

Counsel *for* Young Christians



TIMELESS DIRECTIONS FOR
WALKING WITH GOD

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Timeless Directions for Walking with God

by Richard Baxter

(from Richard Baxter's Christian Directory, updated)

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Direction I:

Against Receiving Religion Merely for Its Novelty or Reputation

Take heed, lest it be the novelty or the reputation of truth and godliness that attracts you more than the solid evidence of their excellence and necessity. For if it is novelty or reputation that wins you, then when that novelty fades or reputation turns, your religion will wither and fade away.

Of John the Baptist and the Jews, Christ said, *“He was a burning and shining light, and you were willing for a season to rejoice in his light”* (John 5:35). All people are most affected by what appears new and strange. It is not merely a childish weakness to be delighted by new clothes, new toys, and new games; even sober and wise adults are more stirred by novelty, while repetition and custom dull their delight. Our homes, our possessions, and our honors are most pleasing to us when they are first gained; and nearly every state of life has its greatest power over us at the beginning.

If human nature were not so strongly drawn to novelty, the printing and selling of news-books would never have continued as such a profitable trade—especially since their contents are so often untrue or trivial. This is why the world is so welcoming to change, even though it frequently pays dearly for it. It is no wonder, then, if religion also seems more attractive when it comes with the advantage of freshness.

When people first hear the doctrine of godliness and the report of another world, especially when preached with power and brought

home to the conscience, it is no surprise if such weighty truths stir them—at least for a time. It is said of those who receive the seed of God’s Word into stony ground that it “immediately sprang up” and that they received it “with joy” (Matthew 13:5; 13:20)—but it soon withered, for lack of root.

Such hearers cannot long delight in one preacher, one profession, or one path of life, any more than a glutton is satisfied with only one dish, or an adulterer with only one partner. Their pleasure in the highest truths is not spiritual, but sensual and natural. And all such delight must be sustained by novelty and variety.

The Athenians listened to Paul’s teaching out of curiosity, because it was new to them—though they later rejected it as unbelievable. “*May we know what this new doctrine is that you are presenting?*” they asked, “*For you bring some strange things to our ears; we want to know what these things mean.*” (Acts 17:19–20). For, as the text notes, “*All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new*” (Acts 17:21).

For these kinds of professors, even the greatest truths lose their flavor with time. They grow weary of them, as of dull and ordinary things. They must have some new light, or some newly popular way of religion. Their souls grow tired of that manna which, at first, they received as angel’s food. What was once sweet becomes stale. To them, old things seem low, and new things seem high. To take up some novelty in religion is, in their eyes, a mark of growth or maturity. And too many of them advance so far in their supposed progress, that they finally outgrow their old garments—and leave behind the old Christ, and the old Gospel.

The light of the Gospel is communicated more quickly than its heat. And since this light is the more pleasant part to receive, it is quickly embraced. At first, religion seems best to them. They begin with the light of knowledge alone. Then they enjoy the warmth of a new and prosperous profession. But heat takes time to work before it begins to burn—and once it does, they’ve had enough. They cast off religion as hastily as they took it up.

If preachers would only give light—and never thunder—then even a Herod would “hear them gladly,” and, like him, might do many things in response (Mark 6:20). But once they touch upon his Herodias, he can no longer bear them. If preachers would speak only to men’s imaginations or intellects, and not deal too sharply with their hearts, their lives, and their worldly interests, the world would gladly tolerate them. They would be heard like stage-players, or at least like lecturers in philosophy or medicine.

A sermon filled with nothing but soft, general notions, dressed up in elegant language, rarely offends or provokes persecution. Carnal hearers are not often troubled by such preaching, nor do they tend to hate the preacher. “It is a pleasant thing for the eyes to behold the sun” (Ecclesiastes 11:7)—but not to be scorched by its heat. Christ Himself, when still a promise at a distance, was greatly desired by the Jews. But when He came, they could not endure Him, for both His doctrine and His life stood against all their expectations. *“The Lord, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, whom you delight in: behold, He shall come, says the Lord of Hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming? And who shall stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap”* (Malachi 3:1–2).

Many who come to Christ—by profession—at first, do not imagine that He will cast them into the fire, and refine them, and purge away their dross, and reshape them into the mold of the Gospel. Many will play for a while by the light, who will not endure to be melted by the fire.

When the preacher begins to press this work—to search the heart, to reprove sin, to call for surrender—the message becomes harsh and unbearable. All the praise he once received is gone. The pleasing novelty of religion is over.

But the Gospel is sent to do this very work in the soul and in the life—a work that tender and worldly hearts will not endure. It must take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). It must crucify every lust and sinful pleasure. It must plant a new and heavenly life within the soul. It must fill the mind with vivid, soul-piercing apprehensions of eternal things. Wavering opinions will never raise and carry a soul through the vigorous, steadfast, and victorious walk required for salvation.

But when the Gospel begins to do this mighty and transforming work, such people cannot bear the search and the sting—and they give it up altogether. They are like children who love a book for its gold-edged pages and fine cover, and take it up quickly enough—but only to play with it, not to learn from it. As soon as it begins to teach them, they grow tired of it.

At first, many come to Christ in wonder, and are eager to serve Him—for some charming aspect they see. But when they learn that the Son of Man has no home, not even like the birds or foxes (Matthew 8:20), and that His doctrine stands opposed to their worldly, fleshly interests, they turn away.

They first welcomed Christ out of flattery, thinking He would please them, or at least not much oppose them. But when they discover that they have received a guest who intends to rule them—and not be ruled by them—who will not allow them their pleasures or let them hold on to their riches, but will bind them to a life they cannot endure, and even ruin them in this world, then He is no longer a guest for them.

If Christ had been received as Christ indeed—and truth and godliness welcomed for their well-understood excellence and necessity—then deep rooting would have prevented this falling away, and would have cured such hypocrisy.

But, alas! Poor ministers find by sad experience that not all who flock to hear them prove to be saints. Not all who “for a season rejoice in their light,” or speak well of them, or take their part, are truly converted. The blossom has its beauty and fragrance, but not every flower brings forth mature fruit. Some are blasted early. Some are blown down by storms. Some are nipped by the frost. Some are eaten by worms. Some fall quickly, and some hang on until the strongest winds cast them down.

Some are deceived and poisoned by false teachers. Some are choked by the cares of the world, or by the deceitfulness of riches (Matthew 13:22). In some, lust has deeper roots than the Word. In others, the influence of friends holds more sway than Christ, and they forsake Him to appease those who press them. Some are corrupted by hopes of advancement or human favor. Others are frightened away by threats and persecution—and choose to risk damnation to escape discomfort.

Some are so “worldly wise” that they convince themselves to tone down their zeal. They can “save both soul and body,” and even

persuade themselves that compromise is their duty, so long as it achieves the desired outcome. And some grow weary of truth and duty as of something dull and ordinary, because they are no longer supplied with novelty to keep their interest alive.

Yet do not misunderstand what I have said, as if every affection stirred by novelty, and lessened by commonness and frequent use, were a sign of hypocrisy. I fully acknowledge that there is something in human nature—even in the best of men—that disposes us to be far more passionately moved by things when they first appear to us, and are newly apprehended, than when they become familiar and long known.

I do not believe there is one man in a thousand who does not find more delight in the light of truth when it first shines upon him, than after it has become commonplace. Likewise, a person is more deeply affected by a powerful preacher at the beginning than after he has sat under his ministry for years. The very sermon that once transported the soul upon first hearing it, will often affect that same person far less after hearing it a hundred times. The books that once stirred us at our first or second reading often do little to move us by the twentieth. The words of prayer that once touched us deeply when seldom used may stir less affection when repeated daily throughout the year.

At the time of our first conversion, we are often filled with deeper sorrow for sin, and more ardent love for the godly, than we are able to retain in later years. And this holds true for the learned and the unlearned, the sincere and the insincere—though not to the same degree.

Even heaven itself seems to reflect this principle, for Christ speaks of it when He says, *“There is joy in heaven over one sinner who*

repents, more than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

It is also the duty of ministers to recognize this tendency in their hearers. They must not dull their spirits by always giving them the same forms of truth, but rather labor to edify them through a fitting and fruitful variety—not by preaching another Christ or a new Gospel, for it is the same God, the same Christ, the same Spirit, the same Scripture, the same heaven, the same church, the same faith, and hope, and repentance, and obedience that we must preach for the whole of our lives.

Though people may say, “We have heard all this a hundred times,” let them hear it still. We are not sent to bring them a new creed. If they hear of God, and Christ, and heaven so often that through faith and love and actual enjoyment they come at last to possess them as their own, then they have heard well.

Yet, a refreshing variety in the subordinate points, in the choice of words, in method, and in timely application, is necessary for the right discharge of our ministry and the edification of our flock. A physician may draw from the same apothecary’s shop and dispensary, and use the same drugs, but he must still employ a great variety of compounds, and adjust the times and manner of administration.

Still, for all this, though the godliest are more affected by what is new, and their affections may grow dull with long and frequent use of the same expressions, yet they are never weary of the substance of their religion, such that they long for a change. Though they may not be stirred so passionately by the same sermons, books, thoughts, or subjects of religion as they once were, their judgment embraces and esteems them more solidly, more tenaciously. Their wills adhere to

them more resolutely. Their lives show the fruit of them more consistently than before.

But those who embraced religion only because it was new will abandon it as soon as it ceases to be new. They must either find a newer version—or have none at all.

Equally unsound are those whose religion is founded only on education, the influence of friends, societal norms, or the expectations of rulers. Such persons are hypocrites from the outset, and cannot be saved by a continued practice of this outward, carnal religiosity.

I freely admit that law, custom, education, and the support of friends—when aligned with godliness—are great helps. They provide many aids and remove obstacles that might otherwise greatly hinder a carnal mind. But truth is not truly yours until it is received on its own evidence. Your faith is not truly divine until you believe what you believe because God is true who has revealed it. You are not a child of God until you love Him for who He is. You are not truly religious until it is the truth and the goodness of religion itself that chiefly make you religious.

One of the clearest signs of sincerity is this: when a man remains godly not only among the godly, but also among the profane, the enemies, the scorers, and the persecutors of religion; when he does not pray only in a praying family, but continues in prayer among the prayerless, and among those who mock fervent, constant prayer; when he is heavenly among the worldly, and temperate among the intemperate and riotous; when he holds fast to the truth among those who revile it and hold to falsehood; when he is not carried by the tide of company or outward advantage into his religion; when he abstains from sin not because he lacks temptation, but even when

temptation presses hard; when he is godly even where godliness is counted as eccentricity, hypocrisy, faction, stubbornness, or heresy; and when he is willing to lose his reputation for honesty rather than lose honesty itself.

Direction II:

Let Judgment, Zeal, and Practice Go Together

Take care that you are not religious in opinion only—without zeal and holy practice; or full of zealous affection, without a sound, well-grounded judgment. See that judgment, zeal, and practice go together, joined in harmony.

I have already spoken to the first part of this counsel—against a merely opinion-based religion—in my *Directions for a Sound Conversion*. It is far easier to change your opinions than to change your heart and life. Simply holding the truth will never save a man unless he also loves and lives it. This is what St. James means when he speaks of the uselessness of a dead, fruitless faith—a faith that does not work through love, and does not lead the soul to obedience. To believe there is a God while you neglect and disobey Him is not likely to please Him. To believe there is a heaven, while you neglect it and prefer the world, will never bring you there. To believe in your duty but not perform it, to know that sin is evil and yet continue in it—this is to sin with greater guilt, without excuse, and not the path to God’s acceptance or justification.

To hold the same beliefs as holy men, without having the same hearts and manner of life, will never bring you to the same blessedness. *“That servant who knew his master’s will and did not do it shall be beaten with many stripes”* (Luke 12:47). To believe that holiness and obedience is the best way will not save those who are unholy and disobedient.

Yet, if judgment does not guide you, then even your strongest zeal will mislead you. It will drive you forward like runaway horses that have thrown off their rider. To ride swiftly in the wrong direction is only to waste your strength and prepare yourself for further labor. The Jews who persecuted Christ and His apostles had, as Paul himself testifies, “a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2). And Paul says of those deceivers who troubled the Galatians (whom he wished “were even cut off”), that they were zealous in courting them, “but not in a good way” (Galatians 4:17). Speaking of his own past, Paul says, *“I was zealous toward God, as you all are this day”* (Acts 22:3), even while he was imprisoning and killing Christians.

Was not the Papist, St. Dominic, who stirred up the bloody persecution against the Christians in France and Savoy—resulting in the murder of many thousands—a very zealous man? Are not the butchers of the Inquisition zealous? Were not those who authored the third canon of the General Council at the Lateran (under Pope Innocent III)—who decreed that the Pope should depose rulers and give away their dominions if they did not exterminate the “heretics”—also full of zeal? Were not the Papist conspirators behind the Gunpowder Plot zealous men? Has not misguided zeal in recent times led many to rebel against their lawful governors, to persecute the Church, and to deprive God’s people of their faithful pastors, showing no compassion for their souls?

Did not Christ foretell such zeal? *“The time is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering a service to God”* (John 16:2). Therefore Paul says, *“It is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing”* (Galatians 4:18)—showing us that zeal is indeed good, but only when guided by sound judgment.

Your first question should always be: *Am I in the right way?* And your second: *Am I making good progress in it?*

It is grievous to see what abominable deeds have been committed in every age under the influence of misguided zeal. And what shame imprudent zealots bring upon their faith—when, in their rashness, they make themselves look foolish before the world and cause unbelievers to mock the very name of religion. Thus the ungodly are hardened in their unbelief and perish more securely. How many well-meaning people are provoked by rash affections to do things they will later be ashamed of and deeply regret?

So labor to gain knowledge and a sound understanding. You must be able to discern truth from error, good from evil. Walk with confidence—but only because you walk safely. Do not bring shame upon your profession by furiously pursuing something you later confess to be false—leading others into what you yourselves will one day wish you had never known.

At the same time, let all your knowledge bear fruit in your heart and life. Receive every truth as an instrument of God—either to reveal Himself to you, or to draw your heart toward Him, and to conform you to His holy will.

Direction III:

Keep a Simple Framework of Doctrine, or a Catechism, in Your Memory

Labor to understand the true order of Christian doctrine, and seek to grasp the truths of Scripture according to their proper degrees and relationships. Take care not to treat what is secondary as if it were primary, nor the lesser as if it were the greater. Be sure, therefore, that you are well grounded in a catechism. Do not neglect to learn one that is sound and comprehensive, and strive to keep it in memory throughout your life.

Order—or a proper method—greatly helps understanding, memory, and practice. Truths are connected to one another: lesser doctrines branch off from greater ones, and all of them grow from the root. Some duties exist to serve other duties, and are to be measured by their purpose. And unless you understand which is the chief duty, you cannot rightly refer the others to it. When two good things come into conflict, and both cannot be done at once, the greater must be preferred. In such a moment, the lesser ceases to be a duty and becomes a sin—because it is chosen before the greater.

This is one of the most common difficulties in matters of conscience: knowing which duty is greater, and therefore to be chosen first. On this basis, Christ healed on the Sabbath and defended His disciples for plucking grain; He justified David for eating the showbread; and He declared, *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,”* and *“I desire mercy and not sacrifice”* (Mark 2:27; Matthew 12:7).

Christian doctrine is a finely ordered structure. It is not enough to possess all the parts—just as having all the gears and springs of a watch is useless unless each part is in its proper place. Without order, the whole will fail to work or achieve its purpose. So it is with doctrine and duty: it is not enough to know the parts, unless you know their proper arrangement and relationship.

You may be confused before you even realize it, and drawn into serious errors, simply by misunderstanding the order of truths. You may also be led into grievous sins by failing to distinguish the degrees and priorities of your duties—such as when piety and charity seem to compete, or when man's commands appear to contradict God's, or when questions arise about whether the substance or the form of a duty should prevail, or when the means seems to oppose the end. In such cases, not knowing the proper method and rank of duties may become a snare to your soul.

Objection. If this is true, what hope is there for ordinary Christians? Few people pay attention to order at all; even fewer agree on it; and no one has published a method so exact and clear that it is widely accepted among pastors. What, then, can the ignorant do?

Answer. Christian doctrine is like a tree: there is one trunk, which grows into a few large branches, and then into many smaller ones, and those into countless twigs. Or it is like the arteries, nerves, or veins of the body—starting from one or a few main channels, then dividing again and again into more and more branches until they become too numerous to trace.

But anyone can begin at the main trunk. It is not difficult to identify the primary divisions. In the same way, it is not hard to begin with the unity of the eternal Godhead, to see there the Trinity of persons, the principal attributes and relations, and then to move outward: to

God's chief works in relation to man, to man's relation to God, to the duties flowing from that relationship, to God's covenants and commandments, to man's obedience, and to God's judgment in rewarding or punishing accordingly.

Though there are many particular truths we may not grasp, the one who begins and proceeds in this manner knows everything he knows in proper order—and is on the right path to knowing more.

And God, in great mercy, has made it necessary for us to know only those few doctrines that are easily understood. He has not made it necessary to comprehend the many minor points. Even a humble Christian, if he understands his catechism—or the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments—may live uprightly, holily, and joyfully. He may find daily instruction and comfort in their use.

A sound and well-structured catechism, carefully studied and retained in memory, provides a solid foundation for ordinary Christians. It makes their understanding more orderly and stable, and helps them proceed to the finer points with greater confidence. It would prevent much of the error and misguidance that many suffer under poor teaching, to the sorrow of both themselves and the Church.

Indeed, it is to be wished that some teachers today had first learned this themselves, and in proper order.

Direction IV:

Certain Cautions about Controversies in Religion (*Hebrews 6:1*
opened)

Begin not too early with controversies in religion; and when you do approach them, give them only their proper share of your time and zeal. Live daily upon the certain and great fundamentals in which all Christians are agreed.

1. Do not plunge too soon into religious controversies.

- (1) It will be a great loss to your soul, diverting your attention from weightier and more necessary things. You could grow more in holiness and spend your time more acceptably to God by going deeper into the foundational truths of religion and applying them to your heart and life.
- (2) Controversy will also tend to corrupt your mind. Instead of producing humility, charity, holiness, and a heavenly spirit, it will feed your pride, stir up party spirit and divisive zeal, cool your charity, and foster a wrangling, contentious temper. You may even come to mistake these sins and disorders for religion itself.
- (3) Worse still, it may mislead and darken your judgment, drawing you into error or heresy—to your own ruin and the Church's disturbance. It is more likely than not that you will either fall into error quickly or develop such an appetite for speculation and opinions that it will eventually lead you astray. You are not yet ready to discern these things until your mind has been formed and prepared by the truths that must first be received in order. If you attempt to handle things beyond your capacity, it's no wonder if the result is a muddled mess that must be undone—or worse.

Perhaps you will object: *“But I must not take my religion on trust. The apostle says, ‘Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.’”*

Answer.

While it is true that you must not take your entire religion on blind trust, there are many smaller, disputed opinions that you *must* take on trust—until you are truly able to discern them for yourself. Until then, you must either take them on trust or not take them at all. The essential truths necessary for salvation must be believed with divine faith. But many supporting doctrines must first be accepted with a human faith, or not at all, until you are more capable of judging them.

Indeed, human faith is often a necessary handmaid to divine faith even in matters of substance. Christ's ministers are appointed to be helpers of your faith, and their teaching is not to be lightly cast aside. Let me speak plainly: while you are still young and untrained, you are not fit to enter into controversies even about the fundamental doctrines themselves.

You may rightly believe that there is a God long before you are fit to hear an atheist argue against His existence. You may believe the Scriptures are God's Word, that Christ is the Savior, and that the soul is immortal—long before you are ready to study the objections of those who deny it. For there is nothing so false or wicked that a clever or corrupt mind cannot make to sound plausible. And your inexperienced understanding will scarcely be able to see through the illusion or escape the snare.

When you cannot refute the arguments of deceivers, they will often leave you doubting—simply because you don't know how plain their answers are to wiser men. Yes, you must “prove all things,” but do so in proper order and according to your capacity. Wait until your mind is furnished and mature enough to evaluate such matters rightly. If you insist on reading before you know your letters, or pretending to

judge Greek and Hebrew books before you can even read English, you will only make yourself ridiculous.

2. When you do come to consider smaller, disputed points, give them only their proper portion of time and zeal.

And for the average Christian, that portion should be small—perhaps no more than an hour in many days. Once you have given proper time to the more needful duties of religion, you will find little left over for lesser controversies.

Those who spend most of their time studying and debating such points are stealing time from greater things—and therefore from God and from their own souls. Worthier work is left undone. When zeal is spent chiefly on minor matters, it is diverted from more important concerns and becomes like bodily heat turned into fever.

3. The essential, necessary truths of your faith must form the image of God in your heart.

These must dwell there continually. You must live on them daily, as your bread and water. All other doctrines must serve these. All lesser duties must be exercises of love to God or neighbor, and must nurture a humble, heavenly mind.

The articles of the Creed and the basic truths of the catechism are living fountains, ever flowing, providing matter for the continual practice of grace. These great foundational truths offer both abundant and solid nourishment for the soul. To know God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; to know His laws, His covenant, His judgments, His rewards and punishments; to understand the parts and structure of the Lord's Prayer—which must be the daily breath of our love and desire—this is the wisdom of a Christian. Here he must dwell and walk daily.

You may say, “*But the apostle says, ‘Leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on to perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works,’ etc.*” (Hebrews 6:1)

Answer.

1. By “leaving,” the apostle does not mean abandoning the practice of these truths, as if we were finished with them—but only ceasing to treat them again in his writing, assuming they have already been taught. Though he does not lay the foundation again, neither does he tear it up.
2. By “principles,” he refers to the first points that must be taught, learned, and practiced. It is true that regeneration and baptism are not to be repeated; but the essentials of religion—which I now speak of—contain much more, especially the daily life of love to God, which Paul calls “*the more excellent way*” (1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13).
3. “Going on to perfection” does not mean ceasing to believe and love God, but growing in deeper and clearer knowledge of salvation’s mysteries, so that our faith, love, and obedience may be matured and perfected.

What many so-called “advanced” Christians take to be higher doctrines—those they pursue in their craving for greater understanding—are often nothing more than smaller, less necessary truths. In some cases, they are little more than doubtful or uncertain questions.

Direction V:

Think Not Too Highly of Your First Degrees of Grace or Gifts

Be deeply thankful for the great mercy of your conversion; but do not overestimate the degree of knowledge or holiness you have attained at first. Remember, you are yet in your spiritual infancy, and you must look for growth and maturity to come through time and diligent pursuit.

You have more cause to rejoice and give thanks for the smallest measure of true grace than if you had been made rulers over all the earth—grace being of far greater worth, and entitling you to more than all the kingdoms of the world could offer. See my sermon titled *Right Rejoicing*, on the words of Christ: “*Rejoice not that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice that your names are written in heaven*” (Luke 10:20). Christ Himself authorizes your rejoicing, even if others envy you or grumble at your victory and joy. If there is “*joy in heaven in the presence of the angels*” at your conversion (Luke 15:10), then surely you have good reason to rejoice on earth. If the prodigal’s father must bring forth the best robe, the ring, the fatted calf, and call for music that all may feast and be merry, then the prodigal son himself should not go without joy—even if his elder brother complains.

But still, be careful not to think that your initial measure of grace is greater than it truly is. Grace often imitates nature—it begins in small degrees and matures gradually over time. We are not newly born into spiritual manhood, as Adam was created in full stature. The parables that compare the kingdom of God to a grain of mustard seed or a little leaven (Matthew 13:31–33) chiefly describe the Church’s growth in the world—but they are also true of grace in the

individual soul. At first, we are only *“newborn babes, desiring the sincere milk of the Word, that we may grow by it”* (1 Peter 2:2). Notice, the new birth brings forth babes—and growth comes gradually, by feeding on the Word. The Word is received into the heart as seed into the soil (Luke 8:11). And seed does not bring forth blade and fruit to maturity in a single day.

I do not deny that some, like Paul, may receive more grace at their conversion than others attain through years of growth. God is free in His giving, and may distribute as He pleases. Yet even in Paul’s case, that first great measure of grace was still his smallest, and he continued to grow until the end. Such abundant grace at the beginning is as rare now as the greatest spiritual stature was in him at the end—and is hardly to be expected today.

Even if God should grant someone a great measure of holiness at the outset—as indeed He may—their gifts, particularly the gift of knowledge, are never great at first, unless they were already acquired before conversion. If grace finds a man who already has strong natural abilities and understanding, gained through study and other means, it is no wonder if that man, once sanctified, possesses great knowledge from the beginning—for he had the knowledge beforehand, though not the heart to use it rightly.

But if grace finds a man ignorant, unlearned, and of limited abilities, he must not expect to be suddenly raised to high degrees of knowledge and understanding simply by grace. Knowledge is not now imparted by sudden infusion, as miraculous gifts once were in the early Church. If anyone doubts this, experience is a sufficient answer.

Look around you and ask: have any of the knowledgeable among us gained their understanding in a moment, by supernatural

impartation? Or did they gain it through diligent study, over time, and by degrees? True, God blesses some men's labors more than others—but still, name one man who attained great understanding without means, without effort, or without time. Name one who knows any truth in nature or in divinity that he did not read, hear, or study before it became his own. Even the proudest of those who boast in their knowledge must admit that he himself came by it in this way.

But you may ask, *“What then is the illumination of the Spirit, and the enlightening of the mind, which Scripture attributes to the Holy Ghost? Does not our understanding need the Spirit for light, just as our hearts or wills need Him for life?”*

Answer. Yes, without doubt—and it is a great and wonderful mercy. I will explain what this illumination is.

1. The Holy Spirit, by immediate inspiration, revealed to the apostles the doctrine of Christ, and enabled them to write the Scriptures infallibly. But this is not the ordinary way the Spirit enlightens today.
2. The Holy Spirit assists us as we hear, read, and study the Scriptures, so that, through diligence, we may come to a true understanding of them. But He does not grant us that understanding apart from hearing, reading, or study. *“Faith comes by hearing”* (Romans 10:17). The Spirit blesses our use of means—but does not bless us in the neglect of them.
3. The Holy Spirit opens the eyes and heart of a sinner who has already heard and intellectually grasped the substance of the Gospel, so that he may now know it in a piercing, effective, and practical way—where before he knew it only notionally and

ineffectually. Thus, the knowledge of the same truth becomes powerful, and in a sense, of another kind. This is the Spirit's sanctifying work upon the mind—the principal aspect of saving illumination. Not by causing us to know something of God, or Christ, or heaven apart from means, but by opening the heart so that, through the means, it may receive that knowledge deeply. Others may know these truths only in a dead opinion; but the Spirit makes our knowledge clear, lively, and powerful—able to affect the heart and govern the life.

4. The Holy Spirit sanctifies all the notional knowledge a person had prior to his regeneration. All his learning and abilities are now made servants to Christ, directed to their proper end, and placed in their rightful channel.
5. And the Holy Spirit, by sanctifying the heart, fills it with such love for God, and heaven, and holiness, and truth, as gives us tremendous help in pursuing further knowledge. Experience teaches how greatly knowledge is helped by a constant love, delight, and desire for the thing we seek to know.

By all these means, the Holy Spirit is the true enlightener of believers.

The danger of overvaluing your early progress in grace

Failing to observe this direction will lead to serious consequences, which I now lay before you—so that you may see the necessity of avoiding them.

1. If you imagine that you are already persons of great understanding, ability, and holiness, while you are still young beginners—newborn babes in grace—you are stepping directly

into the snare and condemnation of the devil: into the vile sin of pride. And not just pride in general, but pride in spiritual gifts—gifts which are most contrary to pride itself—and even pride in what you do not actually possess, which is the most foolish pride of all.

Mark the apostle Paul's warning, when he forbids placing a new convert into church leadership: "*Not a novice*" (that is, a young or immature believer), "*lest being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil*" (1 Tim. 3:6). Why are young converts especially in danger of this sin? One might think that spiritual infancy would be most aware of its own weakness. But Paul knew what he was saying.

It is: (1) In part, because the sudden change they experience—coming out of darkness into a light they never saw before—overwhelms and transports them. It makes them think they are already near heaven, and that there is little more to attain. Like a beggar who has never seen one pound, suddenly given a hundred—he imagines himself as rich as a king.

(2) And in part, because they lack the knowledge to know how much they are still ignorant of. They have never encountered the difficulties of Scripture, or the complexities of theological study, or the hard cases of conscience. Seven years of diligent study would show them hundreds of challenges they've never imagined—and forty or fifty years more would clothe them in humility, as they become more aware of their remaining darkness.

(3) And also because the devil lays this trap with the greatest care and diligence, knowing it gives him the greatest hope of success.

2. Overestimating your own goodness or ability will lead you to presume on your strength, and so walk into dangerous temptations. You will think yourself wise enough to spend time with Papists or other heretics or deceivers, to read their books, or attend their worship. And while you might escape, God may also leave you to yourself, to show you what is truly in your heart—as He did with Hezekiah (2 Chron. 32:31).
3. Overvaluing your first grace will also make you spiritually careless at the very time when your soul needs holy reverence and caution—to *“work out your salvation with fear and trembling,”* and to *“serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire”* (Phil. 2:12; Heb. 12:28–29). Spiritual security without watchfulness is the forerunner of a fall.
4. This self-conceit will also cause you to neglect the labor and patience needed in the diligent use of means for further knowledge and growth. You will suppose you are already well enough instructed—and so you will become worse than those who are “ever learning” and never coming to the knowledge of the truth, because you think yourselves ready to teach when you still need to be taught the very basics.

“For when by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need that someone teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God, and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat” (Heb. 5:12). Note how the Holy Spirit makes time and experience necessary for the kind of maturity that fits one to teach. He adds, *“But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both*

good and evil” (v. 14). Maturity, then, is to be expected through use and spiritual training.

5. This early conceit of your own ability will tempt you to dive into controversies and questions you are not ready for, thereby distracting you from the studies you most need at this season.
6. It will make you overconfident in your opinions, stubborn in your views—too much like the fool in Proverbs 14:16: “*The fool rages and is confident.*” How often have I heard men who could barely speak with sense argue for their opinions with such confidence that they mocked or pitied the wisest opponents—though they themselves were clearly the ones to be pitied. This disease brings with it a kind of madness, robbing you of the sense to see that you are unwell.
7. It will also make you highly censorious of others. This ignorant pride leads you to think other men are ignorant simply because they do not hold your fond opinions. You may assume others lack grace, because they are not of your mind or party. No one is more ready than such men to accuse better Christians—those they do not know—as being merely moral, or as deluded, or heretical. It is a grievous thing to hear an ignorant, self-conceited man speak condescendingly of those a hundred times wiser and holier than himself, as if he alone were the wise man, though he knows not what he says.
8. It will make you rebellious against your teachers and church governors, and render you utterly unteachable, despising those appointed to instruct and guide you. You will imagine yourself wiser than your teachers, when you are still in the lowest form. James speaks to this type when he writes, “*My brethren, be not many masters [teachers], knowing that we shall receive the*

greater condemnation” (James 3:1). That whole chapter is well worth your study—it speaks directly to such cases.

9. This pride is a prelude to heresy. There is hardly a greater preparation for being drawn into false doctrine than a self-flattering mind in a half-learned, young professor of religion.
10. It will make you a troubler of the church, stirring up strife over things you do not understand.
11. It tends toward hypocrisy—causing you to give thanks for gifts you do not truly possess, puffed up with a “knowledge” that is not enough to humble you, and lacking the love that would build up both yourself and others.
12. It will deceive you in regard to assurance of salvation, causing you to mistake your own inflated self-estimation for true assurance—which ordinarily should not be expected until grace has grown stronger.
13. Finally, it will distort your whole view of Christianity. You will judge others by the measure of your own shallow attainments, and fail to see the true beauty of faith as it lives and grows in the sober, wise, humble, charitable, peaceable, mortified, and heavenly-minded believer. If you knew Christianity as it really is, in such hearts and lives, you would see a glory far higher than anything you now express.

I have named all these sorrowful consequences of overvaluing your early progress in grace, so that, if you love your soul, you may carefully avoid them. It is of the utmost importance to your safety and perseverance, that while you are yet infants in grace, you know yourselves to be such. Stay in your proper form. Learn the first

lessons first. *“Walk humbly with your God”* (Micah 6:8). *Obey those who are over you in the Lord* (Heb. 13:17). Wait upon the Spirit in the diligent use of means. Do not gladden the enemy of your soul by corrupting what you have received, and imitating him in falling from your hopeful beginning.

Direction VI:

Let Neither Difficulties nor Opposition in the Beginning Discourage
You

Reasons

Be not discouraged by the difficulties and oppositions that will arise when you begin resolutely to walk with God.

Just as discouragement keeps multitudes from entering the path of true religion, so it becomes a strong temptation for many young beginners to turn back—like the Israelites in the wilderness, who were ready to wish themselves again in Egypt. These discouragements commonly come in three forms:

1. Some arise from the nature of the work itself.
2. Some come as trials from God.
3. And some spring from the malice of the devil and his instruments. Often, all three are present at once.

4. It is no wonder if the weak find even small burdens heavy, or an easy task wearisome. Infants and novices in every trade or discipline commonly find themselves at a loss. Young scholars find learning hard and unpleasant at the start. But once they are well along, one truth helps another, and they proceed with greater ease.

So too, a young convert—raised in ignorance, unaccustomed to prayer, unfamiliar with heavenly conversation, or with joining in worship with others—will find such things strange and difficult at first. And those who were used to indulging the desires of the flesh, to taking their pleasures freely, or to swearing, speaking filthily or idly, or lying, will discover it hard to break these habits and take up a mortified and holy life. Yet *grace will overcome*, and prevail.

Especially in regard to knowledge and the ability to express yourself spiritually, do not expect too much too quickly. Wait patiently, using the means God has provided faithfully and diligently. That which once discouraged you with difficulty will, in time, become both easy and delightful.

2. God Himself will have His servants and their graces tested through trials. He never intended to reward us for sitting still, nor to crown us with victory without a battle—nor to ordain a battle without an enemy and real opposition. Even innocent Adam was unfit for his final state of confirmation and reward until he had been tested by temptation.

This is why the martyrs are promised the most glorious crowns—for they have passed through the severest trials. And shall we, in our pride and weakness, presume to complain against God's wise and holy method?

3. Satan, having liberty to tempt and try us, will raise up storms and waves as soon as we set sail. These often make young beginners fear they will never live to reach the harbor.

He will remind you of the greatness of your past sins, trying to persuade you that they cannot be forgiven. He will point out the strength of your corruptions and sinful passions, in order to convince you that you will never conquer them. He will exaggerate the opposition and suffering you may face, to make you think you can never endure.

He will bring his worst—poverty, losses, injuries, slanders, persecutions, and even cruelty. He will strive to make you doubt God, or think ill of His service. If possible, he will stir up unkindness from your dearest friends, just as he did with Job.

He may turn members of your own household against you—father, mother, husband, wife, brother, sister, children—provoking them to persuade you away from Christ, or to persecute you for following Him. For this reason, Christ tells us that unless we “hate” all these—that is, unless we are ready to forsake them, and treat them as we would hated things when they seek to turn us from Him—we cannot be His disciples (Luke 14:26).

If you have truly enlisted under Christ’s banner, determined to be saved whatever it may cost you, then prepare yourself to endure the worst the devil can do. Read Hebrews 11. And yet—though earth and hell combine their forces against you—see how little cause you have to be discouraged, as the following considerations will make plain.

- 1. God is on your side**, who holds all your enemies in His hand, and can rebuke or destroy them in a moment. O, what is the breath or fury of dust and devils compared to the Lord

Almighty? *“If God be for us, who can be against us?”* (Rom. 8:31). Read that chapter often.

On the day you entered into covenant with God, and He with you, you took refuge in the most impregnable rock and fortress. You housed yourself in that castle of defense, from which you may (humbly) defy all the powers of earth and hell. If God cannot save you, then He is not God; and if He will not save you, then He must break His covenant. True, He may not deliver you from affliction or persecution—but He will deliver you in it, and by it.

In all these sufferings, *“we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us”* (Rom. 8:37)—that is, it is far better and more glorious to conquer through patient suffering for Christ than to defeat our persecutors by force.

O, think on the saints’ triumphant boasting in their God: *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea”* (Ps. 46:1–2).

When his enemies were many, twisting his words and plotting against him daily, yet David said: *“When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?”* (Ps. 56:3–4).

Remember Christ’s command: *“Do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear Him who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him”* (Luke 12:4–5).

If the whole world were on your side, you might still have cause to fear. But if God is on your side, you have infinitely more.

- 2. Jesus Christ is the Captain of your salvation.** He has walked this path Himself, and conquered for you. He is now committed to making you a conqueror. Will you not follow where Christ leads?

He Himself was made perfect through suffering, and He will not permit you to be destroyed by it. Can you shrink back when you see His footsteps and His blood before you?

- 3. You are not to overcome in your own strength,** but by the Spirit of God, and the power of that grace which is sufficient for you. His strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* (Phil. 4:13). *“Be of good cheer,”* He says, *“I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33).

- 4. All the saints now in heaven have gone this way** and overcome the same kinds of opposition and difficulty. They too were tempted, troubled, scorned, and opposed—but they now rejoice in glory.

“These are they who came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence” (Rev. 7:14–15).

All who come to heaven at an age of understanding must come this way. And does not their company encourage you? Does not their success embolden you? Will you desire the crown, yet refuse the path?

5. Consider how much greater difficulties ungodly men endure to go to hell. Their enemies are greater than yours—for God Himself is against them—yet they persist. You are threatened by men with death; they are threatened by God with damnation, yet they are not discouraged.

And will you be more afraid of men than they are of God? Will you fear suffering or shame more than they fear hell?

6. And remember—you yourself must face these greater evils, if, through discouragement, you turn from the way of godliness. You will cast yourself into hell to avoid being burned. You will choose eternal death to escape a temporal one. You will make God your enemy to avoid the hostility of men.

And how wise a course is this?

If your ways please the Lord, *“He can make even your enemies to be at peace with you”* (Prov. 16:7), if He sees it is best for you. If you must fear, then fear the One who can damn the soul.

7. Lastly, remember the abundance of mercies you have, to sweeten your life and make your burdens light. You have all that is truly good for you in this life—and the promise of everlasting joy. *“Godliness is profitable unto all things”* (1 Tim. 4:8).

Consider how many mercies God has given you in body, in estate, in friends, in your reputation—and most of all, in your soul. Consider the promises, the experiences, the open access you have to God. You have Christ to rejoice in. You have heaven to rejoice in.

And shall a stony or dirty path discourage you more than all these blessings comfort you?

The sum of all is this:

Your work will grow easier and sweeter as your skill and strength increase. Your enemies are like grasshoppers before you. The power of the Almighty stands ready—by covenant love and promise—to help you.

And will you claim to trust in God, yet still fear the face of man?

“I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from shame and spitting. But the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near. Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up” (Isa. 50:6–9).

“Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law: fear not the reproach of men, nor be dismayed at their revilings. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool. But my righteousness will be forever, and my salvation to all generations” (Isa. 51:7–8).

He is no soldier of Christ who turns back for fear of scorn—or anything else that man can do against him.

And consider—**should heaven be more easily come by?** You strive for things of unspeakable glory. It is an unworthy heart that

thinks anything too costly to part with for heaven, or any labor, difficulty, or suffering too great to endure in order to obtain it.

Direction VII:

Value and Make Use of a Powerful and Faithful Ministry. *Reasons and Objections Answered*

If it is within your power, live under the ministry of a discerning, faithful, serious, searching, and powerful preacher. Diligently attend to his public teaching, and make use of his private counsel for more particular instruction and personal application—for the establishment and direction of your soul. Do this as you would seek out the advice of a physician for your health, or a lawyer for your estate, or a tutor for your learning.

This direction applies only to those who may enjoy such a great mercy if they will. Some live where there is no such minister to be found. Some are children, or servants, or wives who are constrained by the will or restrictions of others and cannot change their situation. Others are so poor that they cannot relocate for the sake of such advantages. And still others are so useful in their present place that they may be called to stay under a weaker minister in order to benefit others where they are best positioned to do good.

But let the one who is free, and who has the opportunity to enjoy such a blessing, receive it with thankfulness—even if it comes at a

cost. As Christ said in another case, “*Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given*” (Matt. 19:11).

There is a vast difference between a weak, unskilled, inexperienced, lifeless, formal teacher and the kind of minister described in this direction. Some who are indifferent—or altogether dull in such spiritual matters—will try to persuade you to be the same. They’ll tell you to make bodily comfort your first consideration in choosing where to live, and to be content with whatever teacher you happen to fall under. They’ll assure you that the work of grace doesn’t depend on the preacher’s gifts, but on the Spirit of God.

Both the formalist and the enthusiast may agree on this—though they do so from opposite errors.

It is true that God can frustrate the best-prepared means, and that He can work without means, or even through those least suited to the task. But it is still His ordinary way to work through means—and that applies to the soul as well as to the body. And God usually works most powerfully through the most fitting instruments.

I am sure it is every preacher’s duty to minister in the way best suited to the people’s edification—not to do the work of God carelessly or ineptly, just because God *can* bless even the most unfit means. And it is the people’s duty to seek out the best ministry available to them—even though God may sometimes choose to work through the weakest.

The same excuse will not justify those who regularly stay home from worship for petty reasons, as if they didn’t need the ministry at all; nor will it excuse those who deliberately settle for a ministry less suited to their edification, when they might have one far better.

We must not neglect our duty by presuming on miracles. When no better help is available, we may pray and hope for greater blessing through the weakest means—but not when our choice to remain under them stems from presumption or spiritual laziness.

Yes, God enabled Daniel and his companions to thrive on vegetables, while others feasted at the king's table (Dan. 1). And rather than sin against God, we must cast ourselves on Him for unusual provision, or leave the outcome to His will. But few would therefore choose to live on vegetables alone, when better food is available.

This truth ought to be beyond dispute—especially among those who are always eager to downplay the work of the Spirit in the soul, and who claim to recognize no grace except what fits into a nicely ordered arrangement of means and circumstances.

If their doctrine teaches that a man's salvation depends upon a congruity of means, how can they also teach people to neglect the most suitable means, and to choose the least fit and least promising? Yet ungodliness will resolve what it wants to oppose before it considers what it actually has to say. It will contradict God's Word, even if it contradicts itself in the process. It will oppose holiness—even if by opposing itself.

But the spiritual taste and experience of the godly is a great safeguard against such delusions. It's harder to convince a man who has tasted sweetness that sugar is bitter, or that wormwood is sweet, than it is to convince someone who has never tasted either. It's hard to persuade a healthy man that it's better to eat only once a week—or to live on grass or snow.

I do not doubt that those I am now addressing have tasted for themselves the difference between a judicious, lively ministry and

one that is ignorant, cold, and lifeless. And I am confident that no argument could make you indifferent on this point.

Haven't you experienced how the preaching of one kind enlightens, warms, stirs, comforts, and strengthens you far more than the other?

I know that I have the common sense and experience of the faithful on my side—and that alone would be enough to outweigh all that could be said against it. Even newborn babes in Christ have, by their new nature, a longing not for foolish or malicious chatter, but for the *rational and pure milk* of the Word (1 Pet. 2:2)—so that they may grow by it and offer to God a rational worship (Rom. 12:1).

It must be a proud and dull heart indeed that feels so little of its own weakness, sinfulness, and need that it believes the weakest, dumbest minister is sufficient. As if it were easy to maintain spiritual life, strength, watchfulness, and fruitfulness with just a little help from the most ordinary means.

I can't help but suspect that such people do not truly know what the power and effectiveness of the Word on the heart and conscience means—or what it is to live a life of faith and holiness, to keep watch over the heart, and to walk with God.

If they did, they would surely feel how hard such a life is—and how backward and unskilled they are in it—and would deeply sense their need for the greatest helps. They could not help but recognize the difference between a clear, convicting, and heart-stirring sermon, and a lifeless, ignorant discourse—one delivered like a man speaking in his sleep, about something he has never understood or experienced.

Alas! how prone even the best of us are to grow cold, unless we are kept warm by a powerful ministry! How easily we lose our hatred of sin, the tenderness of conscience, the fervency of prayer, the zeal and fullness of edifying conversation, and the delight and strength we once knew in heavenly meditation. How quickly our faith begins to waver, if it is not firmly upheld by those who are helpers of our faith. How hard it is to maintain the warmth of love, the confidence of hope, and the firmness and fullness of obedience, without the aid of a powerful and lively ministry!

Indeed, how hard do we find it to do our part in these things even when we are blessed with the clearest and strongest helps ordinarily available! And can anyone, unless blinded by pride, imagine that they are so holy, so spiritually strong, that they are above the need of such assistance? That the weakest breath is enough to kindle and sustain the fire of holy love and zeal, and keep them walking in the fear and obedience of God?

Alas! we live in a state of spiritual frailty. We must be nourished with the best, or we will soon wither. We are like cripples—we cannot walk or stand without crutches. If we are to be made spiritual, there must be something of the Spirit in the one who teaches us. If faith and love are to be kindled in us, there must be some savor of faith and love in the one who speaks to us. He must speak clearly and convincingly, if we are to understand and be persuaded. He must speak feelingly, if we are to be moved; and seriously, if we are to take him seriously, and be stirred to seriousness ourselves.

And ministers are not appointed only for public preaching, but also for private counsel, as our particular needs require. Just as physicians do not merely write instructions for general health and treatment, but come to the bedside of the sick to apply remedies

specifically, and as lawyers are needed for particular cases to free estates from entanglements or defend them against unjust claims—so should you choose a wise and able minister to be your ordinary counselor in the things of God. Let him be humble, faithful, experienced, and skilled—one who has the time, ability, and willingness to assist you.

Just as infants in a household cannot care for themselves and must constantly be helped by others—so God has given parents a special love to make them diligent and patient in this work—so it is in the household of Christ. The great majority of Christians are spiritually young or weak in understanding and grace. It will be a long time before you are past needing help from others—if ever, in this life. If you don't feel this weakness and need, it is only the greater.

God never intended that any man should be self-sufficient. He has ordained that we should need one another, so that we might be helpful to one another, and that He might use us as messengers and instruments of His mercy to one another. Even self-love may serve to make us sociable, and to stir us to love one another. Our souls, like our bodies, must receive much of God's mercy through this appointed way of mutual help and communication.

Therefore, just as the poor, more than any, should not be against charity and receiving help—because they need it most—so young and inexperienced Christians should, above all others, desire help, especially from an able and faithful guide.

But be careful to deal sincerely. Do not deceive yourself by deceiving your counselor. Do not hide your true condition. To do so with your lawyer is to risk losing your case. To do so with your physician is to risk losing your life. And to do so with your pastor and soul-counselor is to risk losing your soul.

Let the judgment of your pastor—or of a wise and godly friend—regarding the state of your soul be highly regarded by you, even though it is not infallible. How far you are to rely on such counselors, and what other duties belong to you in this relationship, I shall explain later. For now, I proceed with the rest of this general advice.

Direction VIII:

For Charity, Unity, and Catholicity—Against Schism. *False Pretenses for Division Refuted*

Maintain a right understanding of the beauty and excellence of Christian love and unity. Do not quickly receive any opinion or persuasion that undermines them. Especially be on guard, lest under the pretense of someone's authority, or their numbers, or orthodoxy, or personal holiness, you become overly attached to a sect or party—so much so that you withhold your special love and proper fellowship from other believers, and turn your zeal toward promoting the interests of your group, rather than the common good of the church. Instead, love a Christian *as a Christian*, and work for the unity and welfare of all.

Make it your habit to read often, and deeply consider, those many urgent passages of Scripture that command all Christians to walk in unity and love. Such as:

- **John 11:52; 17:11, 21–23**
- **1 Corinthians 3:10–17 and chapter 12 in full**

- **2 Corinthians 13:11**
- **1 Thessalonians 5:12–13**
- **Philippians 2:1–3**
- **1 Peter 3:8**
- **Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 3:3; 11:18**
- **John 13:35; Romans 12:9–10; 13:10**
- **Galatians 5:6, 13, 22**
- **Colossians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:9**
- **1 John 3:14, 23; 4:7, 11, 16, 19–21**

Surely, if the very life of godliness did not largely consist in unity and love, we would never have found such strong words spoken about it in Scripture. Love is to the soul what natural heat is to the body—whatever destroys it, destroys life, and therefore cannot be for our good. Be certain: any opinion, practice, or movement that diminishes your love for the brethren—or worse, under the guise of zeal, stirs up hatred or harm toward them—is a path that leads to spiritual death.

To divide the body is to destroy or maim it. Dividing what is essential and necessary kills it. Cutting off any integral part maims it. The first can never be an act of love—it is the worst that any enemy can do. The second may only be an act of love when removing a member that can be spared is absolutely necessary for saving the whole man from a worse division, that is, the parting of soul and body. By this, judge how much of a friend the divider is to the church—and how acceptable such division is to God.

Whoever loves any true Christian rightly must, by necessity, love all whom he perceives to be Christians. And when malice blinds men so that they refuse to recognize Christianity in another—despite a credible profession—this is no less a violation of love than openly hating someone whom they know to be a true believer.

Censorious judgment, without clear and compelling evidence, is contrary to love just as hatred is.

There is a unity and fellowship that belongs to all Christians as such. This consists in having one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one baptismal covenant, one rule of holy living—and in loving, praying for, and doing good to as many fellow Christians as we are able. This is a spiritual and mental union, and it is the communion we must hold with the **catholic** (that is, universal) church throughout the world.

There is also a bodily or local union and fellowship, which consists in assembling not only in mind but in body with a particular congregation. Now, because we cannot bodily join with all churches at once—nor with more than one local congregation at a time—we are not obligated to maintain physical fellowship with churches that will not permit us to do so unless we sin. Regularly, we are to hold communion with the church to which we are lawfully joined and in whose community we dwell. But we should also, on occasion, hold communion with all others where we are providentially called and have the opportunity—so long as they worship God according to His Word in substance, and do not require us to sin in order to conform to their practices.

It is *not* schism to grieve over the sins of any church—or of all the churches on earth—for the visible church is made up of sinners. It is

not schism to refuse to participate in the sin of even the purest church in the world. Obedience to God is not schism.

It is not schism that you do not bodily join with churches where you do not reside, or to which you have no particular call. Nor is it schism to choose the purest and most edifying congregation, rather than one less pure and profitable to you—*all other things being equal*, and assuming you are free to do so. Nor is it schism to refrain from physical communion with a church that will not allow you to join without sinning against God. Nor is it schism to remain in a less pure church when providentially called to do so, and unable to join with a purer one.

But it is worse than schism to separate from the **universal church**. To reject its faith entirely is **apostasy**—a falling away into unbelief. To separate from it by rejecting one or a few essential doctrines, while still claiming to hold to Christ as Head, is **heresy**. To separate from it in spirit—by refusing holiness and failing to love those who are truly holy—is damnable **ungodliness and wickedness**. To differ from the church in any matter of belief or life that contradicts God's law is **sin**.

To elevate any one church or party so highly that you deny proper love and communion to the rest is **schism**. To limit the entire church to your own party—and to deny that any outside of it are Christians or parts of the universal church—is schism, by a grievous breach of charity. This is the **chief form of schism** I warn you to avoid.

It is also schism to unjustly condemn a particular church as if it were not a true church. And it is schism to withdraw from bodily communion with a church to which you are duty-bound to remain united—on the false assumption that it is no church at all, or that it is

unlawful to worship with them. Likewise, it is schism to create factions or parties *within* a church, even if you do not fully separate from it.

Thus, I have briefly defined what schism is.

(1) A common pretense for schism is usurped authority—when one church claims the right to command others who owe them no such subjection.

Pride, the very spirit of hell, has crept into the church of Christ and stirred up men to seek dominion and superiority. This has caused the most dangerous divisions the church has ever known.

The **Bishop of Rome**, benefitting from his position in the capital of the empire, claimed authority over the entire Christian world—and condemned all churches that would not submit to him. In so doing, he has made himself the head of a sect, and author of the most ruinous schism the church of Christ has ever suffered.

The Bishop of Constantinople and many others have followed this same pattern on a smaller scale, exalting themselves above their brethren, laying down laws, and condemning or persecuting those who do not comply. After imposing their own usurped authority on others, they then call all dissenters “schismatics” for refusing to submit to their tyranny. They cleverly confuse **church unity** with **their own authority**, and **schism** with **refusal to obey them**.

If you will not accept them as your lords, they cry out that you have “divided from the church”—as if communion were impossible unless

you obey their bishops.

But communion with other churches is maintained by **faith**, **charity**, and agreement in the necessary things of religion—not by **subjection** to them. Just as we can hold true communion with the churches of Armenia, Arabia, or Russia without being subject to their bishops, so we can with any other church apart from the one in which we are members.

Division, or schism, is the enemy of unity and peace—not of unappointed, illegitimate government. While disobedience to the pastors that God has set over us is indeed a sin, and a separation from them is schism—this is very different from refusing submission to those who have no God-given authority over us.

Let the Pope and every lesser usurper first show us their **divine commission** to rule over us, before they charge us with schism for declining their governance. If they had not gained more by **fire and sword** than by **Scripture and sound reason**, the world would have long ago laughed their claims to scorn.

They say, “All are schismatics who will not be our subjects. Our dominion is necessary to the unity of the church.” But Christ alone is the Head and Governor of the universal church—not any pretended vicar or “vice-Christ.” Bishops of particular churches are His officers, but He has appointed no one to fill His place as universal ruler.

Of all sects, beware most of **this sect**, which claims its own usurped authority as justification for its schism—and which promotes its faction by calling others “sectaries” merely for refusing to join them.

(2) Another pretense for schism is the size of a party.

This is another argument used by the Romanists: “We are the majority, so you should submit to us.” Others make the same claim when, by the use of force, they manage to gather a majority on their side.

But we answer: however many they may be, they are still **too few** to make up the **universal church**. That church includes all true, professing Christians across the world. The Romanists are not even one-third—perhaps not one-fourth—of that whole.

They are a **corrupted sect** within Christianity. And I would rather oppose every divided party, than join the largest one that remains a **sect**.

(3) A third pretense is the soundness or orthodoxy of a party.

Nearly every sect claims that it alone is wise, and that its doctrines are more sound than those of all other Christians. Even those who openly contradict Scripture—like the Papists, who practice half-communion and perform unintelligible rituals—insist they are in the right, simply because others before them did the same.

But:

1. The loudest claims to orthodoxy are not always the most orthodox.

2. Even if they were, I can honor them for what they excel in, without lessening my love or duty toward the rest of the church.
3. The **entire church** is orthodox in all the **essentials of Christianity**—otherwise, it would not be Christian at all. And I must love **all Christians**, with the special love due to the members of Christ—though I may hold a higher esteem for those who are a little wiser or holier than the rest.

(4) A fourth pretense is the holiness of the party one adheres to.

But this only warrants a **greater degree of esteem and love** for some Christians over others. If some are truly more holy, I must indeed love them more, and strive to be as holy as they are. But I must not, therefore, **refuse communion** or **withhold proper respect** from other Christians who are less holy. Nor must I cling to the holier as a sect or party.

For the holiest among us are the most charitable, the least divisive, and the most concerned for the unity and peace of the church.

To summarize this direction:

1. **Greatly value Christian love and unity.**
2. **Love most those who are most holy**, and seek fellowship with them for your own growth. If possible, join yourself to the soundest, purest, and best-qualified local church.
3. **Do not quickly embrace any peculiar opinion of a divided group**—and if you do, don't put more weight on it than

it deserves.

4. **Honor the best Christians as the best**, but do not embrace them as a divided party, nor take up their dividing interest.
5. **Do not restrict your special love to a sect**, especially on the basis of shared opinions, but extend it to all members of Christ.
6. **Do not withhold local communion**, when occasion arises, from any church that worships God in truth and does not require you to sin.
7. **Love them as true Christians and true churches**, even when they drive you away from their communion.

It is a **most dangerous thing** for a young convert to be caught in a sect. Before you realize it, it will fill you with a **feverish, sinful zeal** for your party's cause. It will embolden you to speak harshly and judge bitterly those who differ. It will poison your worship and pollute your prayers with human passions and partiality. It will bring malice under the mask of "zeal." In short, it is a secret but deadly enemy of Christian love and peace.

Let those who claim to be wiser, more orthodox, and more godly than others prove it in the way that the Holy Spirit prescribes:

"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” (James 3:13–18)

Direction IX:

Let Not Suffering Lead You to Sin Through Passion or Disrespect for Authority

Take care that no persecution or wrongdoing from others provokes you into unwarranted passions or sinful actions, depriving you of the charity, meekness, and innocence of a Christian. Be especially cautious that you do not go beyond your bounds in judging, reviling, or resisting your rulers, who are God’s appointed officers.

Scripture calls persecution and affliction *temptations*, because they test whether you will hold fast to your integrity. Just as many fall under such trials through fear of man, love of the world, or desire for prosperity, so also—when you seem most resolved not to yield through sinful compliance—there lies a snare on the other side: a temptation to fall into unrighteous anger, bitterness, or rebellion.

Those infected with pride, uncharitableness, and sectarianism are often the most eager to persecute those who do not conform to their

way. Yet, in doing so, they will loudly accuse others of the very sins—pride, uncharitableness, and schism—that they themselves commit. This has always been, and will continue to be, the ordinary pattern in the world. You might assume that those who act in the name of “order” and “unity” would be furthest from schism. But don’t expect to see this contradiction cured universally, no matter what efforts are made. You must be prepared not only to avoid church division yourselves, but also to endure the persecutions and wrongs that may come from proud or zealous dividers within the church.

It is great weakness to think such treatment is strange. Do you not know that enmity was placed from the beginning between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent? And do you imagine that a mere name or external profession of Christianity will extinguish that enmity in the serpent’s seed? Do you expect more kindness from proud, worldly Christians than Abel received from Cain?

Remember, the Pharisees—driven by their zeal for preeminence, traditions, ceremonies, and hopes of worldly rule through the Messiah—were more bitter enemies to Christ than the heathens. Likewise, the carnal members of the visible church are often the fiercest persecutors of the spiritual members. