focus so intently on the intricate details of this issue when the essence of the sacrament lies elsewhere. The value of the sacrament is not primarily in its presence but in its power to convey Jesus Christ to us. However, those who engage in such debates fail to perceive that our initial inquiry should revolve around how Jesus Christ's body and blood become ours since they were given and shed for us. To acknowledge that His body and blood have become ours is to possess the entirety of Jesus Christ crucified and partake in all His blessings. Yet, these crucial aspects, so weighty and essential, are often overlooked or neglected in favor of scrutinizing the intricate question of how we physically consume the body.

In order to preserve God's unerring and sole truth amidst the diversity of opinions, we must first understand that the sacrament is a spiritual reality designed not to nourish our bodies but to feed our souls. We must seek Jesus Christ within it, not for our physical selves, for our carnal senses cannot grasp Him. Instead, we should seek Him in a manner where our souls perceive His presence, here and now. In essence, we must content ourselves with receiving Him spiritually. Through this spiritual reception, we gain life and partake in all the fruits that this sacrament offers. Upon careful reflection,

one will readily comprehend how Jesus Christ's body is presented to us in the sacrament. To alleviate any lingering doubts, for simple minds can be easily troubled by the variety of perspectives, let us first explain the sense in which the bread is referred to as the body of Christ, and the wine as His blood. Subsequently, we shall examine the communion of His body and blood that our Lord grants to His faithful in the Supper.

First and foremost, we must dismiss the notion of transubstantiation, as proposed by the sophists. This term, though intended to be marvelous, ultimately diverts our focus from what is essential in the words of Christ. Those who adhere to this doctrine become entangled in the phrase, "The bread which is offered with the hand is the body which was given for us," misconstruing it as a declaration that necessitates transubstantiation, claiming that "this transubstantiation is not achieved by a conversion of one thing into another, but because the body appears in place of the bread," an imagined disappearance of the bread. Their explanation deviates far from the intended meaning of Christ's words. It is important to note that such a forced interpretation is contrary to the letter and spirit of His words. The verb "is," an essential element of His statement, has never, in any language, carried the sense assigned to it here.

Furthermore, there are other reasons that render their interpretation untenable. Their stance diminishes the mystery that the Lord intended to represent in His Supper. The Supper, in its essence, serves as a visible and manifest testimony to the promise articulated in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, that "Christ is the bread of life which came down from heaven" (John 6:51). The visible bread must therefore serve as a sign to represent the spiritual nourishment we find in the body of Christ. To dismiss this symbolism is to forfeit the full meaning of the sacrament and the solace our Lord intended

to provide for our weakness. Just as the inward purification of the soul is more deeply understood when it is symbolized by the external washing of water in baptism, the bread in the Supper plays a crucial role in representing the spiritual nourishment we receive from Christ's body. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge the significance of the bread as a witness to the spiritual nourishment we obtain through Christ. To what end did the apostle Paul proclaim that we are one bread and one body because we partake of the same bread (1 Corinthians 10:17), if the bread merely presented a false illusion, with the true reality stripped away?

Many scriptural passages corroborate the argument that bread and wine, once symbolizing the body and blood, still retain their original names. The comparison made by some to Moses' rod, which was named as such even after it was transformed into a serpent (Exodus 7:12), is a frivolous equivocation. Although one may argue that the rod is named as such because it eventually reverted to its original form, there is a clearer reason behind this naming: it is said that Moses' rod devoured the rods of the magicians. To maintain consistency, both sides of the statement should use the same terminology. The rods of the magicians could not be called "serpents" because they had not genuinely transformed into serpents; thus, it was more appropriate to state that Moses' rod had devoured the others. This comparison, however, is markedly different from the linguistic constructs in passages such as "The bread which we break," "whenever you eat this bread," and "they communicated in the breaking of bread." Additionally, the appeal to historical practices, often used to counter God's clear word, does not aid in establishing this doctrine. The concept of transubstantiation is a relatively recent invention or, at the very least, was unknown during the earlier period when the gospel's teaching still maintained a semblance of purity. Notably, among the early church fathers, there is a unanimous

acknowledgment that the sacramental signs are indeed bread and wine, although they frequently employ various titles to honor the significance of the mystery.

The view of those who rigidly adhere to the literal interpretation of these words, refusing to acknowledge any figurative sense, is not more tenable. They seem indifferent to the absurdities their stance may lead to, asserting with unwavering determination that the bread is indeed the actual body, citing Christ's use of the phrase, "This is my body," as their ultimate justification. Despite their claims of reverence for Christ's words, this is insufficient grounds to dismiss the plethora of counterarguments – and I believe it would not require an extensive array of arguments to counter their position, as the absurdity of their teaching becomes evident with every utterance. Their assertion that the body is mingled with the bread to the extent that they become one substance not only contradicts common sense but also goes against the very essence of faith.

They may argue, "It is not permissible to audaciously interpret what is clearly expressed in scripture." While this is true, once the true interpretation is presented, it will become apparent that their oft-repeated argument is neither appropriate nor relevant to the present matter.

It is not entirely misguided that some have proposed that, due to the close relationship between the sign and the thing signified, the name of the thing is attributed to the signs themselves. While it may be an unconventional way of speaking, it is not inappropriate. Although the sign differs from the thing it represents in essence – with the latter being spiritual and heavenly while the former is corporeal and visible – the sign is not merely an empty image; it genuinely conveys the reality. Human signs typically symbolize absent things and often

mislead us by representing those things inaccurately. However, these signs convey the accurate meaning of the things they represent, and they are perpetually linked to the truth of those things. Therefore, when you encounter phrases like "the bread is the body," "the breaking of the bread is the communication of the body," and similar expressions in scripture, recognize that the name of the superior and more excellent thing has been transferred to the inferior one, in accordance with the common practice in scripture.

Setting aside allegories and parables, so as not to exceed reasonable boundaries or seek evasions, it is essential to note that this figurative mode of expression is chiefly employed in matters pertaining to the sacraments. Otherwise, we would struggle to comprehend why circumcision is referred to as "covenant," the lamb as "passover," Mosaic sacrifices as "purification of sins," and the stone from which water flowed in the desert as "Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). Unless we accept this figurative mode of speaking, it would be challenging to interpret such references. Thus, the similarity and close relationship between the sign and the thing signified make the transition between the two quite natural. The sacraments, in particular, exhibit a strong tendency toward employing this transfer of names. The apostle teaches that the stone from which spiritual drink flowed for the Israelites was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4), as it served as a symbol under which this spiritual drink was received, albeit not visibly but truly. Similarly, today, the bread is called "the body of Christ" because it is a symbol under which our Lord offers us the genuine consumption of His body. If anyone, in their stubbornness, insists otherwise, vehemently asserting that the bread is the body and the wine is the blood, I counter by asserting that it is the testament in the body and blood. Why? Because when St. Matthew and St. Mark note that the Lord referred to the cup as His "blood of the new testament" (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24), St. Paul and St. Luke express it as "the

new testament in His blood" (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). Should anyone persist in their objection, let them cry out as much as they please that the bread is the body and the wine is the blood. I maintain, however, that it is the testament within the body and blood – a testament confirmed by His blood.

Now, it is essential to elucidate the nature of this testament within the body and blood of Jesus Christ. When we deny that the bread consumed in the Supper is the body of Christ, we do not intend to diminish the communication of the body offered to the faithful. Instead, we aim to differentiate between the represented reality and its sign. This distinction is of greater significance than we might wish, as human hearts possess a natural inclination toward superstition, often diverting from the truth to focus solely on the sign. However, we must guard against two vices. Firstly, by diminishing the significance of the signs, some separate them from the mysteries they represent, thus diminishing their efficacy. Secondly, by exalting the signs excessively, others obscure the inner power they convey.

It is universally acknowledged, among those who possess even a modicum of religious understanding, that Christ is the bread of life by which the faithful are nourished unto eternal salvation. However, there exists a lack of consensus regarding the manner in which we partake of Him. Some simplify it, defining the eating of Christ's flesh and the drinking of His blood as nothing more than believing in Him. Yet, it appears that in His profound discourse, where He extols the consumption of His body, Christ aimed to convey a more profound truth. He sought to express that true participation in Himself, signified by the terms "eating" and "drinking," results in our revival. These terms signify that we are brought to life and vivified through our genuine participation in Him, to avoid any misinterpretation

that this act merely involves knowledge. Just as eating physical bread – without gazing upon it – nourishes the body, our souls must genuinely partake of Christ to be nourished unto eternal life. We do confess that this eating is accomplished through faith, as no other eating can be imagined. Nevertheless, the distinction lies in the fact that while they believe eating is synonymous with faith, we maintain that eating results from faith. In essence, there is little difference in words but a profound distinction in meaning.

Although the apostle teaches that Jesus Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:17), we must not confuse this indwelling with faith itself. It is clear that the apostle intends to convey a unique blessing of faith – through it, the faithful attain Christ's presence within them. In likening Himself to the bread of life, our Lord not only signifies that our salvation hinges on confidence and trust in His death and resurrection, but also that His life is imparted to us through genuine communion with Him. In a manner akin to how bread nourishes the body when consumed, Christ nourishes our souls. St. Augustine, often cited by those who advocate a different view, did not assert that we "eat the body of Christ by believing in Him" in any other sense than to convey that this eating stems from faith. I do not deny this, but I emphasize that we receive Christ, not as a distant figure, but as one who gives Himself and communicates with us.

I am also dissatisfied with those who, while acknowledging that we partake in some form of communion with the body of Christ, attempt to reduce the sacrament to a mere participation in His Spirit, disregarding His flesh and blood. Yet, the Scriptures speak unequivocally: "His flesh is food, His blood is drink," and "whoever eats this flesh and drinks this blood has eternal life" (John 6:53–56). If it is widely understood that this communion extends beyond their

assertions, let us briefly explore its depth – though I recognize that expressing such a profound mystery in words is a daunting task, as my words are insufficient to encompass its magnitude. I readily admit that my descriptions may not do justice to the greatness of this mystery. The mind, while more adept at thought and belief than the tongue is at expression, still finds itself overwhelmed by such grandeur. Thus, all that remains is to stand in awe of this mystery – one that the mind cannot fully grasp, and the tongue cannot entirely convey. Nevertheless, I shall present a concise summary of my teaching, trusting that it will resonate with all righteous and God-fearing hearts.

Scripture teaches us that from the beginning, Christ was the life-giving Word of the Father, the source and origin of life, from whom all creation derives its existence. Therefore, St. John sometimes refers to Him as the Word of life, emphasizing that He perpetually imparts His vitality to all creatures (John 1:1–14). However, St. John also immediately points out that life became manifest when the Son of God, having taken on our flesh, allowed Himself to be seen and touched. While Christ had always been the source of life, humanity's alienation from God due to sin had severed their communion with this life, subjecting them to death. It was imperative to reintegrate humanity into communion with this Word to rekindle their hope of immortality. Otherwise, the prospect of hope would remain bleak, as humanity, cut off from God's life-giving presence, would be engulfed in death. However, since this Fountain of life has chosen to dwell in our flesh, it is now readily accessible, not hidden in the distance but offered and presented for our enjoyment. Behold how Jesus Christ has drawn the gift of life near to us – the life for which He is the source. Furthermore, He has imbued the flesh He assumed with life for our benefit, nourishing us for eternal life through our participation in it. He declares, "I am the bread of life who came

down from heaven," and "the bread which I will give is my flesh, which I will offer for the life of the world" (John 6:51). Through these words, He signifies that He is life itself, being the eternal Word of God who descended from heaven to us. In this descent, He poured out His life upon the flesh He took, ensuring that this life would reach us. Consequently, His flesh genuinely becomes our sustenance, and His blood, our drink – both are the substance that nourishes the faithful unto eternal life (John 6:54–55). Thus, we find the extraordinary consolation of discovering life within our own flesh. We not only attain life, but it anticipates us. All we need to do is open our hearts to receive it.

Although Christ's flesh may not possess the inherent power to grant us life, as it was initially subject to mortality, it is rightly called "life-giving" because it has been filled with perfect life to convey this life to us. We should interpret Christ's statement that "as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself" (John 5:26) in this context. In this passage, Christ refers not to the eternal properties inherent to His divinity but to the characteristics bestowed upon Him in the flesh through which He revealed Himself to us. He emphasizes that the fullness of life resides even in His humanity, ensuring that those who partake in His flesh and blood will enjoy this life. We can illustrate this with a common example: a fountain's water suffices for drinking, watering plants, and other uses. Nevertheless, the fountain does not possess an unending supply in itself; it receives this water from a source, perpetually replenishing itself to avoid drying up. Similarly, Christ's flesh is like a fountain, receiving life from divinity to convey it to us. Consequently, it is clear that communion with the body and blood of Christ is essential for those who aspire to heavenly life. This is the essence of all the apostle's declarations: that "the church is the body of Christ and His fullness," that "He is the Head from whom the whole body,

joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love" (Ephesians 1:22–23; 4:15–16), and that "our bodies are members of Christ" (1 Corinthians 6:15). These realities can only be fulfilled when Christ fully embraces us, encompassing both body and Spirit. The apostle further emphasizes this profound connection by stating that we are members of Christ's body, "of His flesh and of His bones." Finally, to underscore the magnitude of this union, he concludes with astonishment: "This is a profound mystery" (Ephesians 5:32). Thus, it would be utter folly to deny any participation in the flesh and blood of the Lord, a reality so immense that St. Paul would rather marvel at it than attempt to explain it in words.

We must not entertain notions of this communion in the manner that some have imagined – as if the body of Christ descends onto the table, manifesting a local presence that can be touched, chewed, and consumed. We do not question the limitations imposed upon it by the nature of a human body. Christ's body, in accordance with its nature, has a specific location – it resides in heaven, where it ascended and is preserved until the time of judgment. We firmly believe that it is not permissible to bring His body among perishable elements or to conceive of His omnipresence. Indeed, there is no need for this in order for us to partake of His body. The Lord Jesus, through His Spirit, generously bestows upon us the blessing of becoming one with Him, encompassing our body, spirit, and soul.

The Holy Spirit serves as the bond of this union, connecting us to Christ. He acts as a channel through which all that Christ is and possesses flows down to us. Just as we observe that the sun, when it shines upon the earth, radiates its energy through its rays to produce, nourish, and sustain the fruits of the earth, why would the light and brilliance of Jesus Christ's Spirit be less capable of

bestowing upon us the communion of His flesh and blood? Thus, when Scripture speaks of our participation with Christ, it attributes the power of this communion to His Spirit. One particular passage suffices to illustrate this point. In Romans 8:9, the apostle Paul affirms that Christ dwells in us solely through His Spirit. While he addresses this manner of dwelling, he does not negate our communication with the body and blood of Jesus Christ, which is the subject we presently contemplate. Instead, he demonstrates that the Spirit is the exclusive means through which we possess Christ and experience His presence within us. In the Supper, the Lord bears witness to this communion with His body and blood. He extends it to all who partake in this spiritual banquet, although only the faithful truly participate. They do so by embracing this blessing with genuine faith. This is why the apostle declares that the bread we break is the communion of the body of Christ, and the cup we bless through the words of the gospel and prayer is the communion of His blood (1 Corinthians 10:16).

Some may object, claiming that these expressions are figurative, ascribing the name of the thing signified to the sign. Even if we accept and explain St. Paul's words in this manner, we can still infer that the substance accompanies the sign due to God's truth and faithfulness. It is inconceivable that God, in His sincerity, would offer an empty and futile sign. Therefore, if the Lord genuinely represents to us participation in His body through the breaking of bread, there is no doubt that He simultaneously presents it. The faithful must firmly adhere to this principle: whenever they encounter the signs ordained by God, they must wholeheartedly believe and be absolutely convinced that the reality corresponding to the sign is also conferred. For what purpose would the Lord place the sign of His body in our hands if not to assure us of our true participation in it? Therefore,

when we partake of the sign of the body, we must possess an unshakable confidence that we also receive the body.

However, certain individuals, who insist that participation in the body and blood of Jesus Christ requires a local presence and physical touch, propagate numerous erroneous notions about this local presence. Therefore, we must briefly refute this error. Just as Jesus Christ assumed our true flesh when born of the virgin, suffered in our true flesh to make satisfaction for us, and was raised in the same true flesh, He also ascended to heaven, transporting this true flesh there. Our hope rests on the belief that we too will be resurrected and ascend to heaven, since Jesus Christ, in the same true flesh as ours, was resurrected and ascended there. This hope would be feeble and precarious if Christ's flesh were not truly resurrected and admitted into the kingdom of heaven. The nature of a body is to exist within a place, possess a specific measure, and possess a visible form.

I understand that some stubborn individuals engage in equivocation to persistently defend their erroneous beliefs. They maintain that the dimension of Christ's body has always encompassed the entire extent of heaven and earth in length and breadth. According to them, His birth as a child from His mother's womb, His growth, His crucifixion on the cross, His burial, His post-resurrection appearances in His customary bodily form, His visible ascension, and His subsequent appearances to St. Stephen and St. Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5–8; Acts 7:53; 9:3–6) were all preordained events designed to fulfill specific purposes – to enable His birth, death, and the accomplishment of other human actions. After His resurrection, He appeared in His customary form so that He could be recognized as the established King of heaven. However, if Christ's body possessed such a nature, it would imply that it was merely a phantom. They cite Jesus Christ's statement, "No one has ascended to heaven except the one who

descended from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven" (John 3:13). Yet, they fail to comprehend that this statement employs a communication of properties. Similarly, St. Paul declared that the "Lord of glory" was crucified (1 Corinthians 2:8) not because the divinity suffered, but because the Christ who endured scorn, derision, and suffering on the cross was both God and the Lord of glory. Likewise, the Son of Man was "in heaven" in the sense that this very same Christ, who was the Son of Man in the flesh on earth, was also God in heaven. Their reasoning in this passage also implies that the Son of Man "descended from heaven" in His divinity – not because His divinity departed heaven to conceal itself within the prison of the body, but because, while omnipresent, His divinity indwelt the humanity of Christ in a physical, natural, true, and incomprehensible manner.

Some propose a more subtle argument, suggesting that the body presented in the sacrament is glorious and immortal. They claim that because there is nothing inappropriate about it being in multiple places, it can be contained in the sacrament without occupying space or having a specific form. But I urge them to consider what our Lord gave to His disciples on the day before His betrayal. Do His words not indicate that it was the mortal body, which would soon be betrayed? They may counter, "Previously, He had already revealed His glory to three disciples on Mount Tabor (Matthew 17:1–13)." Indeed, that is true. However, on that occasion, the brightness of His glory only gave them a brief glimpse of His immortality. Yet, during His final Supper, the hour was imminent when He would be betrayed by Judas, humiliated, crucified, and disfigured like a leper (Isaiah 53:4) – He showed so little of His glory then! Moreover, if Christ's body was seen simultaneously in one place as mortal and despised and in another place as immortal and glorious, it would open the

door to theological errors akin to those of Marcion. Such a contradiction cannot be accepted.

Let us consider the claim that this glorious body exists in multiple places without a specific location, form, or boundaries. This essentially defines it as "spirit," albeit not explicitly. Do we deny the resurrection of the flesh, or do we confess that once resurrected, it remains flesh? This flesh is distinct from spirit in that it occupies a specific place, is visible, and can be touched. Will they persuade us that our bodies should be infinite after attaining celestial glory and immortality? Does this align with the apostle's assertion that "they will be transformed to be like the glorious body of the Lord" (Philippians 3:21)? Therefore, these individuals should not ascribe to the glorious body of Christ the capacity to be in multiple places simultaneously without occupying any space. Doing so would entail making the same assertion about our bodies, an idea that likely finds no support among us. They often raise the objection that "Jesus Christ entered where His disciples were while the doors were closed" (John 20:19), but this argument does not serve their purpose. He entered miraculously, not by force or human intervention, but by His divine power, overcoming all obstacles. After entering, He demonstrated the true nature of His body to His disciples, saying, "Look and touch; for a spirit does not have flesh or bones" (Luke 24:39). This act confirms that Jesus Christ's glorious body is indeed a true body, as it could be seen and touched. Remove this, and it would cease to be a true body.

When they accuse us of speaking inadequately about the power of God Almighty, they either delude themselves or willfully deceive. Our concern is not whether God can do something, but rather what He chose to do. We affirm that He did everything according to His good pleasure. God determined that Jesus Christ would be made like His

brethren in all things except sin. What, then, is our body? Is it not bounded by specific limits, confined to a particular location, and perceivable to the senses? They ask why God did not make this body occupy multiple places simultaneously, exist without a specific location, and lack form or boundaries. Such a request seeks to turn a body into a non-body – akin to asking God to make light both light and darkness at the same time. God's power transforms darkness into light and vice versa as He pleases. However, when they request that light and darkness be indistinguishable, they challenge the wisdom of God's order. Therefore, the body must remain a body, and the spirit a spirit, each abiding by the laws and conditions established by God. A body's nature dictates that it occupies a specific place, has a particular form, and is bounded. Jesus Christ took on a body with these attributes, although He granted it incorruptibility and glory. Nevertheless, He did not strip it of its nature and authenticity. Scripture is unequivocal on this matter: "He ascended into heaven, from which He should come again as He was seen to ascend there" (Acts 1:11).

Some obstinately assert that "He ascended and will come again visibly, but in the meantime, He remains with us invisibly." However, our Lord Himself testified to having flesh and bones that could be touched and seen. Ascending or departing does not mean merely giving the appearance of ascending or departing; it signifies genuinely carrying out the action described in the words. Someone might inquire whether it is necessary to designate a specific place in heaven for Christ. To this, I echo St. Augustine, suggesting that such a question is overly meticulous and unnecessary. It suffices for us to believe that He is in heaven.

Now, if one wishes to connect the bread and wine with the body and blood of the Lord, it becomes necessary to separate one from the

other. Just as the bread is presented separately from the cup, uniting the body with the bread would necessitate separating it from the blood contained in the cup. Those who argue that "the blood is in the body, and the body is in the blood" evade this issue. They often claim that "the blood is in the body, and the body is in the blood." However, the Lord differentiates the signs that hold the body and blood.

Nevertheless, if we fix our thoughts on heaven and transport ourselves there to seek Christ in the splendor of His kingdom (Colossians 3:1), we will be separately nourished by His flesh through the symbol of bread and sustained by His blood through the symbol of wine. This enables us to fully partake of Him. Although He withdrew His flesh from us and ascended to heaven in a physical body, He now sits at the right hand of the Father – signifying His reign in the Father's power, majesty, and glory. This kingdom is not confined to specific locations or limited by any measurements. Therefore, Jesus Christ can demonstrate His power everywhere as He pleases – in heaven and on earth. He can make His presence known through His power and perpetually support, confirm, strengthen, and serve His people, no differently than if He were physically present. In summary, He can nourish us with His own body, allowing us to participate in it through the power of His Spirit. This constitutes the presence of the body we seek in the sacrament – a presence that is characterized by great power and effectiveness. It not only instills unshakable confidence in eternal life within our souls but also assures us of the immortality of our flesh, which has been vivified by Jesus Christ's immortal flesh and, to some extent, shares in His immortality. Those who venture beyond this understanding with their convoluted arguments only obscure the clear and simple truth.

For those who remain unsatisfied, I invite you to ponder with me that we are dealing here with the sacrament, and the entirety of it must be intertwined with faith. By faith, we partake in this communion with the body of Christ, as much as those who seek to bring Jesus Christ down from heaven. It is essential to note that the rule of faith, by which St. Paul instructs us to interpret all scripture (Romans 12:6), strongly supports our position. Conversely, those who oppose this evident truth must consider the rule or standard of faith to which they cling. For "whoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God" (1 John 4:3). Regardless of their arguments, such individuals diminish the credibility of Christ's incarnation.

Furthermore, this understanding should guide us away from the misguided practice of carnal adoration that some have attached to this sacrament. They have reasoned, in error, that if the body is present, then the soul and divinity of Christ must also be there, for they cannot be separated. Consequently, they insist on worshipping Jesus Christ in the sacrament. This illustrates the perilous path we tread when we depart from God's Word and embrace the whims of our imaginations. Had these proponents shown humility, aligning their reflections with God's Word, they would have heeded His command to "Take, eat, drink." They would have obeyed His directive to partake of the sacrament, not to worship it. Those who receive it as instructed, without adoration, remain faithful to God's command. This assurance provides the greatest comfort as we embark on this sacred act. Those who do so follow the example set by the apostles. There is no record of them kneeling in worship of the sacrament; instead, they took and ate it while seated (Matthew 26:20; Mark 14:18; Luke 22:14). They align with the practice of the apostolic church, as recounted by St. Luke, which communicated not in adoration but in the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42, 46). They

adhere to the apostolic teaching, as imparted by St. Paul to the Corinthian church after proclaiming that he received it from the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:23).

Yet those who worship the sacrament rely on their speculations and self-invented arguments, unable to cite a single syllable from the Word of God to support their stance. Even though they attempt to compel belief by referencing the words "body" and "blood," it is implausible for any rational individual to persuade themselves that the body of Christ is indeed Christ. Their syllogisms may appear convincing, but when faced with strong temptations, their consciences and arguments may easily falter, leaving them in fear and confusion. They will discover their lack of grounding in God's unerring Word, upon which our souls firmly rely when held accountable. In their moment of realization, they will recognize that their teachings and examples contradict those of the apostles and that they have conjured their fantasies out of thin air. Such realizations will bring forth remorse and unrest. Why? Is it of no consequence to worship God in a manner unsupported by His Word? In matters of divine service and glorification, should we rashly engage in practices that lack scriptural backing? Scripture carefully elucidates Christ's ascension, which removed the physical presence of His body from our midst, urging us to dispel all carnal notions of Him. Whenever scripture mentions Jesus Christ, it encourages us to set our hearts on things above and seek Him in the heavenly glory at the right hand of the Father (Colossians 3:1). Therefore, we should spiritually worship Him in the heavenly glory rather than contriving this perilous form of worship, which fosters foolish and carnal notions of God and Jesus Christ.

Hence, those who invented the adoration of the sacrament have concocted this notion apart from scripture. If this adoration were

pleasing to God, scripture would undoubtedly have addressed it. By indulging in this practice, they have disregarded God's prohibition against adding to or subtracting from His Word (Deuteronomy 12:32). In creating a god according to their whims and desires, they have forsaken the living God and shifted their worship from the Giver to the gifts themselves. This constitutes a double failure: robbing God of His honor, transferring it to the created, and dishonoring God by defiling and profaning His holy sacrament, turning it into a detestable idol. To avoid stumbling into the same pit, let us turn our ears, eyes, hearts, thoughts, and tongues wholly toward God's most sacred teaching. This teaching serves as the school of the Holy Spirit, our excellent Master. In this school, we find profound enrichment, needing nothing from elsewhere. In this sacred instruction, we must remain content and willingly remain ignorant of all that falls outside of it.

Up to this point, we have explored how this sacrament serves our faith before God. Now, as our Lord reminds us of the immense generosity of His grace and urges us to recognize it, He also calls us to respond with gratitude and praise. When He instituted this sacrament for His apostles, He commanded them to partake of it "in memory of Him," as St. Paul interprets it as "proclaiming the death of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:26). This public confession signifies that all our trust and hope for life and salvation rest in the death of our Lord. By confessing this, we glorify Him and set an example for others to do the same. Here, we discern the sacrament's purpose: to provide us with the practice of remembering Jesus Christ's death. Commanded to proclaim the Lord's death until His return for judgment, we use our confession to articulate what our faith has recognized in the sacrament - that the death of Jesus Christ is our life. This represents the second use of the sacrament, connected with external confession.

Moreover, our Lord intended for the sacrament to motivate us to greater fervor, kindling love, charity, peace, and unity within us. He imparts His body to us in such a way that we become entirely one with Him, and He with us. Since there is only one body, and He allows us to partake in it, we are necessarily joined together as one body through this participation. The symbolism of unity is manifested through the bread, presented to us as a sacrament. Just as the bread is composed of numerous grains of wheat, mingled and blended together so that they cannot be distinguished or separated, we should be united by a common will, free from discord or division. Allow me to explain using St. Paul's words: "The cup of blessing that we bless is a communion in the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break is a participation in the body of Christ. Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:16–17).

We should engrave this knowledge deeply within our hearts. We cannot wound, slander, mock, despise, or offend any of our brethren without doing the same to Jesus Christ in them. We cannot engage in quarrels or division with our brothers without quarreling with and being divided from Jesus Christ. We cannot love Jesus Christ without loving Him in our brothers. We must care for our brothers, who are members of our own body, just as we care for our own bodies. Just as no part of our body can suffer without the rest feeling the pain, we should not let our brother endure affliction without sharing in it through compassion. Thus, St. Augustine aptly termed this sacrament "the bond of love." For what greater incentive is there to kindle mutual love than when Jesus Christ, giving Himself to us, not only invites us and sets an example for us to give ourselves mutually for each other but, by making Himself common to all, truly unites us all in Him?

Consider that the holy bread of the Lord's Supper serves as spiritual sustenance, sweet and rich to those who recognize that Jesus Christ is their source of life. It leads them to gratitude and fosters mutual love among them. Conversely, for those who fail to grasp faith, praise, and love, this sacred food becomes a deadly poison. Just as physical food, when consumed by a body tainted with illness, can corrupt and do more harm than good, this spiritual nourishment, when received by a soul polluted with malice and wickedness, leads to greater destruction. It is not the fault of the sacrament itself but rather because those tainted with unbelief harbor nothing pure within them. As St. Paul rightly asserts, "Those who eat unworthily are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, and not discerning the body of the Lord, they eat and drink their own judgment and condemnation" (1 Corinthians 11:27, 29).

It's crucial to understand that "not discerning the body and blood of the Lord" and "taking them unworthily" are synonymous. Those who, devoid of faith and devoid of love, approach the Lord's Supper like unthinking beasts fail to discern the significance of the Lord's body. Their lack of belief dishonors it to the fullest extent, stripping away its dignity, and profaning and polluting it through unworthy reception. When individuals, embroiled in quarrels and discord with their brothers, dare to mingle the holy symbol of Christ's body with their disputes and disagreements, it is by God's grace alone that the body of Jesus Christ remains undivided. Consequently, it is no surprise that they incur guilt concerning the body and blood of the Lord when they defile it so vilely with their horrendous impiety. Through such unworthy consumption, they bring condemnation upon themselves. Even though they lack faith in Jesus Christ, their reception of the sacrament testifies that their salvation lies exclusively in Jesus Christ, renouncing all other forms of trust. This self-accusation, a testimony against themselves, seals their own

condemnation. Moreover, because their hatred and ill-will estrange them from their brothers, who are members of Jesus Christ's body, they have no share in Jesus Christ, even though they testify that salvation rests only in participating in Jesus Christ and being united with Him. It is worth noting that this passage is often misapplied to argue for the local presence of Christ's body in the sacrament. However, the sense in which St. Paul employs it is clear, rendering any need to respond to such objections unnecessary.

St. Paul's injunction to "examine oneself" before partaking of the sacrament (1 Corinthians 11:28) carries significant weight. It calls for introspection, prompting individuals to consider whether they confidently and trustingly regard Jesus Christ as their Savior and profess Him through their verbal confession. In keeping with Christ's example, they should be willing to give themselves to their brothers and share themselves with those with whom they share a common bond in Jesus Christ. Just as they confess Jesus Christ, they should also regard all their brothers as members of His body. They should desire and be prepared to support, preserve, and assist them as they would their own body parts. While these duties of faith and love cannot attain perfection in us presently, we must earnestly seek and yearn with all our hearts to have our budding faith strengthened and our weak love confirmed.

To urge people to approach the sacrament with reverence, some have burdened and tormented fragile consciences without imparting the necessary understanding. They have asserted, "Those in a state of grace partake of the sacrament worthily," interpreting "being in a state of grace" as being entirely free from sin. By this teaching, they have excluded every person who has ever lived, as well as those living today, from partaking in this sacrament. For if worthiness is based on our own merits, we are all utterly lost! No matter how much we

encourage and exert ourselves, we will gain nothing except to become even more unworthy after our efforts—such is the impossibility of finding worthiness within ourselves. To remedy this affliction, they have concocted a means of attaining worthiness, asserting: "After examining our conscience, we can purify our unworthiness through contrition, confession, and satisfaction."

We have addressed the process of purification elsewhere, where it was more fitting. Concerning the present topic, these remedies and consolations are meager and insufficient for troubled and burdened consciences that are filled with dread of their sins. If, by divine decree, our Lord does not admit anyone who is not righteous and innocent to partake in His Supper, mere reassurance is insufficient to grant anyone confidence that they possess the righteousness required by God. How can we be certain that we have fulfilled the "doing what lies in them" requirement? Even if we were to meet this standard, who would dare to assure themselves that they have done everything within their power? Consequently, because no sure assurance of our worthiness is presented, the path to receiving the sacrament remains perpetually blocked by this formidable prohibition, which warns that "those who eat and drink the sacrament unworthily eat and drink their own judgment" (1 Corinthians 11:29).

Now, it is evident that this teaching, which deprives afflicted sinners of the consolation of this sacrament wherein the sweetness of the gospel is offered, is of diabolical origin. In short, the devil could not have devised a more effective means of leading people astray than to deceive them in this manner, preventing them from savoring the nourishment lovingly provided by our gracious Heavenly Father.

Let us recognize that these sacred elements are like medicine for the spiritually ailing, a source of comfort for sinners, and a form of spiritual support for the needy. They hold little value for the spiritually healthy, the righteous, and the affluent, if such individuals could indeed be found. These sacred foods, through which Jesus Christ is offered as nourishment, reveal that without Him, we are spiritually parched and destined for ruin. Furthermore, they signify that without Him, we are spiritually lifeless. Therefore, the only worthiness we can bring before God is the offering of our unworthiness and insignificance, seeking His mercy to make us worthy of Him. We should humble ourselves to find consolation in Him, confess our shortcomings to be justified in Him, and consider ourselves dead in our own capacity so that we may find life and vitality in Him. Moreover, let us strive for unity, as He commands us through His Supper, desiring to share one will, one heart, and one tongue. Instead of pondering how we can worthily partake of the Lord's body, we should understand that we approach as impoverished souls to a generous Giver, as ailing patients to a Healer, and as sinners to a Savior. The worthiness God seeks is primarily rooted in faith, attributing everything to God and nothing to ourselves, and secondarily in love. Presenting our imperfect love to God is sufficient, as He can then nurture it towards perfection, for we cannot offer it in its perfected form.

Some who concur with us concerning the role of faith and love in worthiness have erred in their definition of worthiness. They insist on a perfection of faith to which nothing can be added and a love like that of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, by setting such high standards, they inadvertently discourage individuals from partaking in the holy Supper, similar to those we discussed earlier. If we were to adopt their viewpoint, no one would partake worthily because everyone, without exception, would be deemed guilty and convicted

of imperfection. This requirement for perfection has rendered the sacrament futile and redundant. The sacrament was not established for the perfect but for the weak and ailing, aiming to awaken, motivate, and exercise their faith and love.

Our previous discussions on this sacrament make it clear that it was not meant to be observed only once a year, as is the current custom of fulfilling an obligation or paying a debt. Instead, it should be frequently observed by all Christians to continually remind them of the passion of Jesus Christ. Through this remembrance, their faith is reinforced, their gratitude is kindled, and the goodness of the Lord is magnified and proclaimed. Furthermore, mutual love among Christians is nourished and upheld, as they witness the unity of the body of Jesus Christ. Whenever we partake in the symbol of the Lord's body, we enter into a covenant with one another, obligating ourselves to uphold all the duties of love. This practice was evident in the early Christian church, as documented by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles when he wrote, "The faithful were persevering in the teaching of the apostles, in communication, that is, almsgiving, in the breaking of bread and in prayers" (Acts 2:42).

It is evident that the custom of partaking in the sacrament only once a year, which lulls us into inactivity for the rest of the year, is a scheme of the devil. This custom stifles spiritual growth and attentiveness to the sacrament. Additionally, another regulation emerged that deprived the majority of God's people of a significant part of the sacrament: the consumption of the cup. This restriction was imposed in order to reserve it for a select group, denying access to "the laity and profane people." Such titles used to describe God's chosen people! Individuals dared to alter and nullify God's decree, which was that all should partake of both the bread and the cup (Matthew 26:27), by instituting a new law that denied this privilege

to all. These legislators, in order to justify their actions, cited potential issues that might arise if the cup were open to all. They argued that one sufficed for both, stating that if it is the body, then it is all of Jesus Christ, who cannot be divided or separated from His body, and thus the body contains the blood. Such reasoning contradicts the clear words and signs of our Lord, who distinguished His body from His blood through His words and actions. If He intended to designate His entire person, He would have simply said, "This is I," as He often spoke in the scriptures, rather than saying, "This is my body, this is my blood."

It is evident that some ministers of Satan who oppose the truth mockingly claim that Jesus Christ only permitted His apostles to partake in this Supper, specifically those whom He had already ordained and consecrated in what they call the "order of priesthood." However, they must answer five questions which reveal the flaws in their argument, questions they cannot evade without being overcome by the truth.

Firstly, what divine revelation supports their assertion, which deviates so far from the Word of God? Scripture mentions that twelve were present with Jesus Christ at the Supper but does not diminish His divine status by referring to them as priests; we will consider this matter shortly. Although He shared the sacrament with twelve, He instructed them to distribute it among themselves.

Secondly, why, in the period from the apostles to a thousand years later, was everyone without exception allowed to partake in both elements of the sacrament? Did the early church remain oblivious to the company Jesus Christ had chosen for His Supper? It would be audacious to deny this or resort to equivocation. Early church histories and records clearly bear witness to this practice.

Thirdly, why does Jesus Christ merely instruct the disciples to eat the bread but emphasizes that all should drink from the cup (Mark 14:22-23; Matthew 26:26-27)? This is precisely what they did, as if He intended to prevent the very diabolical malevolence that exists today.

Fourthly, if, as they claim, Jesus Christ considered only priests as worthy participants in His Supper, who would have dared to invite others to partake when they had been excluded by our Lord? This participation is a gift, and no one has the authority to bestow it without the command of the only One who can give it. How boldly do they now distribute the sign of Jesus Christ's body to the people, without a command or precedent from our Lord?

Fifthly, was St. Paul lying when he declared to the Corinthians that "he received from the Lord what he also passed on" (1 Corinthians 11:23)? He subsequently conveyed that all, without distinction, should partake in both elements of the Supper. If St. Paul received instructions from our Lord that all should partake indiscriminately, those who exclude and reject almost the entire people of God must reconsider the source of their practice, for they cannot attribute it to God. God does not contradict Himself. Yet these antichrists claim to represent the church, those who readily trample upon and abolish the teachings and institutions of Jesus Christ. They assert this under the guise of the church! As if these individuals were the church themselves, those who so readily reject the principles established by Jesus Christ, or as if the apostolic church, where the true essence of Christianity flourished, were not the church.

Through these and similar inventions, Satan has sought to inject his darkness into Jesus Christ's holy Supper, distorting, corrupting, and obscuring it, or at the very least, preventing its purity from being

preserved and safeguarded within the church. However, the most abominable of these errors occurred when Satan introduced the notion that the Mass is a sacrifice and offering to obtain forgiveness of sins. I am well aware of how deeply this plague has taken root and how it conceals itself beneath a veneer of righteousness, cloaking itself in the name of Jesus Christ. Many mistakenly believe that the entirety of faith is encapsulated in the mere term "the Mass." However, when God's Word has clearly demonstrated that the Mass, in all its adornment and splendor, brings great dishonor to Jesus Christ, obscures and weakens His sacrificial death, removes from us the benefits of that death, and disrupts the very essence of the sacrament established for the remembrance of His death—can this error endure, deeply rooted though it may be? Is there any shroud so beautiful that it can hide the hidden evil when exposed by the light of God's Word?

Let us begin by addressing the fact that an intolerable dishonor and blasphemy has been committed against Jesus Christ through the Mass. He was designated and consecrated as a Priest and Pontiff by the Father—not for a limited time, as seen with the priests of the Old Testament. Their priesthood was finite because they were mortal (Hebrews 5:1-10). Thus, they needed successors to take their place upon death. However, Jesus Christ, being immortal, requires no substitute. He has been established by the Father as a "Priest forever, but according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 7:15-17, 23-24). This mystery was foreshadowed in Melchizedek, who, after being introduced as a priest of the living God, is never mentioned again as if he lives eternally, without end. Through this analogy, Jesus Christ is declared a Priest according to His order.

Therefore, those who engage in daily sacrifices require priests to perform the offerings, claiming to act as successors and deputies of

Jesus Christ. This not only diminishes His honor and detracts from His eternal priesthood, but it also implies an attempt to displace Him from His rightful position at the right hand of the Father, a position He can only occupy as an eternal and immortal Priest. They contend that their priests are not substitutes for Jesus Christ since He is not dead but are rather subordinates who assist in His eternal priesthood, which persists alongside their work. They resort to this argument due to the precision of the Apostle's words, which state that a multitude were made priests in the Old Testament because they were hindered by death from enduring eternally. Jesus Christ, however, is the exception, requiring no companions (Hebrews 7:23-24).

Now, let us examine the second aspect of the Mass. We've discussed how it obscures and diminishes the significance of the cross and the passion of Jesus Christ. This is undeniably true, for if Jesus Christ offered Himself on the cross as a sacrifice to sanctify us eternally and acquire everlasting redemption, then the effectiveness of that sacrifice must be perpetual. Otherwise, we would hold His sacrifice in no greater regard than the offerings of oxen and cows, which, as demonstrated by their frequent repetition under the Old Law, were weak and ineffective. Therefore, we must either admit that Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross lacked the power of eternal sanctification, or acknowledge that He made one singular sacrifice. Indeed, as the apostle affirms, "This great High Priest, Christ, through the sacrifice of Himself, appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin" (Hebrews 9:11-12). And further, "God's will was to set us apart as holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). He adds a significant statement: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). He also warns, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no

longer remains a sacrifice for sins" (Hebrews 10:26). This truth is exemplified in Jesus Christ's final words on the cross when He declared, "It is finished" (John 19:30), a phrase we consider divine commandments.

In the dying moments, a person's last words hold special significance. As Jesus Christ was on the verge of yielding up His spirit, He testified that His singular sacrifice had completed and achieved all that pertains to our salvation. Yet, we continue to add countless other sacrifices daily, as if His sacrifice were flawed, despite His clear proclamation of its perfection. By repeatedly seeking additional sacrifices, are we not indirectly accusing Jesus Christ's sacrifice of being incomplete and powerless? The Mass, which mandates hundreds of thousands of sacrifices, serves the purpose of suppressing and burying the passion of Jesus Christ, through which He offered Himself as a singular Sacrifice to the Father. Can anyone, unless blinded by their own ignorance, fail to see the audacity of Satan's design—to resist and oppose God's evident and clear truth? It is no secret to me that this father of deception often disguises this stratagem, attempting to persuade us that the Mass does not entail multiple and distinct sacrifices but rather one single sacrifice repeated frequently. However, these clouds of darkness can be easily dispelled. Throughout his discourse, the apostle not only refutes the existence of other sacrifices but also unequivocally asserts that only one sacrifice was offered and that there is no need for repetition.

Now, we must explore the basis upon which advocates of the Mass assert the existence of multiple sacrifices. They reference the prophecy of Malachi in which our Lord foretells that incense and a pure offering will be presented to His name throughout the world (Malachi 1:11). They treat this as if it were a unique and uncommon

occurrence, as if the prophets, when speaking of the calling of the Gentiles, did not employ the ceremonies of the Law to illustrate the spiritual worship of God. This method was intended to help the people of their time better understand how the Gentiles would be incorporated into the true covenant of God. It was a common practice to depict the fulfillment of gospel realities through the symbolic language of their era. This is evident in numerous examples. Instead of proclaiming that all nations will turn to God, the prophets declared that "they shall go up to Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3; Micah 4:2). Rather than stating that people from the south and east will worship God, they prophesied that "they shall bring gold and frankincense" (Isaiah 60:6). To illustrate the abundant knowledge that would be granted to the faithful through the revelation of Christ, they declared that "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams" (Joel 2:28). Although numerous examples exist, I shall not dwell on them at length. It is unfortunate that these misguided individuals, by failing to recognize any sacrifice other than the Mass, have deceived themselves. The truth is that believers truly offer to God a pure oblation, and this will be discussed shortly.

Now, let us consider the third aspect of the Mass. It effectively erases from our memory the true and singular death of Jesus Christ. Just as the confirmation of a will among people depends on the death of the testator, our Lord's death confirmed the testament by which He bestowed upon us the gift of forgiveness of sins and eternal righteousness (Hebrews 9:15-17). Those who dare to alter or introduce changes into this testament deny His death and render it meaningless. What else is the Mass but a new and entirely different testament? Does not each Mass promise a fresh forgiveness of sins and a renewed acquisition of righteousness, essentially creating as

many testaments as there are Masses? So, if Jesus Christ were to return to ratify this new testament, would it not require another death, or more accurately, an infinite number of deaths corresponding to the countless Masses? Therefore, were my initial words not accurate when I stated that the Mass blurs and causes us to forget the true and singular death of Jesus Christ? Furthermore, does the Mass not directly imply that Jesus Christ should be crucified anew, if such a thing were possible? As the apostle aptly states, "Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established" (Hebrews 9:16). Since the Mass purports to be a new testament of Jesus Christ, it necessitates His death. Moreover, the sacrifice offered must be slain and consumed. If Jesus Christ is sacrificed anew in each Mass, then He must endure a cruel death every minute, in a thousand different places. This is not my argument, but rather the apostle's, who asserts, "For then [Jesus Christ] would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world" (Hebrews 9:25-26).

Let us now contemplate the fourth consequence of the Mass—a matter of profound significance. The Mass effectively robs us of the fruits that should flow from Jesus Christ's death, as it prevents us from recognizing and meditating upon its true essence. How can one believe in the redemption secured by Jesus Christ's death when they witness a supposed new redemption within the confines of the Mass? How can they trust in the remission of their sins through Jesus Christ's death when they witness another remission in the Mass? Even those who assert, "We do not obtain remission of sins in the Mass for any reason other than because it has already been procured by the death of Jesus Christ," do not escape this conundrum. Their assertion is essentially akin to proclaiming that we have already been redeemed by Jesus Christ, on the condition that we ransom ourselves. This perverse teaching, sown by the agents of Satan, is

defended vigorously today, often through proclamations, the edge of the sword, and the consuming fires. They declare, "When we present Jesus Christ to the Father in the Mass, through this oblation, we secure the remission of sins and participate in Jesus Christ's passion." Yet, we must ponder: What is left of the significance of Jesus Christ's passion, other than being regarded as an example of redemption, from which we are to learn to become our own redeemers?

Now, let us consider the final consequence of the Mass – the dire impact it has on the Holy Supper, a profound gift from our Lord, upon which He engraved the indelible memory of His passion. Contrastingly, the Mass disguises itself as a payment offered to God, suggesting that God receives it from us as a form of appeasement. Here, a significant distinction emerges between 'taking' and 'giving,' much like the distinction between 'sacrament' and 'sacrifice.'

It is disheartening to observe human ingratitude at its worst, as individuals are led to believe they place God in their debt through this sacrificial act, when they should be acknowledging His divine benevolence with heartfelt gratitude. The sacrament assures us that our redemption, achieved through Jesus Christ's death, is not a one-time event but an ongoing, life-renewing process, for all elements of our salvation were accomplished during that sacred moment. On the contrary, the Mass asserts an entirely different narrative, suggesting that Jesus Christ must be repeatedly sacrificed for us to reap any benefits.

The Supper should be offered and shared within the congregation, serving as a means to educate us about our collective union with Jesus Christ. However, the sacrifice of the Mass dismantles this sense of community. The erroneous belief that only priests can

perform the sacrifice has led to the cessation of its distribution to the faithful, as originally commanded by our Lord. Instead, private Masses have become prevalent, which not only undermine the sense of community but also create a disconnection between the priest, the supposed sacrificer, and the faithful.

Before concluding, let me pose a question to our proponents of the Mass: Given the biblical emphasis on obedience over sacrifices, how do they reconcile their kind of sacrifice, for which they have no divine command and which lacks any scriptural support? The Apostle's words resonate clearly: Only those chosen and called by God, like Aaron, have the right to claim the name and honor of priesthood. Even Jesus Christ did not appoint Himself to this role but humbly obeyed the calling of His Father. Thus, either they must demonstrate that God Himself instituted their priesthood, or they must admit that their order and office are of human invention, devoid of divine appointment. Not a single scripture supports their priesthood. What, then, remains for these sacrifices, which cannot be offered without a priest? It is evident that this deception, concealed within the golden vessel of God's Word, has intoxicated kings and commoners alike, steering them further away from the truth. Indeed, Satan has contrived no more potent weapon to wage war against and subvert the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

I refrain from delving into the grievous and rampant abuses associated with the Mass, such as sordid commerce and unscrupulous gains. Instead, I simply reveal the essence of the Mass, even in its purest form, to shed light on why it deserves neither admiration nor veneration. To fully expound upon these profound mysteries and their true worth would require a larger volume. It is essential to understand that the Mass, in all its forms and consequences, encompasses impiety, blasphemy, idolatry, and

sacrilege from its very roots, without considering the adjuncts or repercussions.

Lastly, to preemptively address any contentious arguments concerning the terms "sacrifice" and "priest," I would like to offer a brief clarification. I fail to discern any reasonable basis for extending the appellation "sacrifice" to encompass all ceremonies and acts associated with the worship of God. It is evident that, according to scripture's enduring tradition, the term "sacrifice" primarily pertains to what the Greeks refer to at times as "thysia" or "prosphora," encompassing all offerings made to God. Nevertheless, we must draw a distinction here, one informed by the sacrifices prescribed by the Mosaic Law, which served as a symbolic representation and foreshadowing of all spiritual sacrifices. Although various types of sacrifices existed, they could all be categorized into two fundamental groups: those offered as atonement for sins, through acts of expiation and reparation, and those offered as expressions of divine service and testimony to God's honor. The latter category, in turn, included three distinct types of sacrifice, whether as petitions for divine favor, expressions of gratitude for His benevolence, or simple acts that rekindled the memory of His covenant. All these were intended to manifest reverence for His name. Consequently, the rites designated in the law as "holocausts," "libations," "oblations," "first fruits," and "sacrifices of peace" fall under this second category.

Let us explore the concept of sacrifice, dividing it into two distinct categories. First, there are sacrifices that are meant to honor and show reverence to God. Through these acts, the faithful recognize that every good thing comes from Him, and thus, they offer Him the gratitude He deserves. The second category consists of propitiatory sacrifices or expiatory offerings. These are sacrifices made to appease God's righteous indignation, to satisfy His sense of justice, and

ultimately, to purify and cleanse one's sins. This process aims to wash away the stains of transgressions, restoring the sinner to a state of righteousness and grace in the eyes of God.

In the Old Testament, these were referred to as sacrifices made to atone for sins. However, it's crucial to note that these sacrifices were not sufficient to erase iniquity or fully reconcile humanity with God. They served merely as symbols, foreshadowing the ultimate sacrifice that would be realized in its fullness through Jesus Christ alone. His sacrifice occurred only once, for its power and efficacy are eternal. Jesus Himself confirmed this truth, proclaiming that everything necessary for reconciling us with the Father, obtaining forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and salvation, was achieved, consummated, and perfected through His one offering. Therefore, there is no need for any further sacrifice.

Hence, it is an affront and blasphemy against Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross when someone attempts to repeat an offering, thinking it will secure remission of sins, reconciliation with God, and righteousness. Yet, what transpires in the Mass but the participation in Jesus Christ's passion through a new offering? Their audacity knows no bounds, for they go so far as to claim that their sacrifice is common to the entire Church, with the added ability to apply it to individuals as they see fit, even to the highest bidder. They aim to mimic the example of Judas, who sold Jesus Christ for thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14–15). While they cannot match Judas's price, they nevertheless sell Him whenever they find a buyer.

In light of this, we adamantly deny that they are true priests. By their oblations, they do not intercede with God on behalf of the people, reconcile humanity with God, or achieve complete expiation and purification of sins. Jesus Christ is the sole Priest and High Priest of

the New Covenant, and all priesthood has been vested in Him. Even if Scripture did not explicitly mention Jesus Christ's eternal priesthood, it remains irrefutable that God abolished the old priesthood and did not establish another in its place. As the apostle aptly argues, "Let none usurp the honor of the priesthood unless he is called by God" (Hebrews 5:4). Therefore, how can these sacrilegious individuals, who claim to be the crucifiers of Jesus Christ, dare to label themselves as priests of the living God? We must not interpret the terms "priest" and "priesthood" based on their Greek origins, which mean "elder" (1 Peter 5:1–5). Instead, we should understand them according to their common usage, where "priest" signifies a "sacrificer" ordained to present a particular sacrifice to God, and "priesthood" denotes the dignity, status, and function of such a sacrificer.

The other category of sacrifices is known as sacrifices of thanksgiving or praise. These sacrifices encompass all acts of love and charity, which, when directed towards our fellow human beings, are offered in some way to God. In these acts, we honor God through His creations, thereby glorifying Him. This category also encompasses all our prayers, praises, and expressions of gratitude, as well as every effort made to serve and glorify God. These offerings are intimately linked to a more significant sacrifice by which we consecrate ourselves, body and soul, as holy temples of God. It is insufficient for only our outward actions to serve Him; we must dedicate ourselves entirely, ensuring that every aspect of our being serves His glory and exalts His majesty.

These sacrifices do not serve the purpose of appeasing God's wrath, securing remission of sins, or earning righteousness. Rather, their sole aim is to magnify and glorify God. These acts only please God when they originate from individuals who have already obtained

forgiveness of sins, reconciled with Him, and been justified through other means.

These sacrifices are vital to the life of the Church, as they are everlasting, enduring as long as the people of God exist. The prophet Malachi eloquently foretold this truth: "From east to west my name is great among the peoples, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and clean and pure oblation. For my name is terrible among the peoples, says the Lord" (Malachi 1:11). Therefore, it would be inconceivable to deprive God of these offerings. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, calls on us to present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, as our reasonable service. In this context, he refers to a spiritual form of service and worship, implicitly contrasting it with the physical sacrifices of the Mosaic Law. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews acknowledges the pleasing nature of alms and good deeds, terming them sacrifices in which God delights (Hebrews 13:16). Indeed, the Philippians' generosity, which supported St. Paul's needs, is described as an oblation of good odor, and all the actions of the faithful are considered spiritual sacrifices (Philippians 4:18). It is unnecessary to further investigate this topic, as such scriptural language is prevalent throughout the Bible. Even during the period when the people followed the rudimentary teachings of the law, the prophets made it abundantly clear that external sacrifices embodied a spiritual reality that persists in the Christian Church to this day. David prayed that his supplications would ascend before the Lord like incense (Psalm 141:2), while Hosea referred to expressions of thanks as "cows of the lips" (Hosea 14:2). David, in another instance, termed them "sacrifices of praise" (Psalm 50:14, 23). The Apostle also endorsed this idea, instructing us to offer the sacrifices of praise to God, which he explained as the fruit of lips glorifying His name (Hebrews 13:15).

In this sacred act, when we proclaim and remember the death of our Lord and offer thanks, we are, in essence, engaging in a sacrifice of praise. It is imperative to grasp that, as Christians, we are all designated as "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). Through Jesus Christ, we present sacrifices of praise to God, described by the apostle as "the fruit of lips confessing His name" (Hebrews 13:15). When we approach God with our offerings and gifts, we do so through an Intercessor, Jesus Christ. He is the Mediator who intercedes on our behalf, enabling us to present ourselves and all that we possess to the Father. He is our High Priest, having entered the heavenly sanctuary, granting us access. He serves as our altar, upon which we place our offerings. In Him, we find the courage to undertake all that we do, for He is the One who has appointed us as "kings and priests to the Father" (Revelation 1:6).

If anyone should attempt to argue, invoking the authority of the early church fathers, that the sacrifice in the Mass should be understood differently from our explanation, I will provide a concise response. It is essential to understand that the early church fathers should not be invoked to endorse the fantasies concocted by the Papists regarding the sacrifice of the Mass. In unison, the early fathers unequivocally taught that the Supper is a commemoration of the unique sacrifice offered by Jesus Christ. While we acknowledge that the offering of Jesus Christ is presented to us in a manner that allows us to practically contemplate His crucifixion, as the apostle stated that "Jesus Christ had been crucified among the Galatians when the preaching of His death had been made known to them" (Galatians 3:1), we must acknowledge that the early church fathers, in their interpretation of the Lord's Supper, veered away from the Lord's original institution. Their observance of the Supper tended to represent some form of repeated or renewed immolation, which differs from the simplicity of the Lord's ordinance. Therefore, for the

faithful, the safest course is to adhere to the pure and unaltered command of the Lord. When we recognize that the Supper belongs to the Lord and not to humanity, we understand that no human authority, the passage of time, or any other rationale should distract us from His divine will. The apostle, seeking to restore the integrity of the Supper among the Corinthians, where it had been tainted by various vices, employed the most direct and efficient method available to him. He reminded them of the original institution of the Supper, which served as the permanent standard they should follow (1 Corinthians 11:17–34).

At this juncture, my dear readers, you have before you a succinct summary of all that we deem essential to understand about the two sacraments bestowed upon the Christian Church. These sacraments have been intended for use since the inception of the New Testament era and will continue to serve their purpose until the consummation of the age. Baptism stands as a symbolic entry into the Church and a testament of one's initial profession of faith. The Supper, conversely, functions as a perpetual source of spiritual nourishment, wherein Jesus Christ sustains His faithful followers. As there is but one God, one faith, one Christ, and one Church—His body—there is likewise only one baptism (Ephesians 4:4–6), which is administered once and is never to be repeated. In contrast, the Supper is frequently partaken of, signifying that those who have been grafted into the Church continue to be nourished and sustained by Jesus Christ.

Apart from these two sacraments, as no other sacrament has been instituted by God, the faithful Church must neither accept nor acknowledge any other. It is imperative to comprehend that humans lack the authority or power to establish new sacraments. We must remember the principles elucidated earlier: sacraments are instituted by God for the purpose of signifying His promises to us

and bearing witness to His benevolent intentions toward us. No human being can rightly promise us anything concerning our salvation or provide absolute certainty regarding God's goodwill, affection, or the nature of His giving and withholding (Isaiah 40:13; Romans 11:34). Consequently, no one can ordain or institute a sign that testifies to any promise or will of God; only He, by offering a sign, can bear witness to Himself. To state it more succinctly and perhaps more forcefully but with utmost clarity: a sacrament cannot exist without a promise of salvation. The collective wisdom of humanity, no matter how vast, cannot make promises concerning our salvation. Consequently, humanity lacks the authority to ordain any sacrament.

Therefore, let the Christian Church content itself with these two sacraments and not merely disallow, endorse, or recognize any additional sacraments presently but also never anticipate or desire their introduction until the end of time. The Jews, in times past, experienced various supplementary signs and wonders, such as manna, water from the rock, the bronze serpent, and others (Exodus 16:13ff, 17:6; Numbers 21:8–9; 1 Corinthians 10:3–4; John 3:14). These were ordained for the Jews to encourage them not to become fixated on these temporary symbols but rather to expect something better from God—an enduring blessing without alteration or cessation. We, however, find ourselves in a vastly different situation. In Jesus Christ, we have been granted access to all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and we have been enriched to such an extent that to hope or ask for a fresh abundance of these treasures would amount to testing God, potentially provoking His displeasure against us.

Our hearts must be solely set upon Jesus Christ. We should earnestly seek Him, fix our gaze upon Him, acquire His wisdom, safeguard His

teachings, and await with great anticipation the day when our Lord will openly reveal the splendor of His kingdom for all to witness (1 Corinthians 15:24; 1 John 3:2). It is paramount to recognize that the epoch in which we presently dwell is characterized in Scripture as the last hour, the final days, and the closing times. This designation serves as a safeguard against any misguided hopes for new doctrines or revelations. As the Scriptures affirm, "In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:2). It is through His beloved Son that the Father alone reveals Himself (Luke 10:22).

In preserving the sanctity of God's sacraments, we must strive to minimize any human invention within these divinely instituted rites. Just as the addition of water dilutes wine and causes it to lose its flavor, or as yeast sours all the wheat, human adulteration tarnishes the purity of God's holy mysteries. Regrettably, we observe that the sacraments, as practiced today, have strayed far from their original purity. They are often marred by excessive displays, ceremonies, and frivolous actions, while the essence of God's Word is neglected. Without God's Word, the sacraments cease to be true sacraments. Even the ceremonies ordained by God are obscured within this multitude of extraneous rituals. In baptism, the essential act—the baptism itself—is often obscured by extraneous elements. Similarly, the Supper has been largely obscured by its transformation into the Mass, with only occasional glimpses of its true form, albeit disjointed, divided, and distorted.

Conversely, it would be more prudent that, during a baptism, the individual be presented before the congregation of believers, serving as witnesses and offering prayers on their behalf. The candidate should be dedicated to God while the entire congregation bears

witness to this commitment. The confession of faith to be instilled in the candidate should be recited, and the promises associated with baptism should be articulated and expounded upon. Subsequently, the candidate should be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, concluding with prayers and expressions of gratitude. In this manner, every element of baptism would be appropriately represented, free from any foreign contamination. Whether the candidate is fully immersed in water or sprinkled with it is of no paramount significance, as the practice can vary based on regional customs. Both methods convey the symbolism of the sacrament, even though the term "baptize" inherently implies immersion, as historically practiced in the early church.

As for the Holy Supper, its administration can be aptly conducted if, at the very least, it is offered to the congregation weekly. The service should commence with public prayers, followed by the delivery of a sermon. Bread and wine should be present on the table, and the minister should recount the institution of the Supper. The promises encompassed within it should be conveyed, accompanied by the solemn excommunication of those prohibited by our Lord. Subsequently, prayers should beseech God to grant the congregation the faith and gratitude necessary to partake worthily, recognizing their unworthiness. Scripture or Psalms should be read, and the congregation should partake in the holy elements, with the ministers breaking the bread and distributing the cup. Following the Supper, an exhortation should be delivered, urging pure faith, unwavering confession, love, and a moral lifestyle befitting Christians. Finally, a song of thanksgiving and praise to God should resonate throughout the congregation. When these actions are executed in harmony, the congregation can be dismissed in peace.

Whether the congregation members hold the bread in their hands or not, distribute it among themselves or consume what is given to them, or return the cup to the minister or share it with their neighbors—all these particulars are inconsequential. Such elements remain a matter of indifference and should be governed by the liberty of the church. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the early church practice was for all to partake in their hands. Indeed, Jesus Christ Himself directed His disciples to "Divide it among yourselves" (Luke 22:17). Historical accounts affirm that prior to the time of Alexander, the Bishop of Rome, the Supper employed leavened bread—common bread. It was Alexander who introduced the use of unleavened bread, seemingly more as a spectacle to captivate the populace rather than as a means to impart genuine religious instruction.

To those who hold even the slightest affection for piety, I beseech you to ponder whether you do not perceive the brilliance of God's glory radiating more vividly through such practices of the sacraments. Consider the profound sweetness and spiritual solace that these practices afford to the faithful, in contrast to the bewildering and futile ceremonies that merely deceive the senses of those who are entrapped by astonishment. These priests purport to "maintain the piety and fear of God among the people," yet, in truth, they leave the populace ensnared in heedlessness and infatuated with superstition. To those who might endeavor to defend the antiquity of these inventions, let it be known that the use of chrism and exsufflation in baptism dates back, as does the enveloping of the Lord's Supper in human innovations. Nevertheless, such audacity and unwarranted confidence in human wisdom must not persist, for God prizes obedience to His Word to the extent that we, as believers, are called to judge even angels and the entire world by this truth (1 Corinthians 6:2–3; Galatians 1:8–9).

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Regarding the Five Other Ceremonies Falsely Called Sacraments: Confirmation, Penance, Extreme Unction, Ecclesiastical Orders, and Marriage

In our exploration of the sacraments, we have established the validity of two sacraments instituted directly by the Lord Himself, namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. However, it is worth our while to consider the five other practices commonly regarded as sacraments—Confirmation, Penance, Extreme Unction, Ecclesiastical Orders, and Marriage—examining them with a discerning eye, rooted in God's Word, and discerning their true nature.

First, we must firmly grasp a fundamental truth: the authority to institute sacraments rests solely with God. A sacrament serves to console and reassure the consciences of the faithful through God's unwavering promise, granting a level of certainty that no human being can bestow. It testifies to God's benevolence toward us—a testament that no person or angel can provide independently, for no one can claim to have advised God in His divine wisdom (Romans 11:34). The testimony of God about Himself can only be conveyed through His Word. A sacrament acts as a seal that authenticates God's covenant and promise. Without the prior presence of God's Word, a sacrament would lose its sacramental nature.

CONCERNING CONFIRMATION

Confirmation, often termed as such, is a man-made rite created by human endeavor and presented as a divine sacrament. Its proponents claim that it imparts the Holy Spirit, thereby enhancing

the grace initially bestowed in baptism to prepare individuals for the spiritual battle they will face after being born anew through baptism. This act involves anointing with oil and the recitation of specific words: "I mark you with the sign of the holy cross and confirm by anointing of salvation, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." While these rituals hold an aesthetic appeal, the critical question remains: where is the Word of God that assures us of the presence of the Holy Spirit in this ceremony? Regrettably, this assurance is nowhere to be found. We encounter only oil, a viscous substance, and nothing more.

As St. Augustine wisely noted, "Let the word be added to the element, and it will be made a sacrament." Therefore, those who uphold this practice must provide the Word that accompanies this oil if they aim to discern it as something beyond a mere substance.

Should they acknowledge themselves as ministers of sacraments, as they should, there would be no further need for debate. The foremost rule for any minister is to act in accordance with a divine command. Thus, they must produce evidence of such a divine command for this practice, and I shall cease my argument. If they cannot present such a command, they are engaging in a most audacious act without any divine authority. The Lord, in a similar vein, questioned the Pharisees concerning "the baptism of John: from heaven or from man?" (Luke 20:4–7). Had they admitted it was from man, He would have revealed its emptiness and frivolity; had they declared it to be from heaven, they would have been compelled to accept St. John's teaching. In fear of slighting St. John, they dared not admit his baptism was of human origin (Matthew 21:25; Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4). Likewise, if confirmation is of human origin, it is unquestionably empty and frivolous. However, should they seek to convince us of its divine origin, they must provide proof.

They may defend this practice by invoking the example of the apostles, who they believe acted with reason. This assertion holds true; they should not face censure if they indeed imitate the apostles. But what did the apostles do? In the Book of Acts, St. Luke recounts that the apostles in Jerusalem, upon hearing that Samaria had received the word of God, sent Peter and John to them. Upon arrival, Peter and John prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit. Up to that point, none of them had received the Holy Spirit, only having been baptized in the name of Jesus. Following their prayer, Peter and John laid their hands upon them, and through this touch, the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–17). The act of laying on hands is mentioned in other instances as well.

I understand what the apostles accomplished; they dutifully fulfilled their mission. The Lord had determined that the remarkable gifts of the Holy Spirit, which He then poured out upon His people, should be administered and distributed by the apostles through the laying on of hands (Acts 9:12, 13:3, 19:6, 28:8). Nevertheless, I do not envision some profound mystery in this ritual, but rather view it as a symbolic gesture employed by the apostles to commend and offer the individual to God.

If this apostolic ministry were present in the church today, it would indeed be appropriate to retain the practice of laying on of hands. However, as the bestowal of such grace no longer occurs, what purpose does the laying on of hands serve? The Holy Spirit continues to guide and sustain God's people, for without His direction and counsel, the church could not thrive. We possess an unfulfilling promise from Christ Himself, who invites those who thirst to come and drink of the living waters (John 7:37–38; Isaiah 55:1). Nevertheless, the extraordinary powers and visible manifestations that accompanied the imposition of hands have ceased. These signs

were only intended for a specific period, when it was necessary to exalt and magnify the new proclamation of the gospel and Christ's new kingdom through unprecedented miracles. By bringing these wonders to an end, the Lord did not abandon His church but rather declared that the grandeur of His kingdom and the significance of His Word had been manifested in a sufficiently sublime manner.

How, then, do these proponents align themselves with the apostles? It would be fitting for them to demonstrate the manifest power of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, yet they do nothing of the sort.

What reason, then, do they offer for the laying on of hands? Indeed, I acknowledge that the apostles employed the laying on of hands, but for an entirely different purpose. The claims made by these individuals regarding the laying on of hands are as frivolous as asserting that the breath the Lord breathed upon His disciples was a sacrament for imparting the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). However, when the Lord performed this act once, He did not intend for us to replicate it. The apostles employed the laying on of hands for a time when the Lord was pleased to grant the graces of the Holy Spirit in response to their prayers. It was never intended for subsequent generations to counterfeit this empty and fruitless sign, as they do.

Moreover, when they assert that they follow the apostles in the laying on of hands (although their practice bears no resemblance to that of the apostles), they fail to provide the accompanying oil referred to as the "oil of salvation." Who instructed them to seek salvation in oil and attribute to it the power of spiritual solace? Certainly not St. Paul, who directs us to distance ourselves from worldly elements and condemns the fixation on such observances (Galatians 4:9–10; Colossians 2:16–23).

In contrast, I assert with unwavering confidence, not based on my own understanding but on divine revelation, that those who designate this oil as the "oil of salvation" reject the salvation offered through Christ, spurn Christ Himself, and are excluded from the kingdom of God. For this oil serves only the flesh, and both the oil and the flesh are destined for destruction (1 Corinthians 6:13). These temporal elements have no place in the eternal, spiritual kingdom of God.

One might question here: "Do you intend to subject the water used in baptism, or the bread and wine employed in the presentation of the body and blood of the Lord during the Lord's Supper, to the same measure?" To this, I reply that in considering the sacraments, we must discern two aspects: the essence of the physical elements presented to us and the significance imbued by God's Word. The true strength of the sacraments lies in the Word. Therefore, as long as the bread, wine, and water, which serve as the visible aspects of the sacraments, retain their natural composition, we must remember St. Paul's words: "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food; and God will destroy both of them" (1 Corinthians 6:13). These elements are temporal and transitory, belonging to the realm of the perishable world. However, because they have been sanctified by God's Word to serve as sacraments, they direct us away from the flesh and toward spiritual understanding.

Let us take a closer look at the misconceptions that this oil fosters. These anointers, or "greasers" as they may be called, assert that the Holy Spirit is granted through baptism to bestow innocence, and through confirmation to augment grace. They even dare to claim that baptism is incomplete without confirmation—an utterly perverse notion! Are we not buried with Christ in order to partake in His resurrection? St. Paul interprets this participation in Christ's death

and life as the mortification of our flesh and the vivification of the Holy Spirit. This occurs when our old selves are crucified, enabling us to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). Can there be a better preparation for the spiritual battle against the devil? When St. Luke, in the passage we previously cited, states that the Samaritans, who had been baptized in the name of Jesus, had not received the Holy Spirit, he is not denying that they received some gift of the Spirit, as they believed in Jesus Christ with their hearts and confessed Him with their mouths. Instead, he means that they had not received the gift of the Spirit associated with evident powers and visible graces. Therefore, it is said that the apostles received the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), even though the Lord had previously declared, "It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matthew 10:20).

Behold, you who are in the fold of God, the cunning and perilous stratagem of Satan. He cunningly diverts our attention from the promises inherent in baptism and leads us to believe that confirmation is the true source of those promises. Is there any doubt now that this doctrine is a creation of Satan, which severs the baptismal promises and relocates them? As I reiterate, take note of the dubious foundation upon which this anointing is built. God's Word tells us that "all those who are baptized in Christ have put on Christ with His gifts" (Galatians 3:27). However, the proponents of this anointing argue that we have received no promises in baptism that could equip us for spiritual warfare against the devil. One voice speaks the truth, and so the other must be uttering falsehood. Therefore, I dare to define this rite more accurately than they have thus far: it is an affront to baptism, obscuring and undermining its significance. It is a false promise of the devil, enticing us away from God's truth. Or, if you prefer, it is oil tainted by the devil's deceit, intended to mislead the ignorant and unwise.

Furthermore, these advocates insist that all believers must receive the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands after baptism to become complete Christians. They assert that one cannot truly be a Christian without receiving the episcopal chrism. Consider their very words. But I was under the impression that everything essential to Christianity was contained within and revealed by Scripture. Yet now, it appears we must seek the true essence of our faith beyond the confines of Scripture. Are we to believe that the wisdom of God, heavenly truth, and the teachings of Christ themselves only serve as a foundation for Christianity, with oil completing the believer? By such teachings, they condemn all the apostles and many martyrs. It is evident that none of them underwent this anointing, for this sacred chrism did not yet exist. It was not required to "complete their Christianity," or rather, to "make those who were not yet Christians into Christians."

Even if I were to remain silent, these proponents of chrismation would contradict themselves. How many among their flock do they anoint with chrism following baptism? Not even a hundredth. So, why do they permit such half-hearted Christians in their midst, individuals whose imperfection could be easily rectified? Why do they allow their followers to neglect something so crucial, something that should not be omitted without committing a grave offense (unless prevented by sudden death)? Should they not insist more rigorously on this necessary act, if it is truly indispensable for salvation, as they claim? When they tolerate such disregard for confirmation so readily, they implicitly acknowledge that its value is not as great as they pretend it to be.

Lastly, they assert that one must hold this sacred anointing in higher regard than baptism because anointing is conferred by the hands of esteemed prelates, while baptism is commonly administered by all

priests. What can we say to this other than that they are clearly mistaken? They hold their own inventions in such high regard that they dare to disparage God's holy ordinances through comparison. How sacrilegious it is to pit their chrism against Christ's sacrament, a chrism merely tainted with the stench of human breath and enchanted by mere words! How dare they equate it with the water sanctified by God's Word? Yet, that is not enough for their audacity; they even prefer their own invention to God's divine ordinance.

Consider the decrees of the holy apostolic seat, but some among them attempted to temper this madness with a somewhat outrageous opinion. They argued that the oil of confirmation should be held in higher esteem than baptism, not necessarily because it imparts greater power and utility, but because it is administered by more distinguished individuals or because it is applied to a more revered part of the body, namely, the forehead. They suggest that it confers a greater increase in power, even though baptism holds greater value for the remission of sins. Yet, by their first argument, do they not reveal themselves as Donatists, valuing the efficacy of the sacrament based on the status of the minister? Let us suppose, however, that confirmation is considered more significant due to the value of the bishop's involvement. If someone were to inquire about the origin of this privilege granted to bishops, what justification would they provide, aside from their own imaginings? They claim that only the apostles exercised this right when they alone bestowed the Holy Spirit. But are bishops the only apostles? Are they apostles at all? Nevertheless, let us grant them that point. By the same logic, why do they not argue that only bishops should administer the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which they deny to the laity, citing that the Lord only bestowed it upon the apostles? If that practice was exclusively for the apostles, why do they not conclude that the distribution of the body and blood is also exclusive to bishops? In one passage, they

portray the apostles as mere priests, and now they exalt them to the status of bishops. Lastly, Ananias was not an apostle, yet he was sent to St. Paul to restore his sight, baptize him, and fill him with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:10–18). I will add another point, exceeding their demands: if this duty was exclusively reserved for bishops by divine right, why do they dare to delegate it to simple priests, as one can find in some epistles of Gregory?

How frivolous, senseless, and irrational is the second rationale they present! They argue that their confirmation holds greater value than God's baptism simply because confirmation involves anointing the forehead while baptism is applied to the crown of the head. As if the essence of baptism lay in oil rather than water! I beseech all those who revere the Almighty to bear witness to this and affirm whether these deceivers are not attempting to taint the sanctity of the sacraments with the corrupting leaven of their misguided doctrines. In another context, I mentioned how challenging it is to discern what belongs to God in the sacraments amidst the multitude of human innovations. If anyone doubts my assertion, let him now at least consider the testimony of their own authorities. Observe how they disdain and contaminate the significance of God's sign, the water, merely because they elevate their oil to such heights in baptism. In contrast, we assert that in baptism, the forehead is moistened with water, and their oil, whether in baptism or confirmation, we deem nothing more than waste. If someone argues that their oil is more costly, the response is simple: their commerce is nothing but deceit, injustice, and theft.

Regarding their third argument, they reveal their impiety when asserting that confirmation bestows a greater increase in power than baptism. The apostles, through the laying on of hands, conferred visible graces of the Holy Spirit. How, then, does the anointing of

these deceivers prove beneficial? Let us refrain from engaging with leaders who attempt to mask one blasphemy with several more. It is a knot so tangled that it is better to sever it entirely than to struggle in vain to untangle it.

When they find themselves bereft of God's Word and sound reasoning, they fall back on tradition. They claim that this practice is ancient and has been affirmed over many ages. Even if that were true, it would not bolster their argument. A sacrament is not an earthly invention but a heavenly ordinance, emanating solely from God, not people. If they wish to establish confirmation as a sacrament, let them demonstrate that God is its author. However, how can they assert its antiquity when the early church fathers recognized only two sacraments? If we must rely on the testimony of people, we have an unassailable stronghold: the early church fathers never acknowledged as sacraments what these sophists falsely label as such. While early church leaders discussed the laying on of hands, did they refer to it as a sacrament? St. Augustine himself unequivocally states that it is nothing more than prayer. Let them not attempt to confuse the issue by suggesting that St. Augustine's words pertain not to the laying on of hands for confirmation but for healing or reconciliation. The texts are readily available. If I distort St. Augustine's words to mean something other than what he intended, let them censure me.

I, too, wish that we could maintain the practices of the early church before this stillborn notion of a "sacrament" emerged. Not that confirmation, which cannot be mentioned without detracting from the dignity of baptism, existed in those times, but there was Christian instruction. Children or those beyond infancy were required to articulate their faith before the church. It would be a commendable approach if there were a specifically designed form for this purpose,

encompassing and explaining, in accessible language, all the tenets of our faith that the universal assembly of faithful believers should embrace harmoniously. Let a child of approximately ten years or older present themselves before the church to profess their faith, answering questions about each aspect and elucidating any uncertainties. If they lack knowledge or comprehension, let them be educated in a manner that allows them to confess, present, and bear witness to the genuine, unadulterated faith that unites all believers in honoring God. Certainly, with this discipline in place, some negligent parents would amend their ways, as they could not easily overlook their children's instruction, as they do now. It would foster greater unity of faith among Christian congregations, mitigating the ignorance and crudeness that afflicts many. Some would not be as readily swayed by new teachings. In summary, each would benefit from sound Christian instruction.

ON PENETINCE

Moving on to the subject of repentance, they discuss it in such a muddled and disorderly manner that one can hardly extract anything coherent or definitive from their discourse. We have already extensively addressed the nature of repentance based on Scripture in a prior discussion, followed by an examination of their teachings. Now, let us focus on why they arbitrarily and baselessly designate it as a sacrament.

Their attempt to find a rationale for this is an exercise in futility, for they seek what is simply not there. Ultimately, the best explanation they conjure is left in a state of suspension, marked by uncertainty and further compounded by the diversity of their opinions. They contend that "external penitence is a sacrament." If this is the case, then it must be regarded as a sign of inner penitence, namely, a

contrite heart, which thus becomes the essence of the sacrament. Alternatively, one could argue that both external and internal aspects constitute a single sacrament, with the external serving as a mere sign. In summary, their perspectives are disjointed and do not align with the definition of a sacrament that I have previously presented. Comparing their definition of a sacrament with mine, it is evident that there is no agreement. According to their definition, a sacrament is not an external rite instituted by the Lord to strengthen our faith. As a result, their assertion does not stand up to scrutiny.

If these sophists claim that my definition is not a binding law they must adhere to, let them heed the words of St. Augustine, whom they hold in such reverence. He asserts, "Sacraments are established as visible elements for the sake of the carnal people so that through the stages of the sacraments, they may transition from the physical to the spiritual." What do these individuals perceive or demonstrate that resembles this concept in what they label as the sacrament of penitence? St. Augustine further clarifies, "A sacrament is so named because it represents one thing while signifying another. What is seen here is a physical image, while what is understood is a spiritual reality."

To further demonstrate the inconsistency within their own framework, consider this: if there were indeed a sacrament here, one could argue that priestly absolution serves as the sacrament of penitence, both internal and external. It is plausible to claim that absolution is a ceremony designed to confirm our faith in the forgiveness of sins, supported by the promise attributed to the keys: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). However, one may object that many are absolved by priests for whom such absolution is of no benefit, contradicting the

effectiveness they attribute to the sacraments of the new law. In response, it is simple to argue that absolution is received in a dual manner. In this analogy, it is similar to the dual reception of the Eucharist: one is sacramental and common to both the righteous and the wicked, while the other is spiritually profound and exclusive to the faithful. Despite my inability to comprehend how they interpret the sacraments of the new law as possessing such powerful efficacy (a point I have previously addressed), I only wish to highlight that this obstacle does not hinder them from designating priestly absolution as a sacrament. They can cite St. Augustine to support this claim, asserting that "sanctification occurs at times without any visible sacrament, while a visible sacrament may exist without internal sanctification." Moreover, they maintain that "the sacraments accomplish what they symbolize only in the elect" and that "in the sacrament, some put on Christ to the extent that is visible, while others do so up to the point of sanctification. The former applies to both the good and the wicked, while the latter pertains only to the righteous."

These individuals appear to be naïve and blinded to the truth when they find themselves in such perplexity and fail to grasp something so straightforward and commonplace. Nevertheless, they must not become arrogant, for no matter how they attempt to ground their concept of a sacrament, I assert that it should not be recognized as such. Firstly, there is no divine promise, the cornerstone of any sacrament, to support their position. As I have stated previously, the promise associated with the keys does not establish a specific rite of absolution but is instead linked to the proclamation of the gospel, whether delivered to one individual or a group. Essentially, this promise does not create a unique form of absolution for each person but is extended to all sinners collectively, without discrimination.

Secondly, I dispute the notion that penitence should be regarded as a sacrament because the entire ritual associated with it is purely a human invention. As previously determined, sacramental ceremonies can only be ordained by God.

Hence, all their assertions and claims about the sacrament of penitence are mere falsehoods and deceit. Furthermore, they have embellished this spurious sacrament with a distinctive name, dubbing it "a second plank after shipwreck." According to their assertion, if someone has stained the robe of innocence bestowed upon them in baptism with sin, they can cleanse it through penitence. But this is supposedly a statement from St. Jerome. Regardless of its origin, it remains profoundly misguided. It suggests that baptism is nullified by sin, when in fact sinners should remember it each time they seek forgiveness, drawing comfort from this recollection and finding strength to trust that they will obtain the promised forgiveness from their baptism. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate to refer to baptism as a sacrament of penitence because it was intended to console those who engage in penitence. I do not present this as my own idea; rather, it is evident that this concept was firmly established in the early church. In a text attributed to St. Augustine, titled "Of the Faith," baptism is described as a sacrament of faith and penitence. However, there is no need to rely on uncertain witnesses when the Gospel account itself is abundantly clear. St. John preached "the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3).

OF EXTTEME UNCTION

Now, let us turn our attention to the third counterfeit sacrament - extreme unction. According to their doctrine, this sacrament can only be administered by a priest to a person on the brink of death.

The consecration of the oil, they claim, is solely within the bishop's purview and requires specific words: "By this holy unction and by His mercy, may God pardon every offense that you have done, by hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, and tasting." They contend that this sacrament possesses two faculties: the forgiveness of sins and the alleviation of physical ailments if necessary or the spiritual well-being of the soul.

They attribute the institution of this sacrament to St. James, whose words read as follows: "Is someone among you sick? Let him call the elders of the church and let them pray for him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and he will recover his health; and if he has sinned, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14–15). The rationale behind this unction bears resemblance to the one we previously discussed regarding the laying on of hands - it is a frivolous and senseless imitation of the apostles' actions, devoid of meaning or purpose.

St. Mark narrates that, during the apostles' initial mission, they obeyed the Lord's command by raising the dead, casting out demons, cleansing lepers, and healing the sick. He adds that, in the case of healing the sick, they used oil: "They anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (Mark 6:13). This is what St. James likely had in mind when he instructed the calling of elders to anoint the sick. However, a close examination reveals that the Lord and His apostles exercised great freedom in such external matters. To restore the sight of a blind man, our Lord made mud from dust and saliva (John 9:6). He healed some through touch, others through spoken word. Similarly, the apostles healed the sick through words, touch, and anointing (Acts 28:8).

One might argue that these actions were not arbitrary, but that the apostles adhered to specific practices. I concede this point. However, it is crucial to note that the apostles did not view these practices as instruments of healing, but rather as symbolic acts. They served as signs to teach the simple-minded where this power originated, ensuring that praise was directed to God rather than themselves. Throughout Scripture, oil is a common symbol signifying the Holy Spirit and His gifts.

Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that these miraculous powers, including the practice of anointing with oil, were temporary phenomena designed to astonish and establish the gospel's credibility during its initial proclamation. Therefore, even if we accept that anointing was a sacrament related to the powers wielded by the apostles, it no longer pertains to us today, as we have not been entrusted with the administration of these powers.

The question arises: why do they designate extreme unction as a sacrament while ignoring other signs or symbols mentioned in Scripture? Why not designate a particular pool in which the sick may bathe (John 9:7)? They argue against this, deeming it futile and vain. However, it is no more futile than anointing. Why not perform rituals involving mud made from saliva and dust (John 9:6)? Their response is that the other examples were unique, whereas the anointing was commanded by St. James. Indeed, St. James did issue this command for a specific period in which the Church possessed these extraordinary powers (a period, it should be noted, for which they falsely claim continuity in the power of their unction, contrary to our experience).

It should come as no surprise that these sophists have boldly deceived souls weakened and blinded by their separation from God's

Word, which serves as their life and light. They are unashamed to attempt deception even upon our bodily senses, feelings, and lives. They seek to deceive, although our Lord continues to assist and support His people in their illnesses, no less so today than in the past. However, He no longer openly displays such powers or performs miracles as He did through the apostles. In light of this, it was not without reason that the apostles used oil as a symbol to represent the grace entrusted to them, signifying that it was the power of the Holy Spirit rather than their own. Conversely, these sophists gravely insult the Holy Spirit by claiming that their ineffectual and foul-smelling oil possesses His power. This is as absurd as asserting that all oil embodies the Holy Spirit because the term appears in Scripture or that every dove is the Holy Spirit because He once appeared in that form.

Let them continue down their chosen path. As for us, we firmly believe that their unction is not a sacrament. It lacks the essential qualities of a sacrament - it is not a ceremony instituted by God, and it carries no promise from Him. When we inquire about sacraments, we seek two critical elements: that it is a rite ordained by God and that it holds a divine promise. Moreover, for a ceremony to be considered a sacrament, it must be intended for us, and the promise must apply to us. Therefore, no one argues today that circumcision is a sacrament of the Christian church, even though it was God's ordinance and came with a promise. This is because it is not prescribed for us, and its promise does not extend to us. We have previously demonstrated that the promise they attribute to their unction is irrelevant to us, and those who receive this unction can confirm this through their own experiences. This ceremony should only be claimed by those who possess the grace to bring healing, not by these individuals who seem more adept at causing harm and destruction than healing.

Even if they managed to reinterpret what St. James wrote about unction to make it relevant to our time (which they have failed to do), it would not significantly bolster the legitimacy of their unction, which they have continuously promoted to us. St. James stipulates that all the sick should be anointed, while these individuals apply their grease not to the sick but to those on the brink of death, when the soul is on the verge of departing from the body, or, as they say, when the person is in extremis. If their sacrament possesses a remedy capable of alleviating the severity of the sickness or providing solace to the soul, they act cruelly by not administering it in a timely manner. St. James envisions that the sick would be anointed by the elders of the church. They restrict this task to the hands of a priest alone. They argue that when St. James mentions elders, he is referring to priests, justifying the use of the plural form for added honor [James 5:14]. This argument is frivolous, as if at that time, the churches were overflowing with priests who could conduct lengthy processions while carrying their precious oil boxes!

When St. James instructs the anointing of the sick, I perceive no requirement for any oil other than common oil. St. Mark's account makes no mention of any different oil. However, these individuals pay no heed to any oil unless it has been consecrated by a bishop, subjected to the intense heat of his breath, and enchanted through murmuring. They perform this process nine times, bowing on their knees, uttering three salutations of "I salute you, holy oil," three of "I salute you, holy chrism," and three of "I salute you, holy balm." (Such is their solemn ritual!) Where did they obtain these incantations? St. James implies that when the sick person has been anointed with oil and prayer has been offered for him, if he has sinned, he will be forgiven. St. James does not intend for the oil to cleanse away sins but rather for the prayers of the faithful, who commend their afflicted brother to God, to be efficacious [James 5:15–16]. These

individuals falsely claim that sins are forgiven through their sacred (abominable) unction. Their unwarranted interpretation of St. James' words reveals their misguided fantasy.

ECCLESIASTICAL ORDERS

The sacrament of orders occupies the fourth place in their list, yet it is so prolific that within it, they contrive seven minor sacraments. It is a matter worthy of jest that while they profess there are seven sacraments, they inexplicably count thirteen when they attempt to enumerate them. They cannot excuse this discrepancy by claiming that the seven sacraments of orders are simply facets of one sacrament, as they all culminate in a single priesthood, resembling steps leading to it. Since they acknowledge different ceremonies and assert the bestowal of distinct graces for each, there is no doubt that, by their own doctrine, one must recognize seven sacraments. Why engage in such arguments when their own confession clearly attests to the number seven? These are termed seven orders or ecclesiastical degrees, which they designate as follows: doorkeepers, readers, exorcists, acolytes, subdeacons, deacons, and priests. According to their doctrine, there are seven of these, as they contend that the grace of the Holy Spirit encompasses seven forms. Those ascending through these orders should be filled with this grace, and it supposedly increases and flows more abundantly upon their promotion.

First and foremost, this number is derived from a gloss and a twisted interpretation of scripture. They claim that Isaiah alludes to seven powers of the Holy Spirit, although in reality, the prophet mentions no more than six in that passage. He did not intend to enumerate all the graces of the Holy Spirit [Isaiah 11:2]. Furthermore, in other scriptural passages, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Spirit of life

[Ezekiel 1:20], of sanctification, and of adoption of God's children [Romans 1:4, 8:15]. In the cited passage in Isaiah, the Spirit is named the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. Yet, some more astute scholars claim not merely seven orders but nine, in "likeness," as they say, to the triumphant church. However, they differ among themselves, with some including clerical tonsure as the first order and episcopacy as the last, while others exclude tonsure and place archbishopric among the orders. Isidore distinguishes them differently, designating Psalmists and lectors as separate entities, with the former intended for singing and the latter for reading scriptures to instruct the people. Such diversity raises the question of what we should adhere to or shun. Should we affirm there are seven orders? The master of the Sentences teaches this, but erudite theologians decide otherwise. These theologians also hold differing opinions among themselves. Furthermore, the sacred canons offer yet another perspective. Observe how discordant their arguments become when they engage in theological disputes without relying on the Word of God.

Moreover, their attempts to explain the origins of their orders seem laughable, even to children. They assert that "clerks" derive their name from "the lot" because they have been chosen by God or received their calling from Him, or that God is their portion. However, it is sacrilegious for them to appropriate this name exclusively for themselves, as it rightfully belongs to the entire church. "Clerk" signifies "heritage," and the church is the heritage of Christ, granted to Him by the Father. St. Peter does not designate a select group of shaven individuals as "clergy," as they deceitfully insinuate, but he ascribes this title to the entire people of God [1 Peter 5:3].

They further claim that clerks shave the tops of their heads to symbolize a regal authority, as clerks ought to be kings, tasked with governing themselves and others. They base this notion on St. Peter's words: "You are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a bought people" [1 Peter 2:9]. However, they are once again found in error. St. Peter addresses the entire church, and they distort his message to imply some form of priestly distinction. They suggest that St. Peter instructed them alone to "be holy," as if they were the only ones redeemed by Christ's blood, the sole recipients of a kingdom and priesthood for God, and as if this did not apply to all believers, as attested in Scripture [1 Peter 1:15–16]. They then propose various other reasons for their crowns: that the exposed crown signifies that their thoughts should contemplate God's glory without hindrance, or that it signifies the removal of vices from their eyes and heads. They even contend that it signifies the abandonment of temporal possessions, with the remaining circular hair symbolizing the goods they retain for sustenance. These explanations are nothing more than symbolic gestures, as if they could fulfill any of these truths by adorning themselves with deceptive signs. How long will they continue to deceive us with such falsehoods and illusions? By shaving a small patch of hair, clerks supposedly demonstrate that they have renounced earthly possessions, their thoughts are free to contemplate God's glory, and they have eradicated wicked desires from their eyes and ears. Yet, there exists no estate more fraught with avarice, ignorance, and debauchery! They should strive to manifest their holiness genuinely, rather than feigning it through false and deceptive symbols!

Lastly, when they assert that the origin and reason for their distinctive crowns are rooted in the practices of the Nazarites, what are they attempting to demonstrate, if not that their rituals descend from Jewish ceremonies or, more accurately, mirror a form of

Judaism? Their folly is laid bare when they claim that Priscilla, Aquila, and St. Paul shaved their heads to purify themselves (Acts 18:18). Nowhere does it state that Priscilla did so, and only one of the other two individuals is mentioned as having done it. It remains uncertain which of them it was, as St. Luke's reference to the tonsure could apply equally to St. Paul and Aquila. Particularly, to counter their assertion that they have drawn inspiration from St. Paul, the uninitiated must be aware that St. Paul never shaved his head for any form of purification. Instead, he did so to adapt to the customs of his neighbors (Numbers 6:1–21; 1 Corinthians 9:19–23). I refer to such vows as "vows of love" or "charity" rather than piety, for they are not undertaken for religious purposes or in the service of God but to accommodate the simplicity of the weak. St. Paul states that "he made himself a Jew for the Jews" (1 Corinthians 9:20), among other things. Therefore, he made that vow temporarily to align with the Jews. However, those who mimic the Nazarites' purification rites without any meaningful outcome merely establish a new form of Judaism. The Decretal letter that compels clerks to shave their hair, based on their interpretation of the apostle, was drafted with the same care. This shaving must be done in a circular manner, like a sphere. As if the apostle, who taught what is honorable for all people (1 Corinthians 11:2–16), had a great concern for the round tonsure of their clerks! From these initial practices, readers can gauge the nature of the other orders that share similar foundations.

But it surpasses all reason that, in each of their orders, they declare Christ as their companion. They contend that Christ first assumed the role of a doorkeeper when He drove out the buyers and sellers from the temple (Matthew 21:12; John 2:15) and affirmed His role as such by saying, "I am the door" (John 10:7, 9). They argue that He acted as a lector when He read from Isaiah in the midst of the synagogue (Luke 4:16ff). They claim that He performed the duties of

an exorcist when He touched the ears and tongue of the deaf and mute with His saliva, enabling them to hear and speak (Mark 7:33–35). They assert that He demonstrated His role as an acolyte with the words, "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness" (John 8:12). They maintain that He executed the responsibilities of a subdeacon when He, girded with a towel, washed His apostles' feet (John 13:4ff). They argue that He served as a deacon when He distributed His body and blood to the apostles during the Supper (Matthew 26:26–27). Finally, they suggest that He fulfilled the duties of a priest when He offered Himself as a sacrifice on the cross to the Father (Matthew 27:50). These claims are so preposterous that one cannot help but laugh. I am even surprised if they were made without laughter, assuming the authors were indeed human. However, the subtlety with which they explain the term "acolyte" as "Ceroferaire" is particularly absurd. This term, I believe, is entirely fabricated and nonexistent in any language or nation. While "acolyte" in Greek means "one who follows and accompanies," their use of "Ceroferaire" refers to someone who carries a candle. To seriously refute these follies would be to subject oneself to mockery, considering their baselessness and frivolity. However, in order to prevent these sophists from continuing to deceive even women, we must expose their falsehoods to some extent.

They ceremoniously appoint their lectors, psalmists, doorkeepers, and acolytes, who are responsible for tasks typically performed by children or individuals they refer to as "laity." Who else but some child or a humble layperson, earning their livelihood in this way, most often lights the candles or pours the water and wine? Do these clergy themselves sing or open and close the church doors? Who among us has witnessed an acolyte or doorkeeper fulfilling their duties in their temples? Instead, we encounter individuals who, after serving as acolytes during their childhood, cease to perform these

functions upon ordination to the respective orders. It appears that they willingly relinquish the responsibilities associated with their titles upon receiving them. This illustrates why they are ordained to these sacraments and receive the Holy Spirit: to effectively accomplish nothing! If they argue that the neglect of their duties today is due to the degeneracy of the times, they must equally acknowledge that their sacred orders hold no purpose or value in today's church—a church they extol with great reverence. Furthermore, their entire institution is tainted because it permits laity and children to handle candles and cruets, tasks deemed unworthy unless one is consecrated as an acolyte, and entrusts the responsibility of singing to children that should solely be undertaken by consecrated individuals.

Regarding the exorcists, what purpose does their ordination serve? I understand that the Jews had exorcists, but it is evident that their name derived from the exorcisms they performed (Acts 19:13). Yet, who has ever heard that these counterfeit exorcists have genuinely practiced the primary aspect of their profession? They pretend to possess the power to lay hands on the insane, unbelievers, and the demon-possessed, but they fail to persuade the demons of their authority. Not only do the demons disobey their commands, but they also exert control over those who presume to command them. Scarcely one out of ten exorcists remains untouched by evil spirits. Thus, all their prattling about their minor orders, whether they number five or six, is steeped in ignorance and falsehood. Among these minor orders, I include the rank of subdeacon, which has been elevated to higher offices since the inception of this multitude of minor roles. Clearly, these roles should not be considered sacraments, as even by their own admission, these offices were unknown to the earliest church and were devised several years later. Since sacraments require God's promise, they cannot be established

by angels or humans but only by the one God, who alone can appropriately bestow His promise. It seems that they possess divine warrant for the other two orders, and, therefore, they designate them as "sacred orders." However, their misuse of Scripture in this context must be examined. Let us begin with the order of priesthood. I employ the term "priesthood" here in accordance with its customary usage in French, which signifies what the Latins call "sacerdotium." Therefore, they designate "priests" as those responsible for performing the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood at the altar, reciting prayers, and offering blessings for God's gifts. Yet, there is no biblical foundation for any of these claims, and they have thus perversely distorted the order and institutions established by God.

Let us reaffirm what we discussed in the previous chapter, as it holds absolute truth: anyone who claims the title of priest to offer sacrifices of reconciliation is, in fact, offending Christ (Hebrews 5–10). For it is He who was ordained by the Father and consecrated with an oath "to be priest according to the order of Melchizedek," eternally and without any successor (Hebrews 5:5–6, 7:15–17). He is the one who once offered the sacrifice of eternal purification and reconciliation and who now intercedes for us in the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 7:25, 9:12, 24). In Him, we are indeed all priests, but our purpose is solely to offer praises and thanksgivings, in summary, to offer ourselves and all that we possess to God (1 Peter 2:5, 9). His supreme role was to appease God and cleanse sins through His offering (Revelation 1:5–6). What more needs to be said except that the priesthood claimed by these sophists is a damnable sacrilege?

However, because they feel no shame in boasting that they are the successors of the apostles, we must examine how they discharge their apostolic responsibilities. While they should be in agreement among themselves if they wish to be believed, bishops, mendicant friars, and

priests are currently embroiled in a heated dispute regarding apostolic succession. Bishops assert that there were twelve individuals chosen by a unique privilege for the rank of apostles, and they now occupy that position, granting them preeminence over others, while simple priests occupy the role of the seventy disciples established by our Lord later. Yet, their reasoning is frail and does not require an extensive refutation, as it is contradicted by their own records. These records state, "Before the diabolic division happened in the church, and one said: 'I belong to Cephas,' and another: 'I belong to Apollo' [1 Corinthians 1:12], there was no difference between priest and bishop." So those who assert that this distinction was adopted from the Gentiles display greater discernment, as the Gentiles have various types of priests distinguished by honor and rank. Mendicant friars seek to be regarded as vicars of the apostles only by a superficial resemblance, in which they greatly differ from the apostles. They do so by incessantly roaming from place to place and subsisting on the possessions of others. The apostles did not whimsically travel from one location to another as these wanderers do; rather, they went where God called them to spread the gospel. They did not lazily indulge in the substance of others but, in accordance with the freedom permitted by God, utilized the offerings of those they instructed in the Word. The monks do not require borrowed plumage, as ample evidence attests to their true nature. St. Paul describes them well, stating, "We have heard that some among you walk in a disorderly way, not working but living in a meddlesome way" (2 Thessalonians 3:11). In another instance, he notes, "Among them are those who go from house to house and make captives of women who are burdened with sins, always teaching them and never leading them to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:6–7). Since they can rightfully claim these titles, let them leave to others the role of the apostles, from which they are as distant as heaven itself.

Leaving aside these matters, let us examine the priesthood in general and how well it aligns with the responsibilities of the apostles. Prior to the establishment of the Church, our Lord commanded His apostles to preach the gospel to all creation and to baptize all who believe for the remission of sins (Mark 16:15–16). He also directed them to partake in the holy sacrament of His body and blood, as exemplified at the Last Supper (Luke 22:17–20). Nowhere is there any mention of sacrifice. Here we observe a sacred and unchangeable ordinance bestowed upon all those who succeed the apostles, commanding them to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Thus, those who fail to engage actively in preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments falsely lay claim to the title of apostles. To reiterate, those who falsely engage in sacrificial practices falsely boast of sharing in the apostles' ministry.

Now, there are some differences between the apostles and those entrusted with governing the Church today. Firstly, there is a distinction in the title. While both can logically be referred to as apostles since they are all sent by God (Romans 10:15), the twelve apostles were chosen by our Lord specifically to proclaim the new gospel message to the world (Luke 6:13). They were designated as apostles because they needed a firm understanding of their role, as they carried a new and unfamiliar message. In contrast, those currently leading the Church are called "priests" and "bishops." Secondly, their roles differ. Although both groups share the responsibility of administering the Word and sacraments, the twelve apostles were instructed to spread the gospel to various regions without specific limits (Acts 1:8). Those serving today have their respective churches assigned to them. We do not deny that one ordained to oversee a single church may assist others if a situation arises requiring their presence or if they can benefit others through their writings in their absence. However, it is crucial for the

preservation of ecclesiastical peace that each one's role is clearly defined, ensuring they do not all gather together or travel aimlessly, neglecting the churches entrusted to them as they please.

The distinction we discuss here finds clear support in the writings of St. Paul, who conveys his instructions to Titus in the following manner: "I left you in Crete for the purpose of correcting what is lacking and ordaining pastors for all the cities" (Titus 1:5). This distinction is also exemplified in St. Luke's account in Acts, where he records St. Paul's message to the elders of the church in Ephesus: "Guard yourselves and all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has established you as bishops to govern God's church, which He obtained by His blood" (Acts 20:28). In line with this reasoning, St. Paul mentions Archippus, the bishop of the Colossians (Colossians 4:17), and in another instance, the bishops of the Philippians (Philippians 1:1). Having considered these points carefully, we can more easily discern the role of priests and identify those who rightfully belong to the priesthood or, more accurately, the entire order of the priesthood. This role centers around proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments. I will set aside discussions about the standards of holy living that priests should uphold and their individual responsibilities to people, as our intent is not to explore all the qualities of a good pastor, but solely to address the profession embraced by those known as priests. A bishop is one who, called to the ministry of the Word and sacraments, faithfully carries out this sacred mission. I use the terms "priests" and "bishops" interchangeably to refer to the ministers of the church. The essence of this role is a divine calling.

Now, we must consider the process of appointing ministers, which involves two aspects. Firstly, we need to understand who should appoint bishops and priests. Secondly, we must explore the

ceremonial aspects of their ordination. Regarding the first aspect—determining who should appoint bishops and priests—we cannot glean definitive guidance from the establishment of the apostles. They did not wait to be chosen by people but, armed solely with God's mission, embarked on their work. It remains unclear to us the precise procedure followed by the apostles when ordaining others, except that St. Paul, as previously mentioned, left Titus in Crete to ordain bishops for the cities (Titus 1:5). Conversely, he urged Timothy not to lay hands on anyone hastily (1 Timothy 5:22). In Acts, St. Luke recounts how St. Paul and St. Barnabas appointed elders in the churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:21–23). These passages are strongly cited by mitred prelates, as they tend to seize upon anything that appears advantageous to their cause. They interpret these passages as evidence that the power to ordain and consecrate priests (as they claim) belongs exclusively to them. To add an air of solemnity and spectacle to their consecration ceremonies for the benefit of the uninformed, they have adorned them with numerous rituals. However, if they wish their consecration to align with St. Paul's guidelines, they must recognize that ordaining and consecrating are no different from appointing a bishop or pastor over a church. If they practice ordination differently, it is misleading for them to twist these passages to fit their own agenda.

In truth, their practice differs significantly, for they do not ordain those they consecrate as bishops but as priests. They argue that by doing so, they dedicate them to the service of the church. Yet, what do they believe the service of the church entails if not the ministry of the Word? I am aware that they frequently assert that their "priestlinesses" are ministers of the church. However, they will never convince anyone with sound judgment of this claim. They are particularly contradicted by the truth of scripture, which recognizes

no other ministers of the church besides those who are messengers of God's Word, called to govern the church—whom it occasionally designates as "bishop," at times as "elder" (Acts 20:17, 28), and on occasion as "pastor" (1 Peter 5:4). If they counter that they are prohibited by ecclesiastical canons from admitting anyone to orders without a position, I acknowledge this fact, but I do not accept the titles they lay claim to. Are not the majority of their titles positions, offices, provostships, canonries, prebends, chaplaincies, priories, and monasteries? These are partly derived from cathedral churches, collegial churches, cloisters, and now-destroyed residences. I view these positions as nothing more than Satan's dens of iniquity, and I boldly affirm this. Moreover, all these various individuals—what purpose are they ordained for, if not to sacrifice and offer Jesus Christ as a victim? In summary, they ordain no one except to become a sacrificer, a dedication not to God but to the devil.

Conversely, true and authentic ordination involves calling someone to shepherd a church whose life and teaching have been rigorously examined. This is the process of appointing a person to such a role. This interpretation is aligned with the passages from St. Paul cited earlier, even though they incorporate both the calling and the associated ceremony. However, we will address the ceremonial aspects in their appropriate context.

Now, let us investigate the matter at hand: the ordination, or consecration, of ministers in the church. By whom should this sacred act be performed? Did St. Paul grant Timothy and Titus the authority that the mitred rulers of the church now claim for themselves? Certainly not; that would have been far from his intentions. Instead, when he charged both of them with the task of establishing and organizing the churches in the provinces where he had left them, he admonished one not to leave the churches without pastors and

warned the other not to appoint anyone as a minister unless they had undergone thorough examination (Titus 1:5–9; 1 Timothy 3:10). Did St. Paul and St. Barnabas seize the possessions of the churches, as metropolitans and archbishops do today? Absolutely not. Furthermore, I do not believe they placed just anyone over the churches without consultation or consent. Instead, I believe that, having communicated their intentions to these churches and sought their counsel, they selected individuals they considered to be the most morally upright and sound in their teaching, above all others. If those in positions of power and authority had genuinely sought to preserve the integrity of the churches, this is the course of action they should have followed. Specifically, a church in the process of electing a minister should, before proceeding with the election, invite one or two reputable bishops from neighboring areas, known for their virtuous lives and sound teaching, to consult and advise them on the most suitable candidate for the position.

As to whether a bishop should be elected by the entire congregation of Christians or by the guidance of appointed individuals, there is no fixed rule, and the decision should be made based on the prevailing circumstances, the customs of the people, and other relevant factors. St. Cyprian vigorously argued that an election was valid only when conducted by the voices of the entire congregation. Historical accounts confirm that this practice was observed in many regions at that time. However, because it rarely happens that a large group makes a well-considered decision unanimously, and the adage holds true that the masses often act on impulsive emotions, I believe it is most expedient for the magistrates, council members, or the most experienced individuals to oversee this process. Prior to the election, they should call upon neighboring bishops with reputations for moral uprightness and sound teaching to offer their counsel. In certain circumstances, this responsibility may be better carried out

by princes or other superiors who are committed to piety. Surely, no reasonable person can deny that the legitimate order of election entails the participation of the people, given the ample scriptural evidence in favor of such a practice.

It should be noted that St. Paul's statement about not being sent by human will (Galatians 1:1) does not contradict this principle. Firstly, the fact that he was not sent by human will is something he shared with all faithful ministers of the Word, as we acknowledge that this should be universally observed, for one cannot rightly assume this office unless called by God. Secondly, the uniqueness of his situation lies in his affirmation that he had not been chosen according to the customary methods of appointing ecclesiastical pastors but had been revealed through the mouth of the Lord and visible revelation (Galatians 1:12). Among the Galatians, some individuals sought to diminish his authority by depicting him as a mere disciple, inferior to the chief apostles. To safeguard the credibility of his teachings, which he saw were being challenged, he needed to convey that he was in no way inferior to the other apostles. Thus, he asserted that he had not been chosen by the human will according to the usual practices of ecclesiastical pastors, but rather, he had been revealed by the Lord Himself through visible revelation (Galatians 1:12). Despite being chosen by the Lord through this unique privilege, the Lord also followed the discipline and order of ecclesiastical calling. St. Luke recounts that, as the apostles were fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit declared: "Separate to me Paul and Barnabas for the work to which I have appointed them" (Acts 13:2). The purpose of this separation and laying on of hands, after the Holy Spirit had testified to his selection, was to ensure the observance of ecclesiastical discipline in the appointment of ministers according to human judgment. This underscores the Lord's approval of this orderly procedure through the establishment of the church.

The same principle can be observed in the election of Matthias. Recognizing the significance of the apostolic office, the apostles refrained from appointing anyone to their ranks based on their own judgment. Instead, they selected two individuals and cast lots to determine which one the Lord had chosen (Acts 1:23–26). This approach allowed for divine testimony from heaven while still adhering to the principles of ecclesiastical governance.

Regrettably, our hierarchical prelates have completely distorted the good order that should prevail in the church by exercising their rights of advowsons, presentations, representations, patronage, nominations, and other forms of tyrannical control. They argue that these measures were necessary due to the prevailing wickedness of the times. They claim that the populace was too swayed by favoritism or hatred in the election of bishops, often failing to exercise sound judgment. Consequently, this power was transferred to certain prominent prelates. However, even if we were to concede that such measures were a remedy for a dire problem, it is abundantly clear that this solution has proven more harmful than the original malady. Given this reality, why have they not rectified this new evil and established proper order? Their response is to cite the canons, which they selectively adhere to when it suits their purposes, even though these canons are often nothing more than a source of mockery to their own authors.

Do we believe that the people of ancient times failed to recognize the sacredness of their duty when they beheld the divine guidance provided in God's Word for the selection of bishops? The voice of God should always carry more weight than a hundred million canons. Yet, tainted by corrupt desires, they disregarded reason and law. Today, despite the existence of sound laws in writing, they lie hidden and forgotten on paper. Meanwhile, a troubling custom

prevails – the ordination of individuals who are unqualified to be pastors of the churches, such as barbers, cooks, wine stewards, mule-drivers, bastards, and the like. But I have not said enough; bishoprics and vicarages are sold to the immoral and the ungodly. When these positions are filled by hunters and fortune-seekers, all seems well. Astonishingly, the canons make no attempt to prevent these abominations. I reiterate that the people of old possessed an excellent canon when God's Word instructed them that a bishop should be blameless, well-versed in doctrine, not quarrelsome, and not greedy (1 Timothy 3:1–6; Titus 1:5–9), among other qualities.

So why did the responsibility of choosing ministers shift from the people to these prelates? Their only response is that God's Word was not heeded amidst the disputes and conflicts among the people. But why is this responsibility not taken away from these bishops who not only violate all laws but, shamelessly driven by greed, ambition, and disordered desires, pervert everything? Is it even tolerable to refer to them as "pastors" of the churches? These individuals have never tended to a single sheep of their flock. They have seized churches as if they were conquered lands, acquired them through legal processes, purchased them with money, secured them through disgraceful services, and treated them as inheritance. Would the audacity of the people, even when corrupted and thoughtless, have ever gone so far? Those who can witness the state of the church today without profound sorrow are cruel and heartless. Those who possess the power to rectify it and yet remain indifferent are the epitome of inhumanity.

Now, let's turn our attention to the second aspect of the calling of pastors: the ceremony by which they are inducted into their office. When our Lord sent His apostles to preach the Gospel, He breathed upon them, symbolizing the bestowal of the Holy Spirit's power upon

them (John 20:22). These individuals, in their misplaced wisdom, have retained this act of breathing, as if they were expelling the Holy Spirit from their own bellies, murmuring over the priests they are ordaining, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). They mimic every aspect, not like skilled actors who possess some art and finesse in their performances, but like unthinking monkeys, imitating everything without reason or discretion. "We are emulating our Lord's example," they claim. However, our Lord performed numerous actions that He did not intend for others to duplicate. He said to His disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit." On the other hand, He also said to Lazarus, "Lazarus, come forth" (John 11:23), and to the paralytic, "Get up and walk" (Mark 2:9; Luke 6:23). Why don't they apply the same commands to all the deceased and paralyzed? Christ demonstrated one aspect of His divine power when, by breathing upon His disciples, He filled them with the grace of the Holy Spirit. If they strive to imitate this action, they are usurping that which belongs to God and essentially challenging Him to contend with them. Nevertheless, they are far from achieving the same results as Christ did. All they accomplish with their senseless monkey-like behavior is a mockery of Christ. They dare to claim that they confer the Holy Spirit, but experience clearly shows the falseness of this assertion. It is evident through experience that all those consecrated as priests often degenerate into lesser beings. However, I will not argue with them on this point. I merely criticize this ceremony, for the acts performed by Christ as a unique sign of the miracle He was performing should not serve as the basis for a ritual. Furthermore, their excuse of emulating Christ is unconvincing.

Furthermore, where did they obtain this practice of anointing? They argue that it was derived from the sons of Aaron, from whom their order traces its origins. Thus, they prefer to defend themselves with

poorly chosen examples rather than admit that their practices are a product of their own invention. However, they fail to recognize that by asserting themselves as successors to the sons of Aaron, they insult the priesthood of Jesus Christ. His priesthood alone was prefigured by the Levitical priesthoods, which were entirely fulfilled and concluded in the priesthood of Christ. These Levitical priesthoods ceased to exist, as we have reiterated several times and as the Epistle to the Hebrews unambiguously testifies. If these individuals are so enamored with Mosaic ceremonies, why do they not continue to sacrifice oxen, cows, and sheep? They may cling to various aspects of the tabernacle and Jewish rituals, but they abstain from sacrificing cows and oxen.

Who fails to recognize that this practice of anointing is much more perilous than circumcision, particularly when combined with Pharisaic superstition and an exaggerated belief in the efficacy of the act? The Jews placed their righteousness in circumcision, while these sophists ascribe spiritual graces to the anointing. They claim that this is holy oil, which imparts an indelible character. But can oil not be removed or cleansed with dust, salt, or, if heavily soiled, with soap? "But this character is spiritual," they argue. What connection does oil have to the soul? Have they forgotten what they cite from St. Augustine, that if one separates the word from the water, only water remains, as it is the word that sanctifies it as a sacrament? What word do they invoke in their anointing? Will it be the command given to Moses to anoint the sons of Aaron (Exodus 30:30)? But Moses received directives for all the priestly garments and other adornments for Aaron and his children, along with numerous ceremonies, such as killing a cow, burning its fat, dissecting sheep, burning them, and consecrating Aaron's and his children's ears and vestments with the blood of one of the sheep (Exodus 28, 29, 30). These commands abound in countless other rituals, which I am

astounded that they completely ignore, ceasing only with anointing. If they wish to be sprinkled, why not with oil rather than blood? Certainly, they ingeniously concoct a blend of Christianity, Judaism, and paganism, sewing together disparate pieces to create their own peculiar religion. Thus, their anointing is tainted because it lacks the salt of God's Word.

Let us contemplate the rite of the laying on of hands, a practice undoubtedly observed by the apostles whenever they ordained individuals to the ministry of the Church. St. Paul, in his writings, referred to the laying on of hands by the priesthood as the means through which Timothy was consecrated as a bishop (1 Timothy 4:14). I understand that some interpret this term "priesthood" as referring to the assembly of elders. However, in my view, it is more appropriate to consider it as denoting the ministry itself. In another place, St. Paul speaks of his own actions in this regard, indicating that he alone laid hands on Timothy without mentioning others. He states, "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6). I believe that this practice stems from the customs of the Hebrews who, by the laying on of hands, presented to God that which they desired to sanctify and bless. Thus, Jacob, when blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, laid his hands on their heads (Genesis 48:14). It seems that the Jews, in obedience to the commandments of the law, laid their hands on their offerings (Numbers 8:12, 27:18, 27:23; Leviticus 1:4, 3:2, 3:8, 3:13, 4:4, 4:15, 4:24, 4:29, 4:33, and elsewhere). Through this act, the apostles signified that, by laying on of their hands, they consecrated and dedicated to God the individual in question.

Now, one might ask, "Were they adhering to the shadows of the law?" Certainly not. They employed this sign without superstition

whenever they deemed it necessary. They laid hands on those for whom they sought the Holy Spirit's anointing from God (Acts 8:17, 9:12, 19:6), a Holy Spirit they administered through this sign, signifying that it did not originate from them but descended from above. In essence, they were commending to God the person upon whom they desired the grace of the Holy Spirit to be conferred. It pleased God, at that time, to distribute this grace through their ministry. However, does this immediately imply that this should be considered a sacrament? The apostles prayed while kneeling on the ground (Acts 21:5); does that mean we cannot bend our knees without it becoming a sacrament? It is documented that the apostles prayed facing east; should we now consider this gesture a sacrament? St. Paul exhorts people to lift up pure hands to God in every place (1 Timothy 2:8). Moreover, it is frequently mentioned that the saints made their prayers with uplifted hands (Psalms 63:4, 88:9, 141:2, 143:6). Should we, then, consider this action a sacrament? In short, should all the practices observed by the saints be transformed into sacraments?

Putting aside all contention, let us briefly elucidate the contemporary significance of this ceremony. If we were to use it for the purpose of imparting the graces of the Holy Spirit, as the apostles did, it would be a mockery. God did not entrust us with this responsibility, nor was this sign ordained for our use. What the Pope and his followers continuously attempt is to make it appear that through such signs, they bestow the graces of the Holy Spirit, as we have discussed in detail when examining their confirmation rite. However, if someone is received as a bishop, and when placed among the congregation of the faithful, they instruct him in his role, pray for him, and the elders lay their hands on his head—this is not for any other mysterious purpose, but to signify that he is offered and dedicated to God, to serve in that capacity. The church is thereby encouraged to commend

him to God through collective prayers. Such laying on of hands should not be criticized by those of sound judgment.

Although the term "deacon" has a broad definition, Scripture especially designates as deacons those ordained by the Church to distribute alms, serving as stewards and distributors of the resources intended for the poor. Their origin, institution, and role are described by St. Luke in the Book of Acts (Acts 6:1–6). Upon recognizing the complaint of the Greek-speaking believers whose widows were being neglected in the distribution of alms, the apostles explained that they could not simultaneously fulfill the tasks of preaching the Word and attending to the needs of the poor. They thus urged the assembly to select seven individuals of good character for this purpose. The role of deacons, therefore, is to care for the poor and administer to their necessities. The term "deacon" is derived from this function and is synonymous with "minister." St. Luke proceeds to detail their consecration: "They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them" (Acts 6:6). I wish that the Church today had deacons of this nature and that they were ordained with such a ceremony, including the laying on of hands. (We have addressed this ceremony sufficiently.)

St. Paul also mentions deacons, specifying that they must be chaste, truthful, not given to excessive drinking, not seeking dishonest gain, well-versed in the faith, devoted husbands, capable of governing their households and children well (1 Timothy 3:8–9, 12).

However, the deacons ordained by these individuals bear no resemblance to this description. I do not speak of the individuals themselves, lest they accuse us of unfair judgment by equating their teachings with the vices of the people. Yet it is unreasonable for them to cite individuals ordained by the apostolic Church as evidence for

their deacons—individuals who differ greatly from those they describe based on their teachings. They claim that their deacons are meant to assist the priests and participate in various sacramental duties, such as baptism, chrismation, preparing the wine and bread for the Eucharist, arranging the altar, carrying the cross, and reading the Gospel and Epistle to the congregation. None of these tasks aligns with the true role of deacons.

Now, consider how they ordain these individuals. The bishop alone places his hands on the deacon during ordination. He drapes a stole over the deacon's left shoulder to symbolize that the individual has undertaken the light yoke of God, committing to uphold all that pertains to the realm of righteousness. The bishop presents the deacon with a copy of the Gospel to signify that he will be the one proclaiming it. What relevance do these rituals hold for deacons? This is akin to ordaining apostles and instructing them to burn incense, arrange idols, light candles, sweep temples, care for mice, and chase away dogs. Who would permit such individuals to be called apostles and likened to the apostles of Christ? Thus, they should not deceive us by designating as deacons those whom they ordain merely for their performances and buffoonery. They also refer to them as Levites, tracing their origin back to the sons of Levi. I will concede this point, provided they acknowledge another truth: by renouncing Jesus Christ, they return to Levitical rituals and the shadows of the Mosaic law.

In conclusion, let us contemplate the sacrament of orders from a comprehensive perspective. This reflection is intended for those who approach this discourse with humility and openness, and for whom this book is intended.

A sacrament is only truly present when a visible ceremony is intertwined with a divine promise—or more accurately, when the promise is illuminated within the ceremony. In this context, we find neither a distinct promise nor a ceremony established by God. Consequently, the essential components of a sacrament are absent in this case, rendering the pursuit of a validating ceremony futile.

OF MARRIAGE

Let us now contemplate the sacrament of marriage, which is the final one in their reckoning. It is widely acknowledged that marriage was instituted by God (Genesis 1:22-24; Matthew 19:4-6). However, it wasn't regarded as a sacrament until the time of Pope Gregory. One must wonder who first conceived this notion. Marriage is unquestionably a virtuous and sacred institution established by God. Yet, virtuous occupations like farming, masonry, shoemaking, and barbering, despite being God's ordained endeavors, are not considered sacraments. A sacrament, beyond being a divine work, necessitates an external ceremony established by God to validate a promise. Even the simplest minds can discern the absence of such elements in marriage.

Nevertheless, these scholars argue that marriage serves as a symbol of a holy reality, specifically the spiritual union between Christ and His Church. If by "symbol" they mean a sign or mark bestowed by God to reinforce our faith, their argument lacks substance. If they merely intend a symbol used for metaphorical purposes, I can demonstrate the flimsiness of their reasoning through metaphorical interpretations. Consider the following examples: St. Paul states, "One star differs from another in brightness, so it will be in the resurrection of the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:41). Here's a sacrament! Christ declares, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard."

Another sacrament! He further says, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast" (Matthew 13:31, 33). Another one! Isaiah prophesies, "The Lord will lead His flock like a shepherd" (Isaiah 40:11). Behold, another sacrament! In another passage, Isaiah describes, "The Lord will come forth like a giant" (Isaiah 42:13). Here's a fifth! According to this line of reasoning, almost anything can be considered a sacrament, as there are countless metaphors and parables in Scripture. Even theft could be labeled a sacrament, as it is written, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief" (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10). Who could tolerate such senseless prattling from these scholars? I concede that whenever we encounter a vine, it is fitting to recall our Lord's words: "I am the Vine, you are the branches; my Father is the Vinegrower" (John 15:1). Likewise, when a shepherd crosses our path, it is wise to remember Christ's statement: "I am the good Shepherd; my sheep hear my word" (John 10:11, 14, 27). However, if someone were to attempt to transform every such likeness into a sacrament, they would require the care of a physician to remedy their madness.

Nonetheless, they reference St. Paul's words, in which they claim the name "sacrament" is attributed to marriage. These words are found in Ephesians 5:28-32: "One who loves his wife, loves himself. No one ever hated his own flesh but he nourishes and sustains it, as Christ does the church. For we are members of His body, His flesh, His bone. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined together with his wife, and they will be two in one flesh. This sacrament is great, I say, in Christ and His church." However, to interpret Scripture in this manner is to blur the lines between the divine and the earthly.

St. Paul employs Christ as an example to demonstrate to husbands the unique affection they should hold for their wives. Just as Christ

lavished His kindness upon the Church, to which He joined Himself, so should every man bestow such affection upon his wife. St. Paul goes on to explain, "One who loves his wife loves himself, as Christ loved the church." To elucidate how Christ loved the Church as Himself, and how He became one with His spouse, St. Paul harks back to what Adam uttered when God presented Eve before him. Adam recognized that Eve had been formed from his own side and proclaimed, "This one is bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23). St. Paul asserts that all of this has been fulfilled in Christ and in us, as He refers to us as members of His body, His flesh, and His bones—or, more accurately, as one flesh with Him. He concludes with an exclamation, declaring, "It is a great mystery!" To avoid any misunderstanding, he explicitly states that this does not refer to the physical union between husband and wife but rather to the spiritual marriage of Christ and His Church. Indeed, it is a profound and mysterious truth that Christ allowed His side to be pierced, from which we were formed; that is, in His strength, He chose to become weak so that, through His power, we might be strengthened, and so that we might not merely live, but that He might live within us.

These scholars have been misled by the term "sacrament" used in the common Vulgate translation. However, was this reason enough for the entire Church to endure the consequences of their misunderstanding? St. Paul used the word "mystery," which means "secret." While the translator could have chosen to interpret it as "secret" or even left it as is, since it was a customary term among the Latin-speaking people, he instead opted for "sacrament." However, this did not alter the original Greek sense of "mystery" that St. Paul intended. Let this be a lesson in the perils of disregarding the knowledge of languages, which can lead to self-deception on such clear and straightforward matters. Yet, why do these scholars fixate

on the word "sacrament" in this passage and, when it suits them, lightly disregard it? The same translator uses "sacrament" in the First Epistle to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:9) and in this same Epistle to the Ephesians multiple times (Ephesians 1:9, 3:3-4, 3:9), always in the context of "mystery."

Furthermore, there exists a contradiction in their teachings. They assert that the grace of the Holy Spirit is conferred in the sacrament, and they acknowledge the carnal act as a sacrament. However, they deny the presence of the Holy Spirit in this carnal act. Even if they argue that they are forbidding the sacrament to priests on the grounds of restraining them from indulging in the pleasures of the flesh, they fail to escape the inconsistency in their reasoning. They maintain that the carnal act itself is a sacrament, one that symbolizes the union we have with Christ according to nature, since a man and a wife become one flesh through this physical union. Nevertheless, some of them discern two sacraments within marriage: one involving God and the soul, represented by the betrothed couple, and the other symbolizing Christ and the Church, embodied by the husband and wife. Regardless of their perspective, according to their own assertions, the carnal act is a sacrament, and they cannot legitimately exclude a Christian from it. Unless they argue that Christian sacraments are so incompatible that they cannot coexist, their position remains untenable.

Their teachings contain another contradiction. They affirm that the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed through the sacrament while simultaneously denying the presence of the Holy Spirit in the carnal act. In their misguided attempt to safeguard the Church from error, they have inadvertently perpetuated a multitude of falsehoods, lies, deceptions, and wickedness. By elevating marriage to the status of a sacrament, they have effectively concealed a multitude of

abominations within its sanctity. Once they secured this designation, they arrogated to themselves the authority to govern all matters related to marriage, deeming it a holy matter unfit for lay judgment. Furthermore, to consolidate their control, they enacted laws that are, in part, blasphemous against God and, in part, unjust towards humanity. Such laws include decrees that marriages between young individuals under parental authority are irrevocable without parental consent, prohibitions against marriages between cousins up to the seventh degree, and restrictions on the celebration of weddings during various periods of the year. These laws, crafted to suit their convenience, defy not only the laws of various nations but also the decrees of Moses. It is evident that I have lingered too long within their mire. Nevertheless, I believe I have rendered some assistance by exposing a portion of the ignorance that plagues these donkeys.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On Christian Liberty

We must now consider the concept of Christian liberty, a topic that one who aims to encapsulate the essence of evangelical teaching in a concise compilation must not neglect. For Christian liberty is of utmost importance, and without a grasp of this, consciences often dare not embark on any course of action. Instead, they frequently waver, doubt, and halt, their resolve uncertain and faltering. Although we have touched upon this subject on occasion in previous discussions, we have reserved a comprehensive exploration for this

moment. This is because, at the mere mention of Christian liberty, some individuals are prone to unleash unrestrained indulgence in their sinful desires, while others vehemently oppose it, fearing that it will disrupt all order, moderation, and discernment. How, then, shall we navigate this impasse? Should we refrain from discussing Christian liberty to avert such perils? Yet, as we have previously asserted, without a thorough understanding of Christian liberty, one cannot truly comprehend Jesus Christ or the essence of the gospel. Therefore, we must ensure that this crucial doctrine is neither neglected nor obscured. Simultaneously, we must address and refute the baseless objections that may arise.

Christian liberty, in my perspective, comprises three key aspects. The first is that, when it comes to seeking assurance of their justification, the consciences of the faithful must rise above the law and put aside all considerations of its righteousness. As previously demonstrated, the law does not render anyone righteous. Therefore, to attain justification, we must either exclude ourselves from all hope, or we must be delivered from the law in such a manner that we no longer rely on our works. Anyone who believes they must contribute even a small portion of their works to attain righteousness will find themselves indebted to the entire law. Hence, in matters of justification, we must set aside all thoughts of the law and our own works, instead embracing God's mercy alone and redirecting our focus from ourselves to Jesus Christ alone. This isn't about determining our own righteousness but understanding how, as unrighteous and unworthy beings, we can be counted as righteous. In this regard, consciences must not entertain thoughts of the law. However, this should not lead to the misconception that the law is unnecessary for the faithful. It continues to instruct, exhort, and encourage them toward goodness, even though it holds no place in their consciences at the time of God's judgment. It is essential to

carefully distinguish between these two realms—justification and the law—since they serve distinct purposes.

Christian life, in its entirety, should revolve around meditation on and practice of piety, for Christians are called to sanctification (Eph. 1:4; 1 Thess. 4:3). This is precisely the role of the law: to encourage Christians in what they ought to do, igniting within them a passion for holiness and innocence. However, when consciences are troubled about how they can gain favor with God, what their response should be, and with what confidence they can stand before God's judgment, they should not consider the law or deliberate on its requirements. Instead, they must present Jesus Christ alone as their righteousness, surpassing all the perfection of the law. Much of the argument in the Epistle to the Galatians centers on this very point. It is easy to demonstrate from St. Paul's arguments that those who claim he is solely fighting for freedom from ceremonial practices are misinterpreting his words. For instance, when he states that Christ became a curse for us to deliver us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13) or emphasizes guarding the liberty by which God has set us free from the yoke of bondage, he is addressing a concept much more profound than freedom from ceremonies.

The second facet of Christian liberty, which is interconnected with the first, is this: Christian liberty frees consciences from serving the law out of necessity. Instead, liberated from the yoke of the law, they willingly and freely obey God's will. While consciences remain under the dominion of the law, they live in perpetual fear and dread. They will never be able to wholeheartedly and joyously obey God's will unless they first experience this liberation. To illustrate this point, consider an example.

The law commands that we "love God with our whole heart, our whole soul, and all our strength" (Luke 20:27). To fulfill this commandment, one must first purge the soul of all other thoughts and cleanse the heart of all other desires, dedicating all strength to this singular goal. However, even those who are far advanced in their spiritual journey are still distant from this ideal. Although they possess sincere affection and a pure heart, many of their heart and soul's chambers remain occupied by worldly passions. These attachments hinder and draw them back, preventing them from wholeheartedly running towards God. They strive, they aspire, they make efforts, but they do not attain perfection. When they look at the law, they realize that everything they endeavor falls short, as the law demands perfect love and condemns imperfection. Those who believe their incomplete works possess some inherent goodness are deceiving themselves. God's law requires absolute perfection and condemns all imperfections. Thus, individuals who hold their works in high esteem must scrutinize them closely and will discover that even the goodness they perceive in them is considered transgression of the law. This demonstrates how all our works are bound to the curse of the law when measured against its standards. How can troubled souls muster the courage to perform deeds that will earn them nothing but a curse? Conversely, if they have been liberated from the relentless demands of the law and witness God extending His paternal kindness, they will joyfully and wholeheartedly follow where He leads them.

In summary, those enslaved to the law are akin to laborers whose masters assign them a fixed amount of work each day. These laborers believe they have accomplished nothing and dare not appear before their masters unless they have executed every task perfectly. In contrast, children who receive more generous and kind treatment from their fathers do not hesitate to present their imperfect and

partially finished works. They trust that their obedience and good intentions are pleasing to their father, even if their efforts fall short of his expectations. Likewise, we must adopt the mindset of children, confident that our generous and loving Father accepts our services, even though they may be imperfect and marred. This is clearly reaffirmed by the prophet: "I will pardon them as a father does the children who serve him" (Malachi 3:17), where "pardon" signifies helping or supporting kindly, as service is mentioned.

We greatly require this reassurance; without it, our efforts would be entirely in vain. God does not consider Himself honored by our deeds unless they are genuinely performed to honor Him. How could we act to His honor when plagued by such fears and uncertainties, unsure whether our actions will offend or honor Him? This is precisely why the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews associates all the righteous deeds of Old Testament figures with faith and assesses their worth through faith (Heb. 11). A notable passage in the Epistle to the Romans underscores this liberty, where St. Paul concludes that sin should not have dominion over us since we are not under the law but under grace (Rom. 6:14). He encourages the faithful not to let sin reign in their mortal bodies or to offer their members as tools of iniquity for sin. Instead, they should dedicate themselves to God, considering themselves as resurrected from the dead, and present their members as instruments of righteousness to God (Rom. 6:12-14). And if anyone should object, recognizing that they still carry their flawed human nature replete with wicked desires, and that sin resides within them, Paul offers solace derived from the liberty from the law. It's as if he's saying: "Although the faithful may not feel sin extinguished within them and the fullness of righteousness, they should not be disheartened, fearing that God is angry with them due to the remnants of sin. By God's grace, they are liberated from the law so that their deeds are no longer measured by its standards."

Those who deduce that they can continue to sin because they are no longer under the law have completely misunderstood the essence of this liberty. The purpose of this liberty is to motivate and guide us towards goodness.

The third aspect of Christian liberty instructs us not to turn external matters, which are inherently neutral, into matters of conscience before God. It teaches us that it is inconsequential whether we engage in these actions or abstain from them. Understanding this liberty is of paramount importance. Without it, our consciences will never find rest and will remain ensnared in superstition. Today, some may argue that debating whether one can freely consume meat, observe specific days, or use particular clothing seems unimportant. However, these matters hold greater significance than many realize because when consciences are constrained and entangled, they descend into an endless labyrinth and profound abyss from which it is difficult to extricate them. If someone begins to doubt whether it's permissible to use linen for sheets, shirts, handkerchiefs, or napkins, they may soon question whether hemp is acceptable and ultimately ponder whether tow is appropriate. They may wonder if it's necessary to use napkins or handkerchiefs. If someone hesitates to consume slightly more delicate food, they may become apprehensive about eating black bread or common foods. This doubt can extend to drinking wine, then to flat or open wine, and ultimately to water, leading to excessive scruples. In the end, even stepping on a straw might be considered a grave sin. When confronted with such inner turmoil, individuals do not simply face a minor skirmish of conscience; they grapple with doubts regarding whether their actions please or displease God. God's will should precede all our considerations and actions. Those who feel compelled to act against their conscience, deeming themselves brave and bold, turn away from God in the same measure they adopt such an attitude.

Conversely, those who fear God deeply and find themselves constrained to act against their conscience experience profound fear and confusion.

Those who employ Christian liberty in this manner, either acting boldly against their conscience or trembling in fear and confusion, will not enjoy the gifts of God with the thanksgiving that, as St. Paul testifies, sanctifies these gifts for our use (1 Tim. 4:4-5). This thanksgiving stems from recognizing God's goodness and generosity in His gifts. However, how can they offer thanks to God as their Benefactor when they believe He has unwillingly provided these gifts to them? In summary, the purpose of this liberty is to enable us to utilize God's gifts without the burden of conscience or spiritual distress. This confidence allows our souls to find peace and rest with God, recognizing His abundant generosity towards us.

It's crucial to note that Christian liberty, in all its facets, is a spiritual concept. Its power lies in bestowing peace with God upon troubled consciences, whether they grapple with doubt regarding the remission of their sins, whether they are anxious about the acceptability of their imperfect works tainted by the imperfections of their flesh, or whether they question the use of indifferent things. This is why Christian liberty is misused by those who employ it as an excuse to gratify their carnal desires, indulging in God's gifts for their own pleasure, as well as by those who believe they don't possess it unless they use it publicly, acting erroneously without considering the weaker brethren.

In the first case, there are widespread faults committed today. Many individuals with the means to lead a lavish lifestyle take delight in extravagant banquets, opulent clothing, and ostentatious buildings. They revel in standing out above all others, deriving immense

satisfaction from their grandeur. They justify and defend these excesses under the guise of Christian liberty, arguing that these matters are inconsequential. I concede that they are indeed inconsequential when approached with indifference. However, when these pursuits are driven by passionate desire, employed for the sake of vanity and pride, and pursued recklessly, they become tainted by these vices. St. Paul aptly distinguishes matters of indifference when he states that "all things are pure to those who are pure, but to those who are stained and unbelieving there is nothing pure because their consciences and thoughts are stained" (Titus 1:15). Why are the wealthy, who find their consolation in the present, cursed? Those who are gluttons, who revel in laughter (Luke 6:21), who indulge in beds adorned with ivory (Amos 6:4), who accumulate possessions, and whose banquets feature harps, lutes, tambourines, and wine (Isaiah 5:8, 12): why do they find themselves under a curse?

Undoubtedly, ivory, gold, riches, and God's other good creations are permissible and intended for human use. Nowhere does Scripture forbid laughter, being satiated, acquiring possessions, enjoying musical instruments, or partaking in wine. This is certainly true. However, when someone possesses an abundance of these goods and indulges excessively, saturating their soul and heart with sensuality while perpetually seeking new forms of gratification, they veer far from the holy and rightful use of God's gifts. To employ God's gifts with a pure conscience, they must abandon their wicked passions, extravagant excesses, and vain pomp and arrogance. When their hearts embrace sobriety, they will find the right path to using God's gifts. Without such moderation, even simple pleasures and those of little cost can become excessive. It's a profound truth that beneath coarse gray cloth or roughly woven linen, one may find a heart enrobed in purple, while beneath silk and velvet, a humble heart may reside. Therefore, each individual should live according to their

means, whether modestly, moderately, or opulently, ensuring that others recognize they are sustained by God for sustenance, not for indulgence. It's essential to understand that this is the essence of Christian liberty: learning, as St. Paul did, to be content with what is offered, and knowing how to endure both humiliation and honor, hunger and abundance, poverty and great wealth (Philippians 4:11-12).

The second fault we've discussed is equally significant and affects many. Some, in their quest to safeguard their liberty, believe it isn't truly secure or complete unless it is witnessed by others. In doing so carelessly, they often offend their weaker brethren. Today, we encounter individuals who believe they must assert their liberty by eating meat on Fridays. I do not criticize them for eating meat; however, we must dispel the misconception that one can only demonstrate their freedom by constantly flaunting it. We must understand that our liberty pertains to God, not people. We preserve it by both abstaining from its use and using it wisely. If someone truly comprehends that, to God, it makes no difference whether they eat meat or eggs or wear red or black, that is sufficient. Their conscience, which deserves the fruits of liberty, is already liberated. Even if they abstain from eating meat for the rest of their life or limit themselves to a single color of clothing, they remain free. Their freedom is even more pronounced when they abstain with a clear conscience. However, those who act without considering their weak brothers, thereby causing them to stumble, commit a grave error. It is appropriate to display our liberty before others at times, but we must strike a careful balance to avoid neglecting the weak, whom our Lord has specifically entrusted to our care.

Now, let's examine the concept of stumbling blocks and how we should distinguish between those we should guard against and those

we can disregard. This will enable each person to determine how to exercise their liberty in the presence of others. We must begin by recognizing the common distinction between two types of stumbling blocks: those that are given and those that are taken. This distinction is supported by clear evidence in Scripture and aptly conveys its meaning. If someone, through intemperate levity, indiscreet capriciousness, or at an inappropriate time or place, does something that causes the weak and uninformed to stumble, we can say they have caused a scandal because their actions led to such a stumbling block. We attribute the first kind of scandal to the author of the act. The second kind of scandal, known as "taking a stumbling block," occurs when an action was not performed intemperately or indiscreetly, but others maliciously turn it into an occasion of scandal or stumbling (Romans 14:13; 1 Corinthians 8:9; 2 Corinthians 6:3). In this case, the scandal was not given; instead, the wicked seize upon it without reason. While the weak are offended by the first kind of scandal, the second kind vexes those who are always prone to criticize and censure due to their irritable rigidity. Therefore, we refer to the first kind as the stumbling block of the weak and the second as that of the Pharisees. Our goal is to find a middle path where the use of our liberty accommodates the ignorance of our weak brethren but does not yield to the inflexibility of the Pharisees. St. Paul provides extensive guidance on how we should accommodate the weak. He urges us to "accept the weak in faith" (Romans 14:1) and advises us not to judge one another, emphasizing the importance of avoiding actions that could cause our brothers to stumble or fall (Romans 14:13). Numerous other passages echo this sentiment and underscore the need to act considerately towards the weak, whom our Lord has specifically entrusted to our care.

In essence, we who possess strength in our faith must bear the burdens of the weak among us and refrain from seeking our own satisfaction. Instead, let each of us endeavor to gratify our neighbor's spiritual growth. St. Paul reiterates this concept in another passage: "Be on guard that your liberty not be an offense to those who are weak" (1 Corinthians 8:9). He advises us not to hesitate in eating whatever is sold in the meat market, considering our own conscience and not someone else's (1 Corinthians 10:25). In brief, our actions should be such that we do not become stumbling blocks to Greeks, Jews, or God's church. Another passage from St. Paul further underscores this point: "You are called to liberty, my brothers; only do not abandon your liberty to the flesh for fleshly license, but serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13). This is undeniably true. Our liberty is not granted to us for the purpose of disregarding our weaker neighbors, to whom we are bound by love, but rather, it is bestowed upon us so that, with peace in our consciences before God, we may also live in harmony with others. As for the offense to the Pharisees, our Lord's words instruct us on how we should handle that. He commands us to leave them be and not be concerned about whether they are offended, for they are blind guides of the blind (Luke 6:39). When the disciples alerted Him that the Pharisees were scandalized by His teachings, He advised them to dismiss this concern and not worry about the offense they caused (Matthew 15:12, 14).

However, the matter remains ambiguous unless we discern who should be considered weak and who should be regarded as Pharisees. Without this discernment, it is perilous to exercise our liberty. Yet it seems to me that St. Paul provides clear guidance, both through his teachings and his actions, on how we should moderate our liberty and when we should allow stumbling blocks to exist. When he took Timothy as his companion, he circumcised him, but he never agreed

to circumcise Titus (Acts 16:3; Galatians 2:3). Although the actions differed, there was no change in his beliefs or intentions. When circumcising Timothy, even though he had the freedom to act differently, he made himself a servant to all. He became like a Jew among Jews to win them over and acted as if he were under the law among those under the law. He adopted the stance of the weak to win them over, showing us a model of how to moderate our liberty when we can abstain for a beneficial purpose. Conversely, when he consistently refused to circumcise Titus, he emphasized the importance of maintaining our liberty when it is undermined for weak consciences by the commands of false apostles. He explained this by saying, "Even Titus, who was with me: although he was a Greek, he was not constrained to be circumcised on account of some false brothers who had entered to spy on the liberty which we have in Jesus Christ, in order to bring us back to bondage. To them we did not submit for a single minute, so that the truth of the gospel might remain for you" (Galatians 2:3-5).

In all our actions, we must serve love and consider the edification of our neighbors. As St. Paul affirms in another passage, "All things are lawful to me, but not all are necessary; all things are lawful but not all are edifying; let no one seek what is his own but the good of his neighbor" (1 Corinthians 10:23-24). There is no clearer or more certain rule than this: we should use our liberty when it serves the edification of our neighbor, and we should abstain when our neighbor does not require it. Some hypocritically emulate St. Paul's abstention from using his liberty but do not serve love and charity. They prefer to bury all mention of liberty, even though using it for the edification of our neighbors is just as lawful and necessary as restraining it for the same purpose. I must emphasize that everything I've taught about avoiding scandal pertains to indifferent matters that are neither inherently good nor bad. When it comes to

necessities, we should not omit them out of fear of scandal. While love and charity should guide our actions in this regard, we must also ensure that we do not offend God for the sake of our neighbor. I do not condone the excessive behavior of those who disrupt everything and prefer to break rather than address matters gently. On the other hand, I cannot accept the reasoning of those who lead others to countless blasphemies through their example, pretending that they must do so to avoid scandalizing their neighbors. Such actions ultimately lead their neighbors' consciences into evil, especially when they persist in the same wrong path without hope of correction. If instructing their neighbor through teaching or example is necessary, they argue that they must continue to feed them with milk. Yet, in doing so, they maintain their neighbor's adherence to wicked and perilous beliefs. St. Paul indeed mentioned nourishing the Corinthians with milk (1 Corinthians 3:2), but if the Mass had existed at that time, would he have participated to provide milk to drink? Certainly not, for milk is not poison! These individuals deceive themselves, pretending to nurture those whom they cruelly lead to spiritual harm under the guise of gentleness. Even if we were to accept that this pretense is beneficial for a time, how long would they continue feeding their spiritual children the same milk? If they never mature to the point where they can partake of solid spiritual food, it is certain that they have not been nourished with good milk. Now, through the privilege of liberty bestowed upon us by Jesus Christ, the consciences of the faithful are liberated from the chains and obligatory observance of matters that the Lord intended to be indifferent for them. Consequently, we assert that they are free and exempt from the authority of all individuals. It is neither fitting to diminish the praise due to Jesus Christ for this remarkable gift nor to allow its benefits to elude the grasp of consciences. We must remember that Jesus Christ paid a great price for this privilege, "not with gold or silver but with His own blood" (1 Peter 1:18-19). It

should not be regarded as a trivial matter. St. Paul does not hesitate to declare, "Christ died for us in vain if we put ourselves in subjection to people" (Galatians 2:21). In fact, this is the central theme of several chapters in his Epistle to the Galatians. He emphasizes that Christ is buried or, more accurately, extinguished in us if our consciences do not stand firmly in their liberty. Without a doubt, they would fall from that liberty if they could be bound by human laws and regulations as people see fit.

Because the subject of human constitutions is of significant importance, it warrants a more detailed explanation. When someone today mentions the removal of human constitutions, it often leads to contentious debates. This is partly due to the provocations of troublemakers and the accusations of slanderers, who wrongly suggest that every form of human authority is being rejected and overturned. To avoid such misconceptions, it is essential to understand that there are two distinct forms of governance for humanity.

Firstly, there is a spiritual government that instructs and enlightens the conscience regarding matters of God and piety. Secondly, there exists a political or civil government, which imparts knowledge concerning the responsibilities of human interaction and civic conduct necessary for harmonious living among people. These designations are commonly referred to as "spiritual" and "temporal" jurisdictions, which adequately convey that the former governs the soul's spiritual life, while the latter establishes laws and guidelines for honorable and just coexistence in this present life.

The spiritual government resides within the inner realm of the soul, guiding one's spiritual journey, while the civil or political government shapes and educates external customs and behaviors. To

facilitate clarity, I shall refer to the former as "the spiritual kingdom" and the latter as "the civil or political kingdom." By making this distinction, we can address each realm individually without conflating their roles. Essentially, within each person, there exist two domains that can be governed by different authorities and guided by distinct sets of laws.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Authority of the Church

All that has been previously discussed concerning Christian liberty pertains to the spiritual kingdom. In this discourse, we do not contend with civil laws, but rather address the encroachment of power by those who claim to be shepherds of the church but, in reality, act as harsh oppressors. They assert that the laws they enact are spiritual in nature, pertaining to the soul, and argue that these laws are essential for eternal life. In doing so, they assault and infringe upon the kingdom of Christ, diminishing and nullifying the freedom He has granted to the consciences of the faithful.

I will temporarily set aside discussions of the impiety upon which they base their laws—claiming that we attain forgiveness of sins and righteousness through these laws and that they encompass the entirety of religion. For now, let us focus solely on this point: in matters liberated by Jesus Christ, we should not impose necessity upon consciences. Consciences, unable to find peace with God without this freedom (as previously explained), must acknowledge

Christ as their sole King and Liberator. They must recognize that they are governed solely by the law of liberty, which is the sacred message of the gospel. This acknowledgment is necessary to retain the grace they once received in Jesus Christ and to avoid subjugation to any form of bondage [1 Corinthians 10:29].

These lawmakers assert that their regulations are "laws of liberty, a yoke of grace, a light burden." However, it is evident that these are mere falsehoods. They themselves take care not to bear the weight of their laws, having cast aside all fear of God and openly disregarding their own laws as well as God's. But those who are concerned for their salvation find themselves far from considering themselves free; these legislators' bonds constrict them greatly. We can see how diligently St. Paul avoided burdening consciences, to the extent that he did not dare to impose necessity upon them in any matter (1 Corinthians 7:35). And he had good reason for doing so, for he knew that imposing necessity on consciences in matters in which God had granted them freedom was a deadly plague. Conversely, these individuals have imposed countless regulations, each declared essential for salvation, and have thereby ensnared people. Among these regulations, some are exceedingly difficult to observe, and when taken as a whole, they become impossible due to their sheer number. How could those who bear the weight of such a burdensome load not be consumed by great anxiety and confusion? Hence, we must briefly conclude, based on our previous explanation, that our consciences are not bound or obligated to God in any way by these regulations, which are established with the aim of binding our souls before God and imposing obligations, as if they prescribed actions necessary for salvation. This is precisely what all the regulations referred to as "ecclesiastical" are today—laws claimed to be essential for honoring and serving God properly. As these laws are countless, they serve as an equal multitude of chains to enslave souls.

Now, is there no ecclesiastical authority? This question may astonish some ignorant individuals whom we aim to enlighten. Our answer is that we do indeed recognize a form of ecclesiastical authority—one that aligns with the concept articulated by St. Paul. This authority is given for edification and not for destruction (2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10) and is exercised properly by those who view themselves as nothing more than servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries (1 Corinthians 4:1). We can aptly describe it as "the administration of the word of God." These are the limits set by Jesus Christ when He commanded His apostles to "go and teach all nations the things which He had commanded them" (Matthew 28:19-20). It is my hope that those entrusted with the governance of God's church will come to realize that this mandate is intended for them. This understanding would help preserve the dignity of true pastors while preventing those who unjustly tyrannize over God's people from falsely boasting of their power.

We must revisit a point mentioned earlier: everything attributed in scripture to the dignity or authority of prophets, priests of the ancient law, apostles, and their successors is not ascribed to their persons but to the office and ministry to which they are appointed. To state it more explicitly, these attributes are ascribed to the word of God that they are called to administer. When we examine these figures—prophets, priests, apostles, and disciples—we find that none of them possessed the power to command or teach, except in the name of the Lord and based on His word. God commanded Moses, the foremost of prophets, to be heard. Yet, what did Moses command or declare if not what he received from the Lord? He had no other option. God once appointed His prophets "over the kingdoms and the people to tear up, bring down, break in pieces, overturn, build up, and plant." However, the reason for this appointment is clearly stated: "because He had put His word in their mouths" (Jeremiah

1:9-10). There is not a single instance of a prophet opening their mouth without first receiving the word of God. Hence, they frequently repeated phrases like "word of the Lord," "burden of the Lord," "the mouth of the Lord has spoken," "a vision received from the Lord," and "the Lord of hosts has said." Such repetition was entirely appropriate. Isaiah confessed that his lips were impure (Isaiah 6:5), and Jeremiah stated that he did not know how to speak because he was but a child (Jeremiah 1:6). If they had spoken their own words, what could have emerged from their impure and inexperienced mouths but madness or impurity? However, when their mouths became instruments of the Holy Spirit, they became pure and holy.

In summary, we have a splendid description in Ezekiel that illustrates the role of all the prophets. The Lord said to Ezekiel, "I have ordained you as a guide to the house of Israel. So you will hear the word of my mouth and proclaim it to them in my name" (Ezekiel 3:17). When our Lord commands Ezekiel to hear His mouth, He forbids Ezekiel from inventing anything on his own. What does it mean to "proclaim in the name of the Lord" if not to speak boldly, boasting that the word he conveys is not his own but the Lord's? A similar principle is expressed in different words in Jeremiah: "The prophet to whom the dream is revealed, let him recount the dream; and the one who has my word, let him speak my word truthfully. What resemblance is there between chaff and the wheat, says the Lord?" (Jeremiah 23:28). Likewise, God commanded that the word of the law be sought from the mouth of priests. Yet, He appended the reason: because they are messengers of the Lord of hosts (Deuteronomy 17:9-12; Malachi 2:7).

Now, let us consider the apostles, who are honored with various esteemed titles. They are described as the "light of the world" and the

"salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13-14), and it is said that one should "listen to them as to Jesus Christ" (Luke 10:16). It is also declared that "what they bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven" (John 20:23; Matthew 18:18). However, these designations reveal the extent of authority granted to them in their role. They were to be apostles, meaning messengers who do not speak on their own authority but faithfully convey the message of the one who sent them. Jesus said to them, "See, I am sending you the way that the living Father sent me" (John 20:21). He attests to this with a living word, stating that He was sent by the living Father: "My teaching," He asserts, "is not mine, but that of my Father by whom I was sent" (John 7:16).

Indeed, it would be a grievous insult to deny this divine law to the apostles and their successors, especially when we consider the profound difference between Christ and Christians in this regard. Christ, being the eternal and unique Counselor of the Father, has eternally resided in the bosom of the Father (Isaiah 9:6; John 1:18). He received His commission from the Father in such a way that all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom were hidden within Him (Colossians 2:3). From this wellspring, all the prophets drew their teachings about heavenly matters. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all others whom God chose to reveal Himself to acquired their spiritual knowledge from this same source. If we accept the enduring truth of St. John the Baptist's words, "No one has ever seen God, but the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has revealed Him to us" (John 1:18), and Christ's own declaration, "No one has seen the Father except the Son and the one to whom the Son has chosen to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27), then how did the Old Testament fathers comprehend or proclaim the mysteries of God except through instruction from the Son, who alone has access to the Father's secrets? These righteous individuals knew God only by

beholding Him in His Son, as if gazing into a mirror. These holy prophets never spoke except through the Spirit of the same Son.

Alternatively, one could express it in this manner: "God has never revealed Himself to humanity except through His Son, who is His only Wisdom, Light, and Truth." While this Wisdom was previously revealed in various ways, it had not yet shone forth clearly. However, when this Wisdom was finally manifested in the flesh, it revealed to us, with open words, everything about God that could be comprehended by the human spirit and everything we should contemplate about Him. The apostle did not intend to convey something ordinary when he asserted that God had spoken to the Old Testament fathers through His prophets in diverse ways but now, in these last days, He has spoken to us through His beloved Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). This signifies that God will no longer communicate in the same manner as before, providing one prophecy after another or revealing more and more. He has accomplished such perfect teaching through His Son that we must recognize Him as the final and eternal Witness who will testify to Him. This is why the entire era of the New Testament, from the moment Jesus appeared with the preaching of His gospel until the day of judgment (as we have previously noted), is referred to as "the last hour," "the last times," "the last days" (1 John 2:18; 1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 1:2; 1 Timothy 4:1; Acts 2:17). By doing so, we are encouraged to embrace the completeness of Jesus Christ's teachings and refrain from inventing new doctrines or accepting human-made ones.

Hence, it is not without reason that when the Father bestowed upon us His Son as a unique privilege, He appointed Him as our Teacher and Instructor, commanding us to heed Him above all others. God succinctly commended Christ's lordship to us when He declared, "Hear Him" (Matthew 17:5). These few words carry profound

significance. They signify that God, having drawn us away from all human instruction, expects us to fix our gaze solely upon His Son and to seek from Him the entire doctrine of salvation. We are to rely exclusively upon Him, in essence, to obey Him alone. In truth, what more could we desire or hope for from human authorities when the very Word of Life has dwelled among us in the flesh? Unless someone believes that human wisdom can surpass God's Wisdom! Now that He has spoken, every human voice must fall silent. Only Christ must speak, and the whole world must listen in silence. Christ alone must be obeyed, leaving all others behind. His authority to speak is unquestionable (Matthew 7:29). Moreover, He could not have stated it more clearly than when He said to His disciples, "Do not be called masters, for you have one single Master, Christ" (Matthew 23:8). He emphasized this point twice in the same passage to firmly implant it in their hearts.

The role left for the apostles and their successors is merely to diligently observe the law to which Christ confined their ministry when He commanded them to "go and teach all peoples," not promulgating their own teachings but delivering "all that He had commanded them" (Matthew 28:19-20). Having been well instructed by their Master regarding their responsibilities, St. Peter does not reserve anything for himself or others. He declares, "One who speaks, let him speak God's words" (1 Peter 4:11). This essentially means rejecting all human inventions, regardless of their source, and overturning all human ordinances, regardless of their origin. Instead, we are to uphold only God's ordinances. Behold the spiritual weapons, endowed with divine power, designed to demolish the instruments of war. These weapons empower God's faithful soldiers to dismantle every plan and every lofty obstacle that rises against the knowledge of God. With these weapons, "they can lead every thought captive in obedience to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5) and stand

ready to execute judgment against all disobedience. Behold, the ecclesiastical authority entrusted to the pastors of the church, whatever their titles may be, is thus revealed! Through God's word, which they are appointed to administer, they boldly undertake all tasks and compel every earthly glory, power, and greatness to submit to the divine Majesty. With this word, they exercise dominion over the entire world, build Christ's house, overthrow Satan's dominion, shepherd the flock while driving away the wolves, guide the teachable with their teachings and exhortations, correct the rebellious and obstinate, bind, loose, proclaim with authority, and bring forth divine enlightenment—all in accordance with the word of God.

When this authority is contrasted with that which the spiritual oppressors, masquerading as bishops and spiritual guides, boast about, there can be no more fitting comparison than that between Christ and Belial. Firstly, they demand that our faith rest on their judgments. They desire us to consider their decisions as firm and unquestionable, accepting what they approve as unquestioned truth and what they condemn as duly condemned. From this, they argue, "The church possesses the authority to establish new articles of faith. The authority of the church is on par with that of the holy scriptures. Anyone who does not implicitly or explicitly maintain all the church's positive and negative decrees is not a Christian," and other such claims. Furthermore, they expect us to submit to their authority, obligating us to obey all the laws they impose upon our consciences. In the process, they disdain God's word and invent new doctrines at will, demanding that we accept them as articles of faith and ordinances that must be upheld. Concerning their first point, they wrongly arrogate to themselves the authority to teach new doctrines and establish new articles of faith—a power we have previously demonstrated was removed from the apostles. If they still resist this

argument, St. Paul, ordained by the Lord as an apostle to the Corinthians, unequivocally states that he does not seek to rule over their faith (2 Corinthians 1:24). If he had endorsed the authority to teach claimed by these legislators, he would not have given the rule that "when two or three prophets speak, let the others judge, and if the truth is revealed to another one, let the first one be silent" (1 Corinthians 14:29-30). By this, he subjects everyone's authority to the scrutiny of God's word. Moreover, he frees our faith from all human traditions and inventions when he declares, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing comes from the word of God" (Romans 10:17). If faith is exclusively rooted in God's word, and if it relies upon and rests upon this word, what place is left for human words?

When it comes to the power to establish laws, it truly astonishes me how these theologians dare to claim this authority for themselves, especially since the apostles never exercised such power. Moreover, God's Word consistently forbids ecclesiastical ministers from making laws. What St. James states is crystal clear: "The one who judges his brother judges the law. The one who judges the law is not an observer of the law but its judge. Now there is one single Lawgiver who can save and destroy" (James 4:11-12). This very concept was expressed earlier by the prophet Isaiah: "The Lord is our King, the Lord is our Lawgiver, the Lord is our Judge; He will save us" (Isaiah 33:22). St. James further emphasizes that "the one who has some power over the soul is the Lord of life and death, of salvation and damnation" (James 5:20). Since no person can claim such dignity for themselves, we must acknowledge only one God as the Sovereign of our souls, the One who alone possesses the power to save and condemn. As the words of Isaiah resound, we must recognize Him as the sole King, Judge, Lawgiver, and Savior. St. Peter, in his counsel to pastors, encourages them to shepherd their flock in a manner that does not involve exercising dominion over God's heritage (1 Peter

5:2-3). By "heritage," he refers to the faithful. Behold! All the power that these theologians boast of—those who seek to elevate themselves without adhering to God's Word—is rendered null and void. The apostles were not granted the authority to establish their own kingdom and doctrine; they were only given what was necessary to magnify and exalt God's kingdom and teaching.

I understand that they may retort by saying, "Our traditions do not originate from us but from God, for we do not teach our own dreams but simply distribute to the Christian people, over whom God's providence has placed us as overseers, what we have received from the Holy Spirit." They present various reasons to support their claims, such as the high titles Jesus Christ bestowed upon His church, referring to it as holy and blameless, without blemish or spot (Ephesians 5:26-27). They also point to explicit promises from Jesus Christ, assuring the church that it will never lack the presence of His Spirit. "Therefore," they argue, "anyone who questions the authority of the church not only insults the church but blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, who undeniably guides the church. This is why Jesus Christ decreed that anyone who does not heed the church should be regarded as a pagan and tax collector" (Matthew 18:17). According to their perspective, it should be universally accepted that "the church cannot err in matters essential for salvation." Furthermore, they claim that everything said about "the church" pertains to them, reasoning that "if we were to fail, the entire church would stumble, as it rests solely on our shoulders."

Their conclusion is as follows: "You should have equal confidence in the truth of the church councils as you do in the church itself because the councils represent the church. You should not doubt that we are directly guided by the Holy Spirit, and therefore, we cannot fail. Consequently, it follows that our traditions are revelations from the

Holy Spirit that cannot be disregarded without disrespecting God." To lend greater legitimacy to their constitutions and authenticate them further, these theologians assert that a significant portion of these traditions originated with the apostles, such as prayers for the deceased and nearly all the ceremonial practices. They hold firmly to the belief that many revelations were given to the apostles after Jesus Christ's ascension, which were not recorded in writing, citing Jesus' words to them: "I have many things to say to you that you cannot now bear; but you will know them hereafter" (John 16:12). They also argue, "It is evident from the example of the apostles how they acted in all other matters. When they assembled together as one body, they, through the authority of the council, decreed that all Gentiles should abstain from consuming food sacrificed to idols, blood, and the meat of strangled animals" (Acts 15:20, 29). However, I will elucidate for those who have the patience to consider these arguments with me, one by one, how baseless and unfounded they are. (I would certainly request that they seriously contemplate my teachings for their own benefit.) Yet, since the sole intent of these theologians is not to seek the truth but to advance their personal interests by any means possible, I do not believe that they deserve my attention. Instead, I will guide those who fear God and are dedicated to the truth, as I have undertaken here to instruct them, in how to refute the fallacies of these individuals.

First and foremost, those I am instructing must be cautioned against being easily swayed by the false claim of the name "church" that these tyrants incessantly boast about. They are indeed dangerous adversaries of the church! Similar to the Jews of old, when they were confronted by God's prophets with accusations of blindness, impiety, and idolatry, they are masking themselves with the name of the temple and the ceremonial practices, which they believe constitute the essence of the church but are often far removed from it. In

reality, the church can thrive quite well without these external trappings. Therefore, there is no need to confront them with any other argument than the one employed by the prophet Jeremiah against the vain confidence of the Jews, who gloried in deceptive words, proclaiming: "The temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord!" (Jeremiah 7:4). The Lord does not acknowledge anything as His own except in places where His Word is proclaimed and reverently upheld. This is the enduring sign by which the Lord has identified His people, as He declared that "everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). He stated that He is the good Shepherd who knows His sheep and is known by them, and His sheep hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:14, 27). Just a little earlier, He had also emphasized that "the sheep follow their shepherd and know His voice, and they do not follow a stranger but flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:4-5). Therefore, why should we waver in discerning the church when Jesus Christ has provided us with such a clear and unfailing criterion, a sign that undeniably identifies the church wherever it is present? Conversely, where this sign is absent, there remains nothing that can truly signify the church. It is essential to distinguish between Jerusalem and Babylon, the church of Christ and the company of Satan, using the distinguishing marks ordained by our Lord. "The one who is of God," He says, "hears God's words. Therefore you do not hear them because you are not of God" (John 8:47). In summary, as the church is the kingdom of Christ, and as Christ reigns solely through His Word, why do we still question these claims that are devoid of His sacred scepter, His holy Word?

Now, let us set aside all pretense and falsehood, and focus on what it is our duty to contemplate: the kind of church that Jesus Christ requires. By doing so, we can align ourselves with His will and conform to His divine rule. It will become evident that the true

church does not stray beyond the boundaries of God's Word, indulging in the creation of new laws and the invention of novel ways to serve God. For this law, which was once solemnly commanded to the church, remains eternally relevant: "Take care to do what I have commanded you; you shall not add anything or take anything away" (Deuteronomy 12:32). Similarly, in Proverbs, it is wisely stated: "Do not add to the Lord's word or diminish it, so that He may not reprove you and you may not be found a liar" (Proverbs 30:6). These passages clearly apply to the church, so what are those who claim that the church, despite these prohibitions, dared to introduce additions to God's Word doing, if not accusing the church of rebelling against God? Let us not be misled by their falsehoods, which harm the church. Instead, let us understand that those who falsely wield the name "the church" are seeking to conceal their excessive disregard for God's Word by attributing their own inventions to it. The words that prohibit the universal church from adding to or diminishing from God's Word are straightforward and unambiguous; there is no ambiguity or uncertainty about them.

Some theologians argue that these statements apply only to the law that preceded the prophecies. I can concede this point, provided they understand that the prophecies serve to fulfill the law rather than add to or subtract from it. If the Lord did not permit anything to be added to or taken away from the ministry of Moses, even though it was laden with obscurity until He provided clearer teachings through His prophets and, ultimately, through His beloved Son, why should we not believe that we are even more strictly prohibited from adding to or diminishing from the law, the prophecies, the Psalms, and the Gospel? The Lord has not changed His will; He declared long ago that nothing offends Him more than when people attempt to serve Him with their own inventions. The prophets provide ample testimony to this, and we must keep their words constantly before us.

For instance, in Jeremiah, God says, "When I led your fathers out of the land of Egypt, I did not command them to offer me sacrifices, but I gave them this command, saying: 'Hear my word and I will be your God, and you will be my people, and walk in the ways which I will show you'" (Jeremiah 7:22-23). There are several similar passages, but the following is particularly significant; it is recorded in Samuel: "Does the Lord ask for sacrifices and not instead that a person obey His voice? For obedience is better than sacrifice, and listening is worth more than offering fat sacrifices. For rebelling is like sorcery to God, and not obeying Him is like idolatry" (1 Samuel 15:22-23).

Therefore, since we cannot deny that all these inventions defended by these theologians under the authority of "the church" are impious, it is clear that they are falsely attributing them to the church. For this reason, we boldly stand against the tyranny of human traditions, which are upheld under the name "church." We do not reject the church, as our adversaries falsely accuse us (seeking to make us deserving of contempt). Instead, we attribute to the church the honor of obedience, which is the greatest aspiration it can have. It is, in fact, these theologians who are acting against the best interests of the church by making it rebel against its Lord, for, according to their claims, it has transgressed God's commandments. I do not need to emphasize the audacity and wickedness of their continuous assertion of the church's authority while simultaneously ignoring and concealing God's commandment to the church and its duty of obedience. However, if, as is proper, we desire to be in agreement with the church, we must instead consider what God has commanded us and the entire church. In doing so, we can obediently follow His will in unison. There should be no doubt that we will be in perfect harmony with the church if we, both collectively and individually, are obedient to God in everything and everywhere.

"But," they contend, "the church is endowed with abundant promises: never to be abandoned by Christ, its spouse, and to be led by His Spirit in all truth." Firstly, it is essential to recognize that all the promises they frequently cite are given to each of the faithful no less than to the entire body of believers. While our Lord addressed His twelve disciples when He said, "I am with you until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20), and "I will pray to my Father, and He will give you another Comforter to remain with you eternally, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him, for He remains with you and will be in you" (John 14:16-17), He did not make these promises to the twelve alone but to each of them and to His disciples, whether they had already been chosen or would be chosen later. When these theologians interpret promises that are profoundly personal and comforting as if they were exclusively meant for the entire church, they deprive each individual Christian of the consolation that should be theirs. I do not deny that the Lord, in His abundant mercy and goodness, bestows His generosity more fully on some than on others, particularly on those ordained as teachers in the church, who possess superior gifts (Romans 12:6-8). I also acknowledge that God's diverse gifts are distributed in various ways, and that the community of believers, adorned with this diversity of graces, collectively possesses more heavenly wisdom than any individual does alone (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). However, I emphasize that these theologians are distorting the meaning of our Lord's words from their original intent when they do this.

We do acknowledge, as is true, that the Lord forever assists His own and leads them through His Spirit—a Spirit of revelation, truth, wisdom, and light. It is through Him that God's people can learn without deception about the gifts God has bestowed upon them (1 Corinthians 2:12), such as "the hope of their calling, the riches of the

glory of God's heritage, and the surpassing greatness of His power over all believers" (Ephesians 1:18-19). Furthermore, they can learn that the Lord has established a diversity of graces within His church, ensuring that there are always individuals who are particularly gifted to serve the church with His gifts for its edification. "He gave apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors," and all of them, although fulfilling different roles, work with the same purpose—to edify the church "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). However, even the faithful, including those who excel in the fullness of God's graces, receive only a taste and a beginning of the Spirit while they are in the flesh. Therefore, it is essential for them to recognize their own weakness and remain obedient to the terms of God's Word, guarding against straying from the right path by following their own inclinations.

To speak truthfully, it is imperative to recognize that if these theologians were to deviate even slightly from the path of God's Word, they would lead themselves astray in numerous ways. This is because they remain void of the Holy Spirit, whose divine guidance is the sole means by which we can grasp the mysteries of God. The words of the Apostle Paul affirm that "Christ has purified His church in baptism of water in the word of life to make it His glorious bride, without wrinkle or spot, so that it may be holy and spotless" (Ephesians 5:26–27). When he articulates this, he is revealing what Christ continually accomplishes in His chosen ones, rather than a completed work. For if Christ sanctifies His people day by day, purifying and cleansing them from their sins, it is evident that they still bear imperfections, and their sanctification is an ongoing process. To believe that the church is already entirely holy and spotless when its members remain tainted and impure would be

nothing short of a mockery. Indeed, Christ has cleansed His church through the waters of baptism and the life-giving Word, signifying the remission of sins. However, only the initial stages of sanctification are visible to us now; its fulfillment will be realized when Christ, the Holy One of His holy people, fills the church completely with His holiness.

Hence, the church, placing trust in these promises, finds firm ground for its faith. It possesses the unwavering assurance that it always has the Holy Spirit within, serving as an excellent guide and directing it along the right path. Therefore, the church will not falter in its confidence, for the Lord does not deceive His own or sustain them in vain expectations. Yet, in acknowledging its own limitations, the church receives a valuable reminder to keep its ears attentive, always ready to heed the teachings of its Master and Bridegroom. It is fitting for the church, as a sober and docile spouse and pupil, to recognize that it lacks inherent wisdom. Consequently, it does not presume to concoct ideas independently but rather defines the boundaries of its wisdom where the voice of Jesus Christ ceases to speak. Therefore, the church places no trust in the inventions of human reason and rests securely, unwavering, in profound certainty and constancy upon God's Word. Indeed, it is prudent to contemplate the purpose for which the Lord has blessed us with His Spirit within the church. He proclaims, "The Spirit whom I will send to you from the Father will lead you in all truth" (John 14:16–17; 16:13). How will this be achieved? He immediately adds, "For He will remind you of all the things which I have taught you" (John 14:26). This underscores that we should anticipate nothing more from His Spirit than the enlightenment of our minds to grasp the truths of His teachings. It echoes the words of St. Chrysostom, who wisely said, "Many boast of the Spirit, but those who introduce something of their own falsely claim Him. Christ testified that He was not speaking on His own, for

His teaching was drawn from the law and the prophets. Therefore, if anyone, under the guise of the Spirit, presents something not found in the Gospel, we do not believe it. Just as Christ fulfills the law and the prophets, the Spirit fulfills the Gospel."

It is not surprising, then, that Jesus Christ has highly commended the authority of His church, such that He decreed that those who contradict it should be regarded as "publicans and gentiles." He also added a special promise: "Wherever two or three are gathered in His name, He will be in their midst" (Matthew 18:17, 20). However, it is astonishing that these deceivers have the audacity to boast about this testimony. What can they deduce from this except that it is unlawful to disregard the consensus of the church, which is always grounded in the truth of God? They assert, "We must heed the church." Who would deny this? After all, the church proclaims nothing except what is derived from God's Word. If they seek something beyond this, they should understand that these words of Christ do not in the slightest support their cause. This is because the promise is bestowed upon those gathered in Christ's name, and such an assembly is known as "the church." We firmly hold that there is no other church except that which gathers in the name of Christ. Gathering in Christ's name is not accomplished by disregarding God's command, which prohibits adding or subtracting from His Word (Deuteronomy 12:32; Proverbs 30:6), and then fabricating whatever teachings one pleases.

Furthermore, we do not oppose the notion that "the church cannot err in matters necessary for salvation." However, we strongly oppose their interpretation of these words. We believe that the church cannot fail or stumble when it fully submits its wisdom to the Holy Spirit's guidance through the Word of God. On the contrary, their interpretation leans towards the idea that "since the church is governed by God's Spirit, it can confidently proceed without the

Word and, whatever it does, it cannot entertain or express anything but the truth." Nevertheless, even if we were to concede everything they claim about the church, it would not justify their traditions. As for their argument that "the truth does not reside in the church unless it dwells in the pastors, and the church itself could not exist without manifesting itself in general councils," we must declare that this has never been true, assuming the testimonies of the prophets from their own times hold any weight. Isaiah stated, "All their watchmen are blind; they are without knowledge; all of them are mute dogs; they cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber" (Isaiah 56:10-11). Jeremiah likewise lamented, "From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely" (Jeremiah 6:13), and "The prophets have prophesied falsely in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds" (Jeremiah 14:14). To avoid dwelling on this issue at length, I will be brief. We are cautioned not only by the examples of that era but also by those throughout history that the truth does not always prosper among the pastors, and the church's salvation is not exclusively dependent on their good governance. While it would be appropriate for them to be diligent guardians of the church's peace and salvation, as they were ordained to uphold these, it is one thing to recognize what should be done and another to fulfill what one is obliged to do.

Nonetheless, I want to clarify that my intention is not to undermine the significance of pastors' authority or recklessly disparage it. Instead, I emphasize the importance of discernment in distinguishing true pastors. It is crucial for individuals not to hastily assume that those bearing the title "pastors" truly embody the role. We must firmly grasp that their entire calling revolves around the administration of God's Word, their wisdom centers on

understanding that Word, and their eloquence is wholly dedicated to preaching it. Should they stray from this mission, their understanding becomes foolishness, their speech falters, and they act as traitors and disbelievers in their pastoral duty, regardless of their titles, whether they are prophets, bishops, doctors, or hold higher positions. I am not singling out only a few individuals; if an entire congregation of pastors were to abandon God's Word and rule according to their own understanding, the entire assembly would descend into senselessness.

These individuals, however, possess no valid grounds for allowing their inventions to run amok and distancing themselves from God's Word, except for the mere fact that they are pastors. It is as if they believe that the light of truth can never abandon them, that the Holy Spirit perpetually abides within them, and that the very existence of the church hinges solely upon them. They seem to forget that God's judgments can indeed bring about the same circumstances that prophets once foretold to the people of their time. This is reminiscent of the words spoken in the Scriptures: "The priests are bewildered, and the prophets are terrified" (Jeremiah 4:9) and "The law shall perish from the priests, and counsel from the elders" (Ezekiel 7:26). They also appear to dismiss the warnings of Christ and His apostles, such as Christ's admonition that "many false prophets will arise" (Matthew 24:5) and St. Paul's caution to the bishops of Ephesus that "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29–30). St. Peter likewise writes, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies" (2 Peter 2:1), and so on. There are numerous similar passages. These individuals fail to realize that in making such

arguments against us, they echo the same sentiments once expressed by those who opposed God's Word, individuals who possessed the same unwarranted confidence that now inflates our adversaries. These adversaries are essentially singing the same tune as their historical counterparts who said, "Come, let us make a plot against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet" (Jeremiah 18:18).

Therefore, let these theologians cite the councils of bishops as much as they desire; their arguments will not hold much weight. They cannot convince us that they are guided by the Holy Spirit until they demonstrate that they gather in the name of Christ. After all, wicked bishops can conspire against Christ just as easily as good ones can gather in His name. Numerous decrees stemming from such councils can attest to this. I could expound upon the impiety of these councils, but brevity is essential in this discourse. Nevertheless, let us examine some of the decrees to gain insight into the nature of the others. St. Paul unequivocally asserts that "forbidding marriage and abstaining from certain foods" is a form of "deceit and demonic doctrines" (1 Timothy 4:1–3). Our opponents cannot justify themselves by attributing St. Paul's words solely to the Manichean and Tatian heretics, since these councils have indeed prohibited marriage for certain individuals and abstaining from certain foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving (1 Timothy 4:3). In light of these decrees, one should reflect on what one can expect in all other matters from those who have once become instruments of Satan!

Furthermore, is it necessary to recount the contradictions among the councils, where one council's decisions often contradicted those of another? The theologians argue that these differences only pertain to customs, asserting that it is reasonable to enact varying laws according to changing times. However, the reality is that significant

doctrinal conflicts and contradictions exist among these councils. For instance, consider the First Council of Constantinople convened by Emperor Leo and the Council of Nicaea assembled by his mother, Irene, in opposition to him. The former advocated for the destruction of religious images, while the latter ordered their reinstatement. In summary, unity has been seldom achieved between the Eastern and Western churches, as they are called. Let them now examine and boast, as is their custom, that the Holy Spirit is firmly attached to their councils!

Nonetheless, it is not my intention to pass sweeping condemnation on all church councils or dismiss all the teachings and wisdom that have emanated from them. Especially in the early church, I recognize a genuine sense of piety and a profound illumination of teaching, wisdom, and spiritual insight in some of these councils. I do not doubt that other periods in history may have also witnessed the presence of honorable bishops. However, it is evident that in more recent councils, a problem akin to the one the Roman senators lamented in their senate has emerged. It seems that the tendency to count opinions without adequately considering the underlying reasoning, seeking resolutions through numerical majorities, has often overshadowed sound judgment. This phenomenon extends even to the councils of the ancient church, which are considered the most pure. In these assemblies, certain deficiencies are evident, either because the assembled bishops, despite their knowledge and wisdom, were preoccupied with the specific matters that brought them together and failed to address other important issues, or because their attention was absorbed by weighty concerns at the expense of less significant ones. Additionally, mistakes might have arisen from ignorance or, at times, from excessive emotional fervor.

The latter reason may appear as the most severe criticism, but a glaring example can be found in the First Council of Nicaea, which holds a revered status above all others. The bishops convened to uphold the core tenets of our faith, confronted by the presence of Arius, a formidable adversary. To counter him, they needed unity. However, rather than addressing the imminent threat to the church, they appeared to engage in conflicts designed to appease Arius rather than safeguard the church's well-being. They turned on each other, exchanging accusations and insults, presenting libelous accusations in which their entire lives were misrepresented. In short, their animosity towards one another overshadowed the central issue of Arius's heresy, and their intense emotional responses threatened to prevent any resolution. Their disputes may have continued indefinitely if not for the intervention of Emperor Constantine, who, reluctant to serve as the judge, rebuked their arguments. Given such a historical example, it becomes more probable that subsequent councils might also contain flaws.

One might argue that I am misguided to criticize these errors, as our adversaries themselves acknowledge that councils can err in matters not essential for salvation. However, I do so with good reason. While they may concede this under duress, they simultaneously strive to establish the authority of councils as infallible instruments of the Holy Spirit in all matters, without exception. Their actions attempt to convey the notion that councils are inherently incapable of error, or if they do err, it is unlawful for us to seek the truth independently and we must adhere to their errors. In light of these warning signs, no titles or claims of councils, pastors, bishops, or even the church itself, which can be falsely asserted as well as genuinely, should deter us from scrutinizing all human teachings in the light of God's Word to discern whether they align with His truth.

Regarding their assertion that their traditions trace back to the apostles, this is a fallacious claim. The entire teaching of the apostles aimed to prevent consciences from being burdened by new traditions and sought to preserve the purity of the Christian faith from human inventions. If we are to believe ancient historical accounts, what they ascribe to the apostles was not only unknown to them but was never heard of. They should not argue that many of the apostles' regulations were orally transmitted and were never written down, especially those teachings they did not comprehend before Jesus Christ's crucifixion but learned after His ascension through the revelation of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). Such audacious claims! I acknowledge that the apostles were initially ignorant when the Lord spoke these words to them. However, by the time they documented their teachings, guided by God's Spirit into all truth (John 16:13), what would have prevented them from including in their writings the complete and perfect knowledge of the gospel, leaving it for us sealed with their approval?

Furthermore, our opponents appear rather absurd when they attempt to delineate these profound mysteries, which remained concealed from the apostles for so long. They put forward ceremonies that are partly borrowed from, and intermingled with, practices that had long been common among Jews and Gentiles. These ceremonies appear to be mere imitations, rather dim and senseless rituals known even to simple priests who neither walk nor speak with understanding. Even those who are considered foolish or childish can mimic these ceremonies so accurately that it seems they possess this entire knowledge in their minds.

The example of the apostles, often cited to legitimize their authoritarian rule, is not entirely applicable to their claims. They argue, "The apostles and the elders of the earliest church enacted a

decree beyond the teachings of Christ, forbidding Gentiles from consuming food sacrificed to idols, strangled animals, and blood" (Acts 21:25). If they did so lawfully, why should their successors not follow suit when the need arises? I wish they would emulate the apostles in this matter, as well as in others! However, I contest that the apostles did not establish or decree anything new in this instance, as I can readily demonstrate. St. Peter himself, in that very passage, acknowledges that "imposing burdens on the disciples is tantamount to testing God" (Acts 15:10). He would contradict this statement if he permitted the imposition of burdens on them. Indeed, it would constitute a burden if the apostles, by their own authority, decreed that Gentiles were prohibited from eating food sacrificed to idols, strangled animals, or blood. Nonetheless, there seems to be an element of prohibition in their directive. The resolution to this apparent contradiction lies in a careful examination of the intent behind their decree.

The primary and fundamental purpose of their decree was to preserve the liberty of Gentile believers, ensuring they were not burdened with adherence to the Jewish law. In this regard, their decree aligns directly with our standpoint. The subsequent exceptions pertaining to sacrifices, strangled flesh, and blood did not introduce a new law authored by the apostles but rather upheld God's eternal commandment to maintain love and charity, without diminishing the liberty of Gentiles. Instead, it was a reminder to Gentile believers to accommodate their practices to their Jewish brothers, avoiding actions that could potentially scandalize them. Therefore, we must understand that the second point of their decree emphasized that Gentile liberty should not result in harm or offense to their fellow believers.

Should anyone persist in asserting that the apostles indeed enacted a specific law, my response is that they merely identified the potential stumbling blocks that could cause offense to their brothers, offering guidance on how to avoid them, which was necessary for that time. They did not introduce any new elements into God's eternal law, which inherently forbids causing stumbling blocks. To illustrate this, consider a modern scenario: in regions where churches are not yet well-established, wise pastors may advise well-instructed believers not to eat meat on Fridays or engage in public work on feast days until those with weaker faith become more firmly grounded through sound teaching. Although these practices, once stripped of superstition, are inherently neutral, engaging in them could cause offense to the weak in faith in the current climate. In this context, who would dare to claim that these pastors are establishing a new law? Clearly, they are merely avoiding actions that are clearly prohibited by God to prevent the occurrence of stumbling blocks. The same logic applies to the apostles, whose intent was solely to preserve God's law by preventing offenses, as if they had proclaimed, "God's commandment is that you do not offend your weak brothers. Since eating food offered to idols, strangled flesh, or blood would offend them, we, guided by God's Word, command you not to partake in such a way as to cause offense."

St. Paul corroborates this understanding, affirming that the apostles' intention was to maintain God's law and prevent stumbling blocks. According to their decree, he writes: "We know that there is no idol in the world, and food offered to idols is nothing. However, not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Corinthians

8:4, 7, 9). Those who carefully consider these matters will not easily be deceived by those who seek to portray the apostles as imposing restrictions on the church's liberty through this decree.

Although we have not exhausted this topic, and our discussion has been brief, I believe I have sufficiently refuted our adversaries' claims. There should be no further doubt that the spiritual authority upon which the Pope and his entire kingdom rely is a blasphemous tyranny against God's Word and unjust to His Church. Under the banner of "spiritual authority," I encompass their audacious attempts to introduce new doctrines, diverting the faithful from the pure simplicity of God's Word, and their imposition of new laws that have needlessly tormented troubled consciences. In summary, all their ecclesiastical jurisdiction, exercised through their subordinate bishops, vicars, penitentiaries, and officials, crumbles when we allow Christ to reign among us.

It is beyond the scope of our current discussion to consider their other forms of worldly authority, which pertain to possessions and estates, as they do not directly involve matters of conscience. However, it is clear from these secular authorities that their fundamental disposition remains unchanged; they bear little resemblance to the shepherds of the Church they claim to be. I am not here to critique individual vices but to highlight the systemic issues that plague their entire hierarchy. It appears that they are never satisfied unless they accumulate riches and indulge in pride. First, were bishops ever meant to involve themselves in matters of secular justice, to assume governance over cities and territories, and to undertake responsibilities that fall outside the scope of their office? Their responsibilities are already significant, and even if they devoted themselves entirely to their ecclesiastical duties, they would scarcely manage to fulfill them. Was it appropriate for them to mimic

secular rulers in the number of their servants, opulence of attire, lavish banquets, and grand residences, when their lives should serve as models of sobriety, moderation, modesty, and humility? Was it fitting for those in the roles of pastors and bishops to reach out with greedy hands, not only seizing cities, towns, and castles, but also vast counties and duchies, and even extending their grasp to kingdoms and empires, all while violating God's unwavering commandment against covetousness and greed (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7)?

Nevertheless, they display audacity in persisting to equivocate, asserting that such pomp and grandeur are essential for the dignity of the Church, all the while claiming that they have not neglected their pastoral duties. Let us first address their assertion concerning the support of their dignity. If, indeed, their elevation to such exalted heights, where they command the fear of the mightiest rulers of the world, enhances their dignity, then they ought to take issue with Jesus Christ, who, in their view, has gravely dishonored them. For, according to their perspective, what greater affront could be leveled against them than Christ's own words: "Kings and princes of the peoples have dominion over them, but it will not be so among you. For let the one who is the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the one who is master, as a servant" (Matthew 20:25-26; Luke 22:25-26; Mark 10:42-44)? Through such words, Christ deliberately separates their office from the greatness and worldly glory of this realm.

Now, addressing their second assertion regarding the fulfillment of their pastoral duties: I wish they could substantiate it through their actions as easily as they boast without merit. However, if the apostles did not deem it fitting to neglect the Word of God to distribute alms (Acts 6:2), these individuals inadvertently testify to the impossibility of a single person simultaneously fulfilling the roles of a virtuous

ruler and a virtuous bishop. Considering the extraordinary graces bestowed upon the apostles by God, they were far more capable of managing substantial responsibilities than anyone who followed them. Even so, they acknowledged that they could not simultaneously attend to the Word and charitable works without being overwhelmed (Acts 6:1-6). How then can these present-day usurpers, who pale in comparison to the apostles, claim to exceed the apostles' diligence a hundredfold? Indeed, their attempt at such a feat was audacious and reckless. The outcomes of their endeavors are evident for all to see. This reckless decision to relinquish their own responsibilities while adopting the roles of others has left its mark. The well-intentioned generosity of princes who generously bestowed their wealth upon bishops for the benefit of the Church, though driven by piety, has, through unregulated munificence, inadvertently compromised the Church's ancient and true integrity. Furthermore, bishops who have exploited this generosity for their personal gain have unequivocally demonstrated, through this abuse, that they do not deserve the title of bishop.

Lastly, I return to the topic of both their authorities. When they valiantly fight to maintain these powers today, it becomes evident that their motivations are far from pure. If they were to relinquish their spiritual authority in favor of yielding to Jesus Christ, there would be no detriment to God's glory, sound teaching, or the Church's well-being. Similarly, if they abandoned their claims to secular authority, it would not diminish the public good provided by the Church. However, since they believe that "they must rule through ignorance and power" (as prophesied by Ezekiel 34:4), they are seized by madness and blinded by an insatiable thirst for power. But I digress from this topic of the Church's wealth.

Let us now return to the discussion of the spiritual kingdom, the core of our discourse. When these adversaries find themselves bereft of reason to defend their "spiritual kingdom," they resort to a desperate last refuge. They argue that, even if they lack understanding and possess corrupt hearts, the Word of God still commands us to obey our superiors. They claim that even if these superiors impose harsh and unjust laws, we are bound to follow them. They cite Matthew 23:3, where Jesus commands obedience to the scribes and Pharisees, even when they impose burdens that they themselves are unwilling to bear. However, if we must unquestionably heed the teachings of all pastors without discrimination, why then does God's Word frequently and earnestly warn us against heeding the teachings of false prophets and pastors? The Lord explicitly warns us: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, for they teach you lies and announce the vision of their own heart, not what came from God's mouth" (Jeremiah 23:16). Furthermore, we are cautioned: "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15). St. John's exhortation to "test the spirits to see if they are from God" (1 John 4:1) serves as a strong reminder that even the devil's deceptions must undergo scrutiny, as the angels in paradise are subject to such examination (Galatians 1:8). Therefore, does not our Lord's warning, "If a blind person leads a blind person, both will fall into the ditch" (Matthew 15:14), clearly illustrate the need for discernment in choosing the pastors we follow? It is evident that our Lord has taken great care to caution us against readily following the errors of others, regardless of the grand titles that cloak them. According to His Word, all blind leaders, whether designated as bishops, prelates, or pontiffs, can only lead those who follow them to their own destruction.

Let us now address the second point. As for their laws, they contend that we must obey them, even if these laws were a hundred times more wicked and unjust. They argue that we, as subjects, are obligated to obey the harsh commands of our superiors, with no right to reject them. However, our Lord, through the truth of His Word, effectively dismantles this argument and liberates us from bondage, preserving our freedom, which He secured through His holy blood. This issue is not limited to merely enduring physical oppression; rather, it pertains to the subjugation of our consciences and the loss of their liberty—specifically, the freedom they derive from Christ's blood, resulting in anguish and servitude. Nonetheless, we will set this matter aside for the time being.

Should we consider it of little consequence to wrest God's kingdom from Him—the very kingdom He ardently desires to preserve above all else? It is an act of theft whenever human laws are introduced to serve God, for He desires to be the sole Legislator concerning His honor and service. To dismiss the gravity of this matter, let us heed our Lord's own valuation: "Because this people has served me according to human commands and teachings," He declares, "behold, I will frighten them with a great and terrifying miracle. For wisdom will perish from the wise and the understanding of the prudent will be destroyed" (Isaiah 29:13-14). In another passage, He laments, "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:9). Some may find it puzzling that our Lord issues such severe warnings, promising terrifying consequences for those who serve Him through human commands and teachings. They may wonder why He deems such honor to be in vain. However, if one contemplates the implications of relying solely on what God communicates in matters of religion—specifically, heavenly wisdom—one will discern the gravity of the situation. Those who adhere to human laws in divine worship may appear humble in

their submission, but they are ultimately disobedient to God, presuming to dictate the laws they themselves obey.

This is why Saint Paul earnestly advises us to remain vigilant, guarding against the deception of human traditions (Colossians 2:4). He employs a fitting Greek term, signifying a voluntary service—namely, one contrived by human will, devoid of God's Word. We ought to hold the wisdom of all, including our own, in contempt, that we may exalt God alone as the source of wisdom. Those who believe that by adhering to practices devised through human desire, practices that have been prevalent for some time and continue to persist in lands where human creations wield greater authority than the Creator, are far from ascribing wisdom solely to God. In such territories, religious practices—though scarcely worthy of that name—are marred by superstitions more irrational and bizarre than the idolatry of paganism. For what can be expected from human senses but carnal and irrational constructs, unmistakably betraying their earthly origin?

Furthermore, there exists an even graver transgression: since they initiated the establishment of religion upon these futile traditions, this perversity is followed by another abhorrent abomination—a sin Christ accuses the Pharisees of committing. He states, "You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition" (Matthew 15:6). I do not contend against our contemporaneous legislators with mere words; I concede victory to them if they can demonstrate that Christ's accusation is not directed at them. But how can they exonerate themselves when, in their view, it is a sin one hundred times more heinous to neglect confessing to a priest once a year than to lead a life steeped in wickedness throughout the entire year? When touching meat with one's tongue on a Friday is deemed a greater transgression than defiling one's body daily through lustful

acts? When engaging in honest work on a feast day is more severely penalized than employing one's entire body in sinful deeds throughout the week? When a priest's lawful marriage is forbidden, while engaging in a thousand adulteries goes unpunished? When failing to fulfill a vow of pilgrimage is regarded as a greater sin than reneging on all promises? When refraining from lavishing money on the ostentatious extravagances of their churches is deemed more offensive than leaving a destitute person in dire need? When passing in front of an idol without removing one's hat is deemed more reprehensible than showing contempt for all the people in the world? When murmuring lengthy, meaningless prayers at specific hours is regarded as more virtuous than never praying with genuine devotion? If this is not rendering God's commandment null and void for the sake of their own traditions, then what is? When they commend the observance of God's commandments with indifference, as though performing a mere duty, yet demand unwavering obedience to their own commands, emphasizing them as if the essence of piety lies therein. When they punish transgressions of God's law with light penances, yet condemn the violation of one of their own decrees with imprisonment, fire, or the sword. When, quick to pardon those who offend God, they relentlessly pursue to death those who offend them. When they instruct those they hold captive in ignorance to such an extent that they would rather witness the overthrow of God's entire law than the transgression of a single point of "the church's commandments," as they term them.

First and foremost, it is an egregious deviation from the righteous path when one scorns, condemns, and shuns another over inconsequential matters—matters that, according to God's judgment, are inconsequential. What is more, this "vain system of this world" (as St. Paul calls it, Galatians 4:9) is held in higher regard than God's heavenly ordinances. Those absolved of adultery are condemned for

their dietary choices; a lawful wife is forbidden to one permitted to consort with a prostitute. Behold the fruit of this obedience, laden with deceit, which inclines more toward humanity's fall than toward virtue!

