

Pro Pastor

A JOURNAL OF GRACE BIBLE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

VOL. 5, NO. 1 | FALL 2026

ROMAN
CATHOLICISM



MORMONISM



The Apologetics *Issue*

EASTERN
ORTHODOXY



JEHOVAH'S
WITNESSES





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**GRACE BIBLE
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY**

Editor's Introduction

This issue of *Pro Pastor* highlights one of the unique theological distinctives of Grace Bible Theological Seminary—its emphasis on presuppositional apologetics (from the Greek word *apologia*, “defense”). Such an approach to defending the faith focuses on looking at the foundational assumptions that any worldview, religion, or philosophy begins with in order to analyze key differences between that thought system and biblical Christianity.

Presuppositional apologetics starts with the affirmation that God has spoken authoritatively and sufficiently in the Christian Scriptures, providing us with a theological system of truth. This method of defending the faith then goes on to demonstrate the impossibility of any opposing system. Presuppositionalism maintains that there is no such thing as neutral reasoning since everyone starts with a bias. But the key is having the *correct* bias, and the inspired Scriptures provide us with such a mindset (2 Tim 3:16–17). Since all people come into the world with cloudy spiritual vision, however, the Spirit of God must enter the heart of a man and do a renovating work from within so that the one who is blind can properly see (1 Cor 2:6–16).

Our team of apologists in this issue are not afraid of getting into the details and minutiae of opposing religious viewpoints. Some of them address certain key matters in painstaking detail. Yet they do so by starting with the conviction that God has truly spoken in his Word and by maintaining that a good defense must start with a solid offense. A positive presentation of biblical Christianity is always foundational to any subsequent negative critique. That is to say, truth must first be proclaimed before doctrinal error can be perceived.

In the present issue of our journal, James R. White analyzes the validity of certain Eastern Orthodox theologians’ affirmation, in keeping with their authoritative Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea II), that the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (CD) originated from the pen of Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17:34) in the first century AD. If such a conclusion can be called into question, it presents a major blow to the concept of sacred tradition in Eastern Orthodoxy. Samuel S. Farag also addresses Eastern Orthodoxy using the Confession of Dositheus and other traditional documents to show how it departs from the biblical gospel.

Meanwhile, Taylor Walls provides tips for how evangelicals can share the good news of salvation with Roman Catholics. Aaron Shafovaloff presents a case for using a specific New Testament text, Romans 4:4–8, to talk with Mormons (Latter-day Saints) about salvation by grace alone. And finally, Eli Ayala and the present writer show how foundational issues of authority are always central to apologetic encounters, especially with Jehovah’s Witnesses.

How do evangelical Christians share their faith and defend their beliefs against Eastern Orthodox proponents, Roman Catholics, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses? How do they tell the difference between what is true and what is *almost* true? The following pages seek to help evangelicals give a reason for the hope that they profess (1 Pet 3:15)—for only those who love the truth and reject the lie will be saved (2 Thess 2:10).

JEFF MOORE
Editor

The Missing Corpus: A Response to the Key Problem with the Nikitopoulos- Truglia Theory

by James R. White

INTRODUCTION

The large majority of evangelicals have never heard of Dionysius the Areopagite. Even if they have carefully read Luke the physician's history of the early church in the book of Acts, they have only encountered a single reference that might not strike them as overly relevant. Luke, after narrating Paul's sermon at the Areopagus (Mars Hill), briefly comments, "But certain men joined him [Paul], having believed, amongst whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others together with them" (Acts 17:34).¹ That's it. That is all we have. We hear nothing more about Dionysius in sacred Scripture. Hence, most believers can be forgiven if this obscure convert from Paul's brief sermon does not strike them as immensely important.

But this individual marks one of the divides between evangelicals and those in other traditions. A few Roman Catholics, who read

more fully in their own history, might recognize the name, not because of this text in Acts, but because there is a body of writing known as the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (CD) that played a very important role in the development of certain elements of Christian theology starting in the middle of the sixth century AD.

The famous doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, Thomas Aquinas, was deeply impacted by the CD. In fact, depending on how one counts references and citations, Aquinas refers to, cites, or alludes to the CD over 500 times in the *Summa Theologiae* alone, and many more times in his other writings. The CD is probably the third most-referenced source in Aquinas's writings, behind only Augustine and Aristotle. This fact, of course, means the CD had a massive impact in Western theology after Aquinas. In particular, the mysticism of the later period was significantly influenced by the apophatic theology (i.e., theology by negation) of the CD.

¹ All translations of the Greek text of Scripture in this article are the author's own unless otherwise noted.

As important as the *CD* is in Western church history, it is even more important when looking at Eastern Orthodoxy. One of the chief architects of Eastern Orthodox theology, liturgy, and practice was Maximus the Confessor (580–662 AD).

As Mark Edwards puts it, “Without the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, there would have been no Maximus the Confessor, no Eriugena, no Aquinas, no Cusanus, and no Ficino as we now know them.”²

The impact of the *CD* on the history and theology of Eastern Orthodoxy is massive—far deeper and more definitional than its impact on Roman Catholicism and the West, even despite its influence on Aquinas. With the rise in interest in Eastern Orthodoxy over the past decade in the West, it is important for historically minded evangelicals to be aware of Dionysius and the *CD*.

BUT WHAT IS THE *CORPUS DIONYSIACUM*?

The *Corpus Dionysiacum* is a collection of four treatises and ten letters that appeared in the Christian world around the late fifth or early sixth century AD, claiming to be the work of Dionysius the Areopagite from Acts 17. Its purported connection to the Apostle Paul gave the collection enormous authority for over a millennium. The problem, though, as scholars eventually recognized, is that the writings are anything but first-century. They are saturated with the vocabulary and ideas of late Neoplatonic philosophy, particularly the school of Proclus, who died in 485 AD, which makes their actual composition fall somewhere around 500 AD by an unknown author we now call Pseudo-Dionysius.

So what do these texts actually say? At the heart of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is a theological paradox: God is absolutely beyond everything—beyond being, beyond knowledge, beyond any name we could give him—and yet the entire created order

flows out from him as from an inexhaustible source. Everything in creation strains back toward him as its ultimate goal. This double movement, outward and upward, structures all of Pseudo-Dionysius’s thought.

The four treatises that comprise part of the *CD* each explore a dimension of this vision. *The Divine Names* (DN) works through the scriptural titles applied to God—Good, Being, Life, Wisdom, and so on—and explains what they can and cannot tell us. *The Mystical Theology* (MT) is a short, dense text arguing that, in the end, even our most exalted affirmations about God must be stripped away in silence. *The Celestial Hierarchy* (CH) maps the nine orders of angels as a cascading structure of illumination and mediation between God and creation. And *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (EH) does the same for the church’s sacramental and ministerial life on earth, reading liturgy as a participation in the angelic ascent toward God.

The ten letters are not as central as the treatises themselves but still provide an interesting addition to the *CD*. Among the ten letters, some of them are addressed to Gaius, Dorotheus, and Sosipater, and two are sent to well-known individuals, John the Apostle, and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna.

Paul Rorem states, “Christian writers of all times and places honored this mysterious corpus as apostolic and therefore highly authoritative for almost fourteen hundred years,” noting that even “the first generation to ‘discover’ his supposed writings, around 530 AD, found them puzzling.” He adds, “The initial sceptics [*sic*], such as the Chalcedonian Hypatius of Ephesus, were quickly forgotten.”³ These works created a huge impact upon the development of theology and practice right as the church moved into the medieval period.

² Mark Edwards, Dimitrios Pallis, and Georgios Steiris, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 21.

³ Paul Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 4–5.

What needs to be understood is that the *CD* presents an entire array of theological and ecclesiastical concepts that, for the vast majority of scholars, even in Roman Catholicism, came into existence many centuries after the days of Paul and Dionysius. The liturgy described in the *CD* is complex and contains many elements unknown not only to the New Testament but also to any other early Christian writing. The theology that underlies the veneration of icons (“iconodulia”), which would precipitate the iconoclastic controversy seven hundred years in the future, is at least in seed form in the *CD*. A complex hierarchical ecclesiology is laid out fully in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. This is vital, because much work has been done delineating the development of ecclesiastical offices in those early centuries, which the *CD* would completely overthrow if it were proven to be a first- or early-second-century AD document.⁴

In the *CD*, there is even a reference to the Dormition of Mary, another concept that, outside of the *CD*, is dated nearly half a millennium after the time of the apostles.⁵ As a result, the modern consensus of scholarship for at least a hundred years has been that the *CD* was written sometime around the year 500 AD and became tremendously popular, quickly exploding into the consciousness of the Eastern Church around 530 AD. For over a century, this has been the consensus among scholars of all denominations and backgrounds. Much of this conclusion came from two scholars, Hugo Koch and Josef

Stiglmayr, who, at the end of the nineteenth century, published works that determined the future direction of all studies of the *CD*.⁶

It is not just that the *CD* would be a massive anachronism if written by a first-century AD author. Scholars have invested a great deal of time in documenting the connections between the *CD* and later Greek philosophical writers, concluding that, in light of the lack of any evidence that the *CD* existed as a body of literature in the first five centuries of the Christian era, the *CD* is borrowing from, and in a sense Christianizing, later Neoplatonic writers.

This brings us to an important point to understand. With few scholars as exceptions (like the above-mentioned Hypatius of Ephesus), the *CD* was accepted as an ancient and nigh-unto-apostolic document for over a thousand years. This reality cannot be understated, for if one truly believed these were the words of a first-generation convert of the Apostle Paul, his testimony to everything he addresses would be given weight second only to Scripture itself. If, however, the work came five hundred years later, the weight of the testimony would be significantly diminished.

The work of Koch and Stiglmayr has been incorporated into all modern scholarship on the topic of the *CD*. Most important in the modern works would be that of Paul Rorem,⁷ in addition to the large compilation of articles in a handbook published by Oxford University Press.⁸ The

⁴ A theme throughout our study will be the massive amount of anachronism the *CD* introduces into church history if it is treated as a nigh-unto-apostolic document. For priests, the *CD* uses *ιερείς* (*hiereis*), sometimes also termed the *τελεστική τάξις* (the “perfecting” or “completing” order/rank) to denote their sacramental-administering function. For monks, the *CD* uses *θεραπευτική τάξις* (the “therapeutic order”) as the technical hierarchical designation, though the more common term *μονάστης/μονάχος* also appears, with *θεραπευτής* (*therapeutēs*, “attendant” or “servant”) underlying the *therapeutike* designation. But why would the *CD* use these terms when documents written *after* the *CD* (assuming its early date) show no knowledge of such complexity?

⁵ The Dormition of Mary is an annual feast that celebrates the purported bodily assumption of Mary, the mother of Jesus, into heaven.

⁶ H. Koch, “Proklos als Quelle des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Bösen,” *Philologus* 54 (1895), 438–54; J. Stiglmayr, “Der Neuplatoniker Proklos als Vorlage des sogenannten Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Übel,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895), 253–73, 721–48; H. Koch, *Pseudo-Dionysius in seinen Beziehungen zum Neuplatonismus und zum Mysterienwesen: Eine litterarhistorische Untersuchung* (Mainz, Germany: Kirchheim, 1900).

⁷ Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁸ Edwards, Pallis, and Steiris, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*.

dependence of the *CD* on such writers as Iamblichus (245–345 AD) and Proclus (412–485 AD) is acknowledged in the majority of works addressing the dating and origination of the corpus. But it is this accepted scholarly narrative that Eastern Orthodox scholars Evangelos Nikitopoulos and Patrick Craig Truglia seek to dispute.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Sometime in 2025 word began to spread about “new research,” proving that icon veneration could be found in the first century AD. Given the rise in apologetic interest in Eastern Orthodoxy, I was sent links to videos that had appeared in 2024, making the bold claim that the Dionysian Corpus is, in fact, first-century, and that Dionysius was the author. These videos were being shared by Eastern Orthodox advocates on social media as well.

Upon obtaining two articles authored by Evangelos Nikitopoulos and Patrick Craig Truglia (hereafter abbreviated as N-T),⁹ I recognized both the importance of the claim as well as the central pillar of its argumentation. My response focuses upon these writers’ presentation from a presuppositional perspective, identifying the foundational assertion that, in fact, fails upon examination, leaving the rest of the presentation untenable.

The N-T argument in favor of the early dating of the *CD* assumes a basic assertion, namely, that the *CD* existed, that it was available as a known body of text, and that linguistic, conceptual, and theological parallels to it can therefore be meaningfully drawn. This, of course, is not controversial after, say, the year 500 AD, when everyone admits the *CD* would have existed and would have begun circulation. But the N-T theory places it minimally hundreds of years earlier and identifies it as likely originating in the first century AD itself.

The N-T case proceeds along four primary fronts: (1) two early writers, specifically, Gregory Nazianzus and Jerome, cite or allude to the *CD*, establishing that it existed well before Proclus, who lived in the fifth century AD; (2) the direction of literary dependence between Proclus and the *CD* runs from Proclus to Dionysius, not the other way around; (3) an asserted set of Alexandrian linguistic and conceptual parallels places the *CD* at least in the second and third centuries AD; and (4) various internal details of the *CD* can be argued against the hypothesis of late forgery. The authors conclude that the “weight of evidence decisively points to the authenticity of the *CD*.”¹⁰

The present article does not intend to respond to those portions of the N-T thesis that can only be evaluated if the *CD* actually existed prior to 500 AD. Such a response would be almost book-length in size. There are capable scholars who have spent careers on the Proclus question, on the Alexandrian philosophical milieu, and on the internal theology of the *CD*, among other topics. This response does not attempt to summarize all of that literature nor to adjudicate every linguistic parallel N-T adduce. Instead, it aims at what is logically prior to all of those discussions: the question of existence, attestation, and documentation.

If the *CD* was produced in the first century AD, known among Christians in Alexandria by the second century, circulated sufficiently to leave conceptual traces in Aristides, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, quoted (on N-T’s reading) by Gregory of Nazianzus in 380 AD and Jerome in 393 AD, and constituted so remarkable a document that a fifth-century Neoplatonist drew upon it for his philosophical system—then where is its historical trail? Where are the references to it in early church history? Why does the most

⁹ Evangelos Nikitopoulos and Patrick Craig Truglia, “In Defense of the Authenticity of the Dionysian Corpus (I),” *Revue Thomiste* 105, no. 1 (2024): 5–21; Evangelos Nikitopoulos and Patrick Craig Truglia, “In Defense of the Authenticity of the Dionysian Corpus (II),” *Revue Thomiste* 106, no. 2 (2024): 5–33. Using an abbreviation for the authors’ combined last names, Nikitopoulos and Truglia, subsequent citations will be given as N-T I and N-T II, respectively, and page references will be made to the free-standing PDFs in circulation, not to the published journal versions, which are far less readily available to readers who are not professional academicians.

¹⁰ N-T I, 7.

comprehensive and careful chronicler of early Christian literature (Eusebius), writing at the height of the corpus's alleged circulation, say nothing whatsoever about it? And why, when the *CD* finally surfaces in the historical record in an indisputable way, does the very context of that surfacing trigger an accusation of novelty?

These questions are not peripheral. They are central, ones that must be answered before any argument from verbal parallels can be considered. N-T acknowledge them briefly, treat them as arguments from silence (and therefore dismissible), and move past them. However, the present response argues that these questions cannot be dismissed. The silence in this case is not the silence of a generic argument from ignorance but is rather the silence of non-existence, and there is supporting data to prove this assertion.

THE EUSEBIAN SILENCE

Eusebius of Caesarea completed his *Ecclesiastical History* around 313 AD, with earlier recensions going back at least to the 290s. He is, by any measure, the most important early Christian bibliographer and literary historian. His project was to document the chain of apostolic succession, the literary production of church leaders, and the battle against heresy. He knew and documented an enormous range of writings, including works of disputed authenticity. He discusses the letters of Paul, the question of the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the status of the Apocalypse of John, and the authenticity of various Ignatian letters. His work is a vital link to the earliest centuries of the Christian faith.

Eusebius would have known of a text purportedly written by Dionysius the Areopagite. He knew

who Dionysius was—he records his conversion by Paul (drawing on Acts 17),¹¹ and in *Ecclesiastical History* 4.23.3 he mentions a letter from a different Dionysius, Dionysius of Corinth, to “the Athenians,” calling them back from near apostasy.¹² He was aware of the Athenian church and its claimed apostolic foundation. If a corpus of theological writings—explicitly attributed to the convert and companion of Paul, who then became the first bishop of Athens—had been in circulation in Alexandria for two centuries, Eusebius’s silence about it is not simply an “argument from silence.” It is an argument from the very loud, obvious reality of Eusebius’s extensive research.¹³

N-T’s response to this historical gap is, essentially, to invoke the general unreliability of arguments from silence. The *CD*, they suggest, may have been circulating in a restricted manner and known to insiders and Alexandrian initiates, without achieving the kind of broad ecclesiastical prominence that would have forced itself into Eusebius’s notice. This is the κρυφία παράδοσις gambit—the hidden tradition.¹⁴ The *CD* itself deploys this concept, speaking of knowledge transmitted secretly, beyond the reach of the uninitiated. One can see why this line of reasoning is appealing as a defense. It converts the very absence of evidence into a mark of the text’s authenticity, since the text itself predicts that it would be hidden.

But this claim should be recognized for what it is: an unfalsifiability strategy. If a text’s absence from the record confirms its genuineness by reference to the text’s own claims about secrecy, then no amount of silence can ever count against such claimed authenticity. But this is not a real argument; it is *insulation* from

¹¹Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.4.10–11. Eusebius identifies Dionysius as Paul’s convert at the Areopagus (Acts 17:34) and notes he became the first bishop of Athens.

¹² Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.23.3. The Letter of Dionysius of Corinth to the Athenians is referenced in this passage. Eusebius distinguishes this Dionysius of Corinth from the Areopagite, but the collocation is telling—he knows the Athenian church’s apostolic history quite well.

¹³ Again, Athens was a city Eusebius knew intimately and whose literary content he documented extensively.

¹⁴ The term κρυφία παράδοσις (“hidden tradition”) is employed at multiple points in the *CD*; see, e.g., *Epistula* 9 (to Titus), where Dionysius explicitly discusses the transmission of hierarchical knowledge only to the initiated. For a discussion, see Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 24–30.

argument. Moreover, it sits in deep tension with the actual claim N-T wish to make. They do not argue that the *CD* was a hidden text known only to esoteric circles. They argue it was cited by Gregory of Nazianzus in a public homily delivered at Christmas 380 AD, summarized by Jerome in a polemical treatise against Jovinian, and conceptually echoed by Aristides in his public *Apology* to the Emperor Hadrian. A text that leaves conceptual fingerprints in imperial apologies and public homilies cannot simultaneously be plausibly hidden.¹⁵ This amounts to having one's cake and eating it, too.

The Eusebian silence is therefore not one data point among many. Given Eusebius's comprehensive program, it is the precise location where the *CD* should appear—and it does not.

THE SILENCE IS NOT EUSEBIUS ALONE

It would be one thing if only Eusebius failed to mention the *CD*. The silence is far broader. Consider the following range of figures who, on N-T's own account, were in a position to know of the *CD* and yet say nothing about it that can be verified.

Origen (ca. 185–254 AD). N-T argue that Dionysius's theology resonates with the Alexandrian tradition and that Proclus knew Origen. Origen himself was arguably the most prolific and systematic theological writer of the ante-Nicene period. He produced commentaries on nearly the entire Bible, a systematic theology (*De Principiis*), and an exhaustive anti-pagan apologetic (*Contra Celsum*). His engagement with angelology (the doctrine of angels), divine names, and mystical

theology is extensive. If the *CD* was in circulation in Alexandria in his time, as N-T's theory requires, Origen's silence about it and his failure to cite it even once in his vast output is remarkable to the point of being inexplicable.¹⁶ Imagine having a first-generation-from-the-apostles resource like the *CD* and ... ignoring it completely. Such a reality would be unimaginable.

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215 AD).

N-T argue that the *CD* is engaged in a polemic against the *Clementine Homilies* and that Clement's theological vocabulary overlaps significantly with the *CD*. Clement was himself deeply interested in the question of esoteric tradition—his *Stromateis* is precisely a meditation on the relationship between hidden and public Christian teaching, between gnosis and simple faith. If anyone would have known about, cited, and engaged with a first-century apostolic document articulating a theology of divine hierarchy and mystical union, it was Clement. He cites an enormous variety of texts. His silence about the *CD* is not explained by the κρυφία παράδοσις hypothesis. Clement was himself the custodian of hidden traditions, and he names his sources regularly.¹⁷

The Cappadocians (other than Gregory of Nazianzus, 4th cent. AD). N-T's argument hangs partly on Gregory Nazianzen's reference to a "predecessor" in *Oration* 38. But Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa—equally sophisticated theologians, deeply engaged with questions of apophatic theology, divine names, and mystical ascent—say nothing about the *CD*. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* and *Homilies on the Song of Songs* cover terrain so close to the *CD*'s concerns

¹⁵ See N-T I, 7–10, where the authors lay out the Gregory of Nazianzus argument; see N-T I, 10–12 for remarks on Jerome. See also Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 8–10, for background on early alleged citations and the difficulties of establishing dependence.

¹⁶ Origen's *De Principiis* I.5–8 contains his most systematic treatment of angelology. The absence of any reference to a text attributed to Paul's convert and companion Dionysius—which would have been an obvious foundation for apostolic authority—is conspicuous, given Origen's attempt to root his speculative theology in apostolic tradition.

¹⁷ On Clement of Alexandria's concept of the true Gnostic and his esoteric transmission, see *Stromateis* I.1 and VI.7. That Clement names his sources across the *Stromateis*—even sources he is careful about—makes his silence about an apostolic document on the very themes he treats (divine hiddenness, hierarchy, and mystical knowledge) all the more significant. For the overlap between Clement's theological vocabulary and the *CD*, see N-T II, 180–195, who cite the parallels as evidence for early dating. The present article, in contrast, argues the linguistic overlap equally (and more economically) establishes the *CD*'s literary dependence on the (prior) Alexandrian tradition.

that the silence is striking and, we believe, evidentiary.¹⁸

Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444 AD). N-T note in passing that Cyril employs certain rare words found in the *CD*.¹⁹ If the *CD* was a known and authoritative text in Cyril's Alexandria, why does he not cite it directly and by name? Given Cyril's combative theological temperament, a first-century AD document supporting his positions would have been invaluable.

The pattern here is not coincidental. The *CD* does not gradually fade from prominence like a text whose manuscript tradition was interrupted. It is simply absent—absent from the literary record of every major Christian writer for five hundred years—and then it appears, suddenly, in a polemical context, where its very novelty occasions a challenge to its credentials.

THE *THESAURUS LINGUAE GRAECAE* 500 AD WALL

The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG)²⁰ is a subscription-based, nearly exhaustive online database of ancient Greek literature. It is hard to imagine what could have been done with such a resource in generations past. When we search for the key term Ἀρεοπαγίτης (Areopagite) in the TLG (Dionysius is a fairly common name), we are able to determine pretty much all currently known references, organized by century. Thus, the TLG allows us to ask a key question: For anyone claiming that a body of work, a piece of literature, existed from the first century onward, is there any evidence for the *CD* in the TLG?

A TLG search was conducted on May 1, 2026, on the term Ἀρεοπαγίτης, returning 176 total hits across the

full Greek corpus. The results were analyzed manually in chronological order. The pattern that emerged was clear and consistent—every single pre-530 AD occurrence fell into one of two categories. Either it was a direct quotation or a paraphrase of Acts 17:34 (where Dionysius the Areopagite is named as one of Paul's Athenian converts), or it was a bare historical notice identifying him as the first bishop of Athens.²¹ We did not identify a *single* pre-530 AD reference that shows any awareness of Dionysius as an author or a theologian or the source of a body of literature. He exists, according to the TLG, in that period solely as a name from Luke's narrative in Acts.

Then, beginning right around 530 AD, the character of the hits changes completely *and without transition*. The first citation of this kind is John of Scythopolis, followed by an unbroken stream of authors—Maximus the Confessor, Pamphilus, Anastasius Sinaita (who calls him ὁ ἀποστολικὸς πατήρ), John of Damascus, and so on through Byzantine theology all the way to Euthymius Zigabenus and Michael Glycas in the twelfth century AD—every one of them citing the *Corpus Dionysiacum* as an established, authoritative theological source: scholia, Christological proof-texting, honorific titles, the full apparatus of settled patristic authority, present immediately and fully formed *rather than building gradually*. There is no messy, unclear, intermediate phase of partial citation or disputed attribution, which is what we would expect if a genuinely first-century work had been slowly rediscovered or was gradually working its way into circulation and the consciousness of the church.

As a control case, we note that Justin Martyr, by contrast, shows continuous citation distributed

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* II.152–169 (the darkness of Sinai as apophatic entry into the divine); *Homilies on the Song of Songs* XI (the soul's endless ascent into the divine).

¹⁹ See N-T II, 30, for the Cyril vocabulary argument. The authors note rare terms shared between Cyril's anti-Nestorian writings and the *CD* but acknowledge the citations are implicit rather than explicit. In reality, though, such terminological similarities are consistent with the standard hypothesis of scholarship, that the *CD*'s author drew on a common Alexandrian philosophical-theological lexicon.

²⁰ The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* is accessible at <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>.

²¹ The user of the TLG should be aware that there is a bit of a trap when you use the system. The chronological order of references given is based upon the original source, not the documentary source. Hence, in this search, early on, a reference is given to Clement of Alexandria (PG 91, 1085), which might lead someone to think this is a very early reference when, in fact, this is a reference to Maximus the Confessor's text from centuries later.

across the centuries rather than a sudden post-threshold explosion. Interestingly, our study found that the word count between the corpus of Justin Martyr's works and that of the *CD* are extremely close. And they appear very close to each other in the N-T's theory of first-century AD origination for the *CD*, within around fifty years of each other. Within a matter of decades, Irenaeus is quoting from Justin's work against Marcion. But where are the citations from the *CD*? It is a similar-size corpus and has similar dates of composition, yet Justin is clearly seen in history, while the *CD* is not. The obvious reason is the *CD* did not exist and would not exist until around 500 AD. It is wishful thinking to assume the *CD* existed and was simply passed over in silence.

An interesting and useful data point emerged from the same *TLG* study that produced the 500 AD "citation wall" discussed above, this time at the level of vocabulary rather than attribution. The corpus's entire cosmological and ecclesiastical architecture is organized around a single Greek term—ἱεραρχία, "hierarchy"—a word so thoroughly identified with Dionysius that it is

easy to forget it is not New Testament vocabulary or even generically Hellenistic vocabulary at all. The apostolic church, as attested throughout Acts and the Pastoral Epistles, organized itself around ἐπίσκοπος, πρεσβύτερος, and διάκονος. The abstract noun ἱεραρχία—a graded, mediating order of sacred office, the very idea that structures the *Celestial* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*—appears nowhere in Greek literature, pagan or Christian, before the *Corpus Dionysiacum* itself.

A *TLG* search across all eleven attested inflected forms of the noun ἱεραρχία ("hierarchy") turns up 1,045 occurrences; every one of the handful that sorts earlier than the corpus in the database's chronological ordering proves, on inspection, to be a catalogue artifact—a spurious Athanasian homily, an open-dated hagiography, and a catena excerpting the *Celestial Hierarchy* itself under a later heading. The word's first genuine occurrence in the whole of Greek literature is in the treatise's own title.²²

The same discontinuity governs the term's entire derivational family. The adjective ἱεραρχικός and its

²² The lexical evidence confirms and extends the judgment of Josef Stiglmayr, "Über die Termini Hierarch und Hierarchie," *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 22 (1898): 180–187, that, while ἱεράρχης in the sense of "cultic official" is attested in pre-Christian pagan usage (principally epigraphic), the abstract ἱεραρχία—a graded, mediating order of sacred offices—is unknown before the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. A search of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* conducted on June 10, 2026, across all eleven attested forms of the noun (ἱεραρχία 142, ἱεραρχίας 556, ἱεραρχία 62, ἱεραρχίαν 196, ἱεραρχία 7, ἱεραρχίων 46, ἱεραρχίας 26, ἱεραρχίαν 2, the bare forms ἱεραρχίαν 2 and ἱεραρχίας 5, and the adjectival neuter plural ἱεράρχια 1) yields 1,045 occurrences in the Greek literary corpus. Sorted chronologically, all twenty-five occurrences antedating the *CD* in the database's sequence prove, on examination, to be catalogue artifacts rather than attestations, falling into three classes: (1) *False attribution*: six occurrences in the *Sermo in annuntiationem deiparae* transmitted under the name of Athanasius (PG 28, 917–940; *TLG* 2035.087), marked spurious ([Sp.]) in the *TLG* canon and sorting at Athanasius's dates solely on the strength of its byline; the relevant passage (PG 28, 940) reproduces the distinctively Dionysian first triad—thrones, cherubim, and seraphim constituting the πρώτη ἱεραρχία (cf. *CH* 6–7)—so that the homily's dependence on the corpus is internal to the very line in which the term appears; (2) *Open-ended catalogue dating*: one occurrence in an anonymous *Vita Joannis Chrysostomi* (*TLG* 5159.002) assigned the range "A.D. 4–11" and sorting on its earliest, impossible boundary; the work's terminus post quem is its subject's death (407 AD), the anonymous work belonging to the later Byzantine hagiographical dossier and the usage itself—ἐν τοῖς τῆς ἱεραρχίας χρόνοις, "during his episcopate"—exhibits the fully lexicalized later sense of the term, a semantic development that presupposes rather than precedes the Dionysian coinage; and (3) *Compilation dating*: eighteen occurrences in the *Catena in epistulam ad Romanos* (typus Monacensis, e cod. Monac. gr. 412; *TLG* 4102.011), dated "post A.D. 5" as a compilation; the hits are excerpts of the *Celestial Hierarchy* itself, reproducing in sequence the complete nine-fold angelic taxonomy of *CH* 6.2, first triad through third, including its attribution to ὁ κλεινὸς καθηγεμών. The first genuine occurrence of ἱεραρχία in Greek literature is therefore the *Corpus Dionysiacum* itself (*TLG* 2798), beginning with its own titulus, ΠΙΕΠΙ ΤΗΣ ΟΥΠΑΝΙΑΣ ΙΕΡΑΡΧΙΑΣ. The remaining occurrences, comprising the overwhelming bulk of the 1,045, belong without exception to the corpus's reception, from the scholia of John of Scythopolis and the Anthologia's dedicatory epigram on the man who "sang the hierarchic ranks" (*Anth. Gr. App., Epigr. demonstr.* 420 Cougny) through Maximus, Psellus, and Pachymeres's paraphrase. Two scope clauses govern the claim. First, the *TLG* indexes the literary corpus; the search does not extend to papyri or inscriptions, where the agent-noun ἱεράρχης (though not, to our knowledge, the abstract ἱεραρχία) has its pre-Christian pagan origination. Second, *TLG* counts are a snapshot of the database as of the search date and will vary marginally with subsequent releases. Neither clause affects the conclusion, which is rather strengthened by the one irony the data supplies: the sole witness to ἱεραρχία that sorts before the Areopagite is itself a pseudoeigraphon—a text attributed to Athanasius doing precisely what the *Corpus Dionysiacum* does to Dionysius. It may finally be noted that the corpus's superscriptions (*CH* 1 120A; *EH* 1 372; *DN* 1 585A), the stratum most plausibly editorial, are the only places πρεσβύτερος appears in the entire corpus: the natural apostolic-era vocabulary of office surfaces precisely in places where the author himself is not writing.

comparative and superlative forms, together with the adverb *ἱεραρχῶς*, add another 356 occurrences to the tally—fully inflected, fully productive, present in the language with no evident period of gradual accretion beforehand.²³ This is not a case, as with some of the corpus’s other technical vocabulary, of a pre-existing philosophical or biblical term repurposed for Christian use; rather, *ἱεραρχία* has no prior life to repurpose.

A word like *ἱεραρχία*, if it had genuinely circulated for four and a half centuries before reaching written form, would be expected to show some stratigraphy—an early, tentative usage, then derivatives, then comparative and superlative forms following later still. What the *TLG* shows instead is a technical nomenclature that enters the record whole, in full grammatical productivity, at a single point—the same signature, arrived at independently and by an entirely different method, that governs the corpus’s citation history as a named author.

THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF CD AND WHAT IT TELLS US

The circumstances of the *CD*’s first indisputable appearance in the historical record are themselves significant evidence. The *CD* was first cited by Severus of Antioch and his party at the Colloquy of 532 AD in Constantinople in the context of

the Monophysite controversy.²⁴ The Chalcedonian party immediately objected that the text was unknown to their tradition and had not been cited by the Fathers of the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD). The Chalcedonian interlocutor Hypatius of Ephesus reportedly pointed out that if the *CD* had genuinely been the work of the apostolic Dionysius, the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) would have cited it—as would the later councils.²⁵

This objection has never received an adequate response from the authenticity camp, and N-T do not provide one. But Hypatius was not merely expressing caution. He was making an argument about the way authoritative texts work in the church’s tradition. Major councils cite major texts. The *CD*, had it been apostolic, would have been the most important doctrinal document after the New Testament and the letters of Ignatius. It would have been cited in every major dispute: the Arian controversy, the Nestorian controversy, and the Eutychian controversy. Yet it is cited in none of them—not because the Fathers were ignorant or negligent, but because the text did not yet exist.

The contrast with how genuine apostolic texts were handled is instructive. The letters of Paul were cited within decades of their composition. The letters of Ignatius, though they had their own complex manuscript history, were known to

²³ The same pattern governs the entire derivational family. A *TLG* search conducted on June 10, 2026 of the stem *ἱεραρχικ-* yields 306 occurrences of the adjective *ἱεραρχικός* across twenty inflected forms—including comparative and superlative formations (*ἱεραρχικώτερος*, *ἱεραρχικώτατος*)—and 50 occurrences of the invariant adverb *ἱεραρχικῶς*. As with the noun (see note 22 above), every occurrence sorting earlier than the *Corpus Dionysiacum* proves on examination to be a catalogue artifact: one adjectival occurrence in the pseudo-Athanasian *Sermo in annuntiationem dei parae* (*TLG* 2035.087 [Sp.]) and four adjectival with two adverbial occurrences in the *Catena in epistulam ad Romanos* (*typus Monacensis*; *TLG* 4102.011), the latter verbatim excerpts of the *Celestial Hierarchy*. Taken together, the *ἱεραρχ-* family numbers 1,401 occurrences in the Greek literary corpus; the thirty-two entries antedating the *CD* in the database’s chronological sequence derive without exception from three texts, each demonstrably posterior to the corpus and two of them directly quoting it. The cumulative point exceeds what any single lexeme could establish. The absence of one word across five centuries might be charged to the accidents of survival, but the absence of an entire derivational family—noun, adjective, adverb, comparative, and superlative, some fourteen hundred occurrences strong in the subsequent tradition—admits no such explanation. Living vocabularies grow and develop by degrees: a coinage circulates, derivatives follow, gradation comes later still. The *ἱεραρχ-* family exhibits no such stratigraphy. It enters Greek in a single corpus, fully inflected and fully productive, and its attestation history thereafter is simply the reception history of that corpus—a profile characteristic not of a first-century vocabulary transmitted for five hundred years, but of a technical nomenclature in use from the day of its invention.

²⁴ The Colloquy of 532 AD in Constantinople is documented in Innocentius Maronitae, *Epistula de Collatione cum Severianis Habita*, in Eduard Schwartz, ed., *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* IV.2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1914). N-T cite this document at N-T II, n. 30.

²⁵ The objection attributed to Hypatius of Ephesus—that a text of apostolic origin would have been cited at Nicaea (325 AD) and subsequent councils—is preserved in the account of the Colloquy of 532 AD in Constantinople. See Schwartz, *ACO* IV.2. For discussion, see Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 12–13. This observation again points out the massive anachronism created by the N-T theory. We are seriously being asked to believe that a first-century AD source of doctrinal teaching by an “immediate convert of the Apostles” was known, cited, and had impact, but was never identified or cited directly throughout all of the controversies about which its contents would have been directly relevant.

Polycarp, who may have known Ignatius personally. The *Didache*, whatever its precise dating, left traces in subsequent literature. When a text genuinely circulated in the early church, the evidence of that circulation is visible precisely because multiple writers in multiple locations draw on it, argue about it, and transmit it. The *CD* shows none of this usage or attestation.²⁶

N-T are aware of this problem and attempt to finesse it by suggesting that the *CD* circulated in Alexandria in a manner that kept it away from the broader conciliar tradition. But this is, again, special pleading that the evidence does not support. Alexandria was not an isolated backwater. It was the intellectual center of the Christian world, and its theological output fed directly into every major controversy of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries AD. A text circulating among Alexandrian theologians for two to four centuries would not have remained invisible to Athanasius, to Cyril, or to the councils they influenced.

THE TWO ALLEGED CITATIONS: WHAT THEY ACTUALLY ESTABLISH

N-T's most substantive positive argument is that two early authorities—Gregory of Nazianzus in *Oration* 38 (delivered 380 AD) and Jerome in *Against Jovinian* (393 AD) and *Apology Against Rufinus* (c. 400 AD)—can be shown to be drawing on the *CD*'s *Celestial Hierarchy*. If this argument succeeds, it constitutes significant evidence for an early dating of *CD*. This is the load-bearing pillar of the entire N-T edifice, and it needs to be examined carefully.

The Gregory of Nazianzus argument turns on *Oration* 38.8, where Gregory attributes to

a “certain predecessor” (ἄλλω τινι τῶν πρὸ ἡμῶν) the idea that the divine Holy of Holies is “concealed even from the Seraphim” and that the triple sanctification of Isaiah 6:3 converges in the trinitarian Godhead. N-T note that this interpretation, together with certain lexical features, is found in the *CD*'s *Celestial Hierarchy*, and conclude that the “only extant source that meets the criteria is the *CD*.”²⁷

Several observations are in order. First, the identification of the “predecessor” is entirely speculative. N-T themselves acknowledge “one can claim that Gregory and Jerome were citing a now lost work other than the *CH*”—they simply assert this is “the less likely explanation.”²⁸ But in what probability space is such an explanation “less likely”? The early church was awash in exegetical literature, most of it lost. Origen wrote an enormous quantity of angelological and hierarchical material. It is quite possible—more than possible—that Gregory was drawing on an Origenian source, a liturgical commentary, or even an oral tradition that has not survived. The argument requires us to assume that the *CD* is the unique possible source for these ideas. That assumption is question-begging; it already presupposes what needs to be proved.

Second, the doctrinal content Gregory attributes to his “predecessor”—the hiddenness of God from the Seraphim, the Trinitarian reading of the Trisagion—was not proprietary to the *CD*. Trinitarian exegesis of Isaiah 6:3 was commonplace from at least Origen onward.²⁹ N-T acknowledge this: “[I]t is true that other ancient commentators provide a trinitarian exegesis of the Seraphic

²⁶ On the Ignatian letters, see Eusebius, *HE* 3.36. Polycarp's *Epistle to the Philippians* 9.1 refers to Ignatius and his companions in a way that presupposes a transmitted correspondence.

²⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 38.8 (PG 36:320). The Greek phrase is ἄλλω τινι τῶν πρὸ ἡμῶν (“a certain one of those before us” or “a certain predecessor”). N-T provide a full argument for identifying this source as the *CD*'s *Celestial Hierarchy* (N-T I, 7–9).

²⁸ N-T state that although “one can claim that Gregory and Jerome were citing a now lost work other than the *CH*, such an inference is the *less likely* explanation of the evidence” (N-T I, 12). The authors do not quantify the probabilities within which “less likely” is assessed, nor do they consider the full range of exegetical literature known to have been produced by Origen and his successors, most of which is no longer extant.

²⁹ For Trinitarian exegesis of Isaiah 6:3 prior to the *CD*, see Origen, *On First Principles* 1.3.4; Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 16.38 (PG 32:136); and Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 41.9 (PG 36:441). N-T themselves acknowledge that “other ancient commentators provide a trinitarian exegesis of the Seraphic hymn” (N-T I, 7). The theological interpretation is thus not proprietary to the *CD*. The argument from lexical specificity bears the full argumentative weight.

hymn.” Their argument then rests on the specific lexical convergence with the *CD*. But lexical convergence with a text does not prove dependence on that text when the text in question is precisely the kind of synthetic theological document that incorporates and reworks earlier tradition. The direction of dependence is, in fact, more easily explained if the *CD* is the later document that drew on and systematized a tradition already present in Gregory—which is, of course, the standard scholarly position.

Third, and most decisively: if Gregory was citing the *Celestial Hierarchy* as the work of the apostolic Dionysius, companion of Paul and first bishop of Athens, why does he describe the source only as “a certain predecessor”? Gregory was not shy about citing sources by name. He cites Basil, Origen, Athanasius, and others explicitly. An apostolic document attributed to a companion of Paul would have been cited with the full weight of its authority, not anonymized as “someone before me.” The anonymization is itself evidence that Gregory was not drawing on a document that bore the name and authority of Dionysius the Areopagite. He was drawing on something else—something he could not, or preferred not to, name precisely.³⁰

The Jerome argument is, if anything, even weaker. Jerome’s angelological lists and comments about hierarchical differences among the heavenly orders are consistent with the *CD*, but they are equally consistent with many other angelological traditions. N-T’s own footnote acknowledges the full range of patristic enumeration of angelic orders: Irenaeus, Origen,

Chrysostom, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Cyril of Jerusalem all list angelic hierarchies with varying numbers and names.³¹ Jerome’s list of nine orders is not uniquely Dionysian; it is one enumeration within a broad and diverse tradition. The argument that Jerome was specifically drawing on the *CD* rather than on any of these traditions, or on Gregory’s teaching, requires more than lexical overlap. It requires the exclusion of other plausible explanations—an exclusion N-T do not accomplish.

What these two alleged citations actually establish, even on the most generous reading, is that by the late fourth century AD certain ideas and certain angelological enumerations were circulating that have parallels in the *CD*. This is entirely consistent with the standard scholarly hypothesis: The *CD* was composed by an author who drew heavily on exactly these traditions—Cappadocian theology, Alexandrian Neoplatonism, the broader liturgical and angelological tradition of the fourth and fifth centuries—and who then attributed his synthesis to the apostolic Dionysius. Two texts sharing a tradition is not the same as two texts in a relationship of dependence.

WHAT THE STANDARD POSITION ACTUALLY REQUIRES

N-T characterize the standard scholarly position as follows: First, it requires us to believe in an implausibly sophisticated forger who managed to mimic the first-century AD theological climate perfectly, producing a document that fooled everyone, and then hiding it for centuries. Second,

³⁰ The argument from Gregory’s naming practices is significant. In *Oration* 43 (the funeral oration for Basil), Gregory names his sources explicitly and at length. His anonymization of the “predecessor” in *Oration* 38.8 stands in contrast to how he naturally would have cited an apostolic document. Compare his explicit invocation of Paul throughout the *Theological Orations*.

³¹ See N-T I, 10–12 for the Jerome argument. On Jerome’s angelological lists and their patristic context, see N-T I, n. 34, where they acknowledge: “Irenaeus, Origen, Chrysostom, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, and Cyril of Jerusalem, etc.” all enumerate angelic orders. The argument that Jerome’s enumeration is specifically Dionysian rather than drawn from this common tradition requires stronger exclusion of alternatives than N-T provide. For Jerome’s use of Gregory of Nazianzus as a source (Jerome was a student under him in Constantinople ca. 379–382), see J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 68–72.

N-T invoke the principle that the burden of proof lies with those who *deny* the traditional ascription.³²

On the second point, the claim about the burden of proof deserves direct challenge. In historical and textual scholarship, the burden of proof does not fall on those who deny a claim. It falls on those who make a positive claim about the past. The claim that the *CD* was written by a first-century AD companion of Paul is a claim that requires positive evidence. The absence of such evidence over five centuries is not a neutral fact that shifts the burden onto skeptics—it is itself evidence against the claim.

N-T's invocation of ecclesiastical consensus (the "historical consensus of Orthodox saints and Ecumenical Councils," see note 32) imports a theological presupposition into what presents itself as a scholarly argument. Scholars are not bound by conciliar definitions in their assessment of the historical record, and the article cannot simultaneously present itself as an exercise in historical scholarship and insulate its conclusions from scholarly scrutiny by appeal to ecclesiastical authority.

On the first point—the "sophisticated forger" claim—the standard position does not actually require the implausible scenario N-T describe. It only requires that an extraordinarily gifted Christian intellectual of the late fifth or early sixth century AD, trained in Neoplatonic philosophy and Cappadocian theology, deeply versed in the Alexandrian tradition, writing at a time when Procline Neoplatonism was at its height, and writing at a time when the Christian East was searching for an apostolic anchor for its developing

mystical and hierarchical theology, composed a series of texts of remarkable depth and power and attributed them to the most philosophically prestigious of Paul's converts. That such a person existed and acted is, on the available evidence, far more probable than a complete corpus of apostolic writing going unmentioned by every major Christian theologian for five hundred years.

THE DEBATE STAKES

Those who find the N-T argument attractive should ask what it would mean if it were true. N-T themselves make this explicit in their conclusion: A first-century *CD* "effectively makes available to scholars an unequaled storehouse of information regarding the practices and beliefs of the first-century Church," including "the earliest description of the liturgy," "the theology underlying iconodulia," and attestation to the Dormition of the Virgin.³³ In other words, the stakes are not merely academic. The authentication of the *CD* as first-century apostolic literature would constitute, for those within a tradition that cannot appeal to the development of doctrine, a definitive witness to the existence of the full apparatus of later Eastern Orthodox theological and liturgical practice in the apostolic age itself.

This observation should not, of course, count as evidence against the N-T thesis—arguments cannot be evaluated by the theological convenience of their conclusions. But it should put readers on notice that the argument is not disinterested, and that the desire for a particular conclusion may be shaping the assessment of evidence. The rules of historical reasoning apply equally to those who wish the *CD* to be apostolic and to those who have concluded it to be a forgery.

³² N-T state: "However, due to the burden of proof being on those who deny traditional ascription (and not the other way around), as well as the historical consensus of Orthodox saints and Ecumenical Councils on this question, such an argument from silence is not persuasive. There is no compelling chronological reason to deny authenticity" (N-T II, 32). This reasoning inverts the normal canons of historical evidence. The positive claim—that a text was written by a specific named individual in the first century AD—requires positive evidence. A five-century absence from the historical record is not a neutral baseline but is itself evidence against the claim. The burden-of-proof argument effectively insulates the authenticity thesis from the standard demands of historical criticism.

³³ For the standard reconstruction of the *CD*'s probable historical context, see the introduction to Beate Regina Suchla, Günter Heil, and Adolf Martin Ritter, eds., *Corpus Dionysiacum I–II*, Patristische Texte und Studien 33, 36 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990–1991). For the most thorough English treatment, see Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 1–24.

The reality is that the N-T theory is not new despite it being advertised as such. It is quite ancient. Note these paragraphs from Charles Stang:

The fact that this allegedly first-century corpus seems to contain ample philosophical terminology from later centuries was not lost on its early readers. The scholiast John of Scythopolis (fl. 6th c.) may have been inclined to ignore it, and to steer the reader back to the Pauline content that in his mind guarantees the work as authentic. But the Migne edition of the Prologue of the *CD* contains this later interpolation, probably authored by the Christian philosopher John Philoponus (died c. 580 AD):

One must know that some of the nonChristian [*sic*] philosophers, especially Proclus, have often employed certain concepts of the blessed Dionysius ... It is possible to conjecture from this that the ancient philosophers in Athens usurped his works (as he recounts in the present book) and then hid them, so that they themselves might seem to be the progenitors of his divine oracles. According to the dispensation of God the present work is now made known for the refutation of their vanity and recklessness.

Philoponus was well versed in the works of Proclus and so he easily spotted the similarities between the two authors' vocabularies. He inoculates Dionysius from the possible implications of this similarity by reversing the charge: it is the Neoplatonists who have "usurped" the works of Dionysius the Areopagite; it is they who have shamelessly stolen from him. Not only that: they have also succeeded in obscuring their debt by suppressing the circulation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* for centuries. With its sudden reappearance in the sixth century, however,

God has exposed this pagan philosophical fraud and set the crooked record straight. Philoponus thereby inoculates Dionysius from what Harold Bloom calls the "anxiety of influence" and renders the Neoplatonic content of the *CD* licit for Christian readers precisely by claiming it as their own.³⁴

The very first promoters of the *CD* recognized the problem and chose the prize of a new, powerful, confirmatory "apostolic" witness in contrast to the more logical conclusion that the corpus did not originate with Paul's convert (especially in light of modern analysis and data such as the *TLG*), but it originated with a widely read Christian at the dawn of the sixth century AD. Besides, as Greek philosophy had grown to become the very language of theology in the Byzantine experience, finding that a convert of the Apostle Paul himself was steeped in, and promoted, Greek philosophical categories and concepts was just too heady a prize to be questioned. And hence, for a thousand years Dionysius was given authority just under that of the New Testament itself. The impact has been far-reaching.

The thesis of Nikitopoulos and Truglia is ingenious, and their articles demonstrate a large amount of work and thought. We do not for a moment question their sincerity in the pursuit of their topic, and we think their effort well worth a response, as is obvious by the length of this article. But we cannot help but note that there is a very clear element of theological overlay to their conclusions. Though muted, their conclusion does make the specific assertion, "[D]ue to the burden of proof being on those who deny traditional ascription (and not the other way around), as well as the historical consensus of Orthodox saints and Ecumenical Councils on this question, such an argument from silence is not persuasive. There is no compelling chronological reason to deny authenticity."³⁵ But as we have seen, there are *many* compelling reasons, and this is not just a matter of an argument from silence.

³⁴ Edwards, Pallis, and Steiris, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 123.

³⁵ N-T II, 32.

The key to the N-T conclusion is “historical consensus of Orthodox saints and Ecumenical Councils.” In reality, Orthodox saints have believed many things that have been shown to be mythical or utterly fictional, and it is actually relevant to point out that the Second Nicene Council (known today as the Seventh Ecumenical Council, and hence held to be authoritative by both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics) three times makes references to the *CD* under the ascriptions of “the great Dionysius” or “the God-bearing Dionysius.”³⁶ Is there any evidence that Nicaea II did anything other than to accept the rapidly developed fame of the *CD*? Did the council do any serious inquiry into its historical validity? Given the fact that Nicaea II produced a very sub-par refutation of the *horos* (decree) of the Council of Hieria in 754 AD that included references to forged works, it is highly unlikely they looked very closely at the history of the *CD* either. So upon what basis are we to ascribe historical weight to the council’s acceptance of the *CD*? For those already committed to a particular theological authority system, practicing fair and critical historiography can create real tensions.

But today we can see that the witness of the corpus of ancient Greek literature points us to the same conclusion even broad Christian scholarship has already arrived at—the *CD* did not exist in the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth centuries AD. All the wishful attempts at parallels of language or terminology cannot change one immutable fact, namely, that had this corpus existed from the first century, it would have, inevitably, left a mark. It would have left something more than hoped-for terminological parallels or vague “one of our predecessors” references.

Ignatius left his mark. Justin left his mark.
Dionysius left ... Acts 17:34. That’s it. Anything else is just wishful thinking.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACO: *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* (Schwartz, ed.)

CD: *Corpus Dionysiacum*

CH: *The Celestial Hierarchy* (Ps.-Dionysius)

DN: *The Divine Names* (Ps.-Dionysius)

EH: *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (Ps.-Dionysius)

MT: *The Mystical Theology* (Ps.-Dionysius)

N-T: Nikitopoulos and Truglia

PG: *Patrologia Graeca* (Migne, ed.)

TLG: *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*

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³⁶ Richard Price, trans., *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)*, Translated Texts for Historians 68 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 212, 470, 612. Price identifies one citation of the *CD* in Session III (p. 212), another in Session VI (p. 470), and the final in Canon 2 (p. 612). It should be noted that in the final reference we read, “The essence of our high priesthood are the sayings transmitted by God,” attributed to “the great Dionysius.” This is from *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* I.4. It is also interesting to note that the Council references “the God-bearing Dionysius in his work on the hierarchy” (second reference in Session VI), when, in fact, they are referring to *Divine Names*, not the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

The False Gospel of the Eastern Orthodox Church

by Samuel S. Farag

A DIFFERENT GOSPEL¹

John Stott, the well-known preacher and Bible commentator, once said: “To tamper with the gospel is always to trouble the church ... Indeed, the church’s greatest troublemakers (now as then) are not those outside who oppose, ridicule, and persecute it, but those inside who try to change the gospel ... Conversely, the only way to be a good churchman is to be a good gospel-man. The best way to serve the church is to believe and to preach the gospel.”²

This principle is foundational. Of all the epistles in the New Testament, Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians contains the most urgent and harshest rebuke. Why? The Galatians were being seduced by the Judaizers, an apostate group that regarded the laws of the Old Testament, such as circumcision, as still mandatory for all Christians. The Apostle Paul was quick to instruct the church that to add any requirements to the gospel is to preach a different gospel, and to preach a different gospel is to preach no gospel at all.

In Galatians, Paul writes, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel

contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:8–9).³ In our current day, there are modern-day “Judaizers” continuing to seduce the church. They claim to come from a line of unbroken apostolic succession. They claim to partake in the same practices that the apostles deposited into the church. They even claim to teach the gospel.

They are theologians in the Eastern Orthodox Church, and they have been seducing many of those who at one time identified as Protestant, especially lately. They make many bold claims about their origins and authority, which can sound appealing to those who only have a surface-level understanding of what the Eastern Orthodox Church teaches, as well as to those who have a limited understanding of Scripture and church history. In this article, we will examine a handful of basic problematic doctrines that the Eastern Orthodox Church holds that are contradictory to Scripture, doctrines that ultimately lead to additional requirements being added to the good news of Jesus Christ.

¹ Portions of this article are adapted from Samuel S. Farag, *Eastern Orthodoxy: Through the Lens of Sola Scriptura* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2026), esp. 37–56.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 23.

³ All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

INFALLIBILITY OF THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH

First, we need to look at the doctrine of the supposed infallibility of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This doctrine is officially found in the Confession of Dositheus of 1672. Decree 2 states:

Wherefore, the witness also of the [Eastern Orthodox Church] is, we believe, not of inferior authority to that of the Divine Scriptures. For one and the same Holy Spirit being the author of both, it is quite the same to be taught by the Scriptures and by the [Eastern Orthodox Church]. Moreover, when any man speaks from himself he is liable to err, and to deceive, and be deceived; but the [Eastern Orthodox Church], as never having spoken, or speaking from herself, but from the Spirit of God—who being her teacher, she is ever unfailingly rich—it is impossible for her to in any wise err, or to at all deceive, or be deceived; but like the Divine Scriptures, is infallible, and has perpetual authority.⁴

So, the first problem we encounter with the Eastern Orthodox Church is that they claim, as a church, to possess the same level of infallibility as the Scriptures themselves. They believe that just as the Holy Spirit breathed out the Word of God so that the Bible is inerrant and infallible, so, too, is the Eastern Orthodox Church just as inerrant and infallible when they speak in an official capacity. This unbiblical belief can be damning and ultimately leads to a different gospel.

ICONS & THE INFALLIBILITY OF ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

The second unbiblical doctrine we need to understand when we are talking about the Eastern Orthodox Church is their belief in the infallibility of the ecumenical councils. The Eastern Orthodox Church believes in seven ecumenical councils,

and of these councils, the most problematic is the seventh one. The most disturbing features of the seventh council are the anathemas they declared on anyone who does not follow their teaching on the veneration of icons. “Anathema” means to be cursed by God to hell unless one repents. The Eastern Orthodox Church will only lift an anathema if one joins their church, in addition to repentance.

Here is just a sampling of the anathemas from the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which is also known as Second Nicaea and took place in AD 787:

To those who apply to the sacred images the sayings in divine Scripture against idols, anathema! To those who do not kiss the holy and venerable images, anathema! To those who call the sacred images idols, anathema! To those who say that Christians have recourse to the images as to gods, anathema! To those who knowingly communicate with those who insult and dishonor the sacred images, anathema!⁵

Eastern Orthodox apologists sometimes try to soften the meaning of an anathema. Yet, here is the definition of anathema by the Eastern Orthodox saint John Maximovitch, which is in line with what the writers of those anathemas from Second Nicaea believed:

In the acts of the Councils and the further course of the New Testament Church of Christ, the word “anathema” came to mean complete separation from the Church. “[Eastern Orthodox Church] anathematizes,” “let him be anathema,” “let it be anathema,” means a complete tearing away from the church. While in cases of “separation from the communion of the Church” and other epitimia or penances laid on a person, the person remained a member of the Church, even though his participation in her grace-filled life was limited, those given

⁴ *The Holy Standards: The Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, ed. Joshua Schooping (Olyphant, PA: St. Theophan the Recluse, 2020), 27–28.

⁵ Richard Price, *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 111–12.

over to anathema were thus completely torn away from her until their repentance. Realizing that she ([the] Eastern Orthodox Church) is unable to do anything for their salvation, in view of their stubbornness and hardness of heart, the earthly church lifts them up to the judgment of God. That judgment is merciful unto repentant sinners, but fearsome for the stubborn enemies of God. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God ... for our God is a consuming fire”. Anathema is not final damnation: until death repentance is possible. “Anathema” is fearsome not because the Church wishes anyone evil or God seeks their damnation. They desire that all be saved. But it is fearsome to stand before the presence of God in the state of hardened evil: nothing is hidden from Him.⁶

So, according to the Seventh Ecumenical Council, if one does not bow down and venerate icons or if someone speaks against the Eastern Orthodox Church’s idolatrous practice of venerating icons, that person is a stubborn enemy of God. Their only chance of salvation is to repent and join the Eastern Orthodox Church. But what difference is there between the Judaizers of Paul’s day and the Eastern Orthodox Church in our day? Both add mandatory requirements to the gospel. Both condemn true, genuine believers, and both are themselves under true anathema by the authority of the Word of God for their false teachings and the works-based gospels they peddle.

MARIOLOGY & THE INFALLIBILITY OF DIVINE LITURGY

Third, we must understand that the Eastern

Orthodox Church believes that any official readings and hymns recited within their Divine Liturgy are also considered infallible. Here are some problematic readings that make an idol out of Mary the mother of Jesus in the form of hymns, which are held to the same level of authority as Scripture.

The “Akathist Hymn to the Most Holy Theotokos” calls Mary the “propitiation of the whole world”⁷ and the “restoration of men.”⁸ She is said to be the “forgiveness for many who have stumbled.”⁹ This hymn also states that she “taketh away the filth of sin,”¹⁰ and the congregation of the Orthodox church proclaims that she is the “salvation of my soul.”¹¹ These verses venerating Mary are slanderous to the pure and true gospel message found in Scripture and preached by Jesus and the apostles. The false claim that this is hyperbolic or poetic language is an Eastern Orthodox apologetic tactic and a very deceptive one at that, since this very same language is not only used in hymns but also in Eastern Orthodox homilies and prayers.

To give another example, in the *Mother of the Light* prayer book, the second prayer says to Mary, “Heal my miserable soul [because] I do not dare ask, nor do I have anyone to entreat on my behalf, the loving God to heal my many sins and incurable wounds.”¹² This is one of a myriad of examples in this prayer book from the ninth century AD, which is highly regarded as containing faithful prayers to Mary. Therefore, even in Orthodox prayer books, Mary is seen as a necessary mediator to go through in order to get to God. In fact, tremendous shame is put on the sinner, and he is urged not to approach God directly, but instead to go to Mary, who is presented as more compassionate. Eastern Orthodoxy claims

⁶ John Maximovitch, *Orthodox Life*, vol. 27 (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1977), 18–19.

⁷ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, eds. John Mikitish and Hieromonk Herman (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Monastery, 2019), 207.

⁸ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, eds. Mikitish and Herman, 210.

⁹ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, 211.

¹⁰ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, 215.

¹¹ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, 216.

¹² *Mother of the Light: Prayers to the Theotokos*, trans. Maximos Constas (Columbia, MO: Newrhome, 2018), 3.

Mary will then go on the sinner's behalf to God and persuade him to offer forgiveness.

Additionally, this attitude is seen in messages by prominent saints of the church, one example being Gregory Palamas. Gregory says in his *Fifty-Third Homily* in Paragraph 37, "She (Mary) alone forms the boundary between created and uncreated nature, and no one can come to God except through her and the mediator born of her, and none of God's gifts can be bestowed on angels or men except through her."¹³ This is not hyperbolic or poetic language being used. Instead, it is the same doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is found all throughout their hymns, prayer books, and teachings from their very own saints. However, the Word of God is clear to those who, according to Scripture, have ears to listen and who approach God with humility. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus is the only necessary mediator between God and man.

Jesus never said that Mary was part of the salvation equation or that a Christian should be encouraged to go to her for anything. The Scriptures are also clear that it is the Holy Spirit and not Mary who bestows gifts to believers:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are

empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills (1 Cor 12:7–11).

Again, Mary is nowhere to be found. So, we have a choice: Are we going to listen to men and the "wisdom" they teach, or are we going to follow and obey the Word of God? Are we going to follow a different gospel filled with the innovations of men, or are we going to follow the true gospel as found in Scripture?

In another supposed infallible Orthodox hymn, the "Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple," we find the strange and unbiblical belief that the Eastern Orthodox Church holds about Mary, that, as a 3-year-old girl, she went to live in the Holy of Holies for a number of years. Clearly, this is a violation of God's law as found in Leviticus 16, which states that the only person allowed in the Holy of Holies is the high priest, and he is only allowed to enter once a year on the Day of Atonement.

Ignoring for a moment the absurdity of this claim and simply focusing on the words of this hymn, we find even more problematic beliefs that contrast with the gospel. It says in this hymn that Mary is the "acceptable sacrifice"¹⁴ and "the ewe-lamb of God without spot, the dove without blemish."¹⁵ It claims she possessed "a body that was never subject to the taint of sin,"¹⁶ and the Orthodox faithfully sing to her, "through you we have been reconciled with God."¹⁷

Again, not a single prophet, apostle, or our Lord himself ever made these distorted claims about Mary, and we have no reason to engage in this idolatrous and blasphemous behavior. It is shocking that the average Orthodox catechumen

¹³ Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, trans. Christopher Veniamin (Waymart, PA: Mount Thabor, 2009), 431.

¹⁴ "Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple," Orthodox Christianity, <https://orthochristian.com/66118.html>.

¹⁵ "Entrance of the Mother of God."

¹⁶ "Entrance of the Mother of God."

¹⁷ "Entrance of the Mother of God."

is purposely not presented with this kind of doctrine upfront, and many people born into the church far too easily take what their priests, bishops, and patriarchs teach to be inerrant and infallible, despite, as we have seen, the numerous contradictions of Scripture.

Once again, the Scriptures have spoken on this matter, as we see in the Epistle to the Romans: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6–8). Christ alone died for us, and the writers of Scripture never felt the need to mention any contribution of Mary. So, are we going to speak in a manner that honors God’s Word, or are we going to put our faith in men like Gregory Palamas or the leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church?

Are we to call Mary “the ewe-lamb of God without spot”¹⁸ or are we going to trust in what God says in Scripture? Peter clearly asserts the following about the one true sacrifice that atones for believers’ sins when he states, “Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet 1:18–19). Christ is the spotless lamb—not anyone else. Christ is the only person to ever walk this earth who is sinless—not anyone else. Mary herself was not sinless. She was, in fact, a sinner in need of a Savior just like the rest of mankind. In fact, look at Jesus’s attitude toward a woman who was praising Mary, as found in Luke 11:27–28, which says, “As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!’ But he [Jesus] said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’”

This woman said nothing shocking by the standards of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In fact, she would be viewed as not praising Mary enough, as we have seen with the idolizing praise and veneration they give her. The woman’s comments really don’t even come close to the language used about Mary in canonical hymns, prayers, and homilies by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Yet Jesus’s words are bold and clear. He says, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:28)! Mary is, indeed, blessed to some degree, as Scripture has revealed, but the greater and true blessing that should be our focus is found in those who hear the Word of God and obey it. That is where the deepest blessing is found! Overt blessing, praise, and veneration of Mary that goes beyond the language and practices of Scripture are never defensible. So, it is ironic then that the Eastern Orthodox Church’s mandatory veneration of Mary can only be achieved either by being totally ignorant of God’s Word or simply ignoring it.

REJECTION OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

Fourth, let us take the time to examine how the Eastern Orthodox worldview rejects the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Their dismissal of this doctrine is cemented in documents like the Confession of Dositheus, which, as discussed, is considered to be an infallible text viewed on the same level as Scripture by the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Confession of Dositheus says this in Decree 13:

We believe a man to be not simply justified through faith alone, but through faith which works through love, that is to say, through faith and works ... We regard works not as witnesses certifying our calling, but as being fruits in themselves, through which faith becomes efficacious, and as in themselves meriting, through the Divine promises that each of the

¹⁸ “Entrance of the Mother of God.”

Faithful may receive what is done through his own body, whether it be good or bad.¹⁹

There is no denying the fact that the theological system of the Eastern Orthodox Church is a merit-based system in which one earns the right to salvation. In this case, salvation is not a gift from God as Scripture teaches, but a right due to the individual based on his or her performance. The Orthodox Church may concede that faith is necessary, but it also claims that faith is insufficient. They view good works as a necessary means of salvation, revealing how the work of Christ on the cross was not enough for them.

In their doctrine of soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, believers' works contribute to salvation with God. Yet, they seem to pass over key passages like John 1:12–13 that say otherwise. Here, John, the beloved disciple, records, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." God could not be clearer. Christians are not born again by the will of man or by the will of the flesh. We are born again solely by the very will of God. That alone is what saves.

Furthermore, many Eastern Orthodox adherents falsely claim that James denies the doctrine of justification by faith alone. However, this claim exposes how the apologists of their tradition have a history of using poor hermeneutics. The ground-zero passage in question here is James 2:14–26:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

This passage must come into harmony and not conflict with other passages like Ephesians 2:8–9, in which Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, teaches, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." There is no doubt that with the right systematic theology in mind and the correct utilization of faithful hermeneutics, both these passages complement each other. What is necessary, and oftentimes haphazardly overlooked, is how key terms are defined. In the Epistle of James, when the Lord's brother is talking about how "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas 2:24), we must interpret this in context and resist cherry-picking just to make a passage fit one's worldview. The "faith" being talked about here is the faith James calls "dead" in James 2:17, and that faith is contrary to genuine saving faith, which is mentioned in James 2:18 and 22. To fail to make that distinction is to miss the whole point of this passage.

¹⁹ *Holy Standards*, ed. Schooping, 48–49.

James is saying that legitimate saving faith always and without exception produces good works. In other words, the tree of faith determines the kind of fruits it produces. It is not the other way around. Paul, then, is not in conflict with James but agrees with him when he teaches that we are “saved through faith” and “this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works” (Eph 2:8–9). In the Eastern Orthodox mindset, with its adherence to man-made doctrines, they cannot faithfully interact with passages like Ephesians 2:8–9, and quite frankly, they are not even able to interact faithfully with most of Scripture. That is why they use tradition and the sayings of the church fathers as a crutch. This is just a page from the playbook of the Pharisees and scribes who did the same thing with their own traditions.

HIGH VIEW OF ASCETICISM IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Fifth, I would like to look at the abusive and shocking practice of asceticism and monasticism in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The best place to get a picture of monastic life in the Eastern Orthodox Church is to look at *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by Saint John of the Ladder (Saint John Climacus). This work is not only a timeless classic of Eastern Orthodox spiritual life, but it is also considered essential reading for all monastics and laypeople alike in Eastern Orthodoxy. In fact, every year during the season of Lent, every single Eastern Orthodox monastery reads this book out loud all the way through, and lay congregants are encouraged to read the book as well. It is easily the most widely used handbook of the ascetic life in the Orthodox Church.

Step 5 (there are thirty steps in total), Paragraph 5 of *The Ladder* states, “They allowed themselves

no rest, but reproached themselves, and drove away sleep with dishonors and insults.”²⁰ Monks are encouraged to abuse their bodies by depriving themselves of sleep, and they are urged to go to great lengths to accomplish that goal. Dishonoring and insulting themselves is just the tip of the iceberg. In Step 5, Paragraph 7, it says, “Others stood in prayer with their hands tied behind their backs like criminals, their faces, darkened by sorrow, bent to the earth.”²¹ So, they would tie their hands behind their backs to act like criminals and prostrate their faces low to the ground. As Step 5, Paragraph 8 of *The Ladder* states, “Others sat on the ground in sackcloth and ashes, hiding their faces between their knees, and striking the earth with their foreheads.”²² Picture the scene. These individuals would not only prostrate their faces to the ground. They also abused their bodies. They actually smashed their heads on the ground.

Furthermore, the extreme abuse of one’s body does not stop there. Just look at what Step 5, Paragraph 19, says:

From the number of their prostrations their knees seemed to have become wooden, their eyes dim and sunk deep within their sockets. They had no hair. Their cheeks were bruised and burnt by the scalding of hot tears. Their faces were pale and wasted. They were quite indistinguishable from corpses. Their breasts were livid from blows; and from their frequent beating of the chest, they spat blood.²³

Then, in Step 5, Paragraph 25 of *The Ladder*, we see this shocking statement, “And some prayed to become possessed by devils.”²⁴ Yes, you read that correctly. These individuals were literally praying to be possessed by demons in a twisted act of

²⁰ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 48.

²¹ Climacus, *Ladder*, 48.

²² Climacus, 48.

²³ Climacus, 51.

²⁴ Climacus, 53.

“humility.” How is it possible for one claiming to be a follower of Christ to pray to become possessed by demons? This is disturbing and painful to hear. Yet, the author of this work, Saint John of the Ladder, could not compose his pleasure in seeing fellow monks praying that demons would possess them, as he said, “And I, my friends, found so much pleasure in their grief that I forgot myself, and was wholly rapt in mind, and could not contain myself.”²⁵

Not only is this a disgraceful insult to Christ, but it is also a mockery of what faithful Christianity looks like. God’s beautiful and perfect Word paints another picture and views these acts of asceticism in a very different light. Just look at what Paul said in his Epistle to the Colossians. He notes about ascetic and self-debasing practices: “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:23).

DENYING *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

Finally, let’s look at the root of all these problems: Eastern Orthodoxy’s low view of the Scriptures. Again, we will examine the Confession of Dositheus, but this time let’s look at Question and Answer One, which says:

Should the Divine Scriptures be read in the [common language] by all Christians? No. Because all Scripture is divinely inspired and profitable, we know, and necessarily so, that without [Scripture] it is impossible to be Orthodox at all. Nevertheless, they should not be read by all, but only by those who with fitting research have inquired into the deep things of the Spirit, and who know in what manner the Divine Scriptures ought to be searched, and taught, and finally read. But to those who are not so disciplined, or who cannot distinguish, or who understand only literally, or in any other

way contrary to Orthodoxy what is contained in the Scriptures, the [Eastern Orthodox Church], knowing by experience the damage that can cause, forbids them to read [Scripture]. Indeed, it is permitted to every Orthodox to hear the Scriptures, that he may believe with the heart unto righteousness, and confess with the mouth unto salvation. But to read some parts of the Scriptures, and especially of the Old [Testament], is forbidden for these and other similar reasons. For it is the same thing to prohibit undisciplined persons from reading all the Sacred Scriptures, as to require infants to abstain from strong meats.²⁶

Instead of trusting in the authority of the Scriptures, the Eastern Orthodox Church discourages individuals from reading the Bible unless they subscribe to the Orthodox Church’s man-made doctrines. These man-made extrapolations stem from what they claim was the practice of the apostles. However, since they have no actual proof of this, they appeal to oral tradition and an unwritten deposit of infallible holy tradition. This tactic is nothing new. The Pharisees were notorious for doing the very same thing. In their case, they appealed to oral traditions from Moses. Hence, they claimed to hold to their own unwritten deposit of infallible holy tradition, which they called “The Tradition of the Elders.”

Instead, let’s find out what Jesus has to say about that kind of unhealthy idolization of man-made traditions and man-centered doctrines. Let’s look at Mark 7:1–9, 13:

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands

²⁵ Climacus, 53.

²⁶ *Holy Standards*, ed. Schooping, 68–69.

properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition ... Making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

In order to accept the Eastern Orthodox Church’s false gospel, one must hold to *sola Ecclesia* (“the Church alone”). The Eastern Orthodox Church believes in only this one *sola*. This belief is derived from their claims of being an infallible apostolic church and holding to the beliefs of an infallible holy tradition that is based on infallible ecumenical councils, which themselves are based on infallible interpretations of Scripture, along with a belief in an infallible consensus of the fathers.

Thus, based on this Orthodox dogma, one is saved by the Church alone, through the Church alone, in the Church alone, according to the Church alone, all for the glory of the Eastern Orthodox Church alone. Protestants who uphold Scripture as the sole infallible and inerrant authority firmly adhere to the five *solas* of the Reformation. Based on the Word of God, one is saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, all for the glory of God alone.

While the Eastern Orthodox Church may seem appealing, curious onlookers should not be lured away from the truth by the deceptive message they

are touting. The Eastern Orthodox Church is an apostate church that promotes a different gospel contrary to the pure gospel preached by Jesus Christ, the apostles, and those who genuinely have been born from above. The true gospel is exclusively found in the Word of God and makes no room for the traditions of man to pollute it.

To the current members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, to catechumens interested in officially joining the Church, and to those dangerously flirting with the Orthodox Church, I appeal to you through the words of Paul when he writes:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Gal 3:1–9). •

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How Do We Evangelize Roman Catholics?

by Taylor Walls

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, a group of evangelical and Catholic leaders sought to heal the divides between the two groups in a document titled *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium (ECT)*.¹ In this document, the authors dissuade devotees of each group from engaging in evangelism with one another, affirming that they are united in essential truths and thus are one in Christ. This ecumenical spirit has only grown in the last 30 years, and thus many may view the question of this article as bigoted and sectarian. However, Protestant Christians must not shy away from boldly and lovingly proclaiming Christ to professing Catholics. For this reason, after showing the importance of equipping ourselves for witnessing to those of the Roman Catholic (RC) faith, I will

present some tactics to engage more effectively with them and to overcome common obstacles.²

Why not just live and let live? Why learn to better evangelize RCs? First, though *ECT* sought to flatten some of the major issues that divide Catholics and evangelicals, a firm commitment to Protestant Reformation principles helps us see that official Roman Catholic doctrine alters or anathematizes some of our central teachings on salvation. Through a shared respect for some of the creeds of the early church (e.g., Apostles' Creed), it is true that we have some beliefs in common, but there are still important aspects of the gospel wherein we differ. Central differences include debates over the role of human merit in salvation and the question of the exclusivity of Christ's mediation for believers.

¹ The primary editors of this document were Charles Colson (evangelical) and Richard John Neuhaus (Roman Catholic). For the full text of *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, see *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* in *First Things*, 43 (May 1994): 15–22. Protestant Michael Horton wrote a helpful review in Michael S. Horton, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A Critical Review," *Modern Reformation* (August 17, 2007), <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/evangelicals-and-catholics-together-a-critical-review>. Likewise, some leading evangelicals, including John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, D. James Kennedy, and others met with some of the endorsers of this document in a summit meeting in Orlando in 1995. This meeting was broadcast, and the recording is still available. See "Irreconcilable Differences: Catholics, Evangelicals, and the New Quest for Unity, Parts 1–3," *Grace to You*, <https://www.gty.org/sermons/GTY54/irreconcilable-differences-catholics-evangelicals-and-the-new-quest-for-unity-parts-1-3>. A full transcript of the proceedings can be found at <https://www.biblebb.com/files/ECTDOC.HTM>.

² The focus of this article is on interpersonal and relational evangelism with friends and family. It is not focused on preparing apologists for formal debates with Roman Catholic theologians.

Second, Roman Catholicism, like large sections of evangelicalism, has a major problem with weak professions of faith and disciples who are only nominal (in name only). One Pew Research study found that only 21% of U.S. Catholics attend Mass weekly, pray daily, and consider religion an important part of their lives.³ This dynamic is very common in large portions of the population of Ecuador (which is 80% RC), where I serve as a pastor. These people are in a very dangerous position, as often the mere external adherence to religion hardens the heart and blinds the eyes to one's true spiritual need and to the redemptive solution.

Third, Roman Catholics represent the third-largest religious population.⁴ This fact is important for American Christians to keep in mind, especially as the constant flow of Hispanic immigrants into the U.S. often brings with it a committed Catholic culture. The same Pew Research study previously cited found that nearly 40% of U.S. Catholics are immigrants or the children of immigrants.⁵ Therefore, we must equip our churches to lead these souls to a far better country than the one they originally set out to find — a heavenly one.

Fourth, as evangelicals continue to represent biblical values on important social and political issues (e.g., abortion, LGBTQ+, etc.), we will be in regular contact with Roman Catholics who are committed to similar ethical principles.⁶ We can

try to utilize such opportunities, but social and political unity must not overshadow our important doctrinal and spiritual differences. We can seek to develop amicable relationships with our RC neighbors in society, even as we strive to shine the distinct light of Christ in the biblical gospel.

Finally, there is a great need for missionaries to Latin America and Europe, where Roman Catholicism is still the dominant religious force. As we prepare laborers for the harvest, training them to engage with RCs is an essential skill for these regions of ministry.⁷ The opportunities to evangelize Catholics are all around us, both at home and abroad.

We must be ready to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to our Roman Catholic neighbors. Accordingly, this article will consider six basic principles and tactics for evangelistic engagement with RCs.

1. REMEMBERING THE BASICS

First, as the Lord opens doors for you to share the gospel with Roman Catholics, always remember the basics of biblical evangelism. In a very important sense, the way we approach a RC in need of salvation is the same as how we would approach any other person. The need is the same, the remedy is the same, and Christ demands the same of us as his representatives. All people are equally born in Adam and under the corruption and guilt of

³ Justin Nortey, Patricia Tevington, and Gregory A. Smith, "10 Facts about U.S. Catholics," Pew Research Center, March 4, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/04/10-facts-about-us-catholics/>.

⁴ According to some studies, the global Roman Catholic population is 1.4 billion adherents. The only region where there is a reported major decline is in Europe. Roman Catholicism is the third-largest religious group in the world, behind only Muslims (2 billion people) and non-religious individuals (1.9 billion people). Some research studies list "Christianity" as the number one world religion, but such studies lump all Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox denominations into one combined category. For one example, see Conrad Hackett, Marcin Stonawski, Yunping Tong, Stephanie Kramer, Anne Shi and Dalia Fahmy, "How the Global Religious Landscape Changed from 2010 to 2020," Pew Research Center (June 9, 2025), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/how-the-global-religious-landscape-changed-from-2010-to-2020/>. You can also view the Vatican's own statistics here: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-03/pontifical-yearbook-2025-priests-religious-statistics.html>.

⁵ Nortey, Tevington, and Smith, "10 Facts about U.S. Catholics."

⁶ A hope for greater political and social cooperation between evangelicals and Catholics was one of the primary motivators for the authors of the *ECT* document in 1994.

⁷ Though not specifically aimed at evangelizing RCs, I have written a book on evangelism directed to a Latin American context. This book could be helpful for missionaries considering serving in Latin America. Taylor E. Walls, *Librando a los cautivos: Una guía teológica y práctica para evangelizar* (Santo Domingo, Ecuador: Legado Bautista Confesional, 2025).

original sin, and all have lived lives of actual sin that so expose them to the wrath of God and the curse of the law that they are without excuse and without hope unless God provides a savior.

The RC Church is just one of a near-infinite number of ways that fallen man has sought to deal with the basic problem of human guilt. The sacramental system of Rome seeks to deal with the guilty conscience and offers grace to those who submit to its tenets. Likewise, the worldwide community and the appeal to a long-standing tradition that spans centuries provide members with a sense of belonging. Therefore, as we talk with a RC, we can be sure that his most basic need is that he is alienated from God due to sin, and his only hope is the justifying and reconciling grace of Christ proclaimed in the gospel.

Second, the only true remedy is the same for the RC as for all men. The gospel is the one and only answer to this basic human dilemma (Rom 1:16; Acts 4:12). Likewise, “Repent and believe” is the consistent gospel call we must make to all people everywhere (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21).⁸ There is not one means of obtaining salvation from Christ for the Catholic and another means for the atheist; all are called to trust in Christ alone for salvation.

Third, the demands of Christ on us as his representatives in a perverse and dark world do not change if we are talking to a Muslim, a RC, or our fellow Reformed Baptists. We sanctify Christ as Lord in every conversation and treat

others with respect (1 Pet 3:15–16). We are bold in proclaiming the truth and confronting sin, but we speak these truths in love (Eph 4:15). We give testimony to the truth and power of the gospel both in our words and in our lives (Matt 5:14–16). We seek to live in a way worthy of the gospel in every conversation and in every sphere of life (Eph 4:1; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 2:12). We persuade others with sound biblical arguments and a firm commitment to Scripture, and we do not resort to coercion or ungodly threats (Acts 18:4; 19:8, 28:23). These are essential aspects of our gospel witness to the world in all encounters.

2. EVANGELIZING THE PERSON, NOT THE INSTITUTION

Second, as you engage with your Roman Catholic neighbor or family member, remember that in that moment your job is not to correct all of the doctrinal and practical problems of the entire RC system. Rather, your goal is to point this individual to Christ. Great theologians like Luther and Calvin couldn’t produce holistic change in the Roman church, and we shouldn’t expect to accomplish it in a single encounter. We are not evangelizing the institution but the individual.

There is often a difference between what a church officially teaches and what an individual adherent believes.⁹ With more than a third of U.S. Catholics saying that religion is not very important in their lives,¹⁰ how much time do you think they spend studying church canons, medieval scholastics, and early church fathers? Therefore, do not assume that

⁸ All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

⁹ Regrettably, we must recognize that this is the reality for large sectors of evangelicalism and maybe even for the members of some of our own confessional Protestant churches. There are people who claim to be evangelical or even Reformed Baptist whose personal beliefs may be out of line with the key teachings of these groups. Some people may even have beliefs that are inconsistent with a basic, saving profession of faith in Christ. We must implore individuals to make sure that their personal beliefs and values are in sync with what they profess. For members of the Roman Catholic Church, though, having a belief system out of sorts with their tradition’s official position could allow for a situation where there are genuine believers who trust in the true Christ and the true way of salvation. Due to RCs having access to the Scriptures, such a scenario could occur *despite* their official church doctrine presenting a different gospel to them.

¹⁰ This “religion-as-non-important” group among Roman Catholics comprises roughly 17.5 million people. Nortey, Tevington, and Smith, “10 Facts about U.S. Catholics.”

just because the person identifies as RC, he believes what the RC Church officially teaches.¹¹ Not only are there a lot of nominal adherents across the globe, but there are historical patterns of syncretism with other native religions as Catholicism has spread into new areas. Latin America especially is full of localized Catholic sects that are dedicated to the veneration of a particular saint or virgin and often are mixed with local customs and superstitions.¹²

For this reason, essential to evangelizing professing RCs is to meet them where they are. Ask questions about what they think about Jesus, how they obtain grace, and how a sinner can be made right with God and escape God's judgment. We cannot assume that we know how this person would respond just because we know how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or the Council of Trent would respond. The two responses are not necessarily the same. Therefore, as we get to know an individual person, we will be able to answer his questions more effectively and to shine the light of biblical truth on his heart and life.

3. GOING DEEPER IN RELATIONSHIPS

Third, do not be afraid to develop friendships with RCs whom God brings into your life. Whether a co-worker, a fellow volunteer at the local pregnancy center, or a member of a family in the homeschool co-op, developing deeper relationships provides more frequent and substantial opportunities for speaking the truth in love. As we seek to live out the gospel faithfully in our lives, in our interactions with others, and in our witness to the world, we can more effectively preach the gospel in word and deed.

Let me illustrate this with a personal anecdote. A nominal and superficial adherence to Roman Catholicism is seen at all levels of the Catholic Church in Ecuador, even among clergy.¹³ A few years ago, the Roman Catholic father of one of my church members passed away, and my congregant—being the only Protestant Christian in her family—invited me to come to the visitation. A few other church members and I arrived early, provided some snacks and coffee for the family, and led a time of worship. I had the opportunity to preach the gospel to my congregant's mourning family. After I was finished, the local priest arrived to serve the Mass and provide funeral rites. The first thing he did was pass around a little cloth bag for all the attendees to give him an offering. He then robotically repeated his script and performed his ritual duties. The next day at the burial, I was the only minister who showed up, and thus, once again, I had the opportunity to share the gospel with a hurting family. I believe my church members and I were able to show this hurting family the love of God and the genuineness of our faith more convincingly than the impersonal actions of the priest.

In the shadow of so much nominalism, consistent displays of the love of Christ in the lives of others can go a long way in convincing others of the truth of the gospel that we preach. This is not a guarantee that people will convert, as overcoming generational traditions and hardened hearts requires a new birth. However, as we minister faithfully in truth and love to those around us, we

¹¹ Moreover, even leading Roman Catholic theologians may disagree on how to interpret certain Scriptures, church fathers, or canons. Describing the aftermath of the Council of Trent, Charles Hodge rightly says, "Each party interpreted its canons according to their own views." Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 2:177. There were certain ambiguities left in the canons that permitted diversity of interpretation. Therefore, even a more formal debate with a Roman Catholic theologian could reveal the theologian's personal beliefs that are not universally affirmed in the Roman Catholic Church.

¹² The focus of this paper is on personal engagement, but I would recommend that potential missionaries considering service in Latin America to take the time to research these local syncretistic forms of religion in the region(s) they are considering. Again, there will be diversity of belief at the individual level, but at least you will have a better idea of what to expect of the local customs and worldviews.

¹³ This dynamic is not merely a modern dilemma. Even Pope Gregory the Great (6th century AD) had to deal with individuals seeking church offices for political and financial gain, not for spiritual pursuits. He lamented how usurpers and abusers were entering into clerical offices. Gregory the Great, *The Pastoral Rule*, I.1. Calvin also gives testimony to this reality in John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reformation*, in *Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 197.

may see doors open for deep conversations—from which ready ears and open hearts can receive the good news of Christ.

4. PREPARING TO MAKE A DEFENSE

Fourth, taking the time to understand what RCs believe and considering how to respond carefully and biblically demonstrates love.¹⁴ We may have very limited time in an evangelistic encounter, so we must use our time wisely. Though there is some value in citing quotes from the church fathers or mentioning the contradictions of popes in history or the lack of Scriptural support for many Catholic beliefs and practices, if our time and opportunities are limited, we must keep the gospel central. We should not content ourselves with merely getting someone out of Rome; rather, we must strive to bring them to Christ.

However, as you develop relationships with the new Hispanic family that moved in down the road, or in the Latin American community where the Lord has called you to serve as a missionary, you will have more time for deeper conversations about the historical and theological claims of the RC Church. For this reason, as doors open for these deeper conversations, be prepared to make a defense and to respond to common objections. As you prepare, consider some of the following important points.

Avoiding Straw Men

First, as in all interactions, avoid straw men and *ad hominem* attacks. It's easy to say things like: "You believe in salvation only by works and not by faith," "You think men can be saved without grace," or "You worship saints and Mary as though they were God." If we make shocking statements like these that can be easily refuted by a cursory look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, then we may lose credibility and find a closed door. We must also avoid attacking a person or mentioning major scandals in the RC Church. Sadly, evangelicalism has had its share of scandals, too. We must present solid biblical arguments with boldness and grace.

Prizing Justification by Faith Alone

Second, the primary difference between RCs and evangelicalism is the doctrine of justification by faith alone—what Calvin identified as the hinge on which the whole controversy turns.¹⁵ RCs officially affirm that justification is by grace through faith, but they also add to that faith works. The Council of Trent anathematizes those who say justification is by faith *alone*.¹⁶ For this reason, familiarize yourself with what RCs teach about justification, and grow in your own understanding of the biblical and Reformed doctrine through resources like the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith

¹⁴ The Roman Catholic Church is one of the most evangelistic and apologetic groups in the world and has many apologists who present the RC faith to outsiders. Familiarizing yourself with some of these arguments can be helpful. See, for example, Trent Horn, *The Case for Catholicism: Answers to Classic and Contemporary Protestant Objections* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017); Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism: The Attack on "Romanism" by "Biblical Christians"* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998); Karl Keating, *What Catholics Really Believe: Setting the Record Straight* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992). Also, consider studying the Roman Catholic Catechism and the Decrees of the Council of Trent. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997); Theodore Alois Buckley, *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (London: George Routledge and Co., 1851). Likewise, there are also helpful resources from a Protestant perspective that provide biblical and historical responses to RC teaching. Charles Hodge discusses RC doctrine throughout his *Systematic Theology* volumes. Another helpful resource is John Calvin's book wherein he analyzes the Decrees of Trent and responds to each decree. See John Calvin, *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote* (1547), monergism.com, https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_trentantidote.html. Also consider some more recent publications by Protestant authors: R. C. Sproul, *Are We Together? A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier, 2012); Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014). These types of resources are helpful, but it is important to look back at original RC sources to ensure their theological positions are being accurately represented by Protestant authors.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Necessity of Reformation*, 160–1.

¹⁶ Council of Trent, Session 6, Canon 9, 12.

(2LBCF, see esp. ch. 11).¹⁷ An essential part of this study will be to learn to distinguish properly between justification and sanctification.¹⁸

Honoring the Fathers

Third, we must remember two things as we respond to Roman Catholicism's historical claims. First, Christ promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against his church (Matt 16:18). Second, Rome was not built in a day. Many evangelicals have a negative view of the church fathers.¹⁹ Some seem to think that there was an immediate apostasy from the truth upon the death of the apostles. However, Christ has always had his church in the world, and we do not have to do historical acrobatics to trace a "trail of blood" that authenticates our doctrine as Baptists. Rather, like the Reformers, we should give the church fathers their due.²⁰ We have much to learn from them.²¹

The Reformers did not reject the church fathers but instead emphasized giving them their proper place as teachers and guides who are to be examined in light of Scripture. The sixteenth-century Anglican apologist John Jewel represents the Reformers' view of the fathers when he said:

But what say we of the fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Cyprian, etc.? What shall we think of them, or what account may we make of them? They be interpreters of the word of God. They were learned men, and learned fathers; the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. They were witnesses unto the truth, they were worthy pillars and ornaments in the church of God. Yet may they not be compared with the Word of God. We may not build upon them: we may not make them the foundation and warrant of our conscience: we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord.²²

¹⁷ To better understand the doctrine of justification, there are many great Protestant treatises on the subject, but the astute reader especially should consider the following sources. First, some of the classic Reformation-era texts on the subject are Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997) and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011). In Calvin's *Institutes*, see especially Book 3, Chapters 11–18. The definitive Puritan work on the subject is John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark). The Particular Baptist Benjamin Keach also has a helpful book on the doctrine, *The Marrow of True Justification, Or, Justification without Works* (London: Dorman Newman, 1692). Another classic work is James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of Its History in the Church and of Its Exposition from Scripture* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867). A more recent work written in commemoration of the Protestant Reformation is Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification: What the Reformers Taught ... and Why It Still Matters*, Five Solas Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

¹⁸ Calvin understands the importance of this distinction when he states: "And since the dispute is concerning the propriety of a word, when Christ is declared by Paul to be our righteousness and sanctification, a distinction is certainly drawn between these two things, though the Fathers of Trent confound them. For if there is a twofold grace, inasmuch as Christ both justifies and sanctifies us, righteousness does not include under it renovation of life." John Calvin, *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote*, "On the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent."

¹⁹ This mindset is what Michael Bauman diagnoses as "ecclesiastical amnesia." Michael Bauman, *Historians of the Christian Tradition* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995). Likewise, J. I. Packer has this helpful quote about how evangelicals should understand the relationship between tradition and Scripture: "Tradition ... is the fruit of the Spirit's teaching activity from the ages as God's people have sought understanding of Scripture. It is not infallible, but neither is it negligible, and we impoverish ourselves if we disregard it. I am bold to say that evangelicals, even those of Anabaptist polity, should be turned by their own belief in the Spirit as the Church's teacher into men of tradition, and that if we all dialogued with Christian tradition more we should all end up wiser than we are." J. I. Packer, "Upholding the Unity of Scripture Today," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 4 (1982): 414.

²⁰ The Puritan writer and Westminster divine, Edward Leigh, had this to say about the early church fathers and how we should view them: "They are called Fathers in respect of their age, they preceding our times many hundreds of years, and in respect of their Doctrine, which they diligently inculcated to those that then lived and endeavoured to propagate; many of their worthy labours being transmitted to posterity." Edward Leigh, *A System or Body of Divinity* (London: William Lee, 1654), 113.

²¹ A number of scholars in recent years have contributed books to the goal of helping the evangelical church recover an appreciation for the church fathers in their rightful place. For example, Michael A. G. Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers: Who They Were and How They Shaped the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011). My own book on Theophilus of Antioch seeks to draw out applications for our apologetic method today from the examples of the second-century Greek apologists. Taylor E. Walls, *A Pledge of the Truth: Theophilus of Antioch's Doctrine of Scripture and Its Role in His Ad Autolycum* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024).

²² Cited in Barrington R. White, "Why Bother with History?" *Baptist History and Heritage* 4 (July 1969): 85.

With the Reformers, we can respect theological insights from the Apostles', Nicene, and Chalcedonian Creeds. We can glean from the church fathers and share their wisdom with our congregations in places where they are sound in doctrine and practice. However, we must always read them in submission to Scripture—the only sufficient and infallible rule for faith and life (2LBCF 1.1).

As we begin to use the church fathers more in our apologetics,²³ there is an important danger to avoid. We must avoid pitting one tradition against the other. As William Perkins said, “Traditions can never settle the conscience” (see also 2LBCF 1.10).²⁴ For example, Reformed Christians often love to quote Augustine with respect to grace and the bondage of the will, but RCs love to quote Augustine’s doctrine of the church. Therefore, we must avoid appealing to one group of fathers as an ultimate authority over against another; rather, we must judge all things by Scripture.²⁵

Understanding the Appeal of Historical Transcendence

Fourth, one of the main attractions of Roman Catholicism, something that has led some to leave

evangelicalism for Rome, is the claim that their teaching and practices transcend the beliefs of an individualistic pastor and stretch throughout all history and across all continents.²⁶ By ignoring church history and arrogantly treating other Protestants as inferior because we differ on secondary issues, many evangelicals have lost sight of the unity of the invisible church of Christ in all ages. This atomistic and sectarian spirit is one of the major arguments of RCs against us. We must remember our essential *gospel unity* with other evangelical groups and theologians across history, though we may differ with them on non-essential matters. By cultivating unity on the essentials and charity regarding secondary issues, we can overcome these problems in our own churches and present a more biblical and faithful alternative to the Roman system.

5. EXPOSING THE DANGERS OF TRADITIONALISM

Another important part of engaging RCs is exposing the dangers of external religion. I will always remember one of the first Roman Catholic services I attended in my early years as a missionary in Ecuador. The priest stood up and led the congregation in a rote repetition of liturgical

²³ As we read the church fathers, three important principles can help: (1) We must always examine them in light of Scripture, and let Scripture be the final judge of truth; (2) We should read them in their own context and avoid imposing later Roman Catholic or Reformed teaching on what the early church said; (3) We should avoid cherry-picking to make them seem as though they were in perfect agreement with us in all things. With these guardrails in place, we can better enjoy the deep wells of doctrinal wisdom and practical piety from these fathers of the faith and avoid the errors that were inevitable in even the best of them.

²⁴ Cited in Joel R. Beeke and Greg A. Salazar, eds., *William Perkins: Architect of Puritanism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 160.

²⁵ Luther emphasized the importance of the supreme and sole authority of Scripture as the judge of all else: “Say for once—if you can—according to which judge, according to which criterion, can a point of contention be decided when the opinions of two of the church fathers disagree with one another? In such a case, the decision has to be based on the judgment of Scripture, which cannot happen if we do not give Scripture pride of place.... Having said this, the Holy Scripture itself on its own, to the greatest extent possible, is easy to understand, clearly and plainly, being its own interpreter [*sui ipsius interpres*], in that it puts all statements of human beings to the test, judging and enlightening.” Luther, *Works*, 7:97, as cited in Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 125. For further study on the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, see Don Kistler, ed. *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Sanford, FL: Ligonier, 2009).

²⁶ The appeal of Rome’s transcendence shows up in many of their critiques of modern evangelicalism and the attractions that have led many to leave evangelical churches for Rome. There is transcendence in history in which, in contrast to many start-up churches across America, RCs claim a unity with all generations of the church since Peter. Transcendence is also seen in doctrinal authority. In evangelicalism, there is often a neglect of creeds and confessions, and every preacher teaches his own private opinions. This can leave young believers in the difficult position of having to discern the truth amid doctrinal chaos. However, RCs offer a supposed final authority on doctrine, through the magisterium and the papal office, that alleviates this dilemma. Transcendence is also seen in the sacraments. Many evangelical churches have emptied the spiritual mysteries of the ordinances and often neglect them, especially the Lord’s Supper. However, RCs have a deep sense of the mystery of these sacraments that makes one the participant in transcendent divine mysteries. I believe the Reformed tradition maintains a healthy type of transcendence, and finds the locus of it the Scriptures themselves, in the mystical union of the universal church of Christ, and in the spiritual presence of Christ in the sacraments (though for us there are only two). However, due to the common weaknesses of evangelicals in these areas, the Roman Catholic Church seems to have much to offer.

phrases and the rosary. I was awestruck at how lifeless everyone seemed. They were just going through the motions. Some of those same people practiced all kinds of wickedness throughout the week, but now they had gathered and were repeating religious language with the vain hope that this external religion would bring them some spiritual and temporal good. Since then, I have had a number of conversations in which a person expresses the sentiment: “I was born a Catholic, and I will die a Catholic.” We must be ready to confront traditionalism but also to be aware of the difficulties in doing so.

Traditionalism is a great danger in which many RCs fall.²⁷ For some, it is a way to honor a long-standing family tradition. For others, saying the rosary, wearing a crucifix, going to Mass, or only eating fish during Lent is a good luck charm to ensure God’s temporal blessings. Such behavior often accompanies a trust that mere external adherence to religious practices will earn one’s salvation. To be fair, this is not official RC doctrine, but it is the reality of many professing RCs where I minister in Ecuador, and I doubt we are the exception.

Fallen man has always sought peace of conscience in externals—ever since Cain—having a form of religion yet denying the true power therein (2 Tim 3:5). The Old Testament prophets frequently rebuked the people for vainly trusting in the presence of the temple or the abundance of their offerings to ensure the favor of God (1 Sam 15:22; Ps 50; Isa 29:13, Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Mic 6:6–8; Zech 7:4–6). Likewise, the New Testament is equally severe in its critiques of Pharisaical religion and even Christian forms of externalism (Matt 6:5–8; 7:21–23; 15:7–9; 23:1–7, 23–28; Rom 2:28–29; Col 2:20–23; Jas 1:26–27).

As Christ responded to the rich young ruler

(Matt 19:16–30), these traditionalists must see the danger of their sin and the insufficiency of their external adherence to moral or religious practices to save them. They must hear the biblical cry that God desires faith and repentance from the heart and not mere external observance. People must be warned that it was not primarily the wicked prostitutes and tax collectors who crucified Christ; rather, it was the religious leaders who despised Christ for shining his light on the darkness of their hypocrisy. It is important to expose traditionalism with grace and respect without giving unnecessary offense, but we must be aware that the true gospel is offensive to the traditionalist.

The Apostle Paul provides a helpful example of a strategy you can use in an evangelistic encounter. In Philippians 3:1–11, Paul talks about how externally he once had all that was necessary for a true and zealous adherence to religion. However, when he came to Christ, he saw that none of these things had any value. Instead, the advantages of circumcision, God’s law, and access to God’s divine oracles had become a stumbling block to true humility, faith, and repentance (Rom 9:30–33; 11:9). Paul found that Christ’s righteousness was the only ground for his right standing before God, and he gladly renounced these external things in order to enjoy true and vital union and communion with Christ. Like Paul, the RC traditionalist must have his spiritual eyes opened to the folly of his external religion, and he must see that salvation is only in Christ and his perfect righteousness.

Therefore, we must point traditionalists away from bare rituals, religious duties, or supposed moral adherence to God’s law. We must show them how the law leaves us completely without hope apart from complete and exclusive dependence on the only Savior and Mediator between God and man,

²⁷ By “tradition” here, I am not referring to the teaching of Rome by which it adds church tradition to the Scriptures as the authority of faith and life, but rather to the reality of those who carry out the Roman Catholic sacraments and penitential practices without understanding and with a focus on adhering to man-made laws. Of course, this is not unique to RCs. Traditionalism can be found in any religion—even in evangelicalism.

Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). We do not want people to leave their external adherence to Roman Catholic practices only to become evangelical externalists. Rather, we want them to enjoy a true saving relationship with God through Christ, as Paul did.

6. EXALTING THE SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST

Finally, in all interactions, we must emphasize the all-sufficiency of Christ. Regardless of what official RC teaching may be, it is common for RCs to invoke a patron saint or the Virgin Mary as a mediator for them in the presence of God.²⁸ Moreover, the RC understanding of justification includes man's good works and will as part of the grounds for justification.²⁹ Likewise, their teaching of the Mass as a continual offering of Christ undermines the value and efficacy of the "once for all" sacrifice of Christ on the cross (Heb 10:26).³⁰ In these ways, RCs add to the all-sufficient work of Christ of whom Paul said, "You are complete in Him" (Col 2:10, NKJV).

It has been said that "all roads lead to Rome," but the Scriptures are very clear that there is only one road that leads to the Father—Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Therefore, if I only had 10 minutes to talk with a RC, I would emphasize the finished work of Christ. Christ's high priestly work of intercession is sufficient, so we need no other advocate.³¹ Likewise, Christ's redemptive work on the cross and his active obedience to God's law are sufficient to pardon all our sins and to ensure our eternal righteousness before God. Christ's work needs no repetition or

human addition. Calvin describes the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice in this way:

It was done but once, because the effectiveness and force of that one sacrifice accomplished by Christ are eternal, as he testified with his own voice when he said that it was done and fulfilled (John 19:30); that is, whatever was necessary to recover the Father's favor, to obtain forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and salvation—all this was performed and completed by that unique sacrifice of his. And so perfect was it that no place was left afterward for any other sacrificial victim.³²

Solus Christus, Christ alone, is the glorious cry of the gospel as it holds up the sufficient work of the one who cried out from the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30). Therefore, we plead with others to receive by faith the blessedness "of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works" (Rom 4:6). We point their eyes to find comfort in the Great High Priest who ever stands before the throne to plead for us before the Father (Heb 4:15–16). As Moses did in the wilderness, we too must lift up Christ and cry out fervently that all must look upon him and live.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the fields are ripe for harvest. There are RCs all around you who have been deceived by their traditions, and their eyes have been blinded from seeing the glory of the all-sufficient Christ.

²⁸ The Council of Trent defends the invocation and veneration of the saints, but it affirms that individuals think impiously who believe this "is opposed to the honour of the *one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus* [1Tim 2:5]." Buckley, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 213. However, such a statement fails to explain how these two opposing doctrines can be maintained. If multiple mediators are allowable, there cannot be, in any sense, "one mediator."

²⁹ See "The Decree and Canons on Justification" in Session 6 of the Council of Trent, and Chapter 3, Article 2 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.18.3.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.19.

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.18.13. Likewise, in his defense of Anglicanism, Jewel summarized well this Reformation principle of the completed work of Christ: "[O]ur only succour and refuge is to fly to the mercy of our Father by Jesus Christ, and assuredly to persuade our minds, that he is the obtainer of forgiveness for our sins; and that by his blood all our spots of sin be washed clean: that he hath pacified and set at one, all things by the blood of his cross: that he by the same one only sacrifice, which he once offered upon the cross, hath brought to effect and fulfilled all things, and that for that cause he said, when he gave up the ghost, 'It is finished;' as though he would signify, that the price and ransom was now full paid for the sin of all mankind." John Jewel, *The Apology of the Church of England*, trans. Anne Lady Bacon, ed. Richard W. Jelf (1564; repr., London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1849), 39.

Let us not fiddle while Rome burns. Rather, let us fervently pray and plead with those around us with boldness, compassion, and respect. Perhaps God may grant them eyes to see, and he may dispel the darkness of error and traditionalism. Perhaps God will grant them faith to be justified by Christ from all the things from which Roman rituals cannot justify. •

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Using David to Talk to Mormons about Grace

by Aaron Shafovaloff

INTRODUCTION

Talking to Mormons, also known as Latter-day Saints (LDS), about God's grace in salvation can be challenging, as they often express instant agreement before terms are properly defined. Mormonism as a religion is also evolving. Biblical passages often used in the past to highlight differences between evangelicals and Mormons have been reinterpreted in modern LDS culture.

In this article I will argue that Romans 4:4–8 provides a helpful starting point for discussing grace with Latter-day Saints. Paul's treatment of David anchors his discussion about salvation in a concrete example. Paul uses David as a model of a forgiven sinner—an adulterer and a murderer pardoned by God, highlighted as an example of righteousness credited apart from works. Latter-day Saint theology, however, makes David an example of a sinner for whom Christ's atonement does not afford complete and total forgiveness.

TIERS OF SALVATION

Latter-day Saint theology has long divided salvation in two: "General, that which comes to all men," and "Individual, that which man merits through his own acts."¹ LDS Apostle Neal A. Maxwell distinguishes the two: "[A]long with the great and free gift of the universal and personal resurrection there is also the personal possibility of meriting eternal life."² Grace is free on the general tier. But according to LDS theologian Thomas S. Monson, individual exaltation, the fullness of glory reserved for the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom, "must be earned."³

Late twentieth-century evangelical writing answered such an overtly merit-oriented LDS tradition shaped by Joseph Fielding Smith, Bruce R. McConkie, and Spencer W. Kimball, in which exaltation was earned and conditioned on obedience and personal worthiness.⁴ Celestial blessings, LDS apostles taught, "can only be earned by meeting the Lord's requirements. His mercy

¹ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, ed. Bruce R. McConkie, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 83.

² Neal A. Maxwell, "Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ," Saturday afternoon session, October 1997 [LDS] General Conference; *Ensign*, November 1997, 23.

³ Thomas S. Monson, then second counselor in the First Presidency, "An Invitation to Exaltation," Sunday morning session, April 1988 [LDS] General Conference; Thomas S. Monson, *Ensign*, May 1988, 53: "It is the celestial glory which we seek ... It is a forever family in which we want membership. Such blessings must be earned."

⁴ Mormon apostle John A. Widtsoe said the following: "In reality, this doctrine means that [for Mormons] we earn and must earn what we get. Salvation must be earned. The plan of salvation is of value to us only as we conform, actively, to its requirements." John A. Widtsoe, *An Understandable Religion* (1944), 81–82. See also Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:83.

does not overcome the requirements of His law.”⁵ These requirements include baptism, confirmation, the temple endowment, eternal marriage, paying a full tithe, and keeping the commandments.⁶ Apostle Boyd K. Packer declared at the 1987 LDS General Conference: “Ordinances and covenants become our credentials for admission into His [God’s] presence.”⁷

MORMON NEO-ORTHODOXY

A softer current has since emerged, which sociologist O. Kendall White Jr. named “Mormon neo-orthodoxy.”⁸ Its bestselling expression was Stephen E. Robinson’s *Believing Christ* (1992) and its parable of the bicycle: a child saves a few coins, and her father makes up the difference. Christ covers the shortfall, but the child’s contribution remains a precondition; she must give all she has before the father acts.⁹ Joseph M. Spencer, a Latter-day Saint philosopher, judges Robinson’s reframing to be unfortunate since it “reproduce[s], albeit in softer, perhaps more comfortable tones, the theology they were intended to replace.”¹⁰

Brad Wilcox, a Brigham Young University professor, pushed the same current further in a popular BYU

speech, “His Grace Is Sufficient” (2011). Answering the charge that Latter-day Saints try to earn heaven, Wilcox replied, “No, we are not earning heaven. We are *learning* heaven.” But he still named obedience as the same precondition for eternal life in God’s presence: “What is left to be determined by our obedience is what kind of body we plan on being resurrected with and how comfortable we plan to be in God’s presence and how long we plan to stay there.”¹¹ Against the prior teaching of LDS prophets and apostles, some LDS scholars now insist that such preconditions are not meritorious,¹² but the question remains whether the fullness of eternal life is still predicated on abiding “the law of a celestial kingdom.”¹³ As LDS rhetoric shifts, it obscures differences. Clarity can be found, however, as we turn to King David.

DAVID IN THE *BOOK OF MORMON*

Joseph Smith’s later treatment of David is foreshadowed by David’s marginal role in the *Book of Mormon*. Kyle Beshears notes how rarely the *Book of Mormon* mentions David compared with other Old Testament figures. Moses is named sixty-three times and Abraham twenty-seven, but David only seven times. Most references are

⁵ Richard G. Scott, “First Things First,” Saturday morning session, April 2001 [LDS] General Conference; *Ensign*, May 2001, 6–8. The occasion is funeral preaching: “[S]tatements are made that the deceased will inherit all blessings of celestial glory when that individual has in no way qualified ... That won’t happen.” See also James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1899), 90–91.

⁶ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 275–80. The section is headed “Requirements for Exaltation,” and states the following requirements as preconditions for exaltation: “To be exalted, we first must place our faith in Jesus Christ and then endure in that faith to the end of our lives ... He commands us all to receive certain ordinances.” Five ordinances are then numbered as required, followed by ten commands, among them “Keep the commandments” and “Listen to and obey the inspired words of the prophets of the Lord.”

⁷ Boyd K. Packer, “Covenants,” Saturday afternoon session, April 1987 [LDS] General Conference; *Ensign*, May 1987, 24. Packer states further, regarding the significance of ordinances and covenants: “To worthily receive them is the quest of a lifetime; to keep them thereafter is the challenge of mortality.”

⁸ O. Kendall White Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), xi. White dates the softer current from the post-war period through the 1980s.

⁹ Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ* (Deseret, 1992), 31–33.

¹⁰ Joseph M. Spencer, “Taking Grace for Granted,” *Element* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 89–108, esp. 100.

¹¹ Brad Wilcox, “His Grace Is Sufficient,” BYU devotional, July 12, 2011; republished as “The Continuous Atonement,” *Ensign*, September 2013. Wilcox also said, “The truth is, there is no line. Jesus filled the whole space.” Obedience, in his analogy, is “like paying a mortgage instead of rent ... You still have to hand it over every month.”

¹² Contemporary LDS theologian Grant Underwood notes: “[N]o human action in and of itself can ‘merit’ justification.” Grant Underwood, *Latter-day Saint Theology among Christian Theologies* (Eerdmans, 2025), 379.

¹³ *Doctrine and Covenants* (D&C), a writing considered sacred scripture by the LDS Church, in 88:22 states: “For he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory.” Similarly, D&C 130:20–21 asserts: “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated. And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated.” *Doctrine and Covenants* is considered scripture by Mormons in addition to the Bible, *The Book of Mormon*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*.

either quotations of Isaiah or condemnations of David's marriages.¹⁴ No Nephite prophet invokes David positively in his own voice.¹⁵ No psalm of David appears either; a record that quotes Isaiah extensively never quotes the Psalter.¹⁶

Grant Hardy, a Latter-day Saint historian, notices a related absence. "In order to communicate their theological principles clearly," Hardy writes, "both Mormon and Nephi present morally unambiguous figures," and even those transformed by conversion are "often catapulted from extreme wickedness to extreme righteousness." He adds: "Remarkably, there are no stories like the biblical accounts of Saul or David about good men who fall; all the tragedy in the *Book of Mormon* happens on a national rather than a personal level."¹⁷

THE JOSEPH SMITH TRANSLATION

Between 1830 and 1833, Joseph Smith produced a revision of the King James Bible (KJV), the Joseph Smith Translation (JST), working without manuscripts in any biblical language and presenting

the result as restoration by revelation.¹⁸ Two of those revisions concern David. In the KJV of 2 Samuel 12, Nathan confronts David over Bathsheba and Uriah, and then pronounces God's pardon: "The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die."¹⁹ The revision in the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) reads: "The Lord also hath *not* put away thy sin."²⁰ Also, where the KJV of Romans 4:5 says God "justifieth the ungodly," Joseph Smith's revision states that God "justifieth *not* the ungodly."²¹

Romans 4 is where David becomes the Apostle Paul's example: "Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works" (Rom 4:6, KJV). This assertion is followed by David's own words from Psalm 32:1–2 (Rom 4:7–8). Smith, however, also emends Romans 4:16 so that believers are "justified of faith *and* works, through grace."²²

No Greek manuscript supports these changes. LDS scholar Robert J. Matthews allows that such portions "may consist of inspired commentary by

¹⁴ Kyle R. Beshears, *Davidic References in the Book of Mormon as Evidence against Its Historicity* (ThM thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 20–21, 32–33. Beshears notes that readers may be "nonplussed at the paltry seven references to Israel's greatest king, especially considering the numerous Abrahamic and Mosaic references."

¹⁵ Beshears, *Davidic References*, 37. The three fall inside 2 Nephi 12–24, which reproduces Isaiah 2–14. The Apostle Paul in Acts 13 cites David both by quotation and in his own words; Nephi never does. Beshears comments, "Had Isaiah not mentioned David in those three verses, one wonders if Nephi would have ever mentioned the king at all."

¹⁶ Beshears, 41–44. Nephi's account of the plates lists the law, the histories, and the prophets, with no wisdom literature. Beshears finds John Hilton III's proposed psalmic allusions either too generic to show intent or verbatim King James Version wording, the same pattern as the Isaiah block.

¹⁷ Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 125.

¹⁸ Robert J. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation: Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1975). The Latter-day Saint edition of the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) of the Bible prints selections in an appendix and shorter variants in the footnotes.

¹⁹ Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the King James Version (KJV) unless otherwise noted. The KJV is the translation used in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible, and it is the text the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) used as its base in making a revision.

²⁰ The KJV translates 2 Samuel 12:13 as follows: "And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die." In contrast, the JST translates 2 Samuel 12:13 as: "And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath *not* put away thy sin *that* thou shalt not die" (italics in the Latter-day Saint edition). Two Latter-day Saint philosophers, David L. Paulsen and R. Dennis Potter, acknowledge the reversal: "[I]nstead of Nathan telling David that he has been forgiven of God for his sins (as the KJV reads), in the JST Nathan tells him that he has not been forgiven." On whether a scribe dropped the word, these authors state: "[I]t seems that the evidence points the other way." David L. Paulsen and R. Dennis Potter, "How Deep the Chasm? A Reply to Owen and Mosser's Review," *FARMS Review of Books* 11, no. 2 (1999): 234.

²¹ The JST translates Romans 4:5 as follows, printed in the Joseph Smith Translation appendix of the Latter-day Saint edition: "But to him that seeketh not to be justified by the law of works, but believeth on him who justifieth *not* the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." The King James Version of Romans 4:5 reads, "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly." The revision changes the verse twice: it negates "justifieth," and it replaces "worketh not" with "seeketh not to be justified by the law of works." Joseph Smith makes a similar substitution in the preceding verse (Rom 4:4), where "to him that worketh" becomes "to him who is justified by the law of works."

²² Grant Underwood says that Joseph Smith "emended Romans 4:16 to read: 'Therefore ye are justified of faith *and* works, through grace,'" which Underwood calls "a succinct, single-sentence summary of the Mormon position." Underwood, *Latter-day Saint Theology*, 389.

the Prophet Joseph Smith.”²³ But on that reading the changes record what Smith *believed* rather than what the Apostle Paul *wrote*. Such commentary reverses the meaning of the text.

JOSEPH SMITH’S SERMONS

Joseph Smith later taught of David’s permanent loss in sermons between 1841 and 1844. His anchor was Peter’s line in Acts 2:34, “David is not ascended into the heavens,” which he took to mean that David’s soul was in hell.²⁴ In *Times and Seasons* Smith taught that David “did not” rise with the saints at Christ’s resurrection “because he had been a murderer,” and that “the prayers of all the ministers in the world could never close the gates of hell against a murderer.”²⁵ Smith names two sins that cannot be forgiven, the sin against the Holy Ghost and the shedding of innocent blood: “A murderer ... cannot have forgiveness. David sought repentance at the hand of God carefully with tears, for the murder of Uriah; but he could only get it through hell.”²⁶ In the same discourse, Smith taught that David’s kingdom would pass “to another by the name of David in the last days, raised up out of his lineage.”²⁷

This teaching entered Latter-day Saint scripture

in 1843. *Doctrine and Covenants* 132:39 says that David’s wives “were given unto him of me, by the hand of Nathan.” “And in none of these things did he sin against me,” the text continues, “save in the case of Uriah and his wife; and, therefore he hath fallen from his exaltation.”²⁸

AFTER JOSEPH SMITH

LDS leaders repeated the verdict about David for a century and a half. Orson Pratt held that David “was perhaps as repentant as anyone could be; but the decree had gone forth.”²⁹ Marion G. Romney taught at the 1979 LDS General Conference that David “lost his families and his exaltation.”³⁰ Bruce R. McConkie stated the consequence—murderers “are not forgiven in the sense that celestial salvation is made available to them. After they have paid the full penalty for their crime, they shall go on to a telestial inheritance,” which is the lowest of the three kingdoms of glory.³¹

Church publications repeated the damning verdict. The *Old Testament Student Manual* heads a section titled “David Is Still Paying in Hell for His Sins,” opens it with the Joseph Smith Translation of 2 Samuel 12:13, and calls the situation one of tragedy: David “was destined for exaltation,

²³ Matthews, “A Plainer Translation,” 253 (1985 ed.), quoted in William J. Hamblin, “An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe’s Assumptions and Methodologies,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no. 1 (1994): 501.

²⁴ Account of Meeting, 12 January 1841, as reported by William P. McIntire, in McIntire, Notebook, [5]–[7], Church History Library, Salt Lake City; *The Joseph Smith Papers*, Documents, vol. 7, *September 1839–January 1841*, 495–97, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/account-of-meeting-12-january-1841-as-reported-by-william-p-mcintire/1>. McIntire records Joseph Smith’s teaching that “Peter said David had not yet ascend[ed] to heaven & that he was a Murderer— & that his soul was in Hell is plainly told By Peter in acts— 2d. ch.” The date is the document editors’ reconstruction. The manuscript reads “Tuesday the 19” corrected to “12,” and the year is inferred from Smith’s whereabouts. Compare Acts 2:29, 34 (KJV).

²⁵ Joseph Smith, discourse of May 16, 1841, as published in *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 15 (June 1, 1841): 429–30.

²⁶ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 339 (March 10, 1844).

²⁷ Joseph Smith, discourse of March 10, 1844, in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1938), 339.

²⁸ D&C 132:38–39; see also 132:19, 26–27. The *Book of Mormon* had said the opposite: “David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord” (Jacob 2:24). Joseph Fielding Smith answers that conflict under the heading “There Is No Contradiction” (*Answers to Gospel Questions*, vol. 4:212–14). David Whitmer, one of the Three Witnesses, pressed it instead and rejected the revelation: “[T]his revelation is a plain contradiction of the Word of God in the Book of Mormon.” David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: David Whitmer, 1887), 44.

²⁹ Orson Pratt, *Journal of Discourses* 15:317.

³⁰ Marion G. Romney, the second counselor in the First Presidency, said, “David ... though highly favored of the Lord (he was, in fact, referred to as a man after God’s own heart), yielded to temptation. His unchastity led to murder, and as a consequence, he lost his families and his exaltation.” Marion G. Romney “Trust in the Lord,” priesthood session, April 1979 [LDS] General Conference; *Ensign*, May 1979, 42.

³¹ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), s.v. “Murder.” McConkie allows David the promise “that his soul would not be left in hell” (Acts 2:27) so he is not a son of perdition. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 39.

destined to rule in heaven forever ... From celestial to telestial—that is tragedy.”³² The *LDS Bible Dictionary* states that “David is still unforgiven.”³³

In a 2026 interview, I (the present author) said that I had been forgiven as King David was forgiven and would enjoy Christ’s presence forever as David will. T. J. Hale, a Latter-day Saint commentator, answered that David “forfeited his exaltation,” and “there’s nothing King David can do ... to recapture that gift that he forfeited.”³⁴

AN INSUFFICIENT ATONEMENT

Behind this verdict lies a historic LDS teaching that certain sins are too grave for Christ’s atonement to cover. Brigham Young drew a further inference—that such a sinner must pay with his own blood, a conclusion the modern LDS Church has disowned even as the premise beneath it survives.³⁵ Modern writers qualify the premise. One author ties guilt to knowledge; a man may sin “according to his light and knowledge” so as to be placed “beyond the reach of the atoning blood of Christ.”³⁶ Writing in 2025, BYU professor Grant Underwood states that “Mormon doctrine ... holds that not only the grievous and inveterate sinner but any unrepentant individual will need to suffer penitential justice for a

period in the intermediate state.”³⁷

OTHER SCRIPTURES BEARING ON THE ISSUE

Davidic Psalms. Psalm 51 is David’s prayer after Nathan confronts him for his adultery with Bathsheba. In it David asks God to cleanse him of murder: “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation” (Ps 51:14). Nathan has already answered him: “The Lord also hath put away thy sin” (2 Sam 12:13). Psalm 32:1–2 speaks of such forgiveness as settled: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven ... unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity.”³⁸

Modern LDS author Tad R. Callister sees in Psalm 51 a general picture of complete cleansing: “There is no black mark that emerges from the waters of baptism, no stain that survives the rigors of repentance.”³⁹ Whether David actually received that cleansing is left unstated. Other recent LDS commentary insists that David himself did not: “Tragically, David’s eloquent prayer would not be answered ... he could not become clean from his sin of murder.”⁴⁰ Spencer W. Kimball made David the centerpiece of a chapter titled “Point of No Return,” explaining: “Some of the Psalms portray the anguish of his soul, yet David is still

³² The *LDS Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis–2 Samuel* asserts: “Consider that David was destined for exaltation, destined to rule in heaven forever and ever as a Creator and a God to his future children ... From celestial to telestial—that is tragedy.” *Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis–2 Samuel*, Religion 301, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 1980), 291, §26–22, “Points to Ponder,” immediately following §26–21, “2 Samuel 12:13. David Is Still Paying in Hell for His Sins.”

³³ [LDS] *Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “David.” This dictionary article also notes, “Like Saul he [David] was guilty of grave crimes; but unlike Saul, he was capable of true contrition and was therefore able to find forgiveness, except in the murder of Uriah. As a consequence David is still unforgiven ... Because of his transgressions, he has fallen from his exaltation (D&C 132:39).” The entry dates to the 1979 Latter-day Saint edition and survived the 2013 revision unchanged.

³⁴ T. J. Hale, “Do They Hear Themselves? Protestant Arguments vs. LDS Reality,” Halestorm, YouTube, April 20, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTdoHaa997I>. This LDS commentator acknowledges an internal dispute over whether David inherits telestial or terrestrial glory, but he presents David’s permanent loss of exaltation as the consensus LDS position. The original debate to which this LDS commentator refers took place between contemporary LDS apologist Jacob Hansen and the present author (Aaron Shafvaloff).

³⁵ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 4:219–20; McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, s.v. “Blood Atonement.” On the modern disowning of the historic LDS idea that for certain sins, a man’s own personal blood (not Christ’s) must atone, see Charles R. Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*”: A Contextual History of *Mormon Theology* (Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 496, citing Snow, “Blood Atonement,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (1992).

³⁶ Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:83, as cited in Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*,” 495.

³⁷ Underwood, *Latter-day Saint Theology*, 767, citing D&C 19:16–17: “[I]f they would not repent they must suffer even as I.”

³⁸ See also Psalm 51:14 and 2 Samuel 12:13.

³⁹ Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2000), 217, Kindle. Callister’s comments appear in a section titled “The Blessing of Repentance” and are an analysis of Psalm 51:2, 7.

⁴⁰ Bryan Richards, “Psalm 51,” *Gospel Doctrine*, posted ca. October 2025, <https://gospeldoctrine.com/old-testament/psalms/psalm-51>.

paying for his sin ... The Prophet Joseph Smith underlined the seriousness of the sin of murder for David as for all men, and the fact that there is no forgiveness for it.”⁴¹

1 John 3:15. Joseph Smith, Kimball, and McConkie each cite “no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15), which McConkie understands to place a murderer “outside the pale of redeeming grace.”⁴² But the sentence begins, “whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer.” The Apostle John describes what an unrepentant person is while he hates, not a class permanently shut out. The same letter promises that “the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from *all* sin” (1 John 1:7), and “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Acts 2:34. Joseph Smith read “David is not ascended into the heavens” (Acts 2:34) as proof that David’s soul was shut out of exaltation. But Peter is preaching the resurrection of Christ. His text is David’s Psalm 16, “[T]hou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption,” and his argument is that David cannot be its subject, because David died and stayed buried (Acts 2:29). David, “being a prophet,” “spake of the resurrection of Christ” (Acts 2:30–31). Ironically, McConkie grants the point at Acts 13:33–35, where Paul shows that Christ, “not David,” was the one “whose soul should not see corruption.”⁴³

TWO ECONOMIES

Paul sets two economies side by side in Romans 4, one of works and one of grace. In an economy of works: “To him that worketh is the reward not

reckoned of grace, but of debt” (Rom 4:4) because a wage is owed rather than given. However, in an economy of grace: “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Rom 4:5). Paul divides the two economies by whether a man works *at all*, not by which works he performs. Blake T. Ostler grants that these “works” are “any type of ‘work’ that is used to earn something.”⁴⁴

Paul describes true justification as not being based on merit or obedience but solely on belief “on him that justifieth the ungodly”—trust in a God who acquits the guilty. That is why David is able to serve as Paul’s prime example in Romans 4. Though a man after God’s own heart, not even that disposition justified him. Like David, all believers immediately enjoy the same verdict by faith—“being justified by faith, we have peace with God” (Rom 5:1), and “there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

BLENDING VERDICT AND PROCESS

Paul Owen and Carl Mosser find an LDS tendency “to supplant St. Paul’s doctrine of forensic justification ... with an emphasis on gradual transformation into the divine image, thereby blending justification and sanctification,” discernible “in certain strands of Latter-day Saint thought.”⁴⁵ Strikingly, Underwood titles one of the sections of his book “Justification as Sanctification.” The Protestant Reformers narrowed justification to God’s legal act of crediting Christ’s righteousness to the believer, thus *declaring* the believer to be righteous judicially; Latter-day Saint writers stretch it to

⁴¹ Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 128. Earlier in the same chapter, Kimball writes that a murderer “denies himself salvation in the celestial kingdom, and in this sense he cannot be forgiven for his crime.” Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 127.

⁴² McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, s.v. “Murder.” Kimball follows this same line of reasoning in Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, ch. 9.

⁴³ McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, vol. 2, 127.

⁴⁴ Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, vol. 2, *The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006), 397, Kindle.

⁴⁵ Paul L. Owen and Carl A. Mosser, review of Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, *FARMS Review of Books* 11, no. 2 (1999): 41. These authors’ example is Blake T. Ostler, “The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace,” *Dialogue* 24, no. 1 (1991): 57–84, esp. 68–73.

include sanctification, the experiential process by which a person is *made* righteous.⁴⁶ Ostler states the consequence: The believer is “promised that faithfulness to the covenant will result in a favorable verdict at the day of judgment.”⁴⁷

Everything turns on this vital distinction. If justification is a verdict, God speaks it over a sinner now, and David is forgiven. If it is a process, the verdict waits for the finished progression, and a progression broken by David’s murder forfeits his justification.

TALKING WITH LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Ask your Latter-day Saint friend to open their Bible to Romans 4 and read verses 4 through 8 together. Let Paul say that God “justifieth the ungodly” and that one man he has in mind is David. Then ask them to find the Joseph Smith Translation appendix in the LDS Gospel Library app or in the back of their printed scriptures and read Romans 4:5 there. Ask them what they make of it. Then read *Doctrine and Covenants* 132:39, where David “hath fallen from his exaltation,” and 130:20-21, where every blessing is predicated on obedience to a law.

Ask your Mormon friend: Have you received the same gift that David received? Did God forgive David? If the blood of Christ does not cover David’s murder, what does David’s own suffering add? The LDS tradition answers that he must pay for his sin in the intermediate state. It credits to a murderer’s own suffering what it denies to the blood of Jesus. It is the sinner, not the Savior, who must close the account.

David himself does not reason that way in Scripture. He asks for cleansing on the ground of God’s mercy, “according to thy lovingkindness” (Ps 51:1), and he expects to receive it. The New Testament agrees with him. David is a grievous sinner, an adulterer who arranged a man’s death

to hide his sin. Yet he is the very man Paul chooses to show that God “justifieth the ungodly.” If God can freely justify David, he can count as righteous ungodly sinners like us. The best of us still deserve judgment, and the worst of us can be forgiven. That is the good news that a false gospel cannot finally offer, and it is worth saying to our Latter-day Saint friends: If God can forgive King David, God can surely forgive you. •

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⁴⁶ Underwood, *Latter-day Saint Theology*, 379.

⁴⁷ Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, vol. 2, 369.

Knowing Truth, Recognizing Error: The Priority of Doctrinal Grounding in Apologetics Ministry to Jehovah's Witnesses

by Eli Ayala and Jeff Moore¹

START WITH THE ESSENTIALS

The study of apologetics can often feel overwhelming. The field is vast, and for those who are beginning the journey, it is not always obvious where to start. One could devote years to studying metaphysics, exploring the complexities of competing epistemological systems, or examining the philosophical foundations of various worldviews. Beyond that lies the enormous task of understanding the world's religions, each with its own history, doctrines, and internal debates. The sheer breadth of material can leave even the most eager student wondering where to begin.

The previously mentioned areas of study are unquestionably valuable. A faithful apologist should never minimize the importance of worldview analysis, philosophy, or comparative religion. Such disciplines sharpen our thinking and help us engage thoughtfully with the many challenges raised against the Christian faith. Yet experience has taught me that while these subjects are important, they are not where most conversations actually begin.

In countless interactions with unbelievers, skeptics, and adherents of different religious groups, I have found that the discussion repeatedly returns to the foundational truths of Christianity.

¹ Eli Ayala wrote the majority of the prose of this article, while Jeff Moore compiled most of the research, but each author shared a hand in both tasks. Where the first-person singular pronoun is used in this article ("I," "me," "my"), Eli is the author speaking.

Questions surrounding the deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, justification by faith alone, the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, and the identity of the true gospel arise with remarkable frequency. While philosophical discussions certainly have their place, it is often these core doctrines that stand at the center of real-world apologetic encounters.

This observation has significant implications for those entrusted with equipping the church. Most believers are not professional apologists. They have families to care for, jobs to fulfill, and countless responsibilities that limit the amount of time they can devote to extensive academic study. If our goal is to prepare God's people to stand firm in the truth, we must begin where Scripture itself begins—by grounding believers deeply in the essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

A believer who knows the basics of biblical doctrine thoroughly is far better prepared to recognize and answer error than someone who possesses only a superficial familiarity with Scripture but an extensive knowledge of philosophical systems. The ability to identify false teaching is rooted not merely in knowing what is false, but even more so, in knowing what is true. When the truth is deeply established in the mind and heart, error often reveals itself with surprising clarity.

My own experience in interacting with groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses has continually reinforced this conviction. Although many imagine these conversations require highly specialized knowledge, I have found that they consistently return to the bedrock doctrines of Christianity. Again and again, the discussion centers on the nature of God, the person of Christ, the gospel itself, and the authority of Scripture. These are not peripheral matters; they are the very foundation of the Christian faith. Consequently, if we desire to prepare believers for faithful witness, our first priority must be to ensure they know these foundational truths well. Only then will they be equipped to recognize error and contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

This principle becomes especially important when preparing believers to engage groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses. When a Jehovah's Witness arrives at our door, it is easy to become distracted by the many distinctive practices for which they are known. Discussions quickly drift toward their rejection of birthdays and Christmas, their refusal to salute the flag (of their given countries), their refusal of military service, their rejection of blood transfusions, or other beliefs and practices that, while interesting, are not the heart of the matter. These issues may have their place, but they are not where the conversation ought to begin.

Our aim should be to help true believers discern the central theological divide between biblical Christianity and the Jehovah's Witnesses' system of belief. Rather than becoming entangled in peripheral issues, Christians should be equipped to recognize the doctrines that truly separate orthodoxy from error. The identity of Jesus Christ, the nature of the triune God, the authority of Scripture, and the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone are not merely points of disagreement—they are the very foundation stones upon which the Christian faith stands, and therefore, believers in the pews must be familiar with them.

Yet even this strategy is only part of the task. Faithful apologetics requires more than knowing which doctrines differ. It also requires understanding *why* those differences persist. Behind every theological system lies a network of foundational assumptions that shape how evidence is interpreted, how Scripture is read, and how truth itself is understood. These underlying commitments—what we often refer to as *presuppositions*—frequently explain why conversations can seem to reach an impasse despite careful reasoning and clear biblical exposition.

PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

One of the greatest services we can render the church is to help believers identify their own foundational presuppositions (and those of their conversation partner). When Christians learn to

recognize the assumptions that govern a person's interpretation of Scripture and theology, they are better equipped to engage others patiently, thoughtfully, and biblically. Rather than chasing every rabbit trail that presents itself, Christians can remain focused on the foundational issues that must be addressed if genuine understanding is ever to take place. In doing so, they become not only more effective witnesses but also more discerning students of God's Word.

At this point, the direction becomes clear. If our desire is to equip God's people to be faithful apologists, then our primary task is not simply to teach them isolated arguments but to ground them in the Christian system of truth as it is revealed in Holy Scripture. A believer who understands Christianity as a coherent, unified worldview is far better equipped to recognize and respond to error than one who merely memorizes a handful of apologetic responses.

This idea is precisely what Cornelius Van Til had in mind when he offered his well-known definition of apologetics: "Apologetics is the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life."² There is much packed into this brief definition, and it is worth pausing to consider what Van Til is emphasizing.

Notice, first, that apologetics is described as the "vindication" of the Christian philosophy of life. The task of the apologist is not merely to present Christianity as one religious option among many, nor is the task to place Christianity and competing religious systems on equal footing as though each were equally legitimate explanations of reality. Rather, the Christian apologist seeks to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith over against every competing worldview. Whether we are engaging a Jehovah's Witness, a Muslim, an

atheist, or any other false devotee, our objective is not simply to exchange opinions but to defend the truth claims of biblical Christianity and expose the inadequacies of every rival system.

Second, Van Til deliberately speaks of the "Christian philosophy of life." This language reminds us that Christianity is not merely a collection of disconnected doctrines or isolated theological statements. Rather, Scripture presents a unified and coherent way of understanding reality. It speaks to God, man, sin, redemption, knowledge, ethics, purpose, and the meaning of history itself. Every doctrine is interconnected because every doctrine finds its place within the unified revelation that God has given in his Word.

This observation has important implications for apologetics. We are not merely defending individual doctrines in isolation (otherwise known as a "blockhouse" approach, i.e., defending Christianity piece by piece, block by block). Instead, we are defending an entire worldview—a comprehensive way of thinking that is grounded in divine revelation and shapes every aspect of life. Our understanding of God informs our understanding of man. Our doctrine of Scripture governs our doctrine of salvation. Our view of Christ shapes our understanding of creation, morality, and human purpose. The Christian faith is not a collection of unrelated truths but a unified system that stands or falls together.

For that reason, the most effective preparation for apologetic ministry is not first becoming an expert on every false religion or every philosophical movement. The best preparation involves becoming deeply rooted in the truth of God's Word. The more thoroughly believers understand the Christian worldview as it is revealed in Scripture, the more readily they will recognize when competing systems depart from it. Error is most easily identified by

² Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 17.

those who have become intimately familiar with the truth. In this way, a robust knowledge of Scripture and the doctrines it contains does more than enrich the believer's theology (although it certainly does that); it equips the believer to contend earnestly for the faith and to defend it with confidence, clarity, and biblical conviction.

BASIC BELIEFS OF CHRISTIANITY

Well-equipped Christians must apprehend and intimately understand the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, matters “of first importance” (1 Cor 15:3, NASB). They must be able to affirm, with full conviction, the following truths:

- 1.) I believe in the authority and inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. (1 Cor 15:3–5; 2 Tim 3:15–17; 2 Pet 3:15–16)
- 2.) I believe that the God of the Bible is the only true and living God. (1 Cor 8:4)
- 3.) I believe that God is one in essence and three in persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (Matt 28:19)
- 4.) I believe that Christ was born of the virgin Mary. (Matt 1:20–21; 2:11)
- 5.) I believe that Christ became a man in his incarnation while remaining at the same time fully God. (Phil 2:5–11)
- 6.) I believe that Christ lived a sinless and perfect life. (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22)
- 7.) I believe that Christ died innocently on the cross to pay for the sins of guilty sinners. (1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:21)
- 8.) I believe that Christ rose bodily from the dead. (1 Cor 15:4–7)

9.) I believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. (Eph 2:8–9)

10.) I believe that Christ will physically appear again at the last day. (Acts 1:11)

11.) I believe that there will be a bodily, general resurrection of the dead. (John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15)

12.) I believe that those who are in Christ will enter into eternal joy, and those who are lost shall enter into eternal punishment. (Matt 25:46; 2 Thess 1:7–10)³

Thus far we have emphasized the importance of grounding believers in the Christian system of truth as it is revealed in Scripture. However, an important clarification is necessary. An emphasis on the basic beliefs of Christianity should not be misunderstood to mean that we can completely ignore what others believe. Faithful apologetics requires *both* a firm grasp of biblical doctrine *and* a basic familiarity with the beliefs of those with whom we are speaking.

SYSTEMS IN CONFLICT

The point is not that Christians should become experts in every false religion before they are prepared to engage. Such a goal would be unrealistic for most believers and, in many cases, unnecessary. Nevertheless, meaningful conversation requires that we understand, at least in broad outline, the theological commitments of the person standing before us. Without that basic understanding, we run the risk of arguing against positions the individual does not actually hold or addressing issues that are not central to his (or her) beliefs.

This is particularly true when engaging Jehovah's Witnesses. While our confidence must always rest in

³ This 12-point doctrinal affirmation is Grace Bible Theological Seminary's statement of evangelical essentials for students, of which assent is required for students' admission to the seminary. See the *GBTS Student Handbook 2026–2027*, 9–10.

the truth of God's Word rather than in an exhaustive knowledge of Jehovah's Witnesses' theology, it is nevertheless helpful to understand the basic contours of their doctrinal system. Familiarity with their teachings enables us to ask better questions, avoid unnecessary distractions, and keep the conversation focused on the issues that matter most.

Accordingly, before considering how a Christian should respond to the claims of Jehovah's Witnesses, it will be beneficial to take a brief reconnaissance of their theological system. Our purpose is not to provide an exhaustive treatment of their doctrine, nor to become specialists in every detail of their theology. Rather, we simply want to identify the foundational beliefs that shape their understanding of God, Christ, salvation, and future things.

As we do so, the principles we have established thus far will become increasingly evident. A believer who is firmly grounded in the essential truths of Scripture will often discover that the most significant errors of Jehovah's Witnesses are not difficult to recognize. The clearer one's grasp of the Christian faith, the more readily one can identify where Jehovah's Witnesses depart from biblical orthodoxy and, with patience and gentleness, point others to the truth revealed in God's Word.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE THEOLOGY OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

It should be clear that this article takes a thoroughly presuppositional approach to apologetic engagement. This methodology does the best and most thorough job of identifying the key foundational issues when interacting with unbelieving thought systems. As pastors seeking to guard the flock and equip the saints, we must help our people move past surface-level

disagreements and get to the root of the matter. Only then can we address the real issues with clarity and biblical power.

Consider, for example, the differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics. When people ask what separates the two, it is easy to point to particular practices of the Roman Catholic Church, such as a heightened view of Mary's role, prayers to the saints, or other distinctives. Those differences are important. Yet the key distinction lies deeper in the foundational question of authority. Roman Catholicism holds to the authority of Scripture plus sacred tradition and the magisterium of the church. Protestants, by contrast, are committed to *sola Scriptura*—the conviction that Scripture alone is the only infallible rule of faith and practice for believers. This central difference in authority shapes everything else that follows.

The same principle applies when engaging Jehovah's Witnesses. We must expose the true foundation of their system if we hope to address their beliefs effectively. Jehovah's Witnesses do not ultimately derive their doctrine from the authority of Scripture alone. Their ultimate governing authority is the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society—the organization headquartered in New York that claims to be God's sole channel of communication on earth today. Everything Jehovah's Witnesses believe about Jesus, salvation, the end times, blood transfusions, and countless other matters flow from this commitment.⁴

Jehovah's Witnesses' interpretation of the Bible is filtered through the lens of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society publications, and this organization is granted ultimate interpretive authority over the devotee—rather than the Bible in its original languages having the supreme authority.⁵ Affirmation of the principle that Scripture itself is its best and

⁴ According to Jehovah's Witnesses, anyone seeking God must submit to "the publications brought forth by the 'faithful and discreet slave,'" which refers to the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. See "Do We Need Help to Understand the Bible?" in *The Watchtower*, Feb. 15, 1981 (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc.), 19.

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 130.

highest interpreter (“Scripture interprets Scripture”) is rejected by this organization.⁶

So, too, Jehovah’s Witnesses reject the Protestant Reformation principles that: (a) the essentials of God’s revelation in Scripture are clear (Ps 19:7; 1 Cor 15:3–5), and (b) the essentials are clear enough for every true believer to understand as guided by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16–17; 1 Cor 2:10–16). These are the twin doctrines of: (a) the perspicuity of Scripture and (b) the priesthood of the believer.⁷ In contrast, in the thinking of Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Watchtower must interpret all Scripture *for* the believer. Until this foundational issue of authority is brought to light, surface discussions about individual doctrines will often remain frustrating and unproductive.

A presuppositional lens is vital for effective ministry. By gently but firmly pressing to the root—asking questions like, “How do you know that the Watchtower is God’s appointed channel?” or “What happens if the organization’s teaching contradicts the clear words of Scripture?”—we can help our Jehovah’s Witness neighbors (and our own congregations) see where their system diverges from biblical Christianity. Only then can we faithfully point them to the authority of God’s Word and the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

BASIC BELIEFS OF JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES⁸

The Jehovah’s Witnesses were founded in 1870

by Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), who was initially a follower of Adventist teachings.⁹ Jehovah’s Witnesses meet in kingdom halls, not churches, and they heavily promote personal evangelism and the dissemination of their literature. Their foundational doctrinal beliefs are laid out and explained in the following discussion.

Authority. Jehovah’s Witnesses, upon first glance, give heavy lip service to the authority of Scripture. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, for this community there is a more ultimate authority, with its name printed inside all of their publications—the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Individuals cannot interpret their Bibles correctly without the authoritative guidance of this organization. As one of their publications asserts, “We all need help to understand the Bible, and *we cannot find the Scriptural guidance we need* outside the ‘faithful and discreet slave’ organization.”¹⁰ The Watchtower is the functional “pope” or “magisterium” for Jehovah’s Witnesses—the lens through which they must view the Scriptures.¹¹

Doctrine of God and the Person of Christ.

Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that there is one God, Jehovah, and he does not exist in three persons, thereby denying the doctrine of the Trinity.¹² This group teaches that Jesus is not fully God, maintaining that Jesus existed as a “spirit creature” (i.e., an angel) in heaven before being born as a human, and he “was God’s first

⁶ For this important principle, see the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (2LBCF) 1.9, which states, “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined ... can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved.” William Collins, et al., *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* (repr., Sand Springs, OK: Grace & Truth Books, n.d.).

⁷ For these twin doctrines, see the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith 1.7.

⁸ The following section is adapted from Jeffery Adams Moore, “Gospel Boundaries: Implementing the Evangelical Alliance’s Doctrinal Basis of 1846 to Determine Cooperation in Christian Education” (DMin diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 154–56.

⁹ Russell established a publishing arm in 1884 known as Zion’s Watch Tower Tract Society, renamed the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society in 1896 and changed again in 1939 to the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Since 1909 this publisher operated with its headquarters in New York City until moving to Warwick, New York, in 2016. See “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” in Frank S. Mead and Samuel S. Hill, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, rev. Craig D. Atwood, 11th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 179.

¹⁰ *The Watchtower*, Feb. 15, 1981, 19. Emphasis added.

¹¹ This organization also publishes its own version of the Bible, the New World Translation, which famously, in John 1:1, calls the Son of God (the Word in the beginning) “a god” instead of “God.”

¹² *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 2005), 201–04.

creation ... the only [creature] directly created by God.”¹³ According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jesus is the “Son of God” and “a god,” but he is not God himself. Jehovah’s Witnesses reject the deity of Jesus Christ, teaching that in his heavenly role he is Michael the archangel.¹⁴

The Person of the Holy Spirit. Jehovah’s Witnesses directly deny the clear biblical teaching of one God who eternally exists in three distinct persons (Titus 3:3–7; Matt 28:19), with each person of the Trinity being fully God (1 John 2:22–23).¹⁵ Thus, in addition to rejecting Christ as fully divine, they also deny the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. Instead, they teach that the Spirit is a force.¹⁶

Salvation. The Watchtower teaches that Jesus was impaled on a stake rather than hung on a cross.¹⁷ They also contend that Jesus did not experience a physical, bodily resurrection from the dead in a human body. Rather, Jehovah’s Witnesses affirm that Jesus rose “to life as a spirit creature in heaven.”¹⁸ In other words, he underwent an angelic resurrection, not a human resurrection.

On the doctrine of justification, Jehovah’s Witnesses have a somewhat complex view. They divide believers into two classes, the “anointed class” and the “other sheep.” The stated claim of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society is justification by faith alone—but only for the “anointed class” or the 144,000, which consists of believers from the time of Jesus up to the present, although there are few remaining, and

this number was mostly completed in the early 1930s.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the “other sheep” (consisting of Old Testament saints and believers beginning in the 1930s) will be resurrected with physical bodies during the millennium. During this 1,000 year “Judgment Day” period, this group must do good works in order to earn their justification and merit their place in an earthly paradise.²⁰ Jehovah’s Witnesses clearly do not affirm the gospel essential of justification by grace alone through faith alone through the work of Christ alone for all believers (Eph 2:8–9).²¹

Future Things. On the subject of future things, Jehovah’s Witnesses reject the immortality of the soul for all men because they teach that only the “anointed class” (i.e., the 144,000) gains such a status. The anointed class undergoes a spiritual resurrection (inheriting a spirit-body), but only the “other sheep” will have a physical resurrection of the body that will take place before the millennial period. Meanwhile, in the teaching of Jehovah’s Witnesses, some unbelievers will remain in a state of nonexistence (entered into at death), while others, who are physically resurrected yet who fail the millennial test, will be annihilated.²²

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ teaching on future things is clearly in opposition to that of the Bible, which affirms a bodily resurrection of all men, believers and unbelievers (Acts 24:15). The Bible attests to eternal and conscious ultimate destinies for all human beings, whether of everlasting life or everlasting wrath (Matt 25:46; 2 Thess 1:7–10;

¹³ *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, 41.

¹⁴ *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, 41–42, 218–19.

¹⁵ James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), 68, 114–15, 131–38, 140.

¹⁶ *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, 210–11.

¹⁷ *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, 51, 204–06.

¹⁸ *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, 73.

¹⁹ *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, 74; for a critique, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults: Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 288. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, those in the “anointed class” are currently resurrected with spirit-bodies (not physical bodies) and reside in heaven.

²⁰ Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that “[t]o live forever, both Armageddon survivors and resurrected ones will have to obey God’s commandments, including whatever new requirements Jehovah might reveal during the thousand years.” Such good works will especially include witnessing to non-believers. *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, 72–73, 214–15; for a rebuttal, see Hoekema, *Four Major Cults*, 284–85, 284n317.

²¹ Anthony Hoekema presents an incisive critique of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ flawed view of justification in Hoekema, 279–85.

²² *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, 57–74, 213–15.

Rom 2:6–8, 16). Thus, Jehovah’s Witnesses’ teaching contradicts essential Christian teachings about the future, including the immortality of the soul (for all men), the resurrection of the body (for all men), and eternal conscious joy for the righteous and eternal conscious punishment for the wicked.²³

SO, WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I believe it is of great practical value for pastors and church members to have a brief overview of what Jehovah’s Witnesses believe on key doctrines, complete with references to some of their own publications. Such a list helps the reader quickly see the breadth of issues that can arise in conversation and prevents us from getting easily sidetracked into secondary matters.

My hope is that you, the reader, can skim through the previous section and identify which point(s) of doctrine would be most beneficial and useful in an actual interaction with a Jehovah’s Witness. As you look over the preceding paragraphs, ask yourself: Where would you start, and why? Are you able to identify the foundational differences?

Hopefully you have already identified a couple of key points that will make for a strong foundation in your discussion. The Witnesses’ denial of the Trinity is central and comes up frequently. Do you know how to defend the doctrine of the Trinity biblically? Are you able to define it clearly within the context of historic Christian orthodoxy? Can you demonstrate from Scripture that the Holy Spirit is not merely an impersonal “force,” but a divine Person? And what about the deity of Christ? Have you identified the Scriptures you would turn to in order to prove this doctrine?

Be careful here. Remember what we have discussed—Jehovah’s Witnesses’ interpretation of any passage will be filtered through the lens of their authority structure (the Watchtower

organization). But they also have their own distinctive Bible translation, the New World Translation (NWT). Your Scriptures will not always be the same as their “Scriptures.”

We could linger on each doctrine endlessly in the basic beliefs section above—many excellent books have been written on them. But let’s focus on issues that typically surface in real conversations. In engaging a Jehovah’s Witness, you can generally go in one of two directions. On the one hand, you can proactively present a positive biblical defense of the Christian faith. This is good and necessary, but you must acknowledge that your conversation partner’s presuppositions will often get in the way. On the other hand, you can seek to place a firm wedge between their authority structure and the text of Scripture itself.

I have found the second approach particularly effective in actual conversations. Rather than beginning with a full defense of the Trinity or the deity of Christ, I start by questioning the foundation upon which the Jehovah’s Witness interprets Scripture. The goal is to help the individual see that his ultimate authority is not the Bible but the Watchtower organization. Once that foundational issue is exposed, the door opens to examine the text of Scripture more directly.

A helpful way to begin is to ask a straightforward question: “How do you know that the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society is God’s appointed channel of truth?” Most Witnesses have been trained to answer this by appealing to the organization’s history, its role as the “faithful and discreet slave” (referencing Matthew 24:45, New World Translation), or its supposed spiritual guidance. This opens the door for follow-up questions that press the issue: “If the organization has given false prophecies in the past, how can we be certain it is reliable today?” or “What would you do if a teaching from the Watchtower clearly contradicted the plain words of Scripture?”

²³ For a refutation of Jehovah’s Witnesses on future things, see Hoekema, *Four Major Cults*, 293–95.

These questions help the person think critically about their own authority structure. Many Witnesses have never been asked to consider such challenges. They have been taught that questioning the Watchtower organization is equivalent to questioning Jehovah (God) himself. By contrast, we want them to see that true faithfulness to God means testing everything by his Word (1 Thess 5:21).

Once the conversation has turned to the question of authority, I seek to root the conversation in Scripture. I might say, “Let’s look together at what the Bible says about how we should test teachers and prophets.” Passages such as Deuteronomy 18:20–22 (the test of a true prophet) or Galatians 1:8–9 (even an angel from heaven, if he preaches another gospel, should be accursed) become powerful tools. I encourage my conversation partner to read the verses aloud from their own New World Translation and then ask, “What does this passage actually say?”

The New World Translation of the Bible published by the Watchtower Society often alters key texts, but there are a number of verses that are translated accurately in it. That allows me to point Jehovah’s Witnesses to their own Bible, in places, on foundational issues. For example, when discussing the organization’s claim to be the sole channel of God’s truth, I turn to Acts 17:11, where the Bereans are commended for examining the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true. I ask, “If the Apostle Paul himself was willing to have his teaching tested by Scripture, shouldn’t we do the same with the publications of the Watchtower?”

This approach keeps the focus on the text of Scripture rather than on secondary matters. It respects the individual on the other side of the table while refusing to grant the Watchtower the authority it claims for itself. Repeated exposure to this tension between the organization’s claims and the plain teaching of Scripture can plant seeds that the Holy Spirit may use to bring about genuine conviction.

Of course, this approach requires patience. Most Witnesses have been deeply shaped by the organization. They may respond with prepared answers or attempt to change the subject. When that happens, I bring the conversation back: “That’s an interesting point, but can we first settle the question of how we determine what is true? Shouldn’t Scripture be the final judge?”

An important note to keep in mind is to stay laser-focused on asking specific questions. Do not let the conversation get derailed by a sudden change of topic. Gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15) are not logically incompatible with pressing a point in order to expose a weakness in someone’s position. It’s important to keep in mind that when doing apologetics, spiritual life and spiritual death is on the line, so we do not want to be so passive that the key distinctions get blurred, or, in some cases, lost altogether.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR PASTORS AND CHURCH MEMBERS

As pastors, our responsibility is not only to engage unbelievers ourselves but also to equip the members of our churches to do the same. The following are some practical ways to prepare God’s people for encounters with Jehovah’s Witnesses.

First, teach the foundational doctrines regularly and clearly. A steady diet of expository preaching through books like John, Colossians, or Hebrews will naturally equip believers to recognize error when they see it. When your people know that Jesus is the eternal Word who was with God and who was (and is) God (John 1:1), they will immediately sense something is wrong when a Witness tells them Jesus is a created being.

Second, practice simple dialogue in small groups or Sunday school classes. Teach people to ask good questions rather than simply firing off proof texts. Questions often move the conversation forward more effectively.

Third, encourage believers to pray before and after every encounter. The battle is ultimately a spiritual one (Eph 6:12). Only the Holy Spirit can open blinded eyes. This point is especially important given the fact that apologetics is typically focused on issues of the intellect, but we need to keep front and center the reality that it is also an issue of spiritual warfare.

Fourth, provide basic familiarity with Watchtower claims. While we do not want people to become overly dependent on extra-biblical materials, a working knowledge of the organization's history—including failed-date predictions such as 1914, 1925, and 1975—can be helpful when the conversation turns to the question of reliability.²⁴

Finally, remind your congregation that our task is to point people to the true Jesus Christ. A believer who is firmly grounded in the foundational truths of Scripture will be ready to recognize error and contend for Christianity in a way that is faithful both to the content of Scripture and the godly behavior that Scripture commends to the believer.

CONCLUSION

The task of equipping the church to engage groups like Jehovah's Witnesses is both challenging and urgent. These sincere people come to our doors week after week. We must meet them with confidence in the power of God's Word and the sufficiency of the gospel.

By grounding ourselves and our people in the foundational truths of Scripture, learning to emphasize the issue of authority, and relying on the Holy Spirit, we can be the *true* "witnesses" of the true Christ to our generation. May the Lord grant us wisdom and conviction as we contend for the Christian faith—a faith that is sturdy enough to stand firm against the incoming arrows of every rival thought system.

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²⁴ For a discussion of these dates (and others) by a former leader in the Watchtower Society, see Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience: The Story of the Struggle between Loyalty to God and Loyalty to One's Religion*, 5th ed. (N.c.: NuLife Press, 2018), esp. 199–310.

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