

**The Gospel as to the Substance of it:
Preaching Christ, the Power and Wisdom of God**

A paper presented by
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Text in bold face type is my emphasis.

This is the age of salvation not by works, gone awry. The Gospel message over the last century in America, in too many instances, has been folded into the arms of reductionism, salesmanship, and decisionism. Many years ago, a young man who was attending our youth ministry, was asked, what is the Gospel? His response, “That’s when you ask Jesus into your heart and you get to go to heaven when you die.” This writer was shocked. It was time to examine what our youth leaders were teaching.

On a more recent query, the same question was put to a young man who had sporadically attended our evangelistic Bible study. What is the Gospel? His response reflected the salesmanship answer, “I tell people that Jesus loves them and that He always has their back(!).”

Equally serious is the “Evangelical sacrament” known as the invitation that equates response with regeneration. With the appropriate music wafting in the background, the preacher urges people to come forward to receive Christ, or to raise one’s hand or sign a card. Add to this the deadly combination of a decision to receive Christ along with the half-truth doctrine known as eternal security. One has prayed to accept Christ as Savior and that person is eternally saved no matter how he lives his life.

Whereas it is true that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ and to the extent that the Christ is proclaimed, it is most certainly true that many have come to faith under circumstances such as these. We would hasten to add, however, that it was not technique or procedure but the gracious act of God’s sovereign grace in regeneration that brought the person to saving faith. To be sure, it is our task to persuade men and women to be reconciled to God.¹ It is also the case that in our evangelistic activity, where there is a response on the part of the hearer, we must determine as much as is humanly possible whether the individual has been persuaded by us or by the Holy Spirit. Time will tell. We will consider this more fully later in this discussion.

We are concerned here with the Gospel as to the substance of it, preaching Christ the power and wisdom of God. That is, we want to enlarge upon the statement found at the end of paragraph I. of Savoy XX. “In this promise, the Gospel, as to the substance of it, was revealed and was therein effectual for the conversion and salvation of sinners.” Thus, the emphasis in this treatise will be on preaching to the lost but we hasten to add the Gospel is for the believer also insofar as he or she believes the Good News for victory over sin and in living the Christian life (Romans 6-8). In a word, the Gospel is for sanctification as well as justification. Our present study directs us to I Corinthians 2:2 as the proof text and it will be the text from which we will launch our inquiry.

The Apostle Paul writes therein, “*For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” In the previous chapter the Apostle had spoken of the foolishness of preaching “the word of the cross” (I Corinthians 1:16). By contemporary standards, given the cruelty of this form of execution, the cross was considered an unacceptable topic for polite conversation. Nevertheless he would pay the price of ridicule and rejection to do just that, to preach Christ and him crucified. Some interpreters would argue that as Paul had arrived in Corinth from a less than successful ministry in Athens, he had learned his lesson about straying into the realm of Greek philosophy. The experience at Athens, we are then told, was an example of how not to preach the Gospel. Thus the conclusion reached by some (not all) is that the Gospel message must remain within the boundaries of Christ and the crucifixion.

We want to avoid a simplistic Gospel message that ends up, in the words of James Emery White, “a pathetic version of itself.” Much less do we want a watered down message that

¹ II Corinthians 5:11a; Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.

produces the unintended consequence of a bifurcated reality in which one secures his eternal destiny but separately has to live in the real world—faith is good but after all a guy has to make a buck!

Most certainly it is true that the Gospel message is simple. We must not, indeed we dare not, complicate it or otherwise adorn it with enticements to discover principles for successful living or finding peace, poise and prosperity. But with equal irony to that stated above, we would assert that it is, in fact, at the point of the Gospel's simplicity where we would embark on an expansive and comprehensive journey the end of which compels one to embrace the Gospel in the entirety of one's being and in a manner that addresses every area of a person's life.

