



Colossians

Christos Singularis

by

Phillip A. Ross

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*For Eric & Cathey
in appreciation of their
patience and perseverance*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword.....	1
Introduction.....	5
Heaven's Hope.....	1
<i>Encouraging The Saints, Pray For Them, Conformity, Hope</i>	
That You May.....	14
<i>Know What? Responsibility, Seek Ye First, Bible Study, Qualifications</i>	
Through Him.....	26
<i>Westminster Confession, Redemption, Close But</i>	
Peace.....	36
<i>Recipe, Gospel Power, Blood Sacrifice, Christ Alone, Sin Is, Natural, What About Them?</i>	
Grounded & Steadfast.....	49
<i>Talk vs. Walk, Innovation</i>	
The Hope of Glory.....	56
<i>Relative, Progress, The Main Problem</i>	
Warning & Teaching.....	64
<i>Desire, Science, Application</i>	
Hidden Treasures.....	71
<i>Offense, Reconciliation, Duty, Reading Scripture, High Calling</i>	
Rooted and Established.....	83
<i>Ecumenism, Readjustment, Circular Reasoning, Freedom, Order, Responsibility, Gratitude, Discrimination</i>	
Habits & Traditions.....	96
<i>Wisdom & Folly, Tradition. Work, Experience, No! Don't! Stop! Christian Bartering</i>	
Circumcision by Christ.....	106
<i>The Flap, Ceremony, Alive! Forgiven, Foreclosure</i>	

Shadow & Light.....	118
<i>Sabbath, Body, Asceticism, Angel Worship, Visions, Superiority, Headship, Divisions, Growth, What Happened?</i>	
Why Indeed?.....	131
<i>Conversion Reversion, The Problem, The Children, No Idea, What Went Wrong? Seems Okay</i>	
Idolatry Defined.....	143
<i>Both Ways, News, With Christ, Clean Break, Idolatry, Taxonomy</i>	
In Christ Alone.....	156
<i>Distributed Ownership, Abandon These, Not, Quit Lying, Triune, Common Denominator</i>	
The Great Put Ons.....	167
<i>God Leads, In Christ, Common Ground, Forgiveness, Offense</i>	
The End Before The Beginning.....	179
<i>Dwelling, Sacred Song, Name & Reality, Singularity</i>	
Family Function.....	193
<i>Out Goes The Old, Family, Covenant Oath, Admonitions, Service</i>	
Calling, Claiming, Completing.....	204
<i>Hey You! Inheritance, Kingdom, Judgment</i>	
Clarity In Christ.....	216
<i>Prayer, Love, Nobility, Mystery, Death, Divisions, Time</i>	
False Dichotomy.....	228
<i>Balance, Example, Evangelism, Who Knows, Useful, Circumcision</i>	
Closing.....	242
<i>Fervent, Great Lie, Greetings, Bondage & Grace</i>	
Appendix.....	252
Books by Phillip A. Ross.....	264

FOREWORD

The Apostle, Paul, wrote letters to seven churches in the Roman World. He discussed a wide range of issues, including theology, personal relations, family relations, being a church, living the Christian life and recognizing and avoiding heresy. He has made such a mark on Christianity that it is hard to conceive what Christendom would be without Paul's writings.

Our loving Father gave us a four dimensional view of Jesus and His teachings as a foundation for His new revelation in Christ. The Holy Spirit inspired Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to record the life and teachings of Jesus. God knew that we needed more than the Gospels, so the Holy Spirit anointed Peter, James, John, Jude, and especially Paul to help us build our lives on the foundation of Christ.

Colossians is often neglected, being overshadowed by the theology of Romans, the teaching of the body of Christ and the love chapter of Corinthians, the legal controversy in Galatians, the practicality in Ephesians, the perseverance in Philippians and the expectation of the Lord's Coming in Thessalonians. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit had things to say to us through Paul's epistle to the Colossians. Paul wrote them this letter that in many ways carries the same message as his letters to the Galatians and Ephesians. He seeks to free the Colossians from the bondage to asceticism (Galatians) and instruct them in living the Christian life (Ephesians). He expected that the Colossians would share this letter with the Laodiceans, so they too could benefit from the truths of the Holy Spirit.

Paul did not plant the church, Epaphras, Paul's disciple did. Since, in a sense, Paul was their "grandfather" they had come to his attention. Colossae was situated in a fertile valley. It had an illustrious history as a center of trade, but by the First Century it had become overshadowed by the growth of Laodicea and Hierapolis. By the time of Paul's writing Colossae, while still a fertile area, had

become just a waypoint on the trade route.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes, some three centuries before had banished thousands of Jews from Israel, transporting them into this region. In Paul's day there was a sizable population of ethnic Jews here. They had the spiritual foundation of the Old Testament Scriptures. It was both an hospitable place for preaching the Gospel of Christ the Messiah and a place where resistance to the teaching of the Messiah as a Suffering Servant and a sacrificial lamb could be anticipated. All in all, this was fertile ground not only for producing food, but also for the sprouting of the Gospel.

Rev. Ross highlights what Paul and the Holy Spirit wants them and us to know. Paul wrote to the Colossians, instructing them to pass the letter on to the Laodiceans. It is obvious that his words were intended to be shared, spread around. How could he have conceived that nearly two millennia later Paul's epistle would not only benefit the Colossians, the Laodiceans and perhaps other churches as well, but also believing Christians of this modern world.

Ross raises the standard of the uniqueness of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah in this work. He points out that this uniqueness, the "singularity of Christ," is enwrapped in the mind-boggling concept of the Trinity. Ross helps us struggle with this one-in-three and three-in-one contra human logic concept. Ross tells us, "The word singularity is defined as a trait marking a thing or person as distinct from others; a peculiarity." (pg. 12) Christ is unique in all the world, in all the cosmos.

Ross guides us through the reality that the Triune God was in the man, Jesus, "His wholeness became focused or localized in His humanity." (pg. 165) The uniqueness of God Himself a member of the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit (as children say) "squinching" Himself down to a human cell and growing in a virgin's womb, is beyond human reason. This is a singular occurrence that causes us to marvel.

This work again and again highlights the "singularity" of the Trinity. God is not only distinct in His unreasonable three-in-one person, but also in being fully man, Jesus acts in many ways distinct from humanity. He stands out as the distinct beacon of what humans should be—loving, compassionate, merciful, righteous, immovably standing on principle, declaring sin wherever He finds it, calling for absolute justice, and having no reluctance to call to account those in authority. The careful reader is astonished that the

Person who has compassion on the widow of Nain can courageously describe the Pharisees as hypocrites. It is strange to us that Jesus can in one breath commend Peter for acknowledging Him as the Messiah, but in the next call Peter by the name of Satan. This is the singularity of Jesus the Son of God.

The Holy Spirit is a one-of-a-kind. He has ministered majestically throughout human history and yet never points to Himself. He is fully God, and yet ever pointing away from Himself to the Father and to the Son. His ministries are unique. He is not the Father. He is not the Son. He is the Comforter, the Guide, the Teacher, and the Convincer. He is the power who conceived Jesus in the virgin's womb. He is the one who baptized Jesus in Himself at the river Jordan. This is the singularity of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God.

The Father is unique. He declares "I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: (Isaiah 45:5, KJV) He is unique because He created all things (except Himself) from nothing. He preexisted matter, time and space. He spoke Adam into being and created Eve. He revealed Himself to Noah and Moses. He led the Children of Israel out of bondage and through the wilderness. He manifested His shekinah glory in the Tabernacle. This is the singularity of God the Father.

Each Person of the Trinity is unique, distinctive, peculiar, and yet they are not unique to one another—they are One. Jesus was in the creation as was the Holy Spirit. The Father was in the son of man as was the Holy Spirit. The Son and the Father participated when the Holy Spirit communicated His messages and warnings to the prophets, They were there in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and are present as He guides people today to surrender to Christ and receive the blessing of salvation and eternal life.

In this context of the Singularity of the Trinity, Ross digs into Colossians. He excavates gems in the Greek exposing them to our minds. He opens up this Epistle, placing the truths Paul taught the Colossians into our hands. These lessons Ross highlights for us and shows us how we need to listen to Paul's instructions to Colossae. Further, he points out how we need to embrace these teachings and inculcate them into our own lives.

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Shoreline, Washington
May 12, 2010*

INTRODUCTION

The aloneness of the gospel has been a topic of interest and confusion for eons. It was Martin Luther (1483-1546) who coined the term “grace alone” in response to the arguments by a corrupt church that relied upon non-biblical sources to define the biblical gospel. Luther’s concern was to return to the original biblical sources in order to recover the original biblical teachings.

The Reformers proclaimed five *Solas*: *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone), *Solus Christus* (Christ Alone), *Sola Gratia* (Grace Alone), *Sola Fide* (Faith Alone) and *Soli Deo Gloria* (God’s Glory Alone). The enemies of the Gospel have twisted these *solas* every which way, and have confused many people. For example, the emphasis upon *sola scriptura* does not mean that other books are off limits. And yet *solus Christus* (Christ alone) does mean that other mediators between man and God are not simply off limits, but that no other mediators actually exist. Each *sola* must be understood individually and holistically, within the context of Scripture.

SINGULARITY

Singularities, popularized by Ray Kurzweil¹ are all the rage. In mathematics a singularity is defined as “a point at which the derivative does not exist for a given function but every neighborhood of which contains points for which the derivative exists.” Got it? It is the point at which math gets quirky, and normal analysis fails. It is the point on a graph which must exist mathematically, but cannot itself be known, defined or computed. It can only be inferred from neighboring points.

If it sounds confusing, it is because it is. But is it important? Yes

¹ <http://singularity.com>; *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, Ken Kurzweil, Viking Adult, 2005.

and no, depending on what you believe about the creation of the universe and how important you think creation is for understanding the world today. Another dictionary defines singularity as “a point of infinite density and infinitesimal volume, at which the descriptions of space and time become abnormal according to the theory of General Relativity. According to the big bang theory, a gravitational singularity existed at the beginning of the universe.” According to the Theory of Evolution, everything came from a singularity at the beginning of time, which means that for the Theory of Evolution a singularity takes the place of God regarding the creation of the universe in the sense that this singularity is the source of the universe in the same way that for Christians God is the source of the universe.