"So why," they ask, "did Christ instruct us to bear the unbearable burdens of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:4)?" I counter with another question: why, in a different context, did He admonish us to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, referring to their teachings, which they mingled with the pure Word of God and described as "leaven" (as elucidated by the evangelist St. Matthew, Matthew 16:6)? What more evidence do we require when we are explicitly commanded to flee and guard against their teachings? It is therefore abundantly clear that, in the preceding passage, our Lord did not intend for the consciences of His own people to be burdened by the traditions of the Pharisees. The words themselves bear no semblance to such an interpretation, except through equivocation. In this instance, our Lord merely sought to publicly denounce the wicked lives of the Pharisees and to instruct His listeners that, despite finding nothing in the Pharisees' customs worthy of emulation, they should not forsake what the Pharisees taught verbally while seated in the seat of Moses—when they expounded upon the law (Matthew 23:2-3).

However, some individuals, lacking understanding, may erroneously conclude that the same reasoning applies to the rules established to maintain order within the church. To dispel this misconception, we must thoroughly analyze the matter. Indeed, it is easy to be misled, for distinguishing between the two types of regulations is not immediately apparent. I shall elucidate the matter with such clarity that none shall be deceived by their resemblance in the future.

Our initial consideration is as follows: recognizing that every assembly of people necessitates a system of government to preserve peace and harmony among them, and acknowledging that order is essential in all things to maintain public decency and humanity, it follows that these principles should be upheld most diligently in the church. First and foremost, these principles are safeguarded through proper order and utterly disrupted by discord. Therefore, if we seek to ensure the church's preservation, we must ensure that all things are conducted decently and in order, as instructed by St. Paul (1 Corinthians 14:40). Since great disparities of human spirit and judgment exist, no system of government can endure without established laws, and no order can be maintained without an established form. Thus, it is vital to understand that laws serve as a solid foundation for good governance, while form is indispensable for the preservation of order. Consequently, we do not condemn laws designed for these purposes, but rather emphasize their importance. For, without such laws, churches would swiftly disintegrate and devolve into chaos. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that these regulations are never perceived as necessary for salvation, thus avoiding any binding of consciences. This distinction is paramount because the misconception that these traditions are essential for salvation burdens consciences. However, in order to attain this understanding, the nurturing of love and charity among us, as we serve one another, is indispensable.

The first type of law, exemplified in Saint Paul's injunction against women teaching publicly or appearing with uncovered heads (1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Corinthians 11:6, 1 Timothy 2:12), serves as an apt illustration. In contemporary times, similar examples abound among us. For instance, we observe the practice of kneeling and uncovering the head during public prayer, while ensuring that the deceased are shrouded. Is there such a profound mystery in a

woman's hairstyle that appearing in public with an uncovered head constitutes a grave offense? Is silence so strictly enjoined that speaking incurs great guilt? Is there a sanctity or religiosity associated with genuflection or the shrouding of the deceased that omission thereof results in transgression? Absolutely not. If a woman must hasten to assist her neighbor and lacks time to cover her head, she sins not at all by appearing with an uncovered head to aid her neighbor. Sometimes, the situation dictates that speech is preferable to silence. Nothing prevents an individual who is ailing and unable to kneel from praying while standing upright. Ultimately, if no shroud is available for a deceased person, it is better to bury them without one than to leave them unburied. However, to govern ourselves appropriately in these matters, we should adhere to the customs and laws of our land and a certain rule of moderation that guides us in distinguishing between what to observe and what to avoid. If one errs due to forgetfulness or inattention, there is no sin. If one errs through obstinate disregard, their obstinacy should be disdained. If someone presumes to argue and exhibit greater wisdom than warranted, they should examine whether their stance aligns with God's will. We should find satisfaction in St. Paul's admonition: "But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God" (1 Corinthians 11:16).

Examples of the second type of law include the designated hours and locations for public prayers, sermons, and baptisms; the singing of hymns or Psalms; the days appointed for partaking in the Lord's Supper; the methods of excommunication; and similar matters. The specific days, hours, buildings, and Psalms chosen are of no intrinsic consequence. However, it is imperative that such regulations exist to maintain peace and harmony. Chaos would ensue if these matters were left to individual whims, for it is impossible to please everyone in such cases.

We must exercise great caution to prevent any errors from infiltrating or contaminating the purity of our worship. This caution can be achieved if every ceremony we employ serves an evident purpose, if we do not burden ourselves with excessive rituals, and most importantly, if the pastor is vigilant in guarding against false beliefs through sound teaching. This understanding grants each of us the freedom to act, yet each one voluntarily imposes certain limits on this freedom, in accordance with the decency and love that should guide us. Furthermore, this should lead us to observe these rules without falling into superstition and to avoid imposing them too rigorously on others. We must refrain from thinking that God's service is more valuable with an abundance of ceremonies. Let one church not look down upon another because of differences in external forms. Lastly, by refraining from establishing a perpetual law, we can connect the purpose and use of ceremonies to the edification of the church. Thus, we should be prepared not only to accept changes to some ceremonies but also the removal and abolition of all those we previously practiced.

In our current era, we can see the wisdom of discarding certain observances that, in themselves, are not indecent or evil. In the past, churches became ensnared in such blindness and ignorance that they clung to ceremonies with a corrupt mindset and stubborn zeal. It was a monumental task to free them from the abhorrent superstitions that had overtaken them without eliminating numerous ceremonies. Perhaps these ceremonies were initially instituted for valid reasons and were not inherently blameworthy. If someone stubbornly insists on defending them, such obstinacy can be perilous. While it is true that, when considered in isolation, these ceremonies possess no intrinsic evil, their perpetuation within their context perpetuates a deeply ingrained error in human hearts. Correcting this error without removing the very objects that continually rekindle it

becomes a daunting challenge. This is akin to the situation faced by King Hezekiah, who received praise from the Holy Spirit for breaking and destroying the bronze serpent erected by Moses at God's command. While it had not been wrong to preserve it as a symbol of God's grace, it had begun to serve as an object of idolatry among the people (2 Kings 18:4). Just as the virtuous king had no other means to rectify his people's impiety, brought about by the misuse of that serpent, than to destroy it, Moses had been justified in raising it in the first place. In order to correct the perverse beliefs of the people, Hezekiah had every reason to break the serpent, just as Moses had had every reason to erect it. Just as one removes certain foods from a diet that may be difficult to digest for weak stomachs, even though these foods may be suitable for those with robust digestion, it becomes necessary to address the error rooted in the hearts of the people by removing the objects that continually fuel it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Of Civil Government

We have firmly established the existence of two distinct kingdoms within the human experience, and we have already expounded upon the first, situated within the depths of the soul, focusing on the quest for eternal salvation. Now, it becomes imperative to illuminate the existence of the second realm—a kingdom dedicated solely to the establishment of civil justice and the rectification of external moral conduct. Before we further explore this subject, it is imperative that we recall the previously drawn distinction. This is to ensure that we do not, as is commonly observed in some individuals, recklessly conflate these two realms, which are inherently disparate.

In the case of certain individuals, when they hear the gospel's promise of a liberty that recognizes no earthly sovereign or ruler, save for Christ alone, they may feel disconcerted when they perceive the presence of worldly authority over them. Consequently, they entertain doubts regarding the realization of their liberty, believing that the attainment of true freedom necessitates a world devoid of legal processes, statutes, magistrates, and all other earthly institutions that they perceive as impediments to their liberty. However, one who possesses the discernment to differentiate between the corporeal and the spiritual, between the transient present life and the eternal life yet to come, will come to a profound realization that the spiritual sovereignty of Christ and the ordinances of civil governance stand as distinctly separate entities.

We must first heed the wisdom of Scripture and the clear distinction it provides, for it is a folly of the Jewish tradition to seek to confine

Christ's kingdom within the earthly elements. We, on the contrary, following the teachings of Holy Scripture, acknowledge that the fruits bestowed upon us by Christ's grace are profoundly spiritual [Gal. 5:22]. Therefore, we exercise great care to maintain the liberty promised and offered to us in Christ within its rightful boundaries.

Consider, my brethren, the Apostle's teachings. On one hand, he exhorts us to "stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1). Yet, on the other hand, he instructs servants not to be unduly concerned about their earthly circumstances (1 Cor. 7:21–22). Is this not a testament that spiritual liberty can coexist with civil subordination? We must approach the Apostle's other proclamations in a similar manner. When he declares, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), and when he affirms, "Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11), he underscores that the kingdom of Christ transcends the distinctions and laws of nations, affirming that His dominion does not reside in these earthly matters.

Nevertheless, my dear brethren, let us not misconstrue this distinction as an indictment against civil governance, deeming it a pollutant that has no place in the lives of Christians. It is true that some zealous individuals, often referred to as Anabaptists, hold the notion that, since we are dead to the worldly elements and have been translated into God's heavenly kingdom through Christ, we should abstain from involvement in the mundane affairs of this world. They question the necessity of laws and legal processes for Christians, asking why we require litigation when it is forbidden to kill. Yet, let it be known that while the earthly kingdom differs from the spiritual

and internal kingdom of Christ, the former does not contradict the latter.

Indeed, even in this earthly existence, the spiritual kingdom offers us a glimpse of the heavenly realm. It provides us with a taste of the immortal and incorruptible bliss, even amid our mortal and transient lives. The temporal purpose of this earthly kingdom is to mold us into harmonious members of human society, to shape our morals and customs in alignment with civic justice and righteousness, to promote unity and concord among us, and to sustain a collective state of peace and tranquility. It is true that all these endeavors might seem superfluous if God's kingdom, as it is presently manifested, were to obliterate our current existence. However, if the Lord ordains that we traverse this earthly realm as we aspire toward our true heavenly abode, and if He deems these aids necessary for our journey, then those who advocate for the abandonment of civil laws are, in essence, stripping humanity of its inherent nature.

To assert that a perfection within God's church could wholly replace all earthly laws is an impractical notion, far removed from the reality of human communities. In a world where the wicked often engage in egregious transgressions and where wickedness itself is rebellious, the implementation of stringent laws is sometimes the only means to maintain order. One must ponder what would befall society if these individuals were permitted unchecked license to commit evil deeds, given that their behavior is barely restrained even by the force of law.

The discussion of the utility of civil governance will find a more fitting place in our discourse later. For now, let it be clearly understood that the rejection of civil authority is an inhumane barbarity, for it is as essential to human existence as bread, water, sunshine, and air—indeed, its value far exceeds these necessities.

Civil governance does not solely pertain to the provision of sustenance, but extends its purview to the prevention of idolatry, blasphemy against God's name and truth, and the spread of religious scandals among the public. It safeguards the peace of the realm, secures each individual's possessions, and fosters fair and honest interactions among people. In summary, civil governance exists to ensure the visibility of a public form of religion among Christians and to facilitate the coexistence of humanity among fellow human beings.

It may appear paradoxical that I ascribe to civil governance the responsibility of regulating religion, especially when earlier I seemed to diminish the role of human authority in religious matters. However, let it be unequivocally stated that I do not advocate for the crafting of laws regarding religion or the worship of God at the whim of human desires. Rather, I support a civil order that safeguards the sanctity of religion as delineated in God's law, preventing its public violation and desecration through unrestrained licentiousness.

Civil governance, dear brethren, consists of three integral components. Firstly, there is the magistrate, the guardian and upholder of the laws. Secondly, there are the laws by which the magistrate governs a Christian society. Lastly, there are the people, who must adhere to the laws and obey the magistrate. Let us first scrutinize the role and legitimacy of the magistrate, exploring whether it is a vocation sanctioned by God, examining the duties of the office, and assessing the extent of its authority. Subsequently, we shall inquire into the laws that should govern a Christian society. Finally, we will address the ways in which the people can be aided by these laws, elucidating the obedience they owe to their superiors.

With respect to the magistrate's role, let it be known that our Lord has not only affirmed its acceptability before Him but has also bestowed upon it honorific titles, thereby highlighting its value to us. To illustrate this briefly, consider the designation of magistrates as "gods" (Exod. 22:8 Vg.; Ps. 82:1, 6). This title is not to be regarded lightly, for it signifies their divine mandate and authorization. They stand as God's representatives, deputies in some sense, entrusted with a sacred duty. This is not a mere conjecture; it is a direct interpretation of Christ's words when He proclaims, "If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Is this not evidence that they possess a commission from God to serve Him in their office, to administer justice not in their name but in God's name (as Moses and Jehoshaphat conveyed to the judges they ordained for the cities of Judea, Deut. 1:17; 2 Chron. 19:6)? Furthermore, the Wisdom of God, as expressed through Solomon, reaffirms this truth: "By me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth" (Prov. 8:14–16).

This proclamation mirrors the divine order of governance, emphasizing that the authority wielded by kings and other superiors over the earth does not stem from human caprice but is divinely ordained, a sacred and holy decree of God Himself. St. Paul eloquently underscores this truth when he enumerates preeminence among the gifts bestowed by God, gifts variably distributed among individuals, all intended for the edification of the Church (Rom. 12:8). While Paul addresses the assembly of elders ordained in the early Church, referring to their role as "government" in his First Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:28), it is evident that such just governance applies not only within the ecclesiastical realm but also extends to the broader sphere of civil authority.

Paul's exposition becomes even more explicit when he further considers this matter, affirming that "there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1). He elucidates that rulers serve as "ministers of God, attending continually upon this very thing" and are tasked with honoring those who perform good deeds while meting out punishment to those who commit evil (Rom. 13:4). We should also consider the scriptural examples of individuals who received God's divine appointments: David, Josiah, Hezekiah ascended to kingship; Joseph and Daniel held esteemed positions within the royal courts; and Moses, Joshua, and the judges were entrusted with leading a free people. These instances bear witness to the acceptability of such roles in the eyes of God, as He has revealed through His divine will.

Therefore, let there be no doubt that civil authority, far from being a profane or unlawful calling, holds a position of great sanctity and honor among all vocations. Magistrates, in particular, should reflect upon this truth, for it serves as both a catalyst to spur them toward fulfilling their responsibilities and a source of solace to fortify them against the challenges and vexations inherent to their office. Recognizing themselves as ordained ministers of divine justice, they must strive for utmost integrity, wisdom, mercy, moderation, and innocence in the execution of their duties. They bear the weighty responsibility of representing to the people an image of God's providence, care, goodness, kindness, and justice in all their actions. Moreover, they must never forget that they occupy a sacred role as deputies of God Himself. This awareness should compel them to devote their unwavering efforts and vigilance to the discharge of their duties, ensuring that every action reflects the divine will. It is incumbent upon them to remember that if all who engage in God's work with treachery are accursed (Jer. 48:10) when executing

judgment, how much more shall those who transgress in this righteous vocation be accursed?

Recalling the exhortations of Moses and Jehoshaphat to their judges, we find a powerful admonition that should resonate with all in positions of authority (Deut. 1:16). "Take heed what ye do," they declared, "for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. Wherefore now let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God" (2 Chron. 19:6). In another verse, it is proclaimed, "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods" (Ps. 82:1). These passages should profoundly affect the hearts of superiors, reminding them that they serve as God's deputies and must render an account of their stewardship before Him. Such admonitions should both compel and comfort them. Compel, for it serves as a stark reminder that any wrong committed not only wrongs the people they unjustly afflict but also affronts God, whose holy judgments they defile (Isa. 3:14). Comfort, for it reassures them that their vocation is not profane but profoundly holy, for they administer God's own office.

Nevertheless, those who, despite the numerous scriptural testimonies, persist in condemning this holy calling as antithetical to religion and Christian piety, do naught but deride God Himself, upon whom falls the accusations made against His ministry. Such individuals do not merely reject their superiors' rule, but they reject God outright. For, if the words spoken by our Lord to the people of Israel hold true regarding their rejection of Samuel's rule (1 Sam. 8:7), why should they not also be applicable to those who brazenly slander all rulers ordained by God today?

Some may argue that our Lord forbids all Christians from assuming dominion or superior roles, citing His words to the disciples: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve" (Luke 22:25–26). Let it be known, however, that our Lord's intention here was not to diminish the dignity of kings but to address a specific quarrel that had arisen among His disciples, one regarding who among them would be considered the greatest (Mark 9:34–35; Luke 9:46–48, 22:24–27). His statement serves to rebuke their unfounded ambition and to clarify that their ministry should not emulate a worldly kingdom where one holds precedence over all others. In no way does this comparison detract from the nobility of kingship. Instead, it underscores that the royal estate differs fundamentally from the apostolic ministry.

Furthermore, although various forms and types of authority exist, they all share a common thread: they should be recognized as ministries ordained by God. St. Paul's assertion that "there is no power but of God" (Rom. 13:1) encompasses all these varieties of authority. Even the form of governance least favored by those of high spirit, namely, rule by a single individual, is particularly commended above the others. While monarchy, by virtue of subjecting all individuals to the will of one, may appear less appealing to those of high spirit, Scripture explicitly affirms that it is by divine wisdom's providence that kings reign and commands that kings be honored (Prov. 8:15–16, 24:21; 1 Pet. 2:17). It is a futile endeavor for common individuals, devoid of authority to direct public affairs, to engage in debates about the most favorable form of governance. Furthermore, it is audacious to make sweeping judgments on this matter, as the efficacy of governance forms is contingent upon specific

circumstances. Without considering these contextual factors, it is challenging to determine which form would be most advantageous, for they are practically equal among themselves.

In the realm of civil governance, three distinct forms of rule are discernible: monarchy, signifying the rule of a solitary individual, whether designated as king, duke, or by another title; aristocracy, denoting governance by distinguished and notable persons; and democracy, entailing rule by the collective populace, each individual wielding power. It remains undeniably true that a monarch or any ruler may, in time, devolve into a tyrant, while the notable class is not immune to conspiring to establish an unrighteous rule. Equally, within a democracy, the potential for sedition looms ever-present. Moreover, if our gaze extends beyond the confines of a single city and embraces the global panorama or surveys diverse lands, it becomes apparent that the various modes of governance across regions are not devoid of God's providential design. Just as the natural elements find harmony through unequal proportion and temperature, so too do human polities require a certain measure of inequality to coexist harmoniously. For those who discern God's will in all things, there is no need for exhortation in these matters. For if it is God's divine pleasure to anoint kings over kingdoms and establish various forms of authority over free peoples, our duty is to submit and obey the superiors ordained in the places we reside.

Now, let us briefly elucidate the magistrates' office as delineated by God's Word and define its essence. Jeremiah, in his exhortation to kings, calls upon them to administer justice, to champion the cause of the oppressed, to refrain from oppressing strangers, widows, orphans, to abstain from harming others, and to avoid shedding innocent blood (Jer. 22:3). Moses, too, instructs the judges he appointed to adjudicate disputes among their brethren, commanding

them "to do justly between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him. Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's" (Deut. 1:16–17). I shall omit references to other passages in Scripture, such as the injunction that "kings shall not multiply horses to themselves, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses" or that they should not exalt themselves above their brethren but continually meditate upon and adhere to God's law throughout their lives (Deut. 17:16). Similarly, it is mandated that "judges should not respect persons, neither take a gift" (Deut. 16:19), among other precepts commonly encountered in the Scriptures. My purpose in elucidating the magistrates' office is not so much to instruct them in their duties but rather to expound to others the nature of a magistrate and the purpose for which they are divinely ordained by God. Thus, we recognize that magistrates are appointed as guardians and upholders of peace, decency, innocence, and public decorum. Their charge requires them to dedicate themselves to the preservation and promotion of the well-being and collective harmony of all.

Since they cannot fulfill this charge without defending the righteous against the wicked and extending aid to the oppressed, magistrates are vested with the authority to reprove and sternly penalize wrongdoers, thereby quelling the disturbances wrought by their malevolence (Rom. 13:3–4). In truth, experience bears witness to Solon's assertion that the foundation of all republics rests firmly upon two pillars: the reward of the virtuous and the punishment of the malevolent. Deprive a society of these two elements, and the entire structure of human civilization crumbles to ruin. For many individuals, virtuous deeds may lack incentive unless they witness the reward bestowed upon virtue. Conversely, the unbridled desires

of the wicked cannot be contained unless they perceive the imminence of retribution and punishment. These dual aspects are encapsulated in the prophet's directive, commanding kings and other superiors "to execute judgment and justice" (Jer. 22:3). Justice entails the protection, defense, support, and deliverance of the innocent, while judgment involves resisting the audacity of the wicked, reproofing their transgressions, and administering due punishment for their offenses.

However, a significant and complex question arises: Is it not universally prohibited for all Christians to take a life? Does this not contravene God's law, as elucidated in the commandments (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17; Matt. 5:21), and the prophetic declaration that in God's Church, none shall harm or afflict another (Isa. 11:9, 65:25)? How then can magistrates shed human blood without transgressing the bounds of piety? Yet, when we understand that magistrates, in their punitive acts, merely execute God's own judgments, this moral dilemma lessens its grip. Indeed, it is true that God's law prohibits the taking of life. Conversely, the Lord empowers His ministers with the sword to bring retribution upon the perpetrators of homicide. It is not incumbent upon the faithful to inflict harm or injury, but rather, to avenge the wrongs suffered by the virtuous at God's command does not constitute harm or affliction. Thus, it becomes clear that in this aspect, magistrates are not subject to the common law, which, while restraining the actions of all individuals, does not impose similar constraints on God's justice, administered through the hands of magistrates. Just as a prince might prohibit his subjects from carrying offensive weapons or inflicting harm, he would not prevent his officers from executing the justice entrusted to them. It is essential to bear in mind that when a ruler engages in this pursuit, they are not acting out of human recklessness but rather, on the authority of God who commands it. Guided by God's authority, one

remains steadfast in the path of righteousness. Upon reflection, we find no grounds for reproach in the meting out of public punishment, unless we seek to thwart God's justice in chastising evildoers.

It is imperative to recognize that magistrates, in administering justice, do not act independently, but rather, execute the very judgments of God. "For they are ministers of God to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" proclaims St. Paul (Rom. 13:4). Hence, if princes and other superiors are desirous of pleasing God through piety, righteousness, and integrity, let them dedicate themselves to the correction and punishment of the wicked. Indeed, Moses was animated by such zeal when, ordained by the Lord to deliver His people, he struck down the Egyptian (Exod. 2:12; Acts 7:24–25). Similarly, he manifested this fervor when he meted out punishment for the people's idolatry, resulting in the death of three thousand individuals (Exod. 32:28). David, too, acted in a spirit of such zealousness when, in his final moments, he instructed his son Solomon to put Joab and Shimei to death (1 Kings 2:6, 8). How did the gentle and compassionate spirit of Moses become kindled with such cruelty that he did not cease from taking lives until three thousand had perished, their blood staining his hands? How did David, a man known for his great gentleness throughout his life, issue such a seemingly inhumane directive with his last breath, imploring his son not to allow Joab and Shimei to find peace in their old age? It is evident that both Moses and David, in carrying out the punishments assigned to them by God, sanctified their hands, which might otherwise have been defiled by extending pardon to these transgressors.

Solomon, the wise king of old, has spoken, and his words bear the weight of truth: "It is an abomination for kings to do iniquity, for a royal seat is confirmed by justice" (Proverbs 16:12). Furthermore, the

sacred scriptures declare, "The king who sits on the throne of judgment casts his eye over all the wicked" (that is, to bring them to account), and, "The wise king breaks the wicked in pieces and turns them on the wheel" (Proverbs 20:8, 26). We are reminded that, "Let the silver be separated from the froth and the goldsmith will make the vessel that he wants; let them remove the perverse person from before the king's face and his throne will be established in justice" (Proverbs 25:4–5). In the same breath, we are cautioned: "The one who justifies the wicked is as detestable to God as the one who condemns the just," and "The one who rebels attracts calamity to himself, and the message of death is sent to him" (Proverbs 17:15, 11). Further still, we read this sage counsel: "Peoples and nations curse the one who says to a wicked person: 'you are just'" (Proverbs 24:24). If the true measure of righteousness and justice for kings lies in the relentless pursuit of the wicked with unsheathed sword, then they cannot avoid the charge of grievous injustice when they abstain from righteous judgment and allow the wicked, with their unsheathed swords, to wreak havoc and violence. How much less should they be commended for justice, righteousness, or goodness when they fail to fulfill their solemn duty.

However, let it be understood that I do not advocate for excessive and severe harshness in the exercise of judgment, nor do I condone a judicial seat transformed into a platform for gallows. I do not espouse unchecked cruelty, nor do I assert that a righteous and just verdict can be rendered devoid of mercy, which should always hold a place in the counsel of kings and, as Solomon wisely discerned, is "the true way of preserving the royal throne" (Proverbs 20:28). It is not amiss to remember that someone once said, "Mercy is the chief power or virtue of princes." Nevertheless, magistrates must remain vigilant on two fronts: they should refrain from causing more harm than good through unbridled severity, and they must guard against

being so swayed by misguided and excessive compassion that it harms more than it helps. As the saying goes, "It is bad to live under a prince who permits nothing, but it is much worse to live under one who permits everything recklessly."

In the instances where kings and peoples must engage in war to fulfill this duty, it may be deduced that wars undertaken for this noble purpose are lawful. For if the authority is granted to them to preserve the peace of their land and territory, to quell the rebellion of troublemakers and enemies of peace, to assist those suffering from violence, and to punish wrongdoers, could there be a nobler use for this power than to thwart the endeavors of those who disturb the tranquility of individuals and the collective peace of all? If they are designated as guardians and protectors of the laws, it becomes their responsibility to thwart the efforts of all who, through their injustice, undermine the foundations of lawful order. Just as they rightly punish common criminals who harm a few individuals, should they not take action when an entire region is besieged by brigandage? Whether the assailant is a king or a commoner, those who violate another's territory to plunder and murder should be treated as robbers and punished accordingly.

However, magistrates must guard against yielding to their base desires. Instead, when they must mete out punishment, they should refrain from anger, hatred, and excessive severity. Especially for the sake of humaneness, they should show compassion even when punishing transgressors. If they are compelled to take up arms against enemies, namely armed marauders, they should not seek conflict lightly, and when the opportunity arises, they should avoid it unless necessitated by dire circumstances. We must strive to surpass the teachings of the pagans; one among them wisely proclaimed that war should have no other aim than to secure peace. Therefore, we

must explore every possible avenue before resorting to armed conflict. In essence, in all matters involving the shedding of blood, magistrates should not be guided by personal emotions but by a sense of public duty. Otherwise, they would recklessly abuse their power, which has been entrusted to them not for personal gain but to serve the greater good.

From this right to wage war, it logically follows that the establishment of garrisons, alliances, and other civic fortifications is also lawful. By "garrisons," I refer to the soldiers stationed in frontier cities to safeguard the peace of the entire land. "Alliances" signify unions formed among neighboring princes to provide mutual assistance in times of trouble, joining forces to counter common threats to humanity. And "civic fortifications" encompass all provisions related to the practice of warfare.

In closing, it is important to emphasize that the tribute and taxes collected by rulers constitute their legitimate revenue. However, these funds should primarily be allocated to meet the needs of the state, although it is also permissible to use them for the support of the domestic dignity of rulers, as we observe in the examples of David, Hezekiah, Josiah, Jehoshaphat, and other righteous kings, as well as Joseph and Daniel. These individuals lived honorably from public funds, in accordance with their roles and stations. Moreover, we find in the book of Ezekiel that, by God's decree, great possessions were allotted to kings (Ezekiel 48:21–22). Though this passage pertains to Christ's spiritual kingdom, it draws its inspiration from a lawful and righteous human kingdom. Nevertheless, rulers should never forget that their domains exist not primarily as private assets but as resources intended for the common good of the people, as confirmed by St. Paul (Romans 12:6). Therefore, they must exercise caution in their use of tributes, taxes,

and other levies, ensuring they do not oppress the impoverished populace without just cause, as such actions would constitute tyranny and pillage, the very antithesis of righteous governance.

In elucidating these matters, we do not intend to fuel the imprudent extravagance of princes (for there is no need to enflame their passions, which are already more fervent than they ought to be). Rather, our purpose is to guide them in walking the path of righteousness with a clear conscience before God. Such guidance is equally pertinent for private individuals, instructing them not to censure and condemn the expenditure of princes, even when it surpasses common norms and customs.

Beyond the realm of magistrates lies the domain of laws—laws that are the very lifeblood or, as Cicero aptly termed them, the souls of all commonwealths. Devoid of these laws, magistrates cannot function; conversely, it is the magistrates who safeguard and uphold the laws. Thus, we aptly describe the law as a silent magistrate and the magistrate as a living embodiment of the law. My intention in shedding light on the laws by which a Christian polity should be governed is not to engage in an exhaustive debate regarding which laws are superior. Such an argument would be unending and ill-suited to our present purpose. Nonetheless, I will briefly touch upon which laws a Christian commonwealth may embrace righteously before God, and by which it may be guided justly in matters concerning its populace. I address this point, for I perceive that many individuals dangerously stray in this realm. Some advocate that a commonwealth is inadequately ordered if it forsakes the polity of Moses and adheres instead to the common laws of other nations. I leave it to others to contemplate the perils and sedition inherent in this opinion. My immediate aim is to demonstrate its palpable falseness and folly.

We shall commence with the moral law, encompassing two fundamental aspects. The first urges us, unequivocally, to honor God with unwavering faith and devotion, while the second entreats us to forge bonds of genuine love among our fellow beings. Therefore, the moral law stands as the unerring and eternal yardstick of righteousness, ordained for all individuals, regardless of their homeland or era, should they seek to govern their lives in accordance with the divine will. For it is God's eternal and immutable desire that He be venerated by all and that we extend love towards one another. The ceremonial law, in its essence, served as a pedagogical tool for the Jews—a form of rudimentary instruction that our Lord deigned to bestow upon that people during their formative years, prior to the arrival of full maturity (Galatians 4:4, Galatians 3:23–25). It was during this season of spiritual infancy that He unveiled the precepts that were then depicted or shrouded in shadow. The judicial law, on the other hand, provided them with regulations of justice and equity to facilitate harmonious coexistence, shielding them from harm inflicted upon one another. The practice of ceremonies pertained to the cultivation of piety—the initial facet of the moral law. Although these rites nurtured reverence for God within the Jewish community, they stood distinct from true piety. Similarly, the judicial law was directed solely towards preserving the love and charity commanded in God's law, though it bore its own distinct character, distinct from the commandment of love and charity. The ceremonial laws have been annulled, but genuine religion and piety remain unaltered, just as the judicial laws may be altered or abrogated without transgressing the duty of love and charity.

It is undeniable that all nations possess the liberty to formulate laws they deem expedient for their governance. Nevertheless, these laws are enshrined within the eternal framework of love and charity. Thus, despite their varied forms, they converge upon the same

objective. I do not advocate for the recognition of barbaric and bestial laws—laws that reward brigands with a certain price, condone promiscuity between men and women, or sanction even more despicable, abominable, and detestable practices. These laws not only defy righteousness but also the very essence of humanity itself. My position will become evident as we examine all laws through the prism of two key components: the decree of the law and the equity upon which this decree is founded. Since equity is natural, it remains constant across all nations. Consequently, all laws worldwide, regardless of their subject matter, must ultimately return to the same equity. While the ordinances or decrees, influenced in part by accompanying circumstances, may differ, they should all be directed towards the same objective of equity. Since the law of God, denoted as the "moral" law, is naught but a reflection of the natural law and the conscience that our Lord has etched into the hearts of all individuals, there is no doubt that this equity we now discuss is entirely revealed within the natural law and conscience. Therefore, it is fitting that this equity alone serves as the goal, rule, and ultimate purpose of all laws.

Furthermore, laws that adhere to this principle, aimed at this end and restrained by this measure, should not displease us, even if they deviate from the Mosaic law or differ among themselves. God's law, for instance, forbids theft. One can discern in Exodus the prescribed punishment for thieves within the Jewish polity (Exodus 22:1–15). The ancient laws of various other nations penalized theft, requiring restitution of double the stolen amount. Later laws differentiated between open robbery and secret theft, with penalties ranging from banishment to flogging, and even death. God's law prohibits bearing false witness. Among the Jews, a false witness faced a penalty similar to that which the falsely accused would have suffered if convicted (Deuteronomy 19:18–19). In some regions, the penalty was limited to

public disgrace, while in others, it led to execution by hanging. God's law forbids murder (Genesis 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). Commonly, throughout the world, laws prescribe capital punishment for murderers, though the methods of execution may vary. Nevertheless, in their diversity, these laws all converge towards the same objective.

These laws pronounce condemnatory judgments upon crimes that God's eternal law also condemns: namely, murder, theft, adultery, and false witness. Their divergence lies not in the necessity for uniformity in punishment but in the different needs of regions, the demands of the times, and the peculiar vices prevalent among certain nations. Uniformity in punishment is neither necessary nor expedient. Some regions would fall into immediate chaos due to murder and brigandage without the imposition of severe penalties for homicide. Circumstances sometimes require the augmentation of penalties. Certain nations necessitate comprehensive reform due to their inclination towards specific vices more than others. Those who find fault with such diversity, which is crucial for maintaining the observance of God's law, should be deemed as harboring ill will and opposing the common good.

Some individuals assert that the magistrates' role is superfluous for Christians and that it is unlawful for them to seek rulers' intervention since Christians are prohibited from seeking vengeance, coercion, or litigation. On the contrary, the testimony of St. Paul, who asserts that magistrates are "God's ministers for our good" (Romans 13:4), elucidates that it is God's will for us to be shielded from the wickedness and injustice of evildoers through their authority and assistance, allowing us to dwell tranquilly under their protection. Therefore, if magistrates were given to us in vain, it would be futile to petition or utilize such a benevolent resource. Hence, it is evident

that we may petition and employ their services without committing fault.

In addressing this matter, I must contend with two categories of individuals. There are those whose fervor for litigation is so intense that they are never at peace unless engaged in disputes with others. They embark upon these legal contests fueled by lethal animosity, an insatiable thirst for harm, and a desire for vengeance, pursuing these litigations with unwavering obstinacy, often to the detriment of their adversary. To cloak their perversity under the guise of seeking justice, they wage a relentless battle. However, it is erroneous to infer that the permissibility of constraining one's neighbor through legal means implies the sanctioning of hatred, harm, or relentless pursuit of vengeance. Thus, let those individuals take to heart this adage: legal processes are permissible when employed justly. Just usage entails two fundamental principles. First, the plaintiff, wrongfully oppressed in person or property, should approach the magistrate for protection, articulating their complaint and presenting a fair and just request. This should be done devoid of vengeance, hatred, bitterness, or an eagerness for conflict. Instead, the plaintiff should be willing to forfeit their rights and endure all adversity rather than harbor anger, hatred, or bitterness towards their adversary. Second, when summoned to court, the plaintiff should attend the proceedings, defending their case with the strongest arguments at their disposal, all the while maintaining an absence of bitterness and with a single-minded desire to uphold justice.

Conversely, if one's heart is tainted with malice, poisoned by hatred, inflamed by anger, driven to vengeance, or corroded to the point where love and charity are diminished, even the most just causes in the world, subject to legal processes, will be tainted by wickedness. Christians must firmly adhere to the resolution that no one can

engage in legal processes—regardless of the justness of their cause—unless they harbor the same feelings of goodwill and love towards their adversary as if the matter in dispute had already been amicably resolved, leading to a peaceful resolution. It is true that such moderation and restraint are seldom witnessed in legal proceedings today, as human nature often veers toward hostility. Nonetheless, the inherent goodness and purity of the concept remain unblemished when detached from wicked circumstances. Therefore, when we acknowledge that the aid of magistrates is a holy gift from God, we must exercise utmost care to preserve its sanctity from contamination through our vices. Those who wholly condemn all forms of legal disputes should understand that they are rejecting a divine ordinance of God—a gift that can remain untainted for those who possess purity—unless they wish to impugn the actions of St. Paul. He exposed the falsehoods and false accusations of his accusers (Acts 24:10ff), particularly unveiling their deceit and malice. Through legal proceedings, he sought the rights of Roman citizenship that were rightfully his (Acts 22:1, 25–29). When necessary, he appealed an unjust verdict issued by the governor to the imperial seat of Caesar (Acts 25:10ff).

The prohibition against Christians harboring any desires for vengeance does not contradict these principles. We must also strive to eradicate such desires from all legal disputes among the faithful (Deuteronomy 32:35; Matthew 5:39; Romans 12:19). When engaged in a civil matter, a person behaves rightly by entrusting their case with innocence and simplicity into the hands of the judge, acting as a public advocate, devoid of any intention to retaliate or seek vengeance. When pursuing a criminal matter, I endorse no accuser except one who enters the legal process without being swayed by a desire for vengeance or personal offense. Such individuals seek only to curtail the wickedness of the accused and prevent their actions

from causing harm to the public. When the heart's desire for vengeance is removed, these actions do not violate the commandment forbidding vengeance among Christians. If someone objects that Christians are not only prohibited from desiring vengeance but are also commanded to await the hand of the Lord, who promises to support the afflicted and oppressed (Romans 12:19), and that those who seek the magistrate's assistance for themselves or others anticipate God's vengeance, the response is that it is not so. We should consider that the magistrate's punishment originates not from humans but from God, and, as St. Paul states, it is delivered to us through human ministers (Romans 13:4).

Furthermore, we are not in opposition to Christ's teachings in which He forbids resistance to evil and instructs us to "turn the other cheek to the one who strikes us on the left, and leave the cloak to the one who takes away our jacket" (Matthew 5:39–40). Christ expects His followers to be free from desires for vengeance, preferring to endure harm themselves rather than to inflict harm upon others. We do not dissuade them from exercising such patience. Indeed, Christians must resemble a people destined to suffer insults and injury, subjected to the wickedness, deceit, and mockery of evildoers. They must bear these trials with patience, understanding that after enduring one affliction, they should be prepared to face another. They should expect nothing but a life marked by the enduring burden of a perpetual cross. Nevertheless, they must "do good to those who wrong them, pray for those who speak ill of them, and strive to overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:14, 21), for this is their ultimate victory. With their hearts disposed in this manner, they will not seek an "eye for an eye" or "tooth for a tooth," as the Pharisees taught their disciples to seek vengeance. Instead, as Christ instructs His followers, they will endure offenses to their persons or possessions in such a way that they are ready to immediately forgive

(Matthew 5:39–40). However, this gentleness and moderation of heart should not prevent them from seeking the magistrate's assistance to protect their possessions or, out of concern for the public good, to seek the punishment of those who are perverse and harmful, and who cannot be reformed except through punishment.

Lastly, the objection often raised—that all forms of litigation are condemned by St. Paul—is highly inaccurate. It is crucial to understand that St. Paul's words pertain to the situation in the Corinthian church, where there was an excessive and unruly desire for litigation. This had reached the point where it tarnished the reputation of the gospel and the entire Christian faith among unbelievers. St. Paul primarily condemns this immoderate contention. He reproaches them for engaging in quarrels within the Christian community, brother against brother, and for failing to endure harm or losses. In this context, he censures their desire to engage in lawsuits against one another (1 Corinthians 6:1–8). He emphasizes that it is completely wrong for them not to endure harm or relinquish their rights rather than resort to lawsuits, particularly when the process would lead to the development of an unworthy and hate-filled heart against their brother. In summary, as we stated at the outset, love and charity should serve as guides in all legal disputes. Those who violate or harm these principles are wicked and condemned.

The foremost duty of subjects towards their superiors is to hold their position in high regard, recognizing it as a divine commission from God. Consequently, they should honor and reverence their superiors as individuals appointed by God to serve as His deputies and representatives. St. Peter instructs us to "honor the king" (1 Peter 2:17), while Solomon commands us "to fear God and the king" (Proverbs 24:21). St. Paul further conveys a very honorable title to

superiors when he states that "we ought to be subject to them not only because of wrath but for the sake of conscience" (Romans 13:5). By this, he means that subjects should not merely comply with their rulers out of fear or dread of punishment, as a weaker party might yield to a stronger adversary under the threat of vengeance. Instead, they should willingly submit out of reverence for God, recognizing that the authority of their rulers is derived from Him.

It is of utmost significance, and in accordance with the divine order, that individuals hold their rulers in honor and reverence, subjecting themselves to their authority with unwavering obedience. This includes adherence to their decrees, the payment of taxes, the bearing of public burdens related to the common defense, and compliance with their commands. As St. Paul emphatically states, "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God" (Romans 13:1–2). Similarly, St. Titus is urged to encourage submission to rulers and superiors, fostering obedience to magistrates and readiness for acts of virtue (Titus 3:1). St. Peter, in the same vein, calls for subjection to human authorities out of reverence for the Lord, whether to the king as the preeminent ruler or to governors appointed by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do good (1 Peter 2:13–14). Moreover, to demonstrate their genuine obedience, subjects should offer prayers for the well-being and prosperity of those in authority over them. St. Paul encourages this, saying, "Therefore, I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence" (1 Timothy 2:1–2). Let no one be deceived, for though some may believe that they can mock a weak or powerless ruler without consequence, they

must remember that it is God who avenges the scorn of His divine order.

Furthermore, within the scope of obedience, it is essential to underscore the need for restraint among private individuals in matters of public concern. Individuals should not meddle in public affairs without proper authorization, recklessly assuming the role of the magistrate or taking initiatives in public matters. In situations where flaws within the governance structure require correction, private citizens should refrain from inciting turmoil, attempting to rectify issues themselves, or taking matters into their own hands, as they lack the authority to do so. Instead, they should bring such issues to the attention of their superiors, who alone possess the prerogative to address public matters. In this context, their actions should be guided by a sense of duty and the acknowledgment that they should not act without specific instructions. Such individuals, when acting under the authority of their superiors, become instruments of public authority. In a manner analogous to how counselors serve as the eyes and ears of a prince, those appointed to execute specific tasks are the "hands" entrusted with carrying out their superior's instructions.

With regard to the qualities that a magistrate should possess, as described thus far, aligning with their title as the father of the country they govern, the shepherd of the people, the guardian of peace, the upholder of justice, and the protector of innocence, one would be justified in deeming any criticism of such a ruler as irrational. However, the reality often deviates from this ideal, as many rulers stray from the righteous path. Some neglect their duties and become engrossed in hedonistic pursuits, while others, driven by insatiable greed, put laws, privileges, rights, and legal processes up for sale. Some exploit the impoverished populace to fund their

extravagant lifestyles, while others engage in ruthless criminality, including the destruction of homes, the violation of virgins and married women, and the murder of innocents. Understandably, it is challenging to persuade people that such rulers should be acknowledged as legitimate and obeyed to the fullest extent possible. When individuals witness their superiors, who should ideally embody the image of God's divine authority and function as ministers of His justice, deviating from their rightful roles and exhibiting vices that contradict not only their roles as rulers but also basic human decency, they struggle to perceive these rulers as possessing the value and authority commended in Scripture. This sentiment, grounded in the human spirit, is not limited to detesting tyrants but extends to loving and revering just kings.

However, when we turn to the teachings of God's Word, a different perspective emerges. It compels us to obey not only rulers who fulfill their duties justly and faithfully but also those who hold positions of authority, even if their actions deviate from their intended roles. While our Lord affirms that magistrates are a unique gift, bestowed by His benevolence to preserve human salvation, and that He prescribes their duties, He also clarifies that their authority, regardless of their character or conduct, is derived solely from Him (Romans 13:3). Therefore, those rulers whose governance aligns with the promotion of the public good serve as true reflections of God's generosity and benevolence. Conversely, rulers who act unjustly and violently are, in a sense, raised up by God to punish the wickedness of the people. Nevertheless, both categories hold the legitimate dignity and majesty conferred upon them by God. We will not proceed further until we provide evidence to substantiate these assertions. It is evident, without dispute, that a wicked king serves as a manifestation of God's wrath on the earth (Job 34:30; Isaiah 3:4, 10:5; Hosea 13:11; Deuteronomy 28:29). This assertion is widely

accepted throughout the world. Therefore, we will refrain from further discussing the nature of a king, as we would of a thief who steals our possessions, an adulterer who disrupts our marriages, or a murderer who seeks to take our lives, for such calamities are classified among God's curses in the law. Instead, our focus shall be on demonstrating that even an unworthy individual, who lacks any honor and occupies a position of public authority, possesses the same dignity and power conferred by God's Word upon the ministers of His justice. With respect to the obedience owed to their authority, subjects are called upon to hold such an unworthy ruler in as great reverence as they would a virtuous king, were they fortunate enough to have one.

First and foremost, I encourage my readers to reflect upon God's providence and His unique methods for establishing kingdoms and appointing rulers as He sees fit. Scripture frequently references this concept, as evidenced in the book of Daniel: "The Lord changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings" (Daniel 2:21) and "That the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men" (Daniel 4:17). Although these sentiments are pervasive throughout the Bible, they are particularly emphasized in Daniel's prophecies. Consider the case of King Nebuchadnezzar, who captured Jerusalem—an accomplished plunderer and destroyer. Nevertheless, our Lord affirms through the prophet Ezekiel that He granted Nebuchadnezzar the land of Egypt as a reward for his service in shattering and pillaging (Ezekiel 29:19–20). Daniel addresses Nebuchadnezzar with these words: "You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory; and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the field and the birds of the heaven, He has given them into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all" (Daniel 2:37–38).

Likewise, Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar, is informed by Daniel: "The Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar a kingdom and majesty, glory, and honor. And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him" (Daniel 5:18–19).

As we reflect upon the divine establishment of kings, we are compelled to remember the heavenly ordinance that commands us to both fear and honor the king. In doing so, we should not hesitate to accord even a wicked tyrant the honor commensurate with the esteem our Lord deems him worthy of. When the prophet Samuel conveyed to the people of Israel the challenges they would face under their future kings, he revealed, "Behold what will be the power of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots and to be his horsemen, and some will run before his chariots. He will appoint captains over his thousands and captains over his fifties, and will set some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and some to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers. And he will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give them to his servants. He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage, and give it to his officers and servants. And he will take your male servants, your female servants, your finest young men, and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take a tenth of your sheep. And you will be his servants" (1 Samuel 8:11–17). It is crucial to note that these actions by the kings were not just, for the law had instructed them to maintain a sense of moderation and sobriety in their reign. However, Samuel referred to these actions as the king's "power over the people," signifying that obedience to the king was mandatory, and resistance was not permitted. In essence, he conveyed that the passions of kings could lead them to commit these excesses, and it

was not the place of the people to challenge these passions, but rather to heed and obey their king's commands.

Moreover, a passage from the Book of Jeremiah deserves special attention, as it offers decisive clarity on this matter. It is worth quoting at length, as it decisively addresses this entire question: "Thus says the Lord: 'I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are on the ground, by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper to Me. And now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant, and the beasts of the field I have also given him to serve him. So all nations shall serve him and his son and his son's son, until the time of his land comes; and then many nations and great kings shall make him serve them. And it shall be, that the nation and kingdom which will not serve Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, and which will not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation I will punish,' says the Lord, 'with the sword, the famine, and the pestilence. Until I have consumed them by his hand. Therefore do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers, who speak to you, saying, "You shall not serve the king of Babylon." For they prophesy a lie to you'" (Jeremiah 27:5–12). These words affirm the great obedience our Lord expected people to accord to this perverse and cruel tyrant, solely because he possessed the kingdom. The possession itself signified that he had been placed on the throne by God's ordinance, and by this divine ordinance, he had ascended to a royal majesty that could not be violated.

Once we firmly establish in our hearts the understanding that wicked kings also attain power through the same divine ordinance that establishes the authority of all kings, we will be spared the folly of entertaining the idea that a king should be treated according to his

personal merit, or that it is justifiable to withhold subjection when he does not fulfill his obligations as a king. It is futile to contend that this commandment was directed specifically at the people of Israel. Instead, we must discern the underlying principle: "I have given the kingdom to Nebuchadnezzar," declares the Lord, "therefore be subject to him and live" (Jeremiah 27:6, 12). Whosoever holds authority, without doubt, merits our submission. When our Lord raises an individual of rank to the position of princely rule, He communicates His pleasure at their reigning. This is affirmed throughout Scripture, as we find in the book of Proverbs: "By the transgression of a land, many are its princes" (Proverbs 28:2). Similarly, in the book of Job: "He takes away the understanding of the chiefs of the people of the earth, and makes them wander in a pathless wilderness. They grope in the dark without light, and He makes them stagger like a drunken man" (Job 12:24–25). Once this is acknowledged, it is clear that our duty is to serve such rulers if we desire to live in accordance with God's divine will.

Additionally, another commandment from God, recorded in the same prophetic book of Jeremiah, instructs His people to "seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace" (Jeremiah 29:7). In this instance, Israelites are not only directed to pray for the well-being of the conqueror who had stripped them of their possessions, expelled them from their homes, subjected them to exile, and forced them into wretched servitude, but they are also instructed to pray for the continued prosperity and tranquility of the ruler's kingdom, for therein lies their own peace. For this reason, David, despite being anointed king by God's ordinance and anointed with His holy oil, even as he was wrongfully pursued by Saul without any wrongdoing on his part, regarded Saul's rulership as sacred and inviolable. He declared, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing

to my master, the Lord's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the Lord" (1 Samuel 24:6). David went on to say, "Moreover, my father, see! Yes, see the corner of your robe in my hand! For in that I cut off the corner of your robe, and did not kill you, know and see that there is neither evil nor rebellion in my hand, and I have not sinned against you. Yet you hunt my life to take it. Let the Lord judge between you and me, and let the Lord avenge me on you. But my hand shall not be against you" (1 Samuel 24:10–12). Furthermore, David inquired, "Who can put out his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?" (1 Samuel 26:9). We are all called to hold such reverence for our superiors as long as they hold authority over us, regardless of their character. I emphasize this repeatedly, that we may refrain from scrutinizing the personal attributes of those whom we are obligated to obey, but rather acknowledge that, by the Lord's divine will, they have been established in an office that commands inviolable majesty.

Some may argue that superiors also have mutual duties toward their subjects, and I acknowledge this point. However, if someone were to conclude from this that we owe obedience only to a just ruler, they would be mistaken in their reasoning. Husbands and fathers, for instance, have certain responsibilities toward their wives and children. Yet, when they fail in these duties, such as fathers treating their children harshly or acting violently, contrary to the commandment for fathers not to provoke their children to anger (Ephesians 6:4), or husbands mistreating their wives, whom they are commanded to love and protect as fragile vessels (Ephesians 5:25; 1 Peter 3:7), should their children or wives be less obedient to them? According to God's law, they are still subject to their fathers or husbands, even if these individuals are unkind. Therefore, it is not our place to scrutinize how well others fulfill their duties to us; rather, we should focus on what we must do to fulfill our own

obligations. This principle holds especially true for those who are subject to others. Hence, if we find ourselves cruelly oppressed by an inhumane ruler, unjustly attacked and plundered by a greedy or extravagant one, or neglected and ill-treated by an apathetic one—indeed, if we are persecuted for the sake of God's name by a sacrilegious and unbelieving ruler—we should first reflect on our own sins against God, which are undoubtedly being corrected through such trials (Daniel 9:7). Secondly, we should remember that it is not within our power to rectify such evils; our only recourse is to implore God's assistance, for "in His hand are the hearts of kings" and He governs the rise and fall of kingdoms (Proverbs 21:1). He is the God who judges among the gods, and before His divine judgment, all the kings and rulers of the earth who have not honored His Christ will stumble and be confounded (Psalm 82:1; Psalm 2:10–12). This judgment will befall all those who have enacted unjust laws to oppress the poor, trample upon the rights of the weak, prey on widows, and exploit orphans (Isaiah 10:1–2).

The incredible goodness, power, and providence of God become evident in these circumstances. At times, He visibly raises His servants and commissions them to bring about justice, punishing unjust rulers and delivering the oppressed from calamity. In other instances, He diverts and repurposes the ambitions of those who seek their own ends. In the former case, God delivered the Israelites from the tyranny of Pharaoh through Moses (Exodus 3:7ff) and rescued them from the power of Cushan, the king of Syria, through Othniel, as well as from various other oppressors through kings and judges (Judges 3:9ff and beyond). In the latter case, God rebuked the arrogance of the Egyptians through the Assyrians, the pride of Tyre through the Egyptians, the greatness of the Egyptians through the Assyrians, the insolence of the Assyrians through the Chaldeans, the excesses of Babylon through the Medes and Persians, and the

ingratitude of the kings of Judah and Israel through the Assyrians and Babylonians (Isaiah 20:4; Daniel 5:28). Both types of agents were instruments and executors of God's justice; however, there is a significant distinction between them. The first group, called by God through lawful vocations to undertake these tasks, did not rebel against kings; rather, they reformed an errant authority through a greater one. This aligns with the concept that it is lawful for a king to discipline his lieutenants and officers. The second group, though directed by God's hand for His purposes, harbored evil intentions. Thus, while the acts themselves were different when viewed from the perspective of those who performed them—some with a conviction of doing good and the others motivated by different zeal—our Lord accomplished His work through both, breaking the scepters of wicked kings and toppling oppressive dominions. Indeed, let this serve as a warning to princes. Nonetheless, it is of utmost importance that we refrain from scorning or undermining the authority of superiors, which should be held in high regard due to its confirmation through numerous divine decrees—even if these authorities are deeply flawed individuals who, to the extent possible, tarnish their positions through their wickedness. Even in times of disorder, we must be vigilant in preserving the dignity of their rule, for it is protected by God's ordinances.

In the obedience we are taught to render to superiors, there must always be one exception, or rather, a principle that takes precedence over all others. Our obedience to superiors should never divert us from obedience to Him under whose will all the desires of kings should rightly be subservient, and all their commands should yield to His ordinances. Their lofty positions should be humbled and subordinated to His majesty. In truth, it would be perverse for us to provoke God's anger in order to please human authorities. The Lord is the King of Kings; as soon as He issues a command, it should be

obeyed above all, before all, and in all. We should then subject ourselves to those who hold authority over us, but always in subordination to Him. If they command something that contradicts God's will, we should not heed it. We should also remember that the entire dignity of their rule is not harmed when we subject it to God's authority, which is the only true authority in comparison to all others.

I understand the potential dangers that may arise from the unwavering constancy I advocate here, as kings often cannot tolerate any affront to their authority. As Solomon wisely observes, "Their anger is a messenger of death" (Proverbs 16:14). Nevertheless, in light of the divine proclamation made by the heavenly messenger St. Peter, that "we must obey God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29), we should find solace in the knowledge that we are truly demonstrating obedience to God when we endure all hardships rather than forsake His sacred Word. Moreover, to fortify our resolve, St. Paul prods us with a compelling reminder: we have been redeemed by Christ at a great price, and as such, we must not subject ourselves as slaves to the sinful desires of people, let alone to impiety (1 Corinthians 7:23).

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Christian Way of Life

As we embark on the path of shaping a Christian life, we find ourselves entering upon a profound and multifaceted subject, one

that could easily fill a voluminous tome should we choose to explore it exhaustively. It's evident that the exhortations of the early church theologians, even when focused solely on a single virtue, span extensive lengths. This expansiveness isn't a product of aimless verbosity; rather, it arises from the realization that when we seek to extol and promote any virtue, the wealth of material necessitates a comprehensive treatment to ensure thorough understanding. However, my aim here is not to elongate the discourse on Christian life to the point of dissecting each individual virtue through lengthy exhortations. Such in-depth discussions can be found in the works of others, especially in the homilies of the early church theologians, which served as sermons directed at the general populace. My goal is more modest—to outline the framework within which a Christian should be guided toward the righteous path of living a well-ordered life. I intend to provide a concise yet comprehensive rule by which one can measure the entirety of their actions. Perhaps, at a later time, we may seize the opportunity to deliver sermons akin to those found in the works of early church theologians. For now, the nature of our current endeavor demands a succinct presentation of fundamental teachings.

Now, let us consider the philosophers and their pursuit of decency and uprightness, from which they derive the specific duties and virtues. Scripture, on the other hand, presents its own method, one that is superior and more reliable than the practices of philosophers. There is a fundamental difference between the two approaches: the philosophers, often driven by ambition, have sought to showcase their remarkable perspicacity in demonstrating the order and arrangement they advocate, parading their own cleverness. Conversely, the Holy Spirit, teaching with humility and authenticity, has not always adhered strictly to a particular order and method in His teachings. Nonetheless, the Spirit, at times, employs such

methods to remind us not to disregard them. This scriptural order, which occasionally includes specific guidelines, serves two primary purposes. First, it impresses upon our hearts the love of righteousness, a disposition that doesn't come naturally to us. Second, it furnishes us with a rule that prevents us from wandering aimlessly, ensuring that our lives follow a clear and righteous path.

As for the first purpose, Scripture provides numerous compelling reasons to incline our hearts toward goodness. We've explored some of these reasons before, and we'll consider others here. Scripture begins by emphasizing that "our God is holy" (Leviticus 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16). This fundamental truth serves as a foundation upon which our understanding of holiness is built. It reminds us that we are called to be sanctified and set apart, which, in turn, leads us to the realization that holiness is the bond of our union with God. While we do not attain God's company through our holiness, as we must first cleave to Him to be made holy, it remains vital that we aspire to resemble Him, for we belong to Him. Scripture teaches us that this is the purpose of our calling, an aspect we must always bear in mind if we wish to respond to God appropriately (Isaiah 35:7 and elsewhere).

Why were we rescued from the filth and defilement in which we were mired if we intend to wallow in it throughout our lives? Furthermore, Scripture warns that, to be part of God's people, we must dwell in Jerusalem, His holy city. Just as God consecrated and dedicated Jerusalem to His honor, it is not permissible for it to be tainted by impure and profane inhabitants. This underpins verses like: "He who walks without stain and who strives to live well will dwell in the Lord's tabernacle" (Psalm 15:1–2). Moreover, Scripture motivates us by explaining that just as God reconciled us to Himself through Christ, He has also established us in Christ as examples of innocence,

and it is Christ's image that should be reflected in our lives (Romans 8:29).

Let those who assert that philosophers alone have adequately discussed moral teaching show me in their works a tradition as robust as the one I've just presented! When they passionately exhort someone to embrace virtue, they rely solely on the premise that we should live in accordance with our nature. In contrast, Scripture leads us to a much richer source of motivation. It not only commands us to align our entire lives with the God who authored them but also underscores that we have deviated from our true created nature. Additionally, it informs us that Christ, in reconciling us to God the Father, has provided us with an example of innocence that we should embody (Romans 6). Could there be a more emphatic and effective approach? What more could we ask for? If God adopts us as His children on the condition that we reflect the image of Christ in our lives, then failing to devote ourselves to righteousness and holiness amounts not only to a negligent disloyalty to our Creator but also a rejection of Him as our Savior.

Therefore, Scripture draws motivation from all of God's blessings and facets of our salvation. It says, "Because God has adopted us as His children, we display an ungrateful indifference if we do not conduct ourselves as His offspring" (Malachi 1:6; Ephesians 5:1; 1 John 3:1). "Because Christ has purified us with His blood and imparted this purification through baptism, we must avoid tarnishing ourselves with new filth" (Ephesians 5:26; Hebrews 10:10; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 Peter 1:15, 19). "Because He has united with us and grafted us into His body, we must diligently guard against contamination, for we are His members" (1 Corinthians 6:15; John 15:3; Ephesians 5:23). "Because our Head, Jesus, has ascended to heaven, it is fitting that we cast off all earthly affections and

wholeheartedly aspire to heavenly life" (Colossians 3:1–2). "Because the Holy Spirit consecrates us as God's temples, we must ensure that God's glory is exalted in us while simultaneously guarding against any defilement" (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16). "Because our souls and bodies are destined for God's eternal kingdom and the imperishable crown of His glory, we must strive to keep both pure and untainted until the day of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). This serves as a firm and righteous foundation upon which we can build our lives—a foundation that surpasses all that the philosophers have ever offered. When philosophers address human duties, they never ascend higher than expounding on natural human dignity.

Let me address those who, though they bear the name of Christ, possess nothing of Him beyond His name. They boldly boast of His holy name, yet the sole individual who truly knows Him is the one who has learned rightly from the Gospel. St. Paul makes it clear that genuine knowledge is not attained until one has learned to cast off the old, corrupted self, with its disordered desires, and put on Christ (Ephesians 4:22, 24). Thus, those who falsely lay claim to the knowledge of Christ, masking themselves with pleasing words, gravely insult Him. The Gospel is not mere rhetoric; it is a life-transforming message, not to be confined to mere understanding or memory like other disciplines. Rather, it should fully possess the soul, taking root in the depths of the heart. Without this depth of acceptance, it remains incomplete. Therefore, they should either cease falsely identifying themselves with Christ, bringing disgrace to God's name, or demonstrate themselves as true disciples of Christ.

While we have accorded primacy to teaching in religion, recognizing it as the genesis of our salvation, its usefulness and fruitfulness depend on its ability to penetrate deep into our hearts and manifest

its power in our lives. The Gospel must be more than mere lip service; it must be embodied in our actions and transform us into the likeness of Christ. If philosophers are justified in resenting those who profess their art, often reducing it to empty talk, how much more should we despise those who proudly bear the Gospel on their lips while disregarding it in their daily lives? The Gospel's transformative efficacy should extend to the heart, ingrained in the soul to a far greater degree than the philosophical exhortations, which are comparatively weaker.

I do not demand that the morals of a Christian be a perfect embodiment of the Gospel. While that is an admirable goal that we should strive for, I do not insist so rigorously on Christian perfection that I would deny Christian status to those who have not achieved it. Were we to adopt such an uncompromising stance, we would exclude virtually everyone from the Church, as most remain far from perfection, even if they have made substantial progress. However, we must keep our eyes fixed on the goal of pursuing the perfection God commands. All our actions should be oriented toward that end, and we must strive diligently to attain it. We cannot selectively obey God's Word, embracing one part while disregarding another according to our whims. God consistently calls us to integrity, denoting a pure simplicity of heart, free from deceit and duplicity.

Nevertheless, while we dwell in this earthly prison, none of us possesses the strength and disposition required to progress along this path as efficiently as we should. In fact, most are so frail that they falter and limp, making only limited advances. Given these limitations, let each of us progress according to our abilities and persevere on the path we have embarked upon. No one should lose heart even if their progress seems meager. Although our advancement may not match our aspirations, it is not in vain, as long

as we make today's progress greater than yesterday's. We must maintain a pure and sincere disposition, continually striving to become better day by day. We should pursue this objective until we attain the supreme goodness we seek, liberated from the frailty of our flesh, and fully participating in it when God welcomes us into His presence.

Now, let's turn our attention to the second point. While God's law offers a sound method and well-ordered structure for guiding our lives, our gracious heavenly Teacher has deemed it necessary to provide His children with a more perfect teaching than the law's regulations. The initial step in this instruction involves acknowledging that faithful individuals are to present their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. In doing so, they fulfill their rightful service. Subsequently, they are urged not to conform to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds, in order to discern and embrace God's will (Romans 12:1–2). This marks significant progress—a declaration that we are consecrated and dedicated to God, intending to live solely for His glory. It is unlawful to employ something sacred for profane purposes. Therefore, since we no longer belong to ourselves but to the Lord, it becomes evident how we must conduct all aspects of our lives.

We do not belong to ourselves; hence, our reasoning and will should not govern our decisions and actions. We are not our own; thus, we should not seek what is expedient for our fleshly desires. We are not our own; therefore, we should minimize our focus on ourselves and our surroundings. Instead, we belong to the Lord, and consequently, His will and wisdom should guide all our actions. Since we are the Lord's, every facet of our lives should be directed towards Him as our ultimate goal.

When a person recognizes that they are not their own and relinquishes self-rule, giving it over to God, they have made great strides. For self-indulgence is the greatest threat to self-destruction, while surrender to God is the ultimate safeguard for salvation. Therefore, our primary step should be to detach from ourselves, redirecting the entire power of our intellect to serve God. By "service," I mean more than simple obedience to His Word; it encompasses the transformation of human understanding, emptied of self-sufficiency, entirely submitting to the leading of the Holy Spirit. This transformation, which St. Paul refers to as "the renewing of the mind" (Ephesians 4:23), is the crucial gateway to life. Unlike philosophers who advocate reason as the sole authority and mediator of human life, Christian philosophy encourages surrender and self-emptying to allow the Holy Spirit to lead. In this way, we do not live for ourselves but for Christ, who dwells in us and governs our lives.

Following this, we must recognize the next vital point we've outlined: our pursuit should not be focused on our personal desires, but on those things that are pleasing to God and contribute to the exaltation of His glory. An essential strength lies in learning to forget ourselves, or at the very least, not obsessing over ourselves. By doing so, we can earnestly apply ourselves to following God's commandments. When Scripture instructs us not to overly concern ourselves with personal interests, it doesn't merely root out greed, the desire for power, or the thirst for great honors and alliances from our hearts. It also aims to eradicate all ambitions and appetites for human glory, along with other concealed plagues. A Christian's disposition should be such that they view their entire life as an account rendered to God. In holding this perspective, they align all their plans with Him, anchoring them firmly in His will. When a person considers God in all their endeavors, it becomes easier to divert their thoughts from vain distractions.

This is the self-denial that Christ diligently asks of all His disciples as their first lesson (Matthew 16:24). Once the human heart is imbued with this self-denial, pride and ostentation are vanquished, as are greed, intemperance, excess, and all forms of indulgence—vices that self-love begets. Conversely, where self-denial is absent, individuals either shamelessly indulge in debasement or, if they display a semblance of virtue, it is tainted by a sinful desire for glory. You will not find anyone practicing genuine benevolence toward others unless they have first renounced themselves, as per the Lord's command. Even the philosophers, who have contended that virtue should be sought for its intrinsic value, have often been so inflated with pride that their pursuit of virtue appears motivated primarily by a desire to boast about their own accomplishments. Those who seek worldly glory through ambition or those who suffer from concealed presumption are far from pleasing God. He declares that the former have already received their reward in this world, while the latter are farther from the kingdom of God than even the publicans and prostitutes.

However, we have not yet explained the numerous obstacles that hinder a person from wholeheartedly engaging in acts of goodness unless they have renounced themselves. As it has long been said, there is a multitude of vices within the human soul. The remedy for this malady is self-denial—putting aside self-concern and devoting our intellect to seeking those things that God desires, solely because they please Him. It is crucial to recognize that self-denial pertains partly to our relationships with others and primarily to our relationship with God. When Scripture commands us to "do to others as you would have them do to you" and to strive earnestly for their well-being, it prescribes actions that our hearts cannot accomplish unless they have been emptied of their natural inclinations (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31).

For we are all so blinded by love for ourselves that each person believes they have ample reason to elevate themselves above others and to regard themselves as superior to the entire world. If God bestows upon us some grace that can be admired, our hearts immediately swell with pride under the guise of possessing that grace. We not only become arrogant but are on the brink of being consumed by pride. We meticulously conceal our own vices and pretend they are insignificant or even, at times, we consider them virtues. Conversely, we believe that we possess virtues to an astonishing degree. When we observe virtues in others, even greater ones than our own, we attempt to obscure or disparage them in order to avoid yielding precedence to them. On the contrary, when our neighbors exhibit vices, we do not simply take note but aggressively magnify them with disdain.

This is the root of our arrogance—each person seeks preeminence above all others and despises all others as inferior, without exception. The poor cede to the wealthy, the humble to the noble, servants to their masters, and the unlearned to the learned. Yet, deep within each person's heart, there is an illusion that they are inherently superior to all. Ascribing to oneself whatever one pleases, one scrutinizes the minds and morals of others. When discord arises, malice surfaces. Many individuals may appear kind and moderate when things align with their desires. However, very few maintain gentleness and moderation when provoked and irritated.

It cannot be otherwise unless we uproot the deadly plague of self-love and self-exaltation from the depths of our hearts—precisely what Scripture endeavors to do. When we heed its teaching, we must recognize that all the graces bestowed upon us by God are not our possessions but gracious gifts from His benevolence. If someone becomes inflated with pride, they demonstrate ingratitude.

Conversely, we must continually acknowledge our vices and humble ourselves. This ensures that nothing remains within us to puff us up, but rather, we find abundant reasons to humble ourselves. Furthermore, we are instructed to honor and revere all of God's gifts that we observe in our neighbors. In doing so, we honor the individuals in whom we see these gifts. It would be discourteous to strip a person of the honor God has bestowed upon them. We are also commanded not to focus on others' vices but to cover them, not to encourage vice through flattery but to avoid harming someone who has committed an error. Thus, whether we are interacting with anyone, we exhibit modesty and temperance, treating others with kindness and affection, and bearing love and respect in our hearts. In this manner, genuine kindness is nurtured, and it is only achieved when our hearts are predisposed to humble themselves and honor others.

Regarding the fulfillment of our duty to seek what is beneficial for our neighbor, we must recognize the inherent challenge in this task. If we fail to cast aside self-concern and rid ourselves of all carnal affections, we will make no progress in this endeavor. Who can achieve what St. Paul requires of us in love and charity unless they have renounced self in order to wholeheartedly dedicate themselves to their neighbors? As St. Paul teaches, "Love is patient, generous; it is not irritable or insolent; it has no pride or hate; it does not seek its own" (1 Corinthians 13:4–5). Even if we were only instructed not to seek what is beneficial for ourselves, it would still necessitate a struggle against our nature, which draws us so strongly towards self-love that it does not easily permit us to neglect our own well-being in order to care for the benefit of others or to relinquish our own rights for the sake of our neighbors. To lead us to this realization, Scripture exhorts us, stating that "all we have received from God's grace is committed to us on the condition that we use it for the common good

of the church" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Therefore, the proper use of these gifts entails loving and generously sharing them with our neighbors. To accomplish such sharing, we can find no better or more certain guide than the understanding that all the good we possess has been entrusted to us by God, with the expectation that we will distribute it for the benefit of others.

Furthermore, Scripture goes beyond this by comparing the graces each of us has received to the functions of different members within a human body (Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–31). Just as a member does not possess its abilities for its own exclusive use but rather to benefit others, so should faithful individuals offer their abilities to their brothers and sisters, not primarily for personal gain, but with a constant intent directed towards the common good of the Church. Therefore, let us adhere to this rule when performing acts of goodness and practicing compassion: we are stewards and dispensers of all that the Lord has bestowed upon us, with the purpose of aiding our neighbors. One day, we will be held accountable for how well we fulfilled this responsibility. Moreover, there is no other righteous and just distribution than one guided by the rule of love and charity. With this principle as our foundation, we will not only combine our efforts for our neighbor's benefit with what we do for our own advantage but also subordinate our personal gain to the welfare of others. To illustrate the proper and just administration of what He has given us, the Lord long ago commanded the people of Israel to offer Him the firstfruits, even for the smallest blessings they received. This practice testified that it was not lawful to reap any benefit from the good things bestowed upon them that had not been consecrated to Him. On the other hand, it would be absurd to attempt to enrich God by offering Him the things we hold in our hands. Thus, since "our benevolence cannot reach to

Him," as the prophet says, "we must practice it toward His servants who are in the world" (Psalms 16:2–3 Vg.).

Additionally, to prevent us from growing weary in doing good, we must remember what the Apostle adds: "love is patient and is not easily angered" (1 Corinthians 13:4–5). The Lord commands us to do good to all, without exception, even though most of them are undeserving if we judge them solely by their own merit. However, Scripture goes before us, urging us not to consider what individuals deserve on their own, but rather to see God's image in all of them. We owe all honor and love to that divine image. We should especially recognize this image in the household of faith since it is renewed and restored in them by the Spirit of Christ. Thus, no matter who requires our assistance and approaches us, we have no reason to deny them our care. If we label them as strangers, the Lord has imprinted His mark upon them, which should be familiar to us. If we declare them as lowly and insignificant, the Lord reminds us that He has honored these individuals by making them reflect His image. If we assert that we are under no obligation to them, the Lord informs us that He stands in their place, so we should recognize the kindness He has bestowed upon us through them. Even if we argue that they are unworthy of our slightest effort, the image of God that we must perceive in them is unquestionably worthy of our involvement, along with all that we possess.

Even when we encounter someone who not only deserves nothing from us but has also harmed us greatly and insulted us repeatedly, that alone is not sufficient reason to withhold our love and act in a manner that is pleasing and beneficial to them. When we claim that this individual does not deserve such treatment from us, God may ask us what we have deserved from Him. For when He commands us to pardon those who have wronged us, He assumes their offenses as

His own. This is the only way we can reach a point that is not only challenging for human nature but entirely contrary to it: to "love those who hate us, to render good for evil, and to pray for those who speak evil of us" (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:28). We will indeed reach this point if we remember that we should not merely stop at human malice but rather contemplate God's image in these individuals. This divine image, by virtue of its excellence and dignity, should arouse our love for them and vanquish all vices that could obstruct this love.

This self-mortification, or dying to self, will take place within us once we have fulfilled love and charity. This fulfillment involves not only carrying out all the duties that pertain to love and charity but performing them with genuine affection. It is possible for someone to fulfill all their obligations toward their neighbor externally yet still fall far short of fulfilling their duties as they should. We often encounter individuals who wish to be perceived as exceedingly generous but end up tainting their benevolence with prideful expressions and haughty words. Sadly, in our time, the majority of the world dispenses charity in an insulting manner. Such perversity should not be tolerated, not even among pagans.

Instead, Christians should aspire to something quite different from a cheerful countenance alone to infuse their benevolence with humanity and gentleness. First and foremost, they should make the needs of the person requiring assistance their own, feeling compassion for their hardships as if they were their own, and experiencing the same sentiments of mercy in helping them as they would for themselves. One who possesses such a heart when assisting their brothers and sisters does not only avoid tainting their benevolence with arrogance or reproach but also refrains from looking down upon the person they are helping because of their poverty, never intending to subjugate them by placing them under

obligation. Just as we do not attack one member of our body because it is in need of restoration, recognizing that all the other members are working towards its recovery, we do not consider the ailing member as uniquely indebted to the rest. What the members share among themselves is not viewed as an act of generosity but as a fulfillment of the natural law. This example introduces another important point in our understanding of love: we should not think that we are free from our obligations after performing a single duty, as is commonly believed. When a wealthy individual gives something away, they often neglect and abandon all other responsibilities as though they no longer concern them. Conversely, each person should consider themselves indebted to their neighbors for everything they possess and everything they can do. They should not limit their obligation to do good to them except in cases where means are lacking, and the only constraint upon the extent of these means, however far they may extend, is love and charity.

Now, let us explore the other aspect of self-denial, the one that pertains to our relationship with God. While we have touched upon this in various places, it is worth revisiting to emphasize its significance. This discussion will center on how self-denial should lead us to exhibit patience and kindness.

First and foremost, in our pursuit of means for sustenance and comfort, Scripture consistently guides us back to one essential principle: entrusting ourselves and all that we possess to God. By doing so, we submit the affections of our hearts to Him, allowing Him to conquer and subdue them. Our human nature often exhibits an insatiable intemperance and unchecked desire for benefits, honors, power, riches, and everything we perceive as fitting for grandeur and splendor. Conversely, we harbor an astounding fear and aversion towards poverty, humility, and ignominy. Therefore, we

strive to avoid them as much as possible. This struggle becomes evident in the restless pursuit of those who chart their lives according to their own counsel. They employ every means and endure significant torment to achieve their ambitions, seeking to satisfy their greed and evade poverty and a humble state.

In order to avoid ensnaring ourselves in these traps, the faithful must adhere to the following path. Firstly, we should not desire, hope for, or conceive any other means of prosperity aside from God's blessing. We ought to rest securely on this truth. Although it may appear that our own efforts and abilities can secure our ambitions for honor and wealth, whether through our industry or human favor, it is certain that these pursuits are ultimately futile. All such endeavors are in vain unless the Lord blesses them. His blessing alone can pave a path through the obstacles and lead us to favorable outcomes in all matters. Moreover, even if, without His blessing, we were to accumulate some degree of honor or wealth (as we often witness the wicked amassing great riches and high positions), these gains would prove meaningless in the absence of God's blessing. It would be sheer folly to covet that which can only bring misery. Therefore, understanding that the sole path to prosperity lies in God's blessing and that without it, misery and calamity await us, we should not passionately aspire to riches and honors. Instead, we should avoid trusting excessively in our abilities, diligence, human favor, or fortune. We must always turn to God, allowing His guidance to lead us to the state that pleases Him. As a result, we will not resort to deceitful or indirect means to acquire the objects of our fervent desires. For who can hope that God's blessing will aid them in deceit, robbery, or other wickedness? His blessing is not bestowed upon those who engage in such deeds but only on those whose thoughts and actions are righteous. Therefore, anyone desiring His blessing must be deterred from wickedness and evil thoughts by this desire

itself. It should serve as a bridle to restrain us from relentlessly seeking self-enrichment and ambitious elevation. How audacious it would be to expect God's help in obtaining things that go against His word! Far be it from us to believe that He would promote, by His gracious blessing, what He condemns with His divine pronouncement!

Lastly, when events do not transpire according to our hopes and desires, this understanding should prevent us from succumbing to impatience and resenting our circumstances. We should recognize that reacting in such a manner would constitute murmuring against God, who determines the distribution of poverty, wealth, contempt, and honor according to His divine will. To summarize, anyone who firmly rests in God's blessing, as previously discussed, will not seek fervently, through wrongful or indirect means, those things for which others have a mad passion. They will realize that such endeavors are fruitless. If some measure of prosperity befalls them, they will attribute it not to their own diligence, industry, or fortune, but solely to God. Conversely, if they make little progress while witnessing others ascend to their desired heights, or even if they fall behind, they will endure their poverty with greater patience and moderation than an unbeliever would exhibit towards moderate riches, which merely fall short of their expectations. The faithful person will find comfort in a firm conviction that, regardless of circumstances, everything is ordained by God for their salvation. Thus, they will neither view themselves as wretched nor complain about their condition, avoiding indirect criticism of God.

It is crucial to recognize the necessity of this perspective by considering the multitude of adversities to which we are subject. Countless afflictions plague us ceaselessly, one after another. It may be an outbreak of disease, a war, freezing temperatures, hailstorms

causing crop failure and threatening poverty, or the loss of loved ones and even our homes to fire. In such circumstances, many individuals curse their lives, despise the day of their birth, detest the heavens and the light they provide, speak ill of God, and blaspheme Him, accusing Him of injustice and cruelty. Conversely, faithful individuals must see God's mercy and paternal kindness even in these trials. Therefore, even if they find themselves desolate due to the death of loved ones and a deserted home, they will not cease to bless God. Instead, they will reflect upon the presence of God's grace in their home, confident that it will not leave their dwelling desolate. If their crops are destroyed by freezing weather, hail, or storms, and they foresee the threat of famine, they will not lose hope or become disheartened. Instead, they will maintain unwavering confidence, recognizing that they remain under the Lord's care, knowing that, despite any barrenness, He will provide for their needs. In the face of illness, they will not succumb to unhappiness, impatience, or discontent with God. Instead, they will cultivate patience by contemplating God's righteousness and goodness in His chastisements. In summary, regardless of the circumstances, faithful individuals will receive them with peace and gratitude, acknowledging that everything originates from the hand of the Lord. They will do so with hearts that are tranquil, appreciative, and without complaint, thereby upholding their trust in the One to whom they have entrusted themselves.

First and foremost, let us firmly distance the Christian heart from the misguided and wretched solace that pagans often seek – attributing their adversities to mere chance or fortune in an attempt to bear them more patiently. Philosophers employ this rationale, asserting that it would be folly to direct anger towards a capricious and indiscriminate fortune that hurls its arrows without distinction, afflicting both the virtuous and the wicked. Instead, we must

embrace this principle of piety: that it is God's hand alone that guides and governs both favorable and adverse circumstances. His hand moves with purpose and justice, neither haphazardly nor recklessly.

The devotion of a faithful person should ascend to even loftier heights, echoing the call of Christ to His disciples: to each bear their own cross. All those whom the Lord has adopted into the fold of His children should prepare themselves for a strenuous and arduous journey, laden with toil and an array of adversities. The heavenly Father finds pleasure in testing His servants, granting them valuable experiences. He initiated this divine order with His firstborn Son, Christ, and continues it with all His followers. Despite Christ being the beloved Son in whom the Father took delight, His earthly life was marked by persistent tribulations. In fact, one might argue that His entire existence was akin to an enduring cross. How then can we exempt ourselves from a condition to which our Head, Christ, willingly submitted Himself? Christ did so for our sake, providing an example of unwavering patience. Hence, the apostle proclaims that God has designated this path for all His children, molding them to be conformed to the image of His Christ.

From this, we derive a unique comfort: in bearing the miseries often labeled as adversities, we share in Christ's cross. Just as He traversed the depths of all afflictions to attain heavenly glory, we too shall reach that glory through various tribulations. St. Paul teaches us that when we partake in His afflictions, we simultaneously grasp the power of His resurrection. When we participate in His death, we prepare ourselves for His glorious eternity. This understanding softens the bitterness that can accompany the cross, for every affliction endured brings us closer to Christ. In our communion with

Him, adversities cease to be mere trials; they become stepping stones toward our salvation.

Furthermore, the Lord Jesus had no inherent need to bear the cross and endure tribulations, except to demonstrate and confirm His obedience to God the Father. However, there are multiple reasons why we, as individuals, must perpetually face afflictions in this earthly life. Firstly, our natural inclination is to elevate ourselves, attributing all accomplishments to our own abilities. Unless our visible weakness is demonstrated to us, we tend to overestimate our strength, assuming it is invincible in the face of any challenge. This leads us to a vain and deluded confidence in our own prowess, causing us to puff up against God, as if we could navigate life without His grace. God, in His wisdom, shatters this presumption by subjecting us to adversities, such as disgrace, poverty, sickness, loss of loved ones, or other calamities. When these trials befall us, we are immediately overwhelmed, recognizing our inability to bear them. It is at this point of humbling that we learn to implore God's strength, the only power that can sustain us beneath the weight of such burdens.

Even the holiest of individuals, though they understand that their steadfastness is rooted in the grace of the Lord rather than their own strength, tend to harbor a sense of unwarranted security in their abilities and constancy. This complacency remains unchecked as long as their lives remain untroubled. However, when adversity strikes, their hypocrisy is laid bare. This is why the faithful must be continually reminded of their frailty, humbling themselves and relinquishing their misplaced confidence in the flesh. Through this process, they align themselves entirely with God's grace. Subsequently, when they find themselves humbled and tested by the cross, they sense the presence of God's power, which becomes their

steadfast support. This is something they could never achieve through their own strength. Patience, then, serves as a testimony to the saints that, in times of need, God indeed provides the help He has promised. This confirmation bolsters their hope, as it would be an act of profound ingratitude not to anticipate the continued faithfulness of God, which has already been proven firm and unwavering.

We now perceive the intertwined threads of benefit that emerge from embracing the cross. By dispelling the false notion of our innate strength and exposing the deception of our hypocrisy, the cross shatters our misplaced confidence in the flesh – a perilous condition. Subsequently, as we become aware of our weaknesses, we are prompted to transfer our trust from ourselves to God. We learn to rely on God with unwavering trust, knowing that His grace is our foundation, ensuring we do not falter or lose heart. From this victory arises hope, for by fulfilling His promises, the Lord reaffirms His trustworthiness for the future. Undoubtedly, even if these were the sole reasons, the necessity of embracing the cross becomes abundantly clear. It serves as a means to eliminate self-love, which blinds us, helps us rightly assess our weaknesses, dispels unwarranted self-confidence, shifts our reliance from ourselves to God, bolsters our trust in God's grace, confirms the trustworthiness of His promises, and ultimately strengthens our hope.

The Lord also has another divine purpose in afflicting His devoted servants – a purpose that encompasses the testing of their patience and the cultivation of their obedience. It is not as if they could possess any other form of obedience than that which He has graciously bestowed upon them. Nevertheless, He takes pleasure in revealing and bearing witness to the grace residing within the faithful, allowing it to emerge from obscurity. Hence, when He

unveils the strength of patience bestowed upon His servants, it is said that He tests their patience. We can trace the origins of this in the story of Abraham when, without hesitation, he willingly prepared to sacrifice his own son to fulfill God's command [Genesis 22:1; Hebrews 11:17]. St. Peter aptly remarks that "our faith is tested by tribulation no less than gold is tried in the furnace" [1 Peter 1:7]. Who among us can deny the wisdom in allowing such a precious gift as the patience bestowed by the Lord to be put to use and manifested? Without such trials, this invaluable virtue would remain concealed and underappreciated. Therefore, it is not without reason that the Lord permits afflictions, without which the patience of His faithful servants would hold no meaning.

Moreover, through these trials, He instructs them in obedience, teaching them to live not according to their own desires but in alignment with His divine will. If everything unfolded exactly as they wished, they would never truly comprehend the essence of following God's path. Even Seneca, a pagan philosopher, recognized the ancient wisdom in encouraging endurance during adversity by saying, "You must follow God." By uttering these words, people conveyed that one submits to the Lord's yoke when willingly embracing His chastisement and offering their hand and back to the divine discipline. If it is indeed reasonable for us to become obedient children of our heavenly Father in every way, then we must not shy away from any method He employs to train us for this obedience.

Nevertheless, the true necessity of this obedience only becomes evident when we consider the unrestrained manner in which our flesh recoils when subjected to seemingly unreasonable demands. It behaves like an unruly horse, accustomed to idleness and abundance in the stable, refusing to recognize the master who had once commanded it. The Lord's lament over the people of Israel, as

recorded in the Scriptures, reflects a common human trait: "when they are fattened on too sweet food they kick out at the one who has fed them" [Deuteronomy 32:15]. Although it would be fitting for God's generosity to inspire our consideration and love for His goodness, our ingratitude often leads us astray, corrupting us rather than motivating us to do good. In such cases, it becomes necessary for God to rein us in and impose discipline to curb our insolence. He employs the remedy of the cross in various ways, according to what is expedient and beneficial for each individual. For not all of us are equally afflicted, nor are we afflicted by the same maladies. Hence, the cure need not be uniform for everyone. This is why some are tested with one form of adversity, while others face different challenges. However, regardless of the means employed, no one is exempt, as the Lord recognizes the universal affliction of humanity.

Furthermore, our gracious Father does not merely prepare us for future challenges but also corrects our past faults, aiming to lead us back to a life of obedience to Him. Thus, when afflictions befall us, we should immediately recall our past deeds, undoubtedly finding some transgressions deserving of such punishment. Nevertheless, we need not solely rely on the recognition of our sins as the primary source of exhortation to practice patience. Instead, we should turn to the Scriptures, which offer a more profound perspective. They reveal that "the Lord corrects us by adversities in order not to condemn us with this world" [1 Corinthians 11:32]. In the midst of the greatest bitterness of tribulations, we must recognize the mercy and kindness of our Father. Even in the midst of these tribulations, He continues to advance our salvation, not afflicting us for our destruction but rather to deliver us from the condemnation of this world. This realization should lead us to embrace the wisdom found in the words of Scripture: "My child, do not reject the correction of the Lord, and do not be angry when He tests you; for God corrects those whom He

loves and keeps them as His children" [Proverbs 3:11–12]. When we hear that these corrections are akin to the discipline of a loving father, we must transform ourselves into teachable children, rather than emulating those despairing souls who remain obstinate in their wrongdoing. Without divine correction, the Lord would have been forced to abandon us, as the apostle attests: "We are bastards and not legitimate children if He does not keep us under discipline" [Hebrews 12:8]. Therefore, we ought to recognize the benevolence of our Father, even amid the most trying tribulations. Scripture distinguishes between unbelievers and the faithful: the former, akin to unruly servants, only grow more obstinate and resistant under the whip, while the latter benefit from correction, like legitimate children. The choice is ours – to become teachable children or to persist in obstinacy. Since this argument has been addressed in more detail elsewhere, let us briefly touch upon it here.

The most profound consolation emerges when we endure persecution for the sake of righteousness. In such moments, we must remind ourselves of the honor bestowed upon us by the Lord as He marks us with the insignia of His soldiers. I refer to it as "persecution for righteousness" not only when we suffer for upholding the gospel but also when we endure hardships while championing any just cause. Whether we defend God's truth against the falsehoods of the adversary or shield the innocent from the wicked, preventing wrongs and insults from befalling them, we may incur the world's hatred and wrath. It might endanger our reputation, our material wealth, or even our lives, but let us not perceive this as evil when we engage to such lengths for God's sake. Let us not deem ourselves unhappy when, with His very words, He pronounces us blessed [Matthew 5:10].

Indeed, when considered in isolation, poverty, exile, disgrace, shame, imprisonment, and even death appear as severe calamities. However, in the presence of God's favor, each of these adversities transforms into a source of good and happiness. Therefore, we must find contentment in Christ's testimony rather than relying on the false perceptions of our flesh. Then, in line with the example set by the apostles, "we will rejoice whenever we are counted worthy to suffer insult for His name" [Acts 5:41]. Even if, while innocent and with a clear conscience, we are stripped of our possessions due to the wickedness of others, we may appear impoverished in the eyes of humanity. Yet, through this, we amass true wealth in the eyes of God. If we are cast out and forced from our homeland, we find ourselves more welcome within the family of the Lord. When vexed and assailed, we grow stronger in our reliance on the Lord, seeking refuge in Him. When subjected to insult and ignominy, we are elevated in the kingdom of God. Even in death, we gain entry into the blessed life. Would it not be a great discredit to us if we held these adversities, esteemed so highly by the Lord, in lower regard than the fleeting pleasures of this world, which dissipate like smoke? Therefore, since Scripture comforts us in the face of every disgrace and calamity endured for the defense of righteousness, we exhibit ingratitude if we do not bear them with patience and a light heart, especially since this type of cross is more suitable for the faithful than all others. Christ desires to be glorified through these challenges, as stated by St. Peter [1 Peter 4:12–14].

Nevertheless, God does not demand that we find such unbridled joy in adversity that all traces of sorrow are eradicated. Indeed, the patience of the saints in their trials would lose its significance if they were devoid of sorrow and anxiety when faced with affliction. Furthermore, if poverty were not harsh and bitter for them, if they did not endure torment during illness, if they did not experience

disgrace, and if death did not evoke fear, what strength or restraint would there be in despising these things? Each of these adversities carries a natural bitterness, which naturally pierces the hearts of all. Therefore, the strength of a faithful person is revealed when, despite experiencing profound sorrow, they persevere and triumph through their struggles. Patience is showcased when, driven by these same emotions, they are restrained by the fear of God as if by a bridle, preventing them from descending into indecency. Joy becomes evident when, wounded by sadness and pain, they find solace in the spiritual comfort of God. This battle against the natural feelings of sorrow, which the faithful endure while practicing patience and restraint, is aptly described by St. Paul: "We endure tribulation in all things, but we are not in distress. We endure poverty, but we are not destitute. We endure persecution, but we are not abandoned. We are as if crushed, but we do not perish" [2 Corinthians 4:8–9].

It should be understood that bearing the cross patiently does not imply complete insensitivity or the absence of pain, as was madly portrayed by the Stoic philosophers in times past. They envisioned a person of great fortitude as one devoid of human emotions, unaffected by adversity or prosperity, sadness or joy, essentially akin to a lifeless stone. However, their lofty wisdom found no practical application in reality. Moreover, some Christians today hold uncivilized views, deeming it a vice not only to sigh and weep but also to experience sadness and anxiety. These erroneous beliefs often stem from idle individuals who engage in speculation rather than productive work, leading to the creation of such fantasies. In contrast, we must disassociate from such rigid philosophies, which our Lord Jesus Christ not only condemned through His teachings but also by His example. He wept and mourned His own sorrows as well as out of compassion for others, and He did not instruct His disciples otherwise. He forewarned them, saying, "The world will rejoice, and

you will be sorrowful; it will laugh, and you will weep" [John 16:20]. To prevent any misjudgment, He proclaimed that "those who weep are blessed" [Matthew 5:4]. This should come as no surprise, for if every tear were deemed unworthy, what would be our perception of the Lord Jesus, from whose body drops of blood were squeezed? If all forms of fearfulness were labeled as unbelief, how would we regard the awe that He experienced? If all sadness were to displease us, how could we justify His confession that "His soul was sad to the point of death" [Matthew 26:38]?

These words are offered to uplift the spirits of all those with good hearts, preventing them from succumbing to despair. They should not abandon their pursuit of patience even when they are not entirely free from the natural feelings of sorrow. In truth, God does not expect us to attain a joy that eradicates every trace of sorrow, as the patience of the saints amidst their crosses would be meaningless if they were devoid of the innate feelings of sorrow and anxiety. Consequently, let those who perceive patience as insensitivity and believe that true strength entails the absence of feeling, be disheartened and ceaseless in their quest for true patience. On the contrary, Scripture celebrates the saints for their endurance when confronted with the harshness of their afflictions, yet they remain unbroken and unconquered. When pierced by bitterness, they maintain spiritual joy, and when afflicted by anxiety, they continue to breathe while rejoicing in God's comfort [2 Corinthians 1:4–7]. Thus, we find within their hearts a contradiction: their natural senses may recoil in fear and dread when confronted with adversity, yet their sense of piety compels them to obey God's will in the face of these difficulties. Jesus Christ articulated this contradiction to St. Peter, stating, "When you were young, you girded yourself as you pleased, and walked where you pleased; when you are old, you will be girded and led where you do not want to go" [John 21:18]. It is

improbable that, given the need to glorify God through his death, St. Peter was compelled against his will. Otherwise, his martyrdom would hold little praise. Nonetheless, despite willingly and joyfully presenting himself in obedience to God's command, St. Peter, in his humanity, grappled with a dual will. When contemplating the cruel death he was to endure, he felt fear and horror and would have preferred to escape it. Conversely, when recognizing that he was called to this fate by God's divine decree, he offered himself willingly and even joyously, treading under foot all fear.

To become true disciples of Christ, we must cultivate hearts filled with reverence and obedience to God. Such hearts have the power to tame and subdue all contrary emotions, aligning them with God's divine will. With this foundation, we can endure even the most profound tribulations while maintaining unwavering patience. Adversities invariably carry a weight of severity that gnaws at our souls. When illness strikes, we groan and long for health; in the face of poverty, confusion and worry besiege us. Disgrace, scorn, and insults cut deeply into our hearts. The loss of a loved one naturally evokes tears. Yet, in the midst of these tribulations, we continually return to one resolute conclusion: "Nonetheless, God has ordained this, so let us follow His will." This reflection, particularly when sorrow, tears, and groaning threaten to consume us, serves as our guiding light, leading our hearts to bear these burdens with joyful endurance.

Distinguishing Christian patience from philosophical patience hinges upon a crucial understanding. Few philosophers have ascended to the heights of comprehending that afflictions are instruments wielded by God's hand, necessitating our obedience to His divine will. However, even those who have grasped this concept offer no further explanation beyond its sheer necessity. But isn't that akin to

acknowledging that we must submit to God simply because resistance would be futile? If obedience to God were merely a product of necessity, we might cease to obey Him when we perceive an opportunity to escape His will. In contrast, Scripture beckons us to contemplate God's will differently. It beckons us to recognize, first and foremost, His righteousness and justice, followed by His profound concern for our salvation. Christian teachings guide us thus: whether faced with poverty, exile, imprisonment, insult, sickness, the loss of loved ones, or any other adversity, we must acknowledge that none of these events occurs without God's will and providence. Moreover, we must understand that God acts with impeccable justice in all these matters. Why? Do not our daily transgressions warrant chastisement far more severe and rigorous than what we endure? Is it not fitting for our flesh to be tempered and taught obedience, thereby preventing it from straying recklessly, according to its base nature? Are God's righteousness and truth not deserving of our willingness to endure suffering for them? If we perceive God's justice in all our afflictions, then we cannot grumble or rebel without committing sin. This is not the cold refrain of philosophers, who declare, "We must submit because it is necessary." Instead, it is a vibrant and potent exhortation: "We must obey because resisting is unlawful, we must have patience because impatience signifies obstinacy against God's justice."

Furthermore, we must recognize that God, as the Father of mercy, comforts us by affirming that, in afflicting us with the cross, He is working for our salvation. If tribulations serve a salutary purpose, why should we not receive them with a peaceful and grateful heart? Thus, by enduring them patiently, we do not merely yield to necessity but acquiesce for our own benefit. These reflections, I assert, will work to enlarge our hearts with spiritual joy even as they are compressed by the natural weight of the cross. This, in turn,

leads to thanksgiving—a sentiment that cannot thrive without joy. Given that thanksgiving and the praise of the Lord can only emanate from a joyful and cheerful heart and must not be obstructed by worldly concerns, it is evident how necessary it is to temper the bitterness of the cross with spiritual joy.

Regardless of the nature of the tribulations we face, we must always keep a specific goal in mind: to learn the art of disdaining the present life, thereby redirecting our focus towards the future life. The Lord, well aware of our tendency to harbor a blind and animalistic love for this world, employs compelling reasoning to draw us away from this perilous attachment. Each one of us claims to aspire to heavenly immortality throughout our lives, striving to attain it. We are ashamed to be inferior to the beasts in any regard; our condition would be no better than theirs if we did not anticipate eternity after death. Yet, if we scrutinize the counsel, deliberation, endeavors, and actions of each individual, we discover nothing but a fixation on earthly matters. This lamentable insensitivity arises from the blinding allure of worldly riches, honors, and power, obscuring our understanding and limiting our vision. Our hearts, consumed by greed, ambition, and other corrupt desires, cling so ardently to these worldly pursuits that they can hardly lift their gaze heavenward. Finally, our entire being becomes enveloped and captivated by carnal pleasures, seeking happiness exclusively on this earthly plane.

To counteract this peril, the Lord imparts to His servants an awareness of the vanity of the present life and exposes them to various forms of suffering continually. By disrupting the tranquility of this life and subjecting it to wars, conflicts, robberies, and other adversities, He reminds us not to anticipate peace and repose in the earthly realm. If we become overly attached to the empty allure of wealth or find contentment in our material possessions, He may

subject us to poverty—be it through infertile lands, fire, or other means—or keep us in a moderate state. To prevent us from indulging excessively in marital joys, He might place us with difficult, incompatible spouses or bestow upon us wayward children to humble us. Alternatively, He may test us by taking our loved ones from us. Even in moments of gentle treatment, the Lord never allows us to become arrogant or overly self-assured. He warns us through illnesses and perils, underscoring the fragility and transience of these earthly blessings, which are all subject to death. Thus, we gain tremendous insight from the discipline of the cross: that when considered in isolation, this present life is fraught with unrest, troubles, and utter wretchedness. There is no inherent happiness to be found in it. Moreover, all the worldly goods we cherish are fleeting, insecure, frivolous, and laden with countless miseries. Consequently, we reach a profound conclusion: that in this life, we should expect nothing but tribulation, while reserving our hope and aspiration for the eternal reward in the life to come. It is undeniable that our hearts will never genuinely incline toward longing, meditating upon, and preparing for the future life unless they are first weaned from an affection for earthly existence.

There exists no middle ground between two stark extremes: we must neither despise the earthly realm nor become ensnared in its excessive allure. Thus, if we harbor any genuine concern for our immortal souls, we must diligently strive to unshackle ourselves from the wicked snares that bind us to this world. Yet, the present life weaves a potent spell, replete with enticing pleasures and an enchanting facade that beckons us towards its seductive embrace. Our daily task, therefore, is to step back, hour by hour, resisting the allurements that could deceive us and ensnare us in their beguiling charms.

Consider this: What would become of us if we were to bask eternally in uninterrupted bliss within this temporal existence? It is when we are incessantly pricked by the thorns of life's trials that we are, perhaps, most effectively awakened to confront our own wretchedness. This perception, that human life is akin to fleeting shadows or ephemeral smoke, is not limited to scholars but is also embedded in the common wisdom of the masses. The recognition of life's transience is echoed in many a poignant saying.

Nevertheless, there is no aspect of our existence that we neglect more, or remember less, than the temporality of life itself. We go about our endeavors as if we were establishing an everlasting kingdom here on earth. It is only when we stand amidst the graves of the departed or traverse cemetery grounds that we may, albeit momentarily, contemplate the fragility of our own existence. Even then, these contemplations may fail to evoke a profound response. When they do, it is often a fleeting, transient philosophy that dissipates as soon as we turn away, leaving no lasting imprint upon our consciousness. We swiftly forget not only death but also the very concept of our own mortality, as though we had never encountered it. We then revert to a sense of security and a deluded confidence in our presumed earthly immortality. On occasion, someone may remind us of the ancient adage that a human being lives but for a day, and we might assent to it, albeit without much contemplation. The notion of living here perpetually remains firmly entrenched in our hearts. Who can deny the pressing need for us to be not only cautioned but also unequivocally convinced, through numerous experiences, of the inherent wretchedness of the human condition with respect to worldly existence? Even when conviction strikes, it scarcely deters us from esteeming this life as the ultimate source of happiness. If the Lord must educate us through such means, then it is our solemn duty to heed His exhortations and admonishments.

These divine interventions serve to awaken us from our apathy, compelling us to despise the world while earnestly aspiring to meditate upon and prepare for the life that awaits us beyond.

Nonetheless, the faithful must cultivate a form of disdain for the present life that does not engender hatred for it or ingratitude toward God. Although this life abounds with countless miseries, it is rightfully counted among God's blessings, to be cherished rather than disdained. Consequently, if we fail to discern any aspect of God's grace within this earthly realm, we stand guilty of profound ingratitude. In particular, this life should serve as a testimony to the Lord's benevolence, for it is entirely devoted to advancing our salvation. Before unveiling the full inheritance of immortal glory, the Lord desires to reveal Himself to us as a Father through smaller blessings, the daily provisions bestowed by His hand. Thus, since this life serves as a pathway to understanding God's goodness, we would be remiss to regard it as devoid of any inherent good. Rather, we ought to cultivate a sense of gratitude and affection, recognizing it as a gift of divine benevolence that should not be spurned. Even without the testimony of Scripture (though we have it in abundance), nature itself impels us to thank God, who has created and placed us in this world, sustains us within it, and provides us with all necessary sustenance. Moreover, our gratitude should be amplified when we consider that God is preparing us here on earth for the glory of His eternal kingdom. He has ordained that those who shall be crowned in heaven must first contend on earth, triumphing only after they have surmounted the trials of this spiritual warfare.

Another compelling reason to be thankful is that, in this life, we begin to savor the sweetness of God's kindness through His benevolent provisions. This taste kindles our hope and desire for the complete revelation of these blessings. Once we firmly grasp the idea

that earthly life is a gift of divine mercy, for which we are indebted to God and for which we must express our gratitude, it becomes evident that we ought to transfer our affections from an inordinate love of this life to an ardent longing for the life that awaits us in heaven.

Indeed, it is conceded that those who, devoid of God's light and the true faith, perceived our supreme good as never being born, with the second good being an expeditious death, may have held a semblance of truth within their limited human understanding. For as pagans, what could they discern in this earthly life other than stark poverty and dread? Therefore, it is not without cause that the Scythian people wept at the birth of their offspring and celebrated with feasts upon the passing of their kin. Yet, they gleaned no true benefit from these practices, for lacking the true doctrine of faith, they failed to recognize how that which is intrinsically neither happy nor desirable could be transformed into a source of salvation for the faithful. Their ultimate conclusion regarding this life, therefore, was one of despair. Hence, in assessing this transient existence, let the servants of God steadfastly fix their gaze upon this goal: recognizing the inherent misery it contains, let them be increasingly inclined to contemplate and prepare for the future and eternal life. Upon comparing the two, not only shall they relinquish their attachment to the former, but they shall also disdain it, assigning it little worth when juxtaposed with the latter. For if heaven is our homeland, what, then, is this earthly realm but an exile and banishment? If departing from this world equates to entering into life, what is this world but a sepulcher? Remaining here, then, is akin to entombment. If liberation from this mortal coil signifies freedom, what else can the body be but a prison? And if our ultimate felicity rests in the enjoyment of God's presence, is it not wretchedness to be bereft of it? Until we depart from this world, we are distant from God, as if in

exile. Thus, when compared to the heavenly realm, this earthly life can, without a doubt, be despised and likened to refuse.

It is undeniable that we ought never to harbor hatred for this life, except inasmuch as it ensnares us in sin—a charge that should not be attributed to life itself, but rather to the sinful inclinations of our hearts. Nonetheless, we should grow weary or disquieted by our longing to witness the culmination of this life's narrative, yet we must do so in a manner that leaves us prepared to live in accordance with God's will. In our earthly tribulations, we ought to remain far from murmuring or impatience, recognizing this life as a station where the Lord has placed us, a station in which we must abide until He calls us forth. Indeed, Saint Paul lamented being detained, "bound in the prison of his body," for a duration longer than he might have desired, and he ardently longed for freedom (Romans 7:24). Nevertheless, he affirmed that he was ready for either outcome, life or death, acknowledging that he was a debtor to God, obligated to glorify His name, whether through life or death. Consequently, it falls upon the Lord to determine what serves His glory. Thus, if it is fitting for us to live for Him and die for Him, we should relinquish both our life and our death to His good pleasure. However, we should always desire our own death, continuously contemplating and preparing for it, while regarding this mortal life with disdain when compared to the future immortality, and being willing to forsake it whenever the Lord deems it time, for it keeps us in bondage to sin.

Unfortunately, this concept appears monstrous to some who profess to be Christians. Instead of desiring death, they are seized by an unfounded terror, quaking at its mere mention, as if it were the greatest calamity that could befall them. It is understandable that the natural response is one of fear and trepidation when confronted with

the separation of body and soul through death. However, it is intolerable that, as Christians, we should lack the inner light capable of conquering and dispelling this fear with a greater comfort. Consider this: When we ponder the dissolution of this fragile and feeble vessel, susceptible to vice and corruption, with the promise of its eventual restoration in perfect glory—steadfast, incorruptible, and celestial—does not faith compel us to ardently desire what nature instinctively flees from and finds terrifying? Contemplating death as the journey back from a wretched exile to our heavenly homeland, should this not provide us with immeasurable consolation? Nevertheless, some may argue that all creatures possess an innate desire for continued existence. To this, I concede the point. Therefore, I maintain that we should aspire to future immortality, where we will attain a permanence unattainable on earth. Is it not reasonable that even animals and inanimate objects, with some semblance of awareness of their vanity and corruption, eagerly await the day of judgment to be liberated from these constraints (Romans 8:19)? In contrast, should we, who possess not only the light of nature but also the illumination of God's Spirit, remain bound to earthly decay when the prospect of spiritual emancipation beckons?

However, it is not my intention to engage in a protracted argument against such pervasive obstinacy. I have stated from the outset that I do not intend to look into each point with formal exhortations. To those with hearts filled with apprehension, I would advise reading Saint Cyprian's treatise, aptly titled "On Mortality." If this does not suffice, perhaps they ought to consult the philosophers, in whom they will find a contempt for death that ought to put their own misgivings to shame. Nonetheless, we must adhere to the adage that "none have truly profited in Christ's school unless they eagerly anticipate the day of death and the final resurrection." Saint Paul identifies all the faithful by this very mark (Titus 2:13). The

Scriptures have a habit of reminding us of this when they seek to inspire joy within us: "Rejoice," proclaims the Lord, "and lift up your heads on high, for your redemption is near" (Matthew 5:12; Luke 21:28). What manner of statement is this, I beseech you? That which Jesus Christ ordained as a source of rejoicing engenders in us only sadness and fear? If this is the case, why do we take pride in being His disciples? Let us realign our perspectives with a more wholesome outlook. Despite the passions of our blind and irrational flesh that may war against us, let us not hesitate to anticipate the coming of the Lord with great joy. Let us not merely desire it but also groan and sigh for it. For He will come as our Redeemer, ushering us into His glorious inheritance after rescuing us from this abyss of afflictions and misery.

While they dwell upon the earth, all the faithful must consider themselves as sheep destined for the slaughterhouse, that they may be conformed to their Head, Jesus Christ (Romans 8:36). They would languish in despondency unless they elevate their thoughts above worldly matters and transcend their focus on present concerns. In doing so, when they witness the wicked flourishing in riches and honors, experiencing tranquility and indulging in every desire, reveling in pleasures and pomp; when they themselves are mistreated by the wicked, enduring insults, pillage, or various forms of abuse, they will still find solace in the face of such adversities. They shall always hold in their sight the final day, when they know the Lord shall gather His faithful, granting them repose in His kingdom, wiping away their tears, adorning them with glory, clothing them in joy, satisfying them with the infinite sweetness of His pleasures, and exalting them to the highest realms. In summary, He shall make them partakers in His own happiness. On that day, the wicked who were exalted on earth will suffer extreme disgrace. Their pleasures shall be transformed into horrendous torments, their

laughter and joy into weeping and gnashing of teeth, their repose shall be disrupted by terrible anguish of conscience. In summary, they shall be cast into eternal fire, subjected to the very faithful they had wickedly maltreated. Behold, this is our singular comfort! If this hope were to be extinguished, we would be left with naught but desolation or the empty allure of frivolous pleasures, which shall ultimately lead to our destruction. The psalmist himself confessed that he wavered and felt his feet slipping when he focused excessively on the present happiness of the wicked. He could not find firm footing until he turned his mind to contemplate God's sanctuary (Psalm 73:2–3, 17), signifying the ultimate fate of both the virtuous and the wicked.

In summation, I declare in a single word: the cross of Christ shall ultimately triumph in the hearts of the faithful against the forces of the devil, the flesh, sin, death, and the wicked, provided they turn their gaze towards the power of His resurrection.

By the same lesson, Scripture imparts guidance on the righteous utilization of earthly resources, a matter not to be overlooked when considering the proper conduct of our lives. As we are bound to exist in this world, it follows that we must employ the means necessary for sustaining life. We are even compelled to partake in those things that serve pleasure more than mere necessity. However, we must exercise discernment and impose certain limits upon ourselves to ensure the purity and wholesomeness of our conscience, both in fulfilling our needs and indulging in permissible pleasures. God imparts to us this boundary and measure, teaching His servants that the present life is akin to a pilgrimage toward the heavenly kingdom. As we are but sojourners on this earth, it becomes evident that we must employ its blessings in a manner that advances, rather than hinders, our journey.

Given the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in this matter, and the peril of veering toward either extreme, it is crucial to provide clear guidance enabling individuals to resolve this issue with certainty. There have been individuals of great holiness and virtue who, in observing the propensity of human intemperance to rapidly spiral out of control, and with the noble intention of rectifying such a grievous failing, advocated for the limited use of material goods—permitting only that which is strictly necessary. While their counsel stemmed from genuine concern, they pursued this approach with excessive rigidity, inadvertently placing a yoke upon consciences heavier than that which God's Word prescribes. Conversely, there exist those who, under the guise of liberty, seek to justify all forms of excess in the consumption of worldly goods, advocating for unbridled freedom of the flesh—a flesh that is already prone to excess. They assume a premise that I do not accept, which posits that we should not impose any regulation on this freedom but instead permit each individual's conscience to determine the lawfulness of their actions. I concede that in this matter, we should not and cannot impose strict formulas and precepts upon consciences. However, given that Scripture provides general principles for the lawful use of these resources, why not align our usage accordingly?

First and foremost, we must firmly grasp that the utilization of God's gifts remains in accordance with His divine order when directed toward the purpose for which He created and destined them. He granted us these gifts for our well-being, not our detriment. Therefore, one's use of these gifts is most apt when aligned with their intended purpose. Contemplating the purpose for which God fashioned food, we discern that it is intended not only for sustenance but also for our delight and comfort. Similarly, in the realm of clothing, God took into account not only necessity but also propriety and decorum. As for plants, trees, and fruits, beyond their practical

uses, He intended to captivate our sight with their beauty and gratify our senses with their fragrance. If this were not the case, the Psalmist would not praise God's provision for the human heart's delight in wine and the radiance that oil bestows (Psalm 104:15). Throughout Scripture, God's kindness is extolled in His creation of these blessings for humanity. Even the inherent qualities of all things reveal how we should take pleasure in them and for what purpose and to what extent. Do we presume that our Lord adorned flowers with such exquisite beauty to please our eyes, without intending for us to derive enjoyment from this sight? Did He bestow upon them such delightful fragrances while forbidding us to revel in their scent? Furthermore, did He not distinguish the colors of these creations so that some possess more grace than others? Did He not infuse gold, silver, ivory, and marble with distinct qualities to render them more precious and noble than other materials and stones? Lastly, did He not bestow upon us many things that we should appreciate without necessarily needing them? Let us rid ourselves of the inhumane philosophy that permits the use of God's creatures only to satisfy our basic needs. Such a philosophy not only unjustly deprives us of the lawful fruit of divine benevolence but also diminishes our human sensibilities, rendering us akin to lifeless blocks of wood.

Conversely, we must not disregard the necessity of tempering the insidious desires of our flesh, which, if left unrestrained, overflow without bound. Furthermore, some, under the pretext of liberty, seek to excuse immoderate indulgence in external goods, granting the flesh unchecked freedom—already prone to excess. It is imperative, then, that we first constrain this liberty according to the following principle: all the blessings we possess were created to elicit acknowledgment of their Author and to magnify His kindness through gratitude. Where, then, is the gratitude if, due to gluttony, one overindulges in food and drink to the point of insensibility,

rendering themselves unfit to serve God or fulfill their calling? How can we truly acknowledge God if our flesh, driven by excessive abundance, incites the mind with its debauchery to the extent that it blinds our ability to distinguish between good and evil? Where is the thanksgiving when, due to ostentation or luxury, we fix our gaze upon the magnificence of our clothing, engendering arrogance and disdain for others? If our display of wealth leads to wantonness, how can we acknowledge our God? The same applies to all other forms of worldly goods. Clearly, reflection already serves to restrain the abuse of God's gifts in some measure.

There exists no more certain or expedient path than to lead one to renounce the allure of this present life and to focus on preparing for the eternal heavenly existence. Two guiding principles naturally follow from this perspective. Firstly, as St. Paul instructs, "those who use this world should not be engrossed in it. For this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:31). Such guidance severs all extravagance in feasting, indulgence in pleasures, excessive ambition, pride, unwarranted discontent, lavish dwellings, extravagant attire, and lifestyle extravagance. Additionally, it reforms all attachments and affections that may distract us from contemplating the heavenly life and adorning our souls with its true virtues. Long ago, Cato wisely stated, "Where there is a great care for elegance, there is great neglect of virtue." Similarly, the old proverb reminds us that "those who spend much time on softening and adorning their bodies seldom concern themselves with their souls." Thus, while the freedom of the faithful in external matters should not be stifled by rigid regulations, it is nevertheless subject to this essential rule: that they engage with the world as sparingly as possible, guarding against excess, empty displays of abundance, and any tendency to become immoderate. They should be vigilant against

allowing worldly possessions to become stumbling blocks instead of sources of aid.

The second guiding principle entails that those who experience poverty must learn to bear their circumstances patiently, without succumbing to overwhelming anxiety. Those who can maintain such moderation have greatly profited in the school of the Lord. Conversely, one who has not learned this lesson can scarcely demonstrate any evidence of being Christ's disciple. For, in addition to the fact that many other vices accompany an attachment to worldly possessions, it is almost always the case that one who cannot endure poverty patiently exhibits a contrary vice when blessed with abundance. In other words, someone who is ashamed of shabby attire will proudly display luxurious clothing when given the opportunity; one who is discontent with a modest meal, tormented by desires for something better, will not exercise restraint when amply supplied with provisions. Similarly, someone who finds it difficult to accept a humble or ordinary position, being vexed and discontented by it, will struggle to avoid pride and arrogance when elevated to positions of honor. Therefore, anyone aspiring to serve God genuinely must follow the example set by the apostle and strive to maintain moderation in times of abundance while exercising patience in times of poverty.

Furthermore, Scripture imparts a third guiding rule to govern our use of earthly possessions, an aspect briefly touched upon when discussing the precepts of love and charity. Scripture reveals that all the blessings bestowed upon us by God's kindness, intended for our benefit, are akin to a trust for which we shall be held accountable (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 12:42-48). Consequently, we must employ them in a manner that continuously reminds us of this reality: we are obligated to provide an account for all that the Lord has entrusted to

our care. Furthermore, we must consider who it is that calls us to render this account—none other than God Himself. He, who so highly esteems self-restraint, moderation, temperance, and modesty, disapproves of all forms of intemperance, pride, ostentation, and vanity. He condones no other mode of use except that which aligns with the measure of love and charity, and He condemns all pleasures that divert the human heart from chastity and purity or dull the intellect.

Additionally, God calls each of us to contemplate our calling in every aspect of our lives. He is well aware of how easily the human mind becomes restless and unfocused, prone to pursuing various interests simultaneously, spurred on by ambition and passion. To prevent us from recklessly wandering through life without purpose or direction, He has established distinctive vocations for each person. These vocations, or callings, serve as our designated stations appointed by God to guide our journey through life. These distinctions are so vital that, in God's eyes, they often influence His judgment more than human reason or philosophy. Although both common people and philosophers may consider the liberation of one's country from tyranny a noble and virtuous act, before God, a private individual who violently opposes a tyrant is unequivocally condemned. However, I shall not linger to provide a comprehensive list of examples.

The crucial point to remember is that we must regard our vocation as a fundamental and guiding principle to navigate our lives wisely. Failing to adhere to this principle will hinder our ability to fulfill our duties adequately. While outward appearances may lead some to perceive certain actions as praiseworthy, one who has not embraced their vocation will discover that their deeds are not accepted at God's throne. Moreover, if we do not rely on our vocation as a constant

guide, the various aspects of our life will lack cohesion and purpose. Therefore, those who strive to govern their lives according to this principle will find their affairs well-ordered. Furthermore, we receive a unique consolation: no task is so menial that it does not shine brightly before God and hold great value, provided that we fulfill our vocation within it.

THE END.