Let us return to our proof text. What did the Apostle mean when he determined to know nothing among the Corinthian believers except Jesus Christ and him crucified? Certainly he was avoiding the artifice of the Roman style of rhetoric in the tradition of Cicero where oratory had become either a form of entertainment or the means by which one established one's credentials. Note what the Apostle said previously in the same letter, *but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God* (I Corinthians 1:23-24). To reiterate, it is Jesus Christ and him crucified that is the substance, power and wisdom of God in the Gospel.

We ask, was it simply the case that he taught only about the actual event, the crucifixion of Jesus itself? We think not. Rather this statement, Jesus Christ and him crucified, as in other places in the Apostle's writings, is to be taken as a synecdoche, the part that represents the whole. Understood in this manner, helps us in our quest to apprehend the substance of the Gospel, namely, the person and work of Christ.

A comprehensive discussion of Christology is beyond the scope of this treatise. Obviously, in our Gospel preaching to the lost and to believers, everything about the person and work of Christ cannot be presented in one session. At the same time we must strive to develop a reservoir of personal Biblical understanding about Christ. Additionally we must have in our minds, the unfolding story of Redemption: the promised seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15), the descendant of Abraham, David's greater Son, to the Child born of the virgin Mary who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried but rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven. We must embrace the person and work of Christ as the center of Redemptive history if our communication is to be effective. Our concern here is with the substance of the Gospel in the preaching of it, with an emphasis on preaching to the lost.

It is instructive to note other examples of preaching Christ and him crucified. Our Lord himself after his resurrection and his encounter speaks to this issue with the two on the road to Emmaus, *"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"* (Luke 24:25-26). In the Apostle Peter's sermon on Pentecost, he declares, *"Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified"* (Acts 2:36).

Jesus Christ as Lord

We begin in the same place the Apostle begins in our proof text, *Jesus* Christ and him crucified. The name *Jesus* itself explodes with meaning, namely, that he is Lord. It speaks to his humanity as well as his deity. Regarding the former, the Child born to the virgin was to be given the name Jesus. Generally speaking "name" in Scripture refers to a person's identity as opposed to modern contemporary parlance where a person's name is little more than a label.

Insofar as words are not wasted on God with respect to his self-disclosure, the name Jesus has a robust meaning which reveals his person and his work. In too many instances in the church today, the name Jesus is bandied about as a kind of Christian mantra without regard to the rich and deep meaning embedded in the name. The name Jesus, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew, Yehoshua (יהושע). It means “the Lord is salvation.” The Apostle states that “*at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Philippians 2:10-11). Jesus Christ is Lord. The angel spoke to Joseph, Mary’s betrothed, “*She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). This is the work of Christ.

That Jesus is Lord is to assert His deity and divine sovereignty. The title Lord takes us back to the Old Testament and the unique name for God in the tetragrammaton, YHWH (יהוה). It is translated in the English text as LORD following the Septuagint translation, Kyrie, Lord. YHWH is the covenant name by which God revealed himself to Abraham. This is close in meaning to the Hebrew verb (הוה of which הוה could very well be the third person singular) meaning *to become*, or *to exist* and would render the meaning of YHWH as simply “the One who is.” He appeared to Moses in Exodus 3 and identified himself as “I am (אהיה).” Add to this his instruction to Moses in the same discourse that YHWH is his unique covenant name by which he was to be remembered to succeeding generations (Exodus 3:15). In other words, there is no god, no being who can be compared to YHWH. He is self-existent. He is who he is. It is no small disclosure, therefore, on Jesus’ part that he referred to himself in John 8:58 as “I am.” Such an appellation infuriated his hearers.

The Lord (YHWH) accompanied his people in the wilderness. He gave them water from the rock (Exodus 17:5ff). The Apostle Paul informs us that that Rock was Christ (I Corinthians 10:4).

In Isaiah’s vision (Isaiah 6:5b) the Prophet laments, “*My eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!*” We should not overlook the fact that Jesus quotes from this passage and applies Isaiah’s vision to Himself.

Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him (John 12:39-41).

Later in Isaiah we see the Lord described as the First and the Last. *Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he* (Isaiah 41:4). Again in Isaiah 44:6, *Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. In the Triumphal Entry, Jesus allowed the people to praise him as the King of Israel (John 12:13). The magi sought out the one born king of the Jews (Matthew 2:2). He answered Pilate in the affirmative that he was a king (John 18:37). Most certainly is he the Redeemer (Luke 24:41; Galatians 4:5; Titus 2:14). That the Lord is spoken of as the first and the last is also spoken of Jesus in Revelation 1:17-18, When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, **I am the first and the last**, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. If YHWH in the Old Testament is God presenting himself in a singular, undifferentiated manner with respect to distinctions between the members of the Trinity, it is nonetheless appropriate to identify Jesus with YHWH.*

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as noted earlier, translated YHWH as Kyrie. Jesus is referred to many times in the New Testament as Kyrie, that is, Lord. It is to be granted that some would argue that the title is nothing more than polite formality such as addressing a person as, sir. This is doubtful but in any case the following takes us beyond conventional discourse: In the temptation in the wilderness Jesus, in his dialogue with Satan referred to himself as Lord. *“Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord (Κύριον) your God to the test’”* (Matthew 4:7). The angels announced to the shepherds, *“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is **Christ the Lord**”* (Luke 2:11). Jesus said to the multitude in the so-called “Sermon on the Plain,” *“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?”* (Luke 6:46). From the healed man who was blind from birth, he received worship, *“He said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him”* (John 9:38). In the post resurrection appearance he shows Thomas his wounds, *“Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”* (John 20:28).

The emphasis in the foregoing has been on Jesus as Lord. There are many other passages of Scripture that speak to the matter of his deity per se. He is the preexistent Logos of John 1:1, the agent of creation (John 1:3). There are the references in the Gospel of John as to Jesus’ divine origin that he came down from heaven (John 3:31; 6:38) from the presence of the Father (John 1:14; 6:46). Throughout the Gospels, much to the chagrin of his hearers, Jesus speaks of *my Father* or *my Father in heaven* all of which was virtually a claim to deity. *This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was **even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*** (John 5:18).

To preach the substance and power of the Gospel is to assert Jesus’ deity but additionally to proclaim him as Lord is to assert his authority, power and sovereignty, whether it Peter’s sermon, *this Jesus whom you crucified is both Lord and Christ*, or the Apostle Paul, *“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”*

The name Jesus itself bespeaks his sovereign authority.

Jesus the Christ

It is Jesus **Christ** and him crucified. Christ is not the last name of our Savior; it is his title. Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew (מָשִׁיחַ), Messiah, the anointed one. In Jesus the Messiah, we are confronted with his deity and humanity. Jesus’ anointing pertains to both his divine and human natures as presented to us in his baptism, *“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’”* (Luke 3:21-22). In the synagogue at Nazareth, the carpenter’s son declared, quoting from Isaiah 61:1, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4:18-19). True God by nature (Hebrews 1:8), in his earthly life and ministry *“he loved righteousness and hated wickedness”* (Hebrews 1:9a. Therefore God, his God anointed him *“with the oil of gladness beyond [above? παρὰ] your companions,”* which denotes his triumphant exaltation (Hebrews 1:9). The anointing of the Christ pertains to his deity and humanity.

As the Christ he is the mediator between God and man. A mediator is one who represents both parties each to the other. More specifically, Christ our mediator represents God

to his people and the people to God. Christ is our mediator in his three-fold office of prophet, priest and king.

A prophet represents God to the people and declares to them the will of God. God spoke to the people through the prophet Moses, "*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers--it is to him you shall listen-- . . . And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him*" (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19). Peter quotes this passage in his sermon in the temple (Acts 3) after the healing of the lame man. His point: to not believe Jesus is to bring on the judgment of God.

A priest primarily represents the people before God. Aaron as a type of Christ was anointed as high priest to represent the people of Israel before God by means of the tabernacle sacrifices and services (Exodus 40:13, Leviticus 8). His priesthood pointed toward a greater priest, one who was a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:17). In the priesthood of Aaron, the high priest would enter the holy of holies, once a year under tightly controlled and carefully prescribed ritual, to make atonement for the sins of the people. Christ our high priest "*appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption* (Hebrews 9:11-12). As our high priest, he is the offerer and the offering. We will speak more about the latter when we come to *Christ crucified*. Christ our high priest *is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them* (Hebrews 7:25). In Christ our high priest God's wrath has been removed because he pleads the merits of his own blood before the Father. In Christ our high priest, our rebellion has been subdued because, as our high priest, he is also the mediator of a covenant founded on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). This covenant of which Christ is the mediator, is the law of God written on the heart (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:7-13).

In Jesus the Christ, he is our mediator by which we mean he is a prophet, declaring to us the will of God, as our priest God's wrath has been removed and our rebellion subdued. He is also our king. In the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 26, "How doth Christ execute the office of a king? Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling, and defending us, and in restraining and conquering his and our enemies. He is the fulfillment of the covenant made with David, that his throne would be an eternal throne. He is the rebuilding of David's fallen tent; for what purpose? that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord (Acts 15:16-17). He is the one who is enthroned subduing his enemies to himself (Psalm 110:1). *For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet* (I Corinthians 15:25). Christ the king is reigning now.

Christ Crucified

At various times the question is put by this writer, what does Christ's crucifixion mean to you? A typical answer: "to show how much God loves us." This is followed by a second question, what kind of love is it for a father to subject his son to such a tortuous death? There is little or no response to this question. The love of God has been so sentimentally smeared over our worship and our preaching that other attributes, such as the holiness, wrath, and justice of God, are either jettisoned altogether or given perfunctory mention. Remember the words of

Jesus to the two on the road to Emmaus: *Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?* What is the necessity of the Cross? Could not God in his omnipotence declare by fiat a person saved? Why did the Christ have to die?

To answer these questions we have to go back to Genesis beginning with creation itself. God spoke the universe into existence. He speaks and it is so. There is no equivocation with God. Thus, when he speaks to Adam in Genesis 2 about the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, he speaks words that are unchangeably true and binding. *“But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”* (Genesis 2:17). There you have it, the establishment of law and justice for all time. The law, any law for that matter, must be obeyed. If it is broken the prescribed penalty must be exacted. This is justice: the law must be obeyed; if broken, the penalty must be paid.

We know, of course, that Adam succumbed to the temptation of Satan; he disobeyed God and sin entered the human race, creation was cursed and death became the just penalty for sin. Why? Because God said so and he means what he says. An additional question must be asked, what were the effects of Adam’s sin on the human race? Was it a matter of ignorance, the remedy for which is information or recollection ala Plato’s *Meno*? Was it a matter of stubbornness, in which case techniques of suasion and persuasion are applied to overcome it? Or, is the condition of the human race that man is dead by which is meant totally unresponsive to the things of God because of an inability to submit to him. The answer to this most certainly affects how one preaches the Gospel to the lost.

It is the third option that is in view here as being the Biblical position. Man will not respond to God because he cannot. Consider the following: *“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”* (Genesis 6:5; cf. 8:21). There is nothing in the Hebrew text to dispute the straight forward meaning here. The heart, Biblically speaking, is that part of our inner being which drives our thinking and our actions (Proverbs 27:19). *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9). Ezekiel says that the unregenerate heart is a heart of stone, *“And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh”* (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26). Jesus describes man’s sinful condition as being totally within, *“For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person”* (Mark 7:21-23). The Apostle Paul describes our sinful condition as suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18) and that the mind (heart) of man does not submit to God’s law and is unable to do so (Romans 8:7). These are but a few of the texts of Scripture that speak to the condition of man which we call, original sin. The condition of man is moral not metaphysical.

The total corruption of our hearts renders us sinners by nature and by choice, the just penalty of which is death. *“The soul who sins shall die”* (Ezekiel 18:4). It is an eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46). How do we resolve the dilemma of being totally bound in sin and at the same time held responsible for it? We need a Savior. One was promised immediately after Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:15). Indeed a Savior would come on whom the Lord would lay the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). We need a Savior who would keep the law on behalf of sinners and pay the penalty of their sin. In other words we need a Savior who would satisfy divine justice. God does not excuse sinners, he redeems them through his precious blood; *“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” (I Peter 1:18-19). The cross was necessary in order to save sinners (Mark 10:45). It was a wrath removing sacrifice, “*whom God put forward as a propitiation [ἰλαστήριον] by his blood, to be received by faith*” (Romans 3:25a).

We affirm that man is justified by grace through faith because of Christ but where does faith come in the *ordo salutis*? It’s a practical question. Does faith come before or after regeneration? From what we have just observed, we note man’s inability to come to Christ for salvation. Yet we are justified by faith. How can this be since we are unwilling because unable to come to Christ? Regeneration must precede faith. How does this happen inasmuch as it must be the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit to change the heart of stone to a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19)? It comes by preaching Christ and him crucified.

The Preaching of Christ and Him Crucified

Regeneration comes through the foolishness of preaching (I Corinthians 1:23). If we reject the notion that one’s “decision” to follow Christ is equated with regeneration how then do we preach to sinners? Is some sort of response required? The answer is yes. The Great Commission of Matthew 2:19-20 gives us an overall strategy. We are told by our Lord to “*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” There are basically three stages in the missionary/evangelistic effort to be noted here, (1) the going and making disciples, (2) baptizing, (3) teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

We note first of all that the content of the Gospel in terms of Jesus Christ and him crucified must be resident within our hearts and minds and available to our lips in the sense we have described above.

(1) The *going* is just that. Wherever you go, wherever you are, make disciples of all nations. This involves the entire spectrum of either going far away to a foreign country or talking with neighbors, co-workers, meeting with individuals over coffee, participation in a Bible study or inviting them to church. In our particular context, it is youth outreach ministries and/or neighborhood contacts, sometimes helping people with emergency needs. These provide opportunities for personal contact and engagement with the Gospel. This, in turn, involves extensive interaction and teaching to the point where we determine as much as is humanly possible, that they understand the Gospel and own it for themselves.

(2) *Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.* Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. Among its various meanings, baptism places the new believer in the church (I Corinthians 12:13), which we understand to mean that to be in the church universal is to be in the church particular. The baptized person is to be brought under pastoral authority in the local congregation.

(3) *Teaching them to observe all things.* It is in the church that the process of evangelism continues. Regeneration is instantaneous but evangelism is a process. How do we really know that the person baptized is truly regenerate? We don’t. Time will tell. It is in the teaching them to observe all things that the full implications of the Gospel are brought to bear not only on the new believer but on the entire congregation as well. It is sad that some, after understanding more fully what it means to be a follower of Christ, walk away. The Apostle John said that would happen, “*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of*

us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” (I John 2:19).

As was stated earlier, preaching Christ and him crucified is not limited to preaching to the lost. Every worship service, for example, should contain elements of the truths presupposed in the words Jesus, Christ, crucified. Indeed these words contain the theme of all of Scripture, a holy God reconciling the world to himself through his Son, Jesus Christ, without violating his holiness and justice, all for his glory. “*For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body*” (I Corinthians 6:20).

A Specific Example

The following is a culmination of years of dialogue by means of a final exchange of letters with a neighbor to whom we had been witnessing off and on over the years. He recently passed away. Here is his last letter to me, December, 2013 and my reply.

Dear Bob and Jeannie Hall,

Merry “Christmas” (sic) and Happy New Year.

I just want to jot down a few stray thoughts while I’m thinking of them.

Does Biblical correctness in interpretation constitute a definite requirement for admission into the kingdom of heaven? I would be surprised if so—but if so I would visually imagine heaven to be something like a ghost town—a very small town with—very few people living there such as Hoosick Falls, New York, Washington, New Jersey, Jackass Flats, Nevada, to name just a few of the small towns and villages in our country that few people have ever heard of and few people live there.

I still stick to the theory that we will be judged on what we’ve done with what “God” (sic) has given us to work with rather than how correct we may or may not have been in our understanding or misunderstanding of the Bible and tradition. Of course, on that point the jury is still out and most likely will continue to be until the end of time.

I repeat the question, is the native in the jungle who may worship the sun or the moon or a rock or a tree any less pleasing to “God” than the “Christian” who has had all the advantages of a “Christian” education if both have done the best they can with what “God” has given them to work with? What, do you ask, will Paul Ryan say when he approaches the grim reaper or the big sleep? Hmmm. That’s a deep question. How about “O ‘God,’ be merciful to me, a sinner or “My God, I am sorry for all my sins because they are offensive to “thee” who are all good and deserving of all my love also because I fear the loss of “heaven” and the pains of hell. Fear seems to outweigh love, in much of human nature.

Okay—here goes: *An American Indian Prayer*. “O Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds and whose breath gives life to all the world, please hear me. I am small and weak, I need “your” strength and wisdom. Make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset and my ears sharp to hear your voice. Make me wise so that I may understand the things you have taught my people. I seek strength, not to overcome my fellow human beings (my brothers and sisters) but to overcome my greatest enemy—myself. Make me always ready to come to “Thee” with clean hands and straight eyes so when life fades, as the fading sunset fades away my spirit may come to “You” without shame.” (End of Indian Prayer) I wish I could recall the rest of it , but it escapes my memory.

I'm open to any suggestions you may have to offer. I have not forgotten that I owe you a fair hearing and am still interested to learn what you have to offer that other "Christian" religions do not have to offer.

I never thought that I would still be alive to see another Christmas but it seems apparently I will be. We are all on the same Dark Road at midnight with no moonlight to guide us.

My sister called me on the phone yesterday. She will be ninety-five, New Year's Eve. She's a great grandmother now. Too bad we lost contact over the years. Life is so short. We are all on the same road but different paths.

Hope all is well with you and everyone else.

I wish I could get to pay you all a visit but I'm just not ready to go very far just yet.

I'm missing out on almost everything lately.

What will the New Year bring? I wish I could get around a little like I used to.

Sincerely in our "Creator" your upstairs
neighbor,
Paul Ryan

December 16, 2013

Dear Paul,

I've been pondering your letter of 9 December. Forgive the tardy response. I'm writing in large print for your sake.

If I could summarize my response to your letter in one sentence, it would be this, it's impossible for me to gainsay the gospel according to Paul Ryan.

You have fabricated in your mind, your articles of faith, that is to say, your starting point for evaluating truth and you have applied it to the historic Christian faith and, in your mind, the historic Christian faith is found wanting. You have dismissed the absolute truth of the historic, Biblical position from the outset of the discussion. How in the world do I convince you that the rose is yellow when you insist on wearing rose colored glasses?

Be that as it may, I shall attempt to answer you within the confines of your own beliefs. There are some unstated assumptions (your articles of faith) imbedded in your letter. They are, (1) All religions are basically the same after you boil away the external trappings. (2) There is no one way to interpret the Bible. (3) Everyone must have an equal shot at having sufficient information about God. Last but not least, (4) as long as you have done your best with what you know about God, he will accept you.

My first question to you, Paul, is how do you know that these assumptions, upon which you are basing your life and your destiny, are true? Apparently, they are true because you say so. We're back to the gospel according to Paul Ryan.

At least have the temerity to admit that what you believe is at odds with what Jesus says about Himself. Consider the claims of Jesus:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I

will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day (John 6:35-40).

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26).

*"I am the **way**, the **truth**, and the **life**. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6).

Judgment day is coming. *"It is appointed unto man, once to die and after that, the judgment"* (Hebrews 9:7). Are your opinions the "credentials" you are going to present to God? It is Jesus Christ Himself who will preside over the last judgment.

But let me take your assumptions in order:

(1) All religions are basically the same after you boil away the external trappings.

All religions are not the same. Any similarities between them [and Christianity] are only superficial. No other religion has a God who is infinite, eternal unchangeable in His being, wisdom, justice, holiness and truth. *"I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God"* (Isaiah 45:5). No other religion has a God who is one yet three and three yet one. I am speaking, of course, of the mystery of the Trinity.

(2) There is no one way to interpret the Bible.

If you deny that you and I are sinners by nature and by choice, then there is no need for a Savior, and, yes, you can then cherry-pick verses and put your particular slant on them to make the Bible say whatever you want.

(3) Everyone must have an equal shot at having sufficient information about God.

This follows from what you believe in (2). If you deny that we are sinners by nature and by choice, then, as I stated above, you deny that there is a need for a Savior. If there is no need for a savior from the guilt and condemnation of sin, then Christianity is just another comparative religion and the point is moot.

But I strongly disagree with your refusal to deal with the reality that we are sinners by nature and by choice. It never comes up in your letters or our conversations, except perhaps to point the finger elsewhere. The Bible says that sin and rebellion cuts through every one of us.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Genesis 6:5).

Then in the words of Jesus, “And he said, ‘What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person’” (Mark 7:20-23).

To continue my disagreement with your belief (3), everyone has to have an equal shot at knowing about God. The trouble is, this view relates to the fact that every man, including, to use your words, “the native in the jungle,” is a sinner by nature and by choice, he takes the knowledge that he does have about God from creation and from his conscience and he suppresses it. To quote the Apostle Paul,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things (Romans 1:18-23).

Notice the words above, “So they are without excuse.” Every person when he or she stands before God, will not be able to say, I did not have enough information.

Given the fact that we are indeed sinners by nature and by choice and given further the fact that our sinful nature suppresses the truth that could otherwise be known about God, it follows that we most definitely need a Savior. In opposition to your point (2), there is, as a matter of fact, only one way to interpret the Bible. Jesus Christ the eternal preexistent Logos, who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered, died and rose again from the dead, He is the interpretive principle of all of Scripture. So, contrary to your position, there is only one, correct way to interpret the Bible and that is the person and work of Jesus Christ.

(4) As long as you have done your best with what you know about God, he will accept you.

Again, this turns on the fact that if you deny that we are sinners by nature and by choice, then this point is nothing more than a hope laced with uncertainty. Why should God accept you if you have tried to do your best? How do you know that your best is good enough? Moreover, “best” presupposes a standard. What is the standard by which you measure your effort as being better than what it was before?

For a man who is likely to meet his Maker in the not too distant future, Paul, you seem to be standing on pretty shaky ground. I’m concerned about your soul.

I plead with you to turn back from this fool's errand of trying to construct your own way to God. Listen to the Words of the Lord:

But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 4:29).

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:6-7).

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved (Romans 10:9-10).

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:20).

This turned out to be longer than I expected but I hope you will heed the Lord's call to come and bow before Him by repenting of your own futile thoughts with respect to God and may you cast yourself on Jesus who alone can forgive your sins, make you a new creation from within to enable you to follow Him whole-heartedly and exclusively.

Bob Hall

In a subsequent visit we had hoped to discuss the points made in my letter in greater detail. I'm sad to report that he had passed it on to his housekeeper, which belied the openness he had been claiming.

This is but one example of many where the offense of the Gospel but also its wisdom and power is Jesus Christ and **him crucified**. We must not be unnecessarily offensive but there is an irreducible offense to preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified. The real issue is man's real, true and actual moral guilt before a holy and righteous God. This is the place where we need to engage people with the Gospel. Without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit who applies the work of Christ to our hearts, every excuse, diversion and self-justification will be deployed to resist the call of God. Thank God for irresistible grace!

As was stated at the beginning of this writing, the emphasis is on preaching to the lost but we are not to understand that the Gospel message is wasted on the elect. The preaching of Christ, the power and wisdom of God is for the elect as well, not only by way of reminder from whence we have come but also for power to live before God in the present. We believe that in Christ we are dead to sin's authority, alive in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live victoriously until Jesus comes. By God's grace through his Son Jesus Christ, he promises to be with us every step of the way on our journey to the Celestial City—good news indeed!

Our Lord Jesus Christ is indeed the power and wisdom of God.