The insight or speculation that a singularity may be Godlike comes from the doctrine of the Trinity, which posits that God is One yet Three. God holds unity and particularity together without damaging or diminishing either. It’s not a hard-and-fast comparison, nor a fully-formed theory. It’s just an idea that may be worth exploring. And that is some of what I will do in these pages.

In this study of Colossians I have taken the doctrine of the Trinity seriously and applied it broadly. This means that I have assumed it to be true of God, and therefore true of people because we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). We are not trinitarian in the same way that God is, but in a similar way, in the way that the image of a thing is not identical to the thing, but is recognizably similar. God’s trinitarian character is the “image” in which He created us because God’s trinitarian character is the way that He has revealed Himself to us. It is the “image” of Him that we are to “see” in Scripture. And occasionally, the idea of God as singularity seems to find expression in Scripture.

The assumption of the immediate reality of the Trinity adds a depth and texture to the biblical text that is not available apart from it. Why? Because if God’s character is trinitarian, then the characters of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are also trinitarian. There is both unity and multiplicity, individuality and corporality, in the Godhead and in reality because of the divine role that God plays in reality. The God of Scripture is both one and three at the same time without losing any meaning or uniqueness. God is also Son and Spirit. The Son is also Father and Spirit. The Spirit is also Father and Son. God’s identity is, then, both individual and corporate at the same time and without any loss of identity regarding the

integrity of His wholeness or the individuals involved.

Many people find that the idea of the Trinity is impossible to understand or just a figment of imagination. Yet, many of those same people readily believe in black holes, even though there is no actual evidence for their existence. Black holes cannot be seen, they're black—dark. They are constructs of calculation or mathematical entities. They exist by implication regarding the surrounding space and neighboring objects. And yet scientists and astronomers swear that they are real.

Is it such a stretch to compare the reality and existence of God to the reality and existence of a singularity or black hole? Obviously, I don't think so. There are some interesting similarities, though the idea of such similarities does not suggest a plurality of Gods apart from the Trinity. No, the Trinity is absolutely unique and is probably related to the three dimensionality of space (length, width, height) and time (past, present future). Nor can it be denied or ignored that the Trinity is a unity of Persons, not forces, conditions or entities.

The central characteristic of a singularity that is Godlike is its simultaneous oneness and manyness, its simplicity as a single entity and its complexity as the locus of several entities. Like the Godhead, a singularity is both simple and complex, both one and many. I am not going beyond this most basic comparison. It is simply a thought, not a full-blown thesis. But it's interesting, and it may be useful for the reconsideration of the reality of God by mathematicians and scientists.

This book, however, is not about black holes or singularities. It is about Colossians. It is about God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit. It doesn't hijack Colossians to justify the idea of God as a singularity. Rather, it suggests the complexity of God's singularity, the *Solas Christos Singularis* of God, as a way to understand the depth and texture of Paul's letter. This book is theology, not science. And yet, Scripture does suggest that theology and science are intimately related in that God is central to the world and everything in it.

PRESUPPOSITIONAL TRINITARIANISM

The Trinity is a difficult concept. I am applying the perspective that I believe the Bible teaches, which I am calling presuppositional trinitarianism, to all reality. So, while God's ultimate being as the

Trinity is absolutely unique, all of reality shares the characteristics of God's trinitarian being—not perfectly, but through a glass darkly. That means that we are trinitarian, and that everything in this world is trinitarian because everything issues out of God. The family relationship in the Trinity provides a kind of common DNA structure to everything that God has created.

The Trinity is absolutely unique to Christianity, and is why Christianity is the only true religion. The Trinity hasn't gotten much attention since the early church fathers mangled it in the press of Greek philosophy. The truth is that the Bible stands in opposition to Greek (and all other man-made) philosophies or categories of thought. This work is an effort to express what the Bible teaches in a way that stands apart from the categories of Greek thought, while being faithful to the trinitarian categories of Scripture. The Trinity is everywhere in Scripture.

Presuppositional trinitarianism is simply a matter of presupposing the reality and veracity of the Trinity as the foundation of all reality as a matter of faith. I am trying to read the book of nature and the Bible faithfully, by assuming the reality of the Trinity. I'm trying to read Scripture with the eyes of faithfulness to the Trinity.

This is not a novel approach, but is a very ancient approach that has been obscured by the overlays of Greek philosophy by the early church fathers. I have used this approach in my treatment of Corinthians, as well, and am assuming some familiarity with that work.² A few other writers are working in the same vein—Peter Leithart, Ralph Smith and R.J. Rushdoony's work, *The One And The Many: Studies In The Philosophy Of Order And Ultimacy* (Ross House Books, second edition, 2009).

COMPLETED EDITION

The publication of this book began early in the Twenty-First Century when Dr. Douglas Vickers³ suggested that I publish my work with Wipf & Stock, one of the early publish-on-demand publishers that he had used. I was surprised and encouraged by his suggestion, but skeptical. So, I decided to print a small book to see how it went. That book was a study of Colossians titled *Nothing But*

2 *Arsy Varsy—Reclaiming the Gospel in First Corinthians* and *Varsy Arsy—Proclaiming the Gospel in Second Corinthians*, by Phillip A. Ross, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2008.

3 Professor Emeritus of Economics, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1990s), has held positions with universities in the United States and Australia and has served with the National Bank of Australasia and Vauxhall Motors Ltd.

Christ—Another Look at Colossians (Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2001). My intention was only to see if they would actually publish me, and evaluate the quality of the product. They did, and it was fine. So, I began preparing other manuscripts for them. I have since moved on. The present volume is a reworking of that manuscript and the completion of the study of Colossians.

Though some scholars doubt that Paul wrote this letter, I don't. Some scholars doubt everything. That's what they are paid to do. Christians need to be very careful with scholarship. Too many people trust the scholars over the Bible, and that's a serious mistake. It's not that scholarship is bad, only that too much of it is godless.

Paul was combating error—again. People forget that Paul was always correcting people—Christians! If it weren't for people getting things wrong, Paul may not have written any letters. But as it was, the enemies of the gospel were hard at work in the early churches, twisting God's Word every which way they could. They still are. So, Paul wrote to straighten them out. Thank God he did.

My intention here has not been to read everything written on Colossians and then try to add something new or to make some unique point. This is not a scholarly book. It's an expanded sermon series that is intended to make the issues, concerns and truths of Paul's letter to the Colossians come to life, God willing.

Special thanks to those who have provided their comments, questions, perspectives and edits to this work: Paul Williams, Eric Brown, Elizabeth Johnson and Ted Bradshaw.

I am thankful for my wife, Stephanie, who undergirds my work, and my children, young men now, who have found their legs in Christ. All of my work is for them. I pray that they will find it increasingly helpful as they mature in Christ. And, as I have said before, I'm not asking them or anyone else to agree with me. Lord knows, I have my shortcomings and foibles. But what I am asking is that people engage my work. My hope is not to get everything right, though I value the effort. Rather, my hope is that people will think deeply about the gospel and engage it seriously.

My intention is to model ordinary faithfulness and to demonstrate how Scripture provides various corrections for ordinary Christians in the midst of our fallen world, and how faithfulness to the only, real, trinitarian God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit impacts the faithful reading of Scripture. If Christians do not bring faithfulness in the trinitarian God to their reading of Scripture, they will miss the message of the trinitarian God, "for we walk

by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Christians are broken and renewed people. The acknowledgment and confession of our brokenness is essential to the process of renewal. And renewal is not possible apart from faith in Christ. Christians are people who have learned from their mistakes. I’m simply trying to help with that learning process by showing how relevant Scripture is to our contemporary situation.

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Marietta, Ohio
April 2010

HEAVEN'S HOPE

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

—Colossians 1:1-8 (ESV)

Caught between Greek culture and Jewish philosophy, the church at Colossae was being pulled away from Christ by the false teaching that spirits required veneration through asceticism and rituals involving food and special celebrations. Paul wrote to teach them that salvation is found only in Christ. The Colossian church had been started by Epaphras, who had ministered to Paul while he was in prison at Rome. There Epaphras told Paul about a strange teaching that threatened the health of the churches in the Lycus Valley (Colossae).

We can benefit from Paul's teaching today because the church in our day is also being pulled off course in many directions by many forces, including asceticism, ritualism, and various errors of contemporary worship that have turned worship into performance and spec-

tacle aimed, not at God, but at attracting unbelievers by appealing to a false spirituality, much as it was in Paul's day. In fact, the church today is in a state of utter disarray and gospel confusion. Too many Christians and their churches have drifted away from the historic teachings of Christianity in a quest for novelty and an unbiblical spirituality. Unfortunately, this is not anything new, it has been going on for a very long time.

The contemporary problem is the almost complete disregard of theology by too many Christians and the failure to study the Bible, much less the historic Christian literature, and the lessons that are available to us. Christians have struggled with similar concerns from the very beginning of the church and we can learn from them. George Santayana has correctly observed that as long as people fail to learn from history, they are doomed to repeat it. But of all people, Christians should know better because God has provided Scripture to correct this particular error.

Apart from Christ, people can only run in the same ruts, and that is precisely the problem—people have abandoned God. People disregard God and His Bible. This is a problem that has always plagued God's people, Old Testament to New. The Old Testament prophets railed about it, but were unsuccessful at turning people back to the Lord apart from God Himself acting in history. And God's action usually brought painful lessons taught through various calamities, as evidenced in the various destructions of Jerusalem.⁴

Paul began by identifying himself as the author of this letter, and as an apostle of the Lord "by the will of God" (v. 1), according to his own testimony. Paul was converted and led, not by his own decision or will, but by the will of God. In fact, Paul had been converted against his own rebellious will. Prior to his Damascus Road conversion Paul had no desire to be a Christian. He had been adamantly opposed to Christ and at that time was fully committed to working against Christ. Yet the Lord converted him in a most dramatic way—contrary to Paul's own best judgment at the time. Indeed, Paul was an apostle *by the will of God*. This was a very

4 The Temple was built in 970 – 930 B.C. Israel (the Ten Tribes) was crushed by the Assyrians in 722 – 720 B.C. during Isiah's time. Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. when they sacked the city, during Jeremiah's time. Construction of a new temple began in 537 B.C. After a hiatus, work resumed 520 B.C., with completion occurring in 516 B.C. and dedication in 515 B.C. Five centuries later, this Second Temple was renovated by Herod the Great in about 20 B.C., and was known as Herod's Temple. It was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

poignant phrase for him to use.

Paul mentioned Timothy as his brother in the faith. Though Paul had written the letter, it was sent (signed) by both Paul and Timothy. No doubt, Timothy must have had a role at Colossae. Otherwise Paul would not have mentioned him. Timothy's mention was a kind of endorsement. The point was that Paul and Timothy were working for the same cause or purpose.

Colossae was only ten miles from Laodicea and much of its history can be associated with Laodicea. Whether Colossae was affected by the lukewarm faith of the Laodiceans is unclear. But because the theology that Paul countered at Colossae was so aberrant, it is difficult to think that it wasn't caught up in the same or a similar spiritual disease that had plagued Laodicea. This kind of contagion is quite understandable. We observe in our own time that churches that have drastically changed their theological perspective today end up being lukewarm at best. Consider the Unitarian Controversy of the 1800s in New England or the decimation of Calvinism in most of the early American denominations.⁵

Paul wrote "to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae" (v. 2). So, he must have believed that there were faithful Christians there. And of course, the Lord had not given up on neighboring Laodicea either. Even at the height of the Laodicean apostasy the Lord warned them, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten; therefore be zealous and repent" (Revelation 3:19). The church at Colossae was surely redeemable in spite of the problems that troubled the church there. Paul's mention of their faith (Colossians 1:4, 2:5) doesn't mean that they were all faithful. Many of them were faithful, but some weren't. Regardless, he wrote to address their problems.

Today Laodicea represents the epitome of faithlessness because of the Lord's threat to spit them out. Nonetheless, we should not neglect God's hope for repentance among such people. If God could so hope, then our hope should follow suit.⁶ The Lord's purpose is always to redeem His people, and He will not fail to do so. Thus, it

5 See, for instance, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Nathan Hatch, Yale University Press, 1989. Also see the various essays on Christian history at www.pilgrim-platform.org/history.htm.

6 Does God hope? Yes, but not like we usually do. God's hope is not tentative, but certain. He knows what will happen, and fully expects and anticipates it. This is how the hope of faithfulness works. God is faithful, and expects the fulfillment of His will without doubt about whether it will come to fruition. God's hope is certain, as ours should be.

would behoove us to hope for the power of redemption in Christ. Indeed, that hope is the engine of redemption because it fills God's people with the certainty and trustfulness of His promises.

Paul's usual greeting was then given in the name of God the Father and Christ the Son, with an emphasis that he and Timothy and the wider church as well were engaged in prayer and service for them. Paul's endorsement of Timothy was intended to solidify the fact that he and Timothy were on the same team. Notice that he told them that he was praying for them. He will go on to tell them exactly what he was praying for. That way, when it happened, they would rightly conclude that his prayers had been answered.

ENCOURAGING THE SAINTS

Paul wrote in order to address the problems in the church that had been reported to him. Paul never visited Colossae, but wrote to them on the basis of what he knew to be true among God's people elsewhere. Many churches faced similar problems because the Jews were adamant about putting an end to Christianity. Because Paul knew about the problems in the Colossian church, it is significant that he began his letter with encouragement. Those who had been holding the line against the apostasy were undoubtedly weary of the struggle. So, Paul bolstered them with encouragement, hoping that others who read his letter would also lend their encouragement to the embattled saints at Colossae.

We can all learn from Paul's method of encouragement. The way he went about encouraging the Colossians may surprise us. He didn't prop up their self-esteem by telling them how great they were. Rather, by telling them that he had boasted of their faithfulness to others he challenged them to meet and maintain the honor and quality of his boast. Paul used this method elsewhere (2 Corinthians 1:14) and must have found it useful.

Paul did not encourage the saints to bask in their accomplishments, or to hold on to any positions they had taken up against those who held to false doctrines. He simply bypassed their accomplishments, their struggles and any positions they held in opposition to the false apostles in their midst. Rather, Paul challenged them to live up to his boast, his expectations. Paul was aware that there had been false teaching in their midst, yet he didn't begin by chastising them for it. Rather, he encouraged them to rise above it by announcing his pleasure in the testimony of their faithfulness.

He knew that the saints would rise above it because Christ would complete in them what He had begun. Here is a model for positive encouragement that we would be well served to learn.

Contrary to popular teaching in our schools and universities today, the difficulty with rewarding people's behavior by stroking their self-esteem is that the encouragement of self-esteem teaches people to be pleased with what they have already accomplished. Satisfaction with what had already been done is encouraged, and the challenge to drive for greater success is discouraged because the reward (a sense of self-satisfaction) is given for what has already been accomplished. Stroking self-esteem fuels the fires of pride and self-confidence. Not only does it blunt the challenge of ongoing self-improvement, but it easily leads to idolatry.

That was not Paul's method. Paul did not stroke their self-esteem. Rather, he encouraged the aspirations of his readers to excel by revealing his personal pleasure in the progress of their character development, not in their achievement. He attributed to them an excellence that they had yet to attain, and showed them his confidence that they would indeed accomplish everything he expected. Paul's encouragement did not allow them to rest on their laurels, but drew them forward to further achievement. When people you admire praise you on the development of your character and confidently boast that you will continue to meet their highest expectations, your admiration of them encourages you to live up to their expectations. The expectations that people we admire have for us fuel our own hope, and hope draws us forward into a better future.

Obviously, if their boast about you is too far fetched or too much out of character it will backfire. They have to know you well. And if their assessment of you is realistic, you will be more likely to trust their expectations for you.

The art of providing such encouragement is to allow your boast to lead your friend's character development but not be out of reach. To give the encouragement maximum effectiveness your boasting should center upon character qualities, not mere accomplishments. The danger of boasting about accomplishments is that the encouragement ends with its accomplishment. For instance, if I boast that you can high-jump six feet, once you jump it that encouragement is finished. But if I boast that you are a disciplined high jumper, my encouragement can serve for a lifetime.

PRAY FOR THEM

Paul spoke not only of the faithfulness of the Colossians, he told them that he had been praying for them. Prayer is an awesome weapon in God's arsenal. But to be properly used we must tell the people we are praying for that we are praying for them, and specifically what we are praying for. We need to tell people that we are praying for them in order to encourage them to look for the results of the prayer, in order to show them how it works.

By letting people know of your prayers for them you are testifying both to your own faithfulness and to the power of prayer. By encouraging them to look for the results of your prayers, you are inviting them to find proof of the reality of Christianity in their own experience. The proof of Christianity is really only found in one's own life. Such proof is the incontestable experience of God's work in one's own personal conversion. It is difficult to deny the Lord when you experience Him working in your own life.

Paul was very specific in both his prayers and his boast. The boast, he said, was not simply his own, but he added his voice to the reports of their faithfulness that he heard about. The boast was not simply one man's opinion, but was common knowledge in the community of faith, in part because of Paul's boasting. The Colossians were not simply encouraged to live up to Paul's expectations, but to the expectations of the greater faith community as well. By boasting about them Paul was holding them up to the faithful expectations of the larger faith community.

A lot of people are uncomfortable with the idea that others have expectations about them, but it's quite normal. Everyone has expectations about all kinds of things. It's not only *not* a bad thing, but it's unavoidable. Paul was employing the proper use of peer pressure by using it in the service of Jesus Christ. The goads of social conformity are powerful social forces that cannot be eliminated, denied or escaped. Americans tend to disavow the forces of social conformity by embracing the doctrine of rugged individualism. We are Americans and don't have to conform to anyone's standards, or so we think.

And yet, historically Americans are among the most socially conforming people in the world. We are the dupes of mass advertising, believing that we are unaffected by it, when in reality we are obsessed by the socially conformed appetites that are dictated by the covetous trends and profiteering of fashion and style. Americans, and the majority of the world at this point in history, are obsessed with fashion, style and novelty. Why? Because people

don't know who they really are so they turn to these things to forge their identities. We live in the midst of an identity crisis evidenced by the current passion for personal authenticity and identity among the young.

Again Paul's method was not to honor social expectations by limiting his appeal to simple outward conformity. Rather, Paul first gave due honor and thanks to Jesus Christ because the expectations of faithfulness belong to Him. Paul did not encourage faithfulness for the sake of fitting into some kind of religious society, but for the sake of pleasing Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ expects the faithfulness of His people, and is pleased by it.

It is important to understand that in today's world Christ's expectations are not the same as those of the church. Churches should have the same expectations as the Lord, but too often don't. Unfortunately, the church's expectations often run counter to those of Christ! Paul did not simply call people to be like their Christian peers. Unfortunately, other Christians provide poor role models. Again, it shouldn't be that way, but too often it is. It was then and it is now. So, Paul called them to satisfy the expectations of Christ's faithfulness, biblical faithfulness, to stand apart and alone when necessary, apart even from those who claim Jesus Christ when their claims are not in line with His teaching.

Because Paul was mature in the faith, he also called Christians to use him as a role model, to imitate his behavior. "I urge you, then, be imitators of me" (1 Corinthians 4:16). "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Faithfulness involves the imitation of the real thing. "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Ephesians 5:1). "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us" (Philippians 3:17).

One of the best ways that people learn is by imitation. Whether in music, sports or math, there is nothing more helpful than watching an expert do it right. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a video is worth a million. So, having an expert who can show you the right way and work with you to learn it is simply priceless.

CONFORMITY

Social expectations and conformity are weapons of spiritual and cultural development. And where Christ does not dominate them Satan reeks havoc with them. Paul suggests that the faith that

is already in the Colossians, the faith that he had heard about and encouraged, had its origin, not in social conformity, but in Heaven, in God's decree, in Christ. Paul harnessed the forces of social psychology to serve the purposes of Christ. He was not opposed to the power of peer pressure, social conformity, or the encouragement and imposition of personal and social expectations on others, but insisted that they must serve God, not man.

In days gone by churches used social conformity to help their members bond to the church community. We can see remnants of this practice in the clothing styles of Roman Catholic priests and nuns, and in Mennonite and Amish communities. In fact, this kind of conformity is still in use today, but it is not led by faithful churches. People, particularly children and youth, even young adults, continue to be driven to find personal identity through clothing styles. But today the church isn't dictating the styles, Wall Street is. The world of fashion is dominated by the most worldly people imaginable—and worse!

But Paul was not simply talking about clothes, style or fashion, but about character and morality, about belief and behavior. Social expectations about character and morality are real forces. Unfortunately, the “ins” and the “outs” have reversed places over the past hundred years or so. No area demonstrates this better than sexual mores. A hundred years ago sex was a taboo topic. We can argue the merits of our Elizabethan sexual heritage, but if marriage and families are a measure of value in this area, all measurements point to the social degradation of marriage and families. Where sexual activity outside of marriage used to be forbidden and socially discouraged, it is now acceptable, even popular, to be sexually active outside of marriage. Today, virginity and prudence will earn a scarlet letter. And the floozies will get a spot on Oprah.

Indeed, the forces of social conformity and expectation produce real effects in the world. And if they do not serve Christ, they will serve Satan. No one can escape the social pressures of conformity and expectation. They are part of our trinitarian character as human beings. Jesus called people *sheep* because these characteristics of conformity are common to everyone. We cannot escape them.

Consequently, if we do not dedicate them to Christ, if we do not use the forces of social conformity and expectation intentionally in service to Jesus Christ, they will destroy us. They will tear the church apart. And they will tear society apart, as they are presently

doing.

But the issue is not whether or not to use them. They are in use already. As human beings, we cannot do otherwise than use them. We are always affected by what other people think, say and do because we are social beings. The social aspects of our being reflect the fact that we are created in God's trinitarian image. Our individual identities are intrinsically caught up in the identities of other people (social groups like families, friends, churches, neighborhoods, etc.) because we are created in the trinitarian image of God.

This is only to say that we are influenced by and adaptable to our environment, to our social conditions. The fact of this influence and adaptability is both our strength and our weakness as a species. When we are rightly influenced and adapted, we are strong, and when we are wrongly influenced and adapted, we are weak. The issue not *whether* to use the forces of social conformity and imitation, but *how* to best use them to Christ's advantage.

Paul was harnessing the forces of influence, encouragement and social conformity for Christ. We must see our peers as saints in the Lord, as people who are sanctified, set apart, for the Lord. We must be conformed to Christ's expectations, and expect other Christians to do the same—not to meet our standards, but to meet God's standards in Scripture in the light of Jesus Christ. We must impose the expectations of maturity and sanctification in Christ upon other Christians, and shame the world out of its childish and adolescent morality, its foolish attraction to Satan's novelties (Jeremiah 13:26, 17:13; Titus 2:8; Colossians 2:15; 1 Peter 3:16; etc).

The effort to inoculate ourselves and our children against the effectiveness of the forces of social conformity is futile. They are effective forces precisely because they produce an effect, because they work! The momentum of worldly conformity in the Twenty-First Century threatens to sweep away everything in its wake. Such forces play upon human nature itself, and they cannot be stripped of their effectiveness without changing human nature. And only God can change human nature!

So, we must commit ourselves to the dedicated use of social conformity to God's purposes. We must not abandon the forces of encouragement and discouragement, of peer pressure and social conformity to the values and aesthetics of Scripture, but engage them in the service of the gospel. We must not allow the world to use them to tear Christ's church apart by contaminating us and our

churches with the corrosive acids of worldliness.

HOPE

Hope is the key to spiritual encouragement. Hope is not only the expectation of something good, but hope requires that the expectation be realistic. If what you hope for is impossible to achieve or to receive, your hope is not hope at all but a mere pipe dream, a figment of your imagination. To be real hope, the object of hope must be realizable, it must be possible. Hope for the impossible is not hope at all, but an idle dream, an imaginary phantasm.

Hope is the engine of faithfulness throughout the Scriptures. Peter said that Christians must always be ready to explain their hope to anyone who asks about it. Christian hope opposes the distress that people have about the end times. Christian hope is not the desire to escape the pain and difficulties of the tribulation. Christians are not to hope for the destruction of the world, nor to hope to escape the destruction of the world. Christianity is not about the destruction of the world. It's about redemption and renewal, not destruction. Our hope is that God's will for Christ will someday be a common human hope. Christian hope is always optimistic. Christianity is not a tragedy but a comedy,⁷ not depressing but uplifting.

The ideas of truth, trust, faith and hope are practically interchangeable in the New Testament. They all involve a confident expectation of a positive and beneficial outcome. Hope is an attitude. Hope is a position to hold, and a posture to assume, especially in the face of difficulties. It's easy to hope when the sun is shining, but it is essential to hope when the rain comes down and the waters come up. We are to practice in the sun so we can perform in the rain.

Paul told the Colossians that their hope had already been laid up in Heaven. The hope that they needed, the hope that Christ provides is a treasure that was already theirs. It was not a distant dream, but was theirs at that very moment by the power of Christ. Hope in Christ is a sure thing because God has guaranteed it.

So, how do we get hope? While Heaven is the ultimate source of genuine hope, its proximate source is "the word of the truth, the gospel" (v. 5). The power of the hope of Christ is the Word of God,

⁷ See: *Deep Comedy: Trinity, Tragedy, & Hope In Western Literature*, by Peter J. Leithart, Canon Press, Moscow, Idaho 2006.

the truth of God's Word, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We get it through exposure to it. We "catch" it. Paul also said that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). The power and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit is a function of God's Word. The gospel is not contained in the words of Scripture like a bug in a box. Rather, God's Word is the gospel, like a bug with a bite. To "get it" at all is to get bitten, to get infected by the Holy Spirit, with the hope of Jesus Christ.

Paul went on to describe the dimensions of Christ's power and effectiveness. He said that faith is assured because Christ's presence and power are already working in the world to change hearts and minds. God's purpose is not merely to proclaim the gospel of Christ to the whole world, but to actually bring forth the fruit of repentance among believers, and to ultimately convert the whole earth.⁸

Paul testified to the power of the gospel because he had seen God's fruit. Paul had seen many people converted, himself included. He knew the power of God's will because he had been broken by it. He was himself the fruit of conversion and repentance. Not only would the Holy Roman Empire crumble before the forces of Jesus Christ, but the Old Testament system of sacrifices and priestly atonement would give way to Christ. What had stood for thousands of years would crumble to dust at the feet of Christ.

In essence Paul said, *This thing is big! Bigger than your hopes and dreams! Bigger than Rome! Bigger than Jerusalem! God will have His way. People will either be part of God's salvation in Christ, or they will be crushed beneath it. God is on the move and is already present in your lives!*

In addition, Paul said that Epaphras had been God's true representative among them. Paul described him as a "dear fellow servant and a faithful minister of Christ" (v. 3). Paul endorsed Epaphras in order to differentiate between the true and the false teaching that had plagued Colossae.

The Colossian church had been infected with a Greek-influenced form of Jewish philosophy that taught that Christians were still vulnerable to various Pagan forces. Some people thought that

8 "God's history is universal history. He is growing all humanity into a Bride for His Son. (Of course, sad to say, some individuals within humanity—those who won't repent—are pruned away from this glorious destiny.)" *Crisis, Opportunity and the Christian Future*, James B. Jordan, Anathasius Press, Monore, Louisiana, 1994, 1998. 2004.

those spirits needed to be placated through the practice of devotion, austerity or holiday celebrations (Colossians 2:16). The Jewish influence kept them tied to Old Testament traditions that had been fulfilled or changed by Christ. Paul endeavored to help them understand that Christ had done it all, that they needed nothing but Christ alone, that their acceptance of Christ was a function of their union with Christ.

It was not enough that Epaphras was God's representative who spoke the truth of the gospel. The false teachers had made the same claim. Saying that you speak on behalf of God is too easy. Counterfeit prophets had already gained a foothold in Colossae. No doubt, there were people in Colossae who said that God was speaking through them. What made the difference in Epaphras' case was the love of Christ.

It wasn't simply that Epaphras claimed to love the people of Colossae. Rather, Epaphras shared with Paul, not *his* love for them (though he surely loved them), but *their* love for the Lord. It wasn't their love for one another that held them together. It was Christ's love for them all, and their love for Christ that held them in communion. What motivated Epaphras was the love of the faithful Colossians for the Spirit of the Lord. In this testimony Paul saw that Epaphras was concerned for and motivated by their love of Christ. That couldn't be counterfeited! He wasn't motivated simply by his own love for Christ, but by the love of the saints for Christ. His motivation was the love of Christ that they held in common. He loved them because they loved Christ and he loved Christ. Christ was the common object of their love.

The love of Christ, the love and concern for God's Word and for God's people is the uncounterfeitable evidence of God's existence. And the primary place to see this evidence is in one's own self. Once you see it in yourself you can recognize it in others. But if you don't see it in yourself, you won't recognize it in others either. Faithful saints love Christ above all.



Falling in love with God is a response to the absolute singularity of God, to His one-of-a-kindness. Real love always involves a passion for a particular person, a single, unique individual. For Christians that Person is Jesus Christ. The word *singularity* is defined as a trait marking a thing or person as distinct from others; a peculiarity. Christians are peculiarly related to God (Exodus 19:5,

1 Peter 2:9). Christians treasure God (Matthew 13:44). Christians love God alone in Christ alone through the Holy Spirit alone because God loves Christians alone in Christ alone through the Holy Spirit alone. *Christos Singularis!*

SCRIPTURE INDEX

OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis 1:11.....165
 Genesis 1:26.....172
 Genesis 1:27.....197
 Genesis 1:28.....245
 Genesis 2:17.....222
 Genesis 2:17.....134
 Genesis 2:20.....245
 Genesis 2:24.....197
 Genesis 3:1.....153
 Genesis 3:3.....134
 Genesis 3:21.....42
 Genesis 17:9-11.....109
 Genesis 25:31-34.....100

Exodus 10:12.....91
 Exodus 12:49.....39
 Exodus 15:26.....98
 Exodus 19:5.....12
 Exodus 20:12.....43
 Exodus 20:3.....85
 Exodus 20:8.....118
 Exodus 21:23-25.....41
 Exodus 32:8.....132

Leviticus 20:23-24.....207

Deuteronomy 10:16....135
 Deuteronomy 10:16....107
 Deuteronomy 10:16....107
 Deuteronomy 28.....112
 Deuteronomy 28.....39
 Deuteronomy 28:15....218
 Deuteronomy 29:4.....124
 Deuteronomy 30:6....107
 Deuteronomy 31:27....135
 Deuteronomy 6:7.....137
 Deuteronomy 9:13.....135
 Deuteronomy 9:6.....110

Judges 2:19.....135

2 Kings 17:14.....135

Nehemiah 9:29.....135

Job 28.....183

Psalm 1.....97
 Psalm 2.....223
 Psalm 15:4.....86
 Psalm 23:4.....42
 Psalm 24:1.....207
 Psalm 78:8.....135
 Psalm 81:12.....135
 Psalm 89:11.....186
 Psalm 89:11.....32
 Psalm 90.....183
 Psalm 111:10.....192
 Psalm 119.....97
 Psalm 119:96.....100
 Psalm 128:2.....206

Proverbs 8:36.....246
 Proverbs 12:15.....98
 Proverbs 21:2.....98
 Proverbs 22:6.....132

Isaiah 29:13.....185
 Isaiah 30:1.....135
 Isaiah 41:26.....42
 Isaiah 46:12.....135
 Isaiah 55:11.....234
 Isaiah 64:6.....113
 Isaiah 64:6.....23

Jeremiah 5:23.....135
 Jeremiah 7:28.....185
 Jeremiah 10:12.....186
 Jeremiah 13:23.....139
 Jeremiah 13:23.....54
 Jeremiah 16:12.....135

Ezekiel 12:2.....124
 Ezekiel 2:4.....135
 Ezekiel 3:7.....135

Hosea 4:16.....135

Amos 4:11.....158

Zechariah 7:11.....135

Malachi 3:6.....127

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew 1:22.....247
 Matthew 3:2.....191
 Matthew 3:11.....110
 Matthew 4:17.....211
 Matthew 5:5.....207
 Matthew 5:13.....229
 Matthew 5:17.....40
 Matthew 5:18.....39
 Matthew 5:22.....79
 Matthew 5:24.....53
 Matthew 5:48.....21
 Matthew 6:10.....29, 207
 Matthew 6:24.....223
 Matthew 6:33.....20
 Matthew 7:11.....209
 Matthew 7:13.....209
 Matthew 7:14.....19, 209
 Matthew 7:16.....15
 Matthew 7:19.....79
 Matthew 7:20.....78
 Matthew 7:21.....17, 57
 Matthew 7:21-ff....24, 133
 Matthew 7:22-23.....18
 Matthew 8:20.....208
 Matthew 8:9.....217
 Matthew 9:37.....47
 Matthew 10:16.....230
 Matthew 10:24.....137

Matthew 10:25.....	71
Matthew 10:34.....	72
Matthew 11:15.....	47
Matthew 11:28.....	104
Matthew 12:31.....	104
Matthew 13:31-32.....	209
Matthew 13:1:44.....	12
Matthew 15:2.....	99
Matthew 15:3.....	99
Matthew 15:8.....	185
Matthew 16:3.....	233
Matthew 16:24.....	122
Matthew 19:19.....	91, 218
Matthew 19:29.....	207
Matthew 19:30.....	202
Matthew 20:26.....	122
Matthew 20:27.....	217
Matthew 23:8.....	232
Matthew 24:1-2.....	233
Matthew 24:44.....	191
Matthew 25:32.....	144
Matthew 25:34-40.....	232
Matthew 28:7.....	141
Matthew 28:18.....	61, 188, 198
Mark 1:14-15.....	31
Mark 4:21-23.....	191
Mark 4:5-6.....	17
Mark 4:9.....	124
Mark 5:44.....	218
Mark 6:7.....	78
Mark 10:19-21.....	207
Mark 16:14-16.....	32
Luke 3:17.....	144
Luke 4:4.....	20
Luke 6:31.....	217
Luke 7:1.....	247
Luke 8:11.....	78
Luke 9:31.....	247
Luke 10:7.....	206
Luke 10:9.....	209
Luke 12:32.....	191
Luke 12:6-9.....	191
Luke 13:24.....	243
Luke 14:35.....	79
Luke 17:10.....	75
Luke 17:21.....	209
Luke 19:27.....	19
Luke 2:10-11.....	191
Luke 2:40.....	247
Luke 21:31.....	209
Luke 22:17-19.....	177
John 1:1.....	181, 228
John 1:1-17.....	59
John 1:3.....	25, 34
John 1:13.....	222
John 1:17.....	229
John 1:29.....	141
John 1:33.....	110
John 3:16.....	24
John 3:3.....	81, 135
John 7:7.....	71
John 7:8.....	247
John 8:12.....	81
John 8:47.....	79
John 9:4.....	81
John 9:5.....	186
John 10:10.....	80
John 10:27.....	144
John 10:9.....	74
John 12:8.....	117
John 13:35.....	218
John 15:2.....	157
John 15:19.....	158
John 15:20.....	57, 233
John 16:33.....	47
John 17:15-18.....	28
John 17:23.....	130
John 18:36.....	208, 243
Acts 1:5.....	110
Acts 2:17.....	41
Acts 10:42.....	218
Acts 16:15.....	108
Acts 16:3.....	237
Acts 17:3.....	30
Acts 17:28.....	127
Acts 18:8.....	108
Acts 18:25.....	42
Acts 19:9.....	135
Acts 19:29.....	236
Acts 20:27.....	72
Acts 26:16-18.....	26
Romans 1.....	44
Romans 1:1.....	220, 231
Romans 1:18.....	226
Romans 1:18.....	135, 173
Romans 1:20.....	45
Romans 1:21.....	177
Romans 1:23.....	155
Romans 3:12.....	23
Romans 3:23.....	44, 52
Romans 4:16.....	78
Romans 5:12.....	36
Romans 5:14.....	165
Romans 6:1-18.....	163
Romans 6:1-2.....	115, 162
Romans 6:10-11.....	131
Romans 6:2.....	147
Romans 6:20-22.....	78
Romans 6:22.....	220
Romans 7...50, 213, 215, 239	
Romans 7:15.....	145
Romans 8:14-17.....	28
Romans 8:23.....	17
Romans 8:9.....	181
Romans 9:6.....	213
Romans 9:8.....	78
Romans 9:23.....	43
Romans 10:3.....	51
Romans 10:4.....	39
Romans 10:17.....	11
Romans 11:17-24.....	127
Romans 12:2.....	21
Romans 13:4.....	39
Romans 14:11.....	19, 166
Romans 14:5.....	119
Romans 16:1.....	231
Romans 16:22.....	250
1 Corinthians 1:11-13...76	
1 Corinthians 1:16.....	108
1 Corinthians 1:23-25...67	
1 Corinthians 2:11.....	16
1 Corinthians 2:12.....	21
1 Corinthians 2:16.....	53
1 Corinthians 3:19.....	21
1 Corinthians 4:9.....	117
1 Corinthians 4:16 7, 230, 247	
1 Corinthians 5:4-5...218	
1 Corinthians 6:20.....	20
1 Corinthians 6:9-10...104	
1 Corinthians 6:9-10...80	
1 Corinthians 7:22.....	217
1 Corinthians 7:23.....	20
1 Corinthians 9:25.....	243
1 Corinthians 11:1, 24, 198	
1 Corinthians 11:1.....	7
1 Corinthians 11:29...120	
1 Corinthians 12:4.....	205
1 Corinthians 12:15...223	
1 Corinthians 13.....	176
1 Corinthians 15:52.....	29
2 Corinthians 1:14.....	4
2 Corinthians 1:22.....	113
2 Corinthians 3.....	222
2 Corinthians 3:14.....	222
2 Corinthians 3:16.....	149
2 Corinthians 5:2-4...162	
2 Corinthians 6:2.....	211
2 Corinthians 6:15.....	145

- 2 Corinthians 10:5..15, 51
 2 Corinthians 11:13....224
 2 Corinthians 12:2....123
- Galatians 1:11.....52
 Galatians 2:12-ff.....236
 Galatians 3:2.....58
 Galatians 3:10.....43
 Galatians 3:16.....78
 Galatians 3:28...214, 224
 Galatians 5:2.....237
 Galatians 5:2-6.....237
 Galatians 5:6.....238
 Galatians 5:13.....218
 Galatians 5:22-23....229
- Ephesians 1:3-5.....44
 Ephesians 1:4.....214
 Ephesians 1:4-6.....79
 Ephesians 1:14.....113
 Ephesians 2:8....41, 104,
 114, 198, 213
 Ephesians 2:16.....40
 Ephesians 4:11-16.....66
 Ephesians 4:13.....103
 Ephesians 4:14.....15
 Ephesians 4:20-32...194
 Ephesians 5 & 6.....198
 Ephesians 5:1.....7
 Ephesians 5:5.....29
 Ephesians 5:21-22....194
 Ephesians 5:25.....199
 Ephesians 6:4.....200
 Ephesians 6:12.....73
 Ephesians 6:17.....72
- Philippians 1:13.....251
 Philippians 1:6.....18
 Philippians 2:12.....150
 Philippians 3:17.....7
 Philippians 3:9.....51
 Philippians 4:8.....161
- Colossians 1:1.....2
 Colossians 1:2.....3
 Colossians 1:3.....11
 Colossians 1:1-8.....1
 Colossians 1:4.....3
 Colossians 1:5.....10
 Colossians 1:7.....242
 Colossians 1:9.....16, 23
 Colossians 1:9-12....14
 Colossians 1:10.....22, 23
 Colossians 1:11.....24
 Colossians 1:12.....24
 Colossians 1:13-18....26
- Colossians 1:15.....32
 Colossians 1:16.....32
 Colossians 1:17.....186
 Colossians 1:19-20....36
 Colossians 1:20.....47
 Colossians 1:22-23....52
 Colossians 1:23.....53
 Colossians 1:24.....212
 Colossians 1:24-27....56
 Colossians 1:28.....67, 68
 Colossians 1:29...69, 243,
 247
 Colossians 2:1.....72
 Colossians 2:1-3.....71
 Colossians 2:277, 78, 121,
 247
 Colossians 2:4.....86
 Colossians 2:4-7.....83
 Colossians 2:5...3, 88, 89
 Colossians 2:6-7.....92
 Colossians 2:8.....96, 98,
 101, 102, 118, 162
 Colossians 2:8-10.....96
 Colossians 2:10.....246
 Colossians 2:11...107, 198,
 110
 Colossians 2:11-15....106
 Colossians 2:12.....109
 Colossians 2:13-14....111
 Colossians 2:16....12, 118
 Colossians 2:16-17....34
 Colossians 2:16-19....118
 Colossians 2:17.....120
 Colossians 2:18.....123
 Colossians 2:18-19....121
 Colossians 2:19...124, 127
 Colossians 2:20.....147
 Colossians 2:20-22....140
 Colossians 2:20-23....131
 Colossians 2:21.....133
 Colossians 2:23...140, 141
 Colossians 3:1....143, 145
 Colossians 3:2...145, 146
 Colossians 3:1-5.....143
 Colossians 3:3...149, 193
 Colossians 3:3-4.....147
 Colossians 3:4.....148
 Colossians 3:5...149, 159,
 193, 212
 Colossians 3:6.....158
 Colossians 3:6-11....156
 Colossians 3:7.....159
 Colossians 3:8...160, 161,
 194, 212
 Colossians 3:8-9.....193
 Colossians 3:9.....163
- Colossians 3:9-10....162
 Colossians 3:11...164, 165,
 236
 Colossians 3:12...169, 176
 Colossians 3:12-14....212
 Colossians 3:12-15....167
 Colossians 3:13...173, 174,
 175, 194, 199
 Colossians 3:14...176, 194
 Colossians 3:15.....177
 Colossians 3:16...179, 180,
 183, 184
 Colossians 3:16-17....179
 Colossians 3:17...185, 188,
 189
 Colossians 3:18.....199
 Colossians 3:18-22....193
 Colossians 3:19.....199
 Colossians 3:20.....200
 Colossians 3:21.....201
 Colossians 3:22.....202
 Colossians 3:23...204, 206
 Colossians 3:23-25....204
 Colossians 3:24...206, 212
 Colossians 3:25.....212
 Colossians 4:1.....217
 Colossians 4:1-5.....216
 Colossians 4:2...217, 220
 Colossians 4:3...220, 221
 Colossians 4:3-4.....220
 Colossians 4:4.....222
 Colossians 4:5...224, 225,
 226
 Colossians 4:6.....229
 Colossians 4:6-11....228
 Colossians 4:7...230, 231,
 233
 Colossians 4:8.....233
 Colossians 4:9...234, 236
 Colossians 4:10.....235
 Colossians 4:11.....236
 Colossians 4:12...242, 243,
 246, 247
 Colossians 4:12-18...242
 Colossians 4:13.....247
 Colossians 4:14.....248
 Colossians 4:15.....248
 Colossians 4:16.....248
 Colossians 4:17.....249
 Colossians 4:18...249, 250
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13...48
 1 Thessalonians 4:17...29
 1 Thessalonians 5:17...243
- 2 Thessalonians 3:6...101

1 Timothy 1:10.....104	Hebrews 7:22.....108	1 John 1:5.....81
1 Timothy 3:4-12.....133	Hebrews 9:15.....207	1 John 1:6.....30
1 Timothy 6:12.....243	Hebrews 10:30.....218	1 John 1:7.....121
2 Timothy 3:5.....158	Hebrews 12:6.....159	1 John 1:8-10.....36
2 Timothy 3:5.....139	Hebrews 13:8.....86	1 John 3:9.....78
2 Timothy 4:13.....250	James 1:27.....150	Jude 1:3.....16
2 Timothy 4:7.....243	1 Peter 1:4.....207	Jude 1:4.....224
Titus 1:7.....150	1 Peter 1:5.....40	Jude 12.....211
Titus 2:14.....18	1 Peter 1:7.....64	Jude 12.....111
Titus 3:5.....78	1 Peter 2:5.....121	Revelation 2:2.....224
Hebrews 3:4.....173	1 Peter 2:8.....72	Revelation 2:9.....139
Hebrews 4:2.....17	1 Peter 2:9.....18	Revelation 11:18.....19
Hebrews 4:12.....73	1 Peter 2:9.....12	Revelation 19:6.....19
Hebrews 4:16.....108	1 Peter 3:8.....53	Revelation 21:2....21, 233
Hebrews 5:13.....79	1 Peter 1:14-19.....208	Revelation 3:14-ff.....71
Hebrews 6:1.....177	1 Peter 1:23.....78	Revelation 3:16.....21, 90
Hebrews 6:10.....206	2 Peter 1:10.....19	Revelation 3:19.....3, 159
		Revelation 4:9-10.....178

ALPHABETICAL INDEX

- Aaron.....132
 Abraham.....109
 abstinence.....141
 academy. 15, 118, 140, 210
 accomplish.....14, 247
 accomplishment....93, 94,
 204
 achieve.....75
 achievement.....5, 62
 Adam. 36, 72, 98, 101, 111,
 112, 115, 153, 186, 222,
 245
 Adams, Jay.....180, 181
 admonishment.....180
 adoption.....17, 28, 79
 adultery.....38, 104
 advent...40, 134, 190, 239
 advertising.....6
 aesthetics.....9
 agapē...176, 218, 231, 232
 agree to disagree.....90
 alienation.....74, 222
 all...33, 34, 165, 166, 169,
 170, 179, 214, 225
 Allah.....219
 ambition.....68
 American Civil Religion
 84
 amusement.....20
 Anarchy.....201
 ancient Israelites.....213
 angel.....191
 angels.....121
 anger.....160, 175, 178
 angry.....64
 apologize.....174, 175
 apostasy.....3, 4
 application.....68
 Archippus.....249
 Aristarchus.....235, 236
 Aristotle.....44, 153
 art.....93, 102, 138, 163
 ascension.....114
 Ascetic.....141
 asceticism.....1, 121, 194
 Associated Press.....146
 assurance...47, 77, 88, 94,
 243, 247
 atonement. 20, 36, 40, 41,
 43
 attitude.....88, 100, 102
 authentic.....93, 122, 140
 authentication.....250
 authenticity.....230
 authoritarian
 relationships.....182
 authority....27, 32, 41, 51,
 56, 73, 139, 155, 182, 188,
 195, 198, 199, 200, 201,
 202, 204, 218, 226
 authority, representative
 124
 automobile.....99
 autonomy.....182, 223
 bad news.....68
 Bahnsen, Greg.....172
 balance of power.....138
 banking industry.....80
 baptism. .28, 78, 104, 107,
 108, 109, 110
 Barnabas.....236
 Barnes, Albert.....243
 bear with.....171, 173, 174
 beauty.....93, 149
 behavior. .8, 92, 133, 136,
 138, 142, 144, 168, 175,
 182, 194, 234
 Belial.....59
 benefit society.....39
 benefits.....23
 best defense.....88
 between the almost and
 the not yet.....145
 beware.....96
 beyond our abilities....80
 Bible study..22, 53, 76, 91,
 180, 182, 222, 248
 biblical culture.....138
 biblical principles.....69
 biology.....127
 blasphemy.....160
 blessing.....56
 blood sacrifice.....41, 43
 boast.....5
 body of Christ 61, 121, 126,
 129, 171, 181, 232
 bookstores.....54
 Boolean logic.....161
 boom and bust.....58
 born-again. 17, 18, 22, 50,
 53, 65, 131
 brokenness.....30
 Buddha.....43
 Buddhist.....200
 business.....178
 caliber.....93
 called.....149
 calligraphy.....250
 calling...77, 100, 168, 202,
 204, 205
 callous heart.....108
 Calvin, John 92, 237, 238,
 248
 Calvinism.....3
 capitalism.....67
 captivity.....205
 cause and effect.....168
 caution.....96
 celebration.....20
 cell division.....127, 129
 CEO.....217
 ceremonies.....237, 238
 chain of command....200
 changed life.....235, 236
 character. 5, 8, 37, 93, 94,
 164, 177, 178, 188, 195,

- 196, 200, 212
charity 176, 218, 225, 230
chastisement.....81, 143,
146, 160, 218
checks and balances. .138
chemical reaction.....180
children. 90, 91, 112, 137,
196, 200, 201
Christ alone..43, 165, 239
Christian media.....146
Christian nation.....138
Christian parents.....90
chromosomes.....45
chronos v. kairos.....226
church growth.....127
circular reasoning.....87
circumcision....106, 107,
109, 110, 164, 236, 237,
238, 239
civil government.....200
Civil Service.....96
civil society.....22
Clark, Gordon.....172
Colossians 3:22.....202
comfort.....238
common courtesies.....89
common Creator.....85
 common denominator
 165
common grace.....173
communication. 191, 233,
244
compartmentalization30,
139
complexity.....223
compliance.....198, 200
concept v. reality.....153
condemnation.....39
conflict. 71, 72, 73, 81, 83,
86, 199
conformity.....6, 8, 9, 119,
239, 243
Confucius.....43
conscience.....103, 244
consolation.....239
 conspiracy of ignorance
 63
constitution.....223
consummation.....247
contention.....201
controversy.....71
conversion....2, 6, 11, 127,
149, 194, 235
corruption.....15, 80, 194
counterfeit.....12
covenant.....85, 90, 106,
107, 108, 109, 112, 177,
197, 198, 199, 218, 222,
245, 246, 247
covenantal identity....128
covenantal transmission
.....128
covet.....102
covetousness.....147, 151,
155, 159
cradle of civilization..200
 created in God's image
 163
creative tension.....206
creatures of habit.....120
criticism.....143
cultural development. .7,
58
 cultural sustainability
 107, 198
culture..79, 80, 195, 198,
200, 233
customer.....20, 21
daily devotionals.....76
Damascus Road.....2
damnation. 19, 24, 27, 37,
40, 88, 114
darkness. .26, 27, 30, 72,
177, 224
Day of Judgment.....162
Deacon.....231
death. 28, 29, 40, 91, 104,
109, 114, 131, 132, 133,
149, 163, 166, 193, 204,
222, 246
debate.....201
debt.....112, 115, 116
deceit.15, 97, 98, 162, 167
deep water.....78
degenerate.....18
deity.....32
Demas.....248
denial....58, 85, 173, 226
denominations.....84
deny.....224
depraved.....150
depravity.....58, 160
destruction.....198, 209,
222, 226
 destruction of Jerusalem
 112, 232, 233
diaspora.....183, 208, 236
discernment....31, 73, 77,
120, 121, 124, 230
discipleship. .89, 90, 104,
129, 218
discipline. .23, 89, 91, 92,
93, 104, 141, 159, 209,
218
disconnect.....133
discouragement.....201
discrimination.....93
disobedience. 94, 112, 156
diversity. .44, 53, 60, 189,
236
divide.....170
division.....125, 145, 214,
224, 225, 238
divorce.....128
doctrine.....22, 66, 69, 77,
137, 140, 168, 182, 183
doctrines.....71, 225
 dominant religious
 perspective.....50
 dominant theological
 perspective.....84
domination.....194
dominion.....172
Donne, John.....109
double entendre.....220
double-bind....37, 39, 40
dreams.....244
duty.....75
ears to hear.....79, 124
Earth Day.....60
ecosystem.....59
ecumenical.....74
education.....61, 196
eggs.....176
ekklēsia.....17
elect.19, 66, 168, 169, 178
elegance.....93, 94
eloquence.....111
empire.....74
employers.....216, 217
employment.....101, 204
encouragement 4, 5, 8, 9,
14, 61, 74, 143, 218, 234
end.39, 87, 100, 177, 211,
215
enemies of God.....49
 English Majority Text
 233
enmity.....73
entertainment.....20
environment.....59, 80
Epaphras....1, 11, 12, 242,
243, 246, 247
equal results.....94
eternal security.....47
Evangelical belief.....75
Evangelicalism.....77
evangelism. .89, 100, 117,

- 128, 129, 136, 169, 170,
218, 232, 247
- Eve.....134, 153, 245
- Eve's error.....98
everyone who believes
.....114
- evidence.....12
- evil...15, 73, 81, 150, 155,
159, 160, 244
- evil, destruction of.....19
- evolution.....34
- exaggeration.....123
- excess.....91
- exclusive.....43
exclusive Psalm singing
.....184
- excuse.....45, 66
- excuses.....65
- exile.....208
- Existentialists.....42
- expectations.....135
- experience.....101, 123
- extended family.....201
- extortion.....151, 194, 226
- facts.....33, 34
- failure of the churches 90
- faith.....17
faith and works.....238
- faith, lukewarm.....3
- faithfulness 178, 199, 201,
225, 240, 244
- faithlessness.....143, 201,
225
fallacy of misplaced
concreteness.....210
- false apostles 4, 224, 238,
239
- false belief.....65
- false dichotomy.....238
- false teaching.....1, 50, 52
- family...28, 195, 212, 231,
245
- fashion.....6, 8
- father.....91
- fathers.....201
- fear.....202
- fear of failing.....40
- fear of failure.....88
- federal head.....112
- fellowship.....90, 119, 121,
145, 150, 236, 238, 239,
240
- fidelity.....197, 203
- Fifth Commandment...43
- financial crisis.....80
- financial markets.....89
- fire.....79
- First Commandment .85,
123
- fog.....42
- forbiddance.....103
- foreclosure.....114, 115
- forgiveness...87, 125, 174,
175
- fornication.....38, 150
- Fourth Commandment 91
- fragmented.....30
- Frame, John.....172
- fraud.....151
- freedom.....15, 59, 69, 88,
119, 195, 198, 250
- Friendship...90, 218, 231
- fundamentalism....74, 75
- fundamentalist.....69
- future.....233
- Gaius.....236
generational
transmission.....129
- generic religious belief 85
- genetics.....214
- Gentiles....128, 169, 183,
184, 213
- gifted.....93
- Gill, John.....248
- glad handing.....202
- glorification.....28, 29
- glory.....33, 34, 62
- Gnostic.....221
- Gnosticism....50, 53, 99,
121, 123, 126
- goadng.....144
- God's backup plan.....42
- God's claims.....193
- God's judgment.....191
- God's mission.....166
- God's values.....61
- Godhead....171, 188, 214,
221
- godless.....72, 99, 102
- godlessness 139, 142, 145,
162
- godliness.....98, 131, 139,
149, 183
- golden calf.....132
- good.....19, 23
- good news.....68
- good works.....23, 24
- gospel...10, 11, 15, 32, 46,
47, 61, 77, 126
- gospel, offer of.....31
governmental
- indoctrination.....90
- grace...16, 39, 40, 83, 93,
104, 121, 122, 168, 170,
213, 220, 221, 230, 232,
234, 237, 238, 239, 250
- grace alone .79, 123, 124,
213
- grace-full.....94
- grafting.....127
- Grand Canyon.....34
- grandparents.....91
- gratitude.....116
- Great Awakening.....91
- Great Depression.....196
- greatest good.....19
- greed.....59, 68, 80, 102,
104, 147, 151, 177, 219
- habitation.....113
- habits...132, 133, 135, 138,
140, 145, 149, 160, 194,
212
half-faithless/half-
faithful.....160
- halfway.....157
- happiness.....105
- hard-hearted.....110
- harvest.....81
- headship.....113, 124
- health.....100
- hearing...11, 46, 58, 209,
234
- Heaven .10, 88, 147, 148,
207, 210, 211
Hebrew thought forms
.....152
- Hell 19, 27, 37, 43, 44, 72,
173
- helper.....245
- heresy.....50
- higher standard.....225
- history. 37, 44, 58, 76, 77,
86, 153, 163, 178, 191,
211, 214, 226, 227, 233
- holiness.....20, 149
- Holy Roman Empire...11
- Holy Spirit .11, 14, 16, 21,
24, 25, 28, 38, 39, 41, 50,
53, 54, 69, 74, 77, 78, 79,
87, 88, 164, 182, 206,
210, 211, 213
- homosexuality.....104
- honesty.....94
- honor.....199, 202
- hope.....10, 52, 58, 62
- hopelessness.....62
- human nature 9, 103, 120
- Humanism .102, 141, 219

- humility.....94
 hymns.....183, 184
 ideal Christian.....202
 identity.....149, 163, 164,
 166, 193, 229
 identity crisis.....7
 idleness.....101
 idolatrous.....121
 idolatry.....104, 139, 149,
 151, 152, 154, 159
 imagination.....151
 imitation.....7, 198
 immaturity.....146, 150
 immersion.....109
 immorality.....89
 improvement.....68
 inability.....114
 incarnation.....165
 independence.....59
 individual. 196, 200, 205,
 213, 221, 246
 individual, not.....245
 industrial revolution.. 59
 inequality.....217
 infallibility.....42
 influence.....27, 73
 ingratitude.....92, 94
 inheritance.. 29, 113, 206,
 207, 208, 220
 initiation.....221
 injustice.....212
 inoculate.....63
 instantaneous.....27
 integrity.....68, 94, 225
 integrity of language. 186,
 189
 intelligence.....97
 interdependence.....60
 interdependent.....59
 internal dialog.....244
 Internal Revenue Service
 158
 Internet.....90, 146, 161
 intimidation.....194
 circumcision of the heart
 107
 Islam.....189, 200
 Jerusalem.....214
 John of Patmos.....177
 Josephus.....232
 joy. 88, 104, 120, 122, 184
 Judaism.....133, 134, 141,
 189, 208, 236, 238
 judgment.....81, 115, 169,
 202, 212, 213, 214, 226
 jurisdiction.....27, 31
 justice..19, 37, 39, 40, 72,
 94, 178, 216
 justification. 28, 102, 170,
 213, 245
 Justus.....236, 238
 kind.....165, 222, 246
 kindness.....230
 kingdom.....27, 29, 30, 74,
 100, 101, 145, 166, 177,
 178, 191, 195, 202, 204,
 205, 207, 210, 211, 214,
 233
 kingdom, trinitarian..210
 knowledge.....16
 knowledge puzzle.....126
 knowledge, secret.....50
 land of milk and honey
 207
 Laodicea.. 3, 71, 247, 248
 lawlessness.....39
 leadership.. 231, 243, 248
 leap in the dark.....42
 legalism..69, 74, 75, 108,
 110
 liberal tendency.....64
 liberty.....27
 literature.....77, 163, 249
 Locke, John.....44
 logic....41, 51, 60, 87, 181,
 228
 logic of blood.....41
 looking good.....202
 Lord's Supper.....177
 Lordship of Christ....188
 lost.....20, 21
 lottery.....102
 love.....12, 194, 199, 204,
 205, 218, 219, 220, 225,
 230, 231, 232
 loyalty.....84, 85
 Luke.....248
 Luther, Martin.....205
 Madison Avenue.....61
 magic.....81
 malice.....160
 mammon.....145
 marketing.....20
 marriage.....38, 39, 106,
 128, 194, 197, 199, 214,
 245, 246
 Martyrs.....158
 mass migration.....233
 math.....161, 186
 maturity....16, 29, 42, 68,
 76, 80, 127, 177, 182, 190,
 243, 244, 247
 meaning.....33, 34
 membership. 28, 121, 139
 membership decrease145
 memory retention.....183
 mercy.....40
 merit.....75
 midwife.....174
 Mishnah.....99
 missionary.....235
 misunderstanding 86, 99,
 152
 money.....206, 207
 Monotheism 40, 189, 201
 moral crisis.....89
 moral imperative.....223
 morality 8, 73, 79, 80, 89,
 150, 161, 170, 248
 moralization.....76
 Moses.....132
 mother.....91
 motivation.....19, 23, 122,
 171, 249
 multiculturalism.. 44, 84
 music.....183, 184
 myopic absolutism...189
 mystery. 78, 112, 148, 181,
 188, 190, 211, 220, 221,
 222, 223, 224
 mystical.....147
 national debt.....112
 nations.....214
 natural disasters.....161
 nature.....120
 neighbors.....218
 neutral.....34, 44
 New Covenant.....126
 new ideas.....52
 New Man/Old Man...214
 New Testament. 248, 250
 news junkies.....146
 Newton's First Law of
 Motion.....132
 no respecter of persons
 212
 Noah's Flood.....34
 nobility.....220
 non sequitur.....119
 nouthetic counseling 180,
 181, 182
 novelty.....6
 nuclear family.....201
 Nymphas.....248
 obedience.. 22, 23, 41, 51,
 69, 78, 88, 94, 104, 112,
 116, 202, 203
 objective.....16, 57, 60

- objective reality.....189
 obligations.....114
 obscurity.....27
 occupation.....204
 offense. .72, 144, 174, 175, 178
 Old Testament 39, 41, 43, 78, 97, 99, 103, 106, 107, 112, 118, 119, 120, 123, 125, 189, 220, 237, 238, 239
 Olympics.....24
 Once saved, always saved104
 one and many.....196
 one hand clapping.....152
 Onesimus. 230, 234, 235, 236, 250, 251
 opinion.....53
 opportunity.....224
 order.....89
 organism. .125, 126, 180
 organism, church.....125
 orientation.....100
 Original Sin.....154
 other worldly.....112
 outsiders.....224
 outward profession.....133
 Pagan.....97
 Paganism.....141
 pantheistic Paganism 189
 parent/ child
 relationship.....91
 parents.....91
 partiality.....212
 particular. 196, 205, 206, 213, 221
 particularity.....188
 partition.....30
 Pastor.....21, 62, 69
 peace...47, 72, 73, 83, 177
 peculiar.....18, 21
 peer pressure.....6, 8, 9
 perfect.....68, 246
 perfect conformity.....88
 perfection.....40, 72, 211, 244
 performance.....24
 persecution 232, 233, 250
 perseverance. 24, 54, 209
 personal experience.....98
 Pharisees. 52, 64, 99, 134
 Philemon.....235, 249
 philosophy 96, 97, 98, 99, 123, 152, 153, 154, 162, 182, 188, 210, 221
 physics.....223
 pirates.....151
 Plato 97, 99, 152, 153, 187
 plurality.....165, 171
 poison the well.....62
 political campaigns...209
 politics.....15
 pollution.....59
 polytheism.....201
 pomposity.....93
 poor.....19
 positive Christianity. 102
 Postmodern.....210
 Postmodernism.....186
 power.....27, 195
 prayer.....6, 90, 217, 222, 224, 234, 242, 243, 244, 247
 predicament.....37
 presumption.....93
 presupposition.....73, 97, 131, 167, 182
 presuppositions.....51
 pride. 45, 75, 80, 118, 121, 124, 168, 219
 pride, spiritual.....75
 principalities and powers116, 117
 principles.....99, 101, 131, 133
 prison.....220
 procreation.....165
 prodding.....144, 146
 productivity.....212
 profession of faith.....65
 profit-driven.....54
 Progress. 59, 75, 163, 178, 195
 promise.....47
 Promised Land.....15
 proof.....6
 proof of the existence of God.....222
 prosperity.....177
 Protestant Reformation205
 prudence.....229
 psalm singing.....183
 psychology.....8, 180
 public education.....138
 published.....250
 pulling history into the future.....233
 punishment 19, 37, 40, 94
 purchase.....20
 purity 71, 74, 99, 144, 145, 150
 purpose...34, 39, 41, 100, 166, 206, 211, 215, 226, 233
 purpose of preaching. 63
 putting Christ first.....162
 quality.....79, 93
 quick fix.....24
 rationalism.....97, 99
 reality.....211
 reason.....60
 Received or Majority Greek Text.....156
 recipe.....38
 reconciliation. 36, 41, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52, 53, 56, 73, 74, 175, 225
 redemption. 3, 32, 78, 94
 refinement.....93, 94
 Reformation.....90, 239
 regeneration....17, 22, 23, 24, 39, 41, 62, 78, 87, 141, 193, 203, 204, 208, 212, 213, 219, 221, 222, 227
 relationship....18, 33, 34, 73, 88, 89, 122, 126, 165, 177, 226, 230
 relationships.....194
 relativity.....85
 renewal.....90
 repentance.....3, 11, 18
 representative government.....201
 reproduction.....107, 127, 180, 245
 resentment.....195
 resources of God.....29
 response.....234
 responsibility. 18, 24, 31, 39, 45, 46, 47, 90, 91, 201, 249
 resurrection. 40, 109, 142
 return of Christ.....162
 revenge 175, 178, 194, 195
 revival.....57, 90, 129
 revolution.....195
 reward.....40
 rich young ruler.....207
 righteous.....21
 righteous weights and measures.....202
 righteousness. 51, 59, 62, 72, 81, 87, 99, 104, 117, 178
 ritual.....99

- romantic.....76, 176, 219
 rooted in Christ.....92
 Rosetta Stone.....78
 rugged individualism....6
 Russian nesting dolls.148
 Sabbath.....61, 119, 204
 sacrament.....126
 sacrifice.....16
 salt.....229
 salvation...16, 24, 29, 40, 42, 48, 62, 65, 66, 71, 78, 79, 84, 110, 117, 132, 158, 222
 salvation, not a possibility.....30
 Samaritans.....214
 sanctification....9, 14, 16, 21, 28, 29, 50, 54, 65, 68, 80, 99, 127, 162, 213, 241
 sanctions.....32
 Santayana.....2
 Santayana, George.....2
 Satan...8, 9, 15, 57, 59, 62, 66, 72, 73, 81, 98, 122, 139, 153, 213
 science15, 58, 59, 67, 101, 163, 178, 185, 190, 214
 Sears, Edmund.....166
 secular.....61, 206
 Seger, Pete.....192
 self-affirmation.....61
 self-delusion.....167
 self-denial.....122
 self-effort.....165
 self-esteem.....4, 14, 62
 self-fulfillment.....62
 self-improvement.....122
 selfishness.....59
 sensory deprivation...122
 separating.....144
 Serpent.....98, 134
 servant.....18
 servant leader.....202
 service.....21, 24, 48, 90, 122, 182, 202, 219, 231, 232, 243
 service, social.....19, 20
 sex.....38
 sexual immorality....150, 155, 159
 sexual intimacy.....150
 shadiness.....27
 shame.....9
 signs of the times.....233
 silversmiths.....236
 simplicity.....223
 sin. 18, 36, 37, 40, 44, 45, 53, 58, 63, 72, 73, 74, 80, 86, 87, 104, 111, 117, 131, 138, 139, 141, 144, 150, 162, 163, 167, 175, 194, 195, 204, 212
 sin, born into.....45
 singing.....183
 singularity. 165, 166, 171, 188, 189, 196
 sinner's prayer.....104
 skills.....93
 slavery.....216
 slaves.....201
 social collapse.....89
 social norm.....136
 social order.....198
 socio-economic class...17
 Socrates.....152
 sophistry.....96
 soul. 73, 78, 120, 150, 244
 sovereignty....19, 30, 98, 168, 179, 213
 speculation.....123
 spiritual danger.....65
 spiritual gifts.....176
 spiritual growth....66, 69
 spiritual laws.....104
 spirituality.....2
 sprinkling.....109
 standard.....60
 status.....18
 strength.....27
 strife.....201
 struggle...71, 72, 73, 215, 239, 242, 244, 247
 study.....90
 style.....6, 8
 subjective.....16, 204
 submit...14, 41, 51, 53, 61, 69, 83, 122, 198, 199
 subscription.....223
 subset.....238
 substance....120, 125, 153
 success.....62
 suffering.....57
 sufficiency.....79, 115
 Sunday School 63, 77, 90, 137
 superiority.....45
 Supreme Court.....85
 sustainability.....203
 sword.....72
 syncretism. 50, 53, 97, 99
 tabula rasa.....44
 talisman.....46, 189
 target market.....20
 taxonomy....153, 154, 186
 team effort.....89
 technology15, 59, 67, 101, 163, 178, 185, 190, 214
 Temple.....43, 213, 220
 Ten Commandments..38, 39, 66, 87, 103, 132
 terrorists.....219
 testimony.....224, 230
 thankfulness.....177, 184
 the sign and the thing signified.....186
 the Way.....80
 theological error.....62
 theology....2, 66, 67, 182, 183
 Tillich, Paul.....42
 timbre.....93
 time....166, 206, 211, 213, 224, 226
 Timothy.....3, 4
 totalitarianism.....201
 training.....93
 transcendence.....190
 tribulation.....47
 trinitarian.....8
 Trinity...40, 78, 108, 122, 134, 137, 138, 141, 147, 148, 163, 164, 165, 171, 181, 186, 188, 189, 190, 196, 198, 199, 200, 205, 207, 209, 211, 214, 219, 221, 225, 246
 truth. 83, 84, 85, 88, 103, 137, 147, 149, 166, 168, 186, 200, 209, 225, 226, 227
 truth, relative.....57, 60
 TV.....90, 146
 two classifications....225
 two opposing ways to believe.....125
 Tychicus...230, 231, 233, 234, 235
 unbelief.....44
 unbiased.....44
 unchanging.....56
 unchurched.....232
 unclear referent.....159
 understand.....34
 understanding 16, 22, 23, 31, 41, 48, 50, 68, 69, 75, 77, 78, 79, 80, 124, 126, 132
 unfaithfulness.....108

- ungodly.....21, 72
 unifying principle.....186
 union.....78
 Unitarianism.....84
 unity....53, 73, 74, 76, 83,
 84, 139, 144, 147, 164,
 166, 171, 188, 189, 196,
 197, 203, 214, 221, 223,
 225
 universal...196, 205, 206,
 213, 221
 universal forms.....153
 universal law.....112
 universalism...50, 84, 85,
 189
 unmarried.....200
 unreconciled.....49
 unsustainable.....80
 Vacation Bible School. 63
 vain.....98, 111, 244
 Van Til, Cornelius....172,
 190
 vanity.....94
 veil.....222
 vengeance.....218
 Vincent, Marvin.....249
 violence.....72, 194
 virtue....68, 169, 171, 178
 vision.....213
 walk the walk.....225
 want.....65
 warning.....180
 wealth....93, 94, 101, 207
 Webster, Daniel.....183
 welfare.....219
 Western thought forms
 152
 Westminster Confession
 28, 32
 wheat and the tares....81
 Whitehead, Alfred North
 210
 wholeness...165, 176, 197,
 244, 246
 wicked.....19, 73, 150
 will.....41, 65, 104, 168
 willingly refuse to believe
 225
 wisdom16, 40, 67, 68, 75,
 80, 97, 118, 140, 179,
 182, 202, 225, 226
 wit.....97
 Word of Christ.....181
 work.100, 101, 202, 204,
 205, 206, 212, 216
 work habits.....94
 works.....113
 works and faith.....239
 works-righteousness 102,
 122
 World War II.....196
 worldliness....9, 98, 100,
 131, 133, 149
 worldview...98, 131, 146,
 147, 229
 worship..20, 89, 119, 123,
 151, 178, 184
 worship of abstractions
 154
 wrath....67, 156, 157, 158,
 159, 161, 162
 wrong.....50
 youth group.....90
 Zen koan.....152
 zombies.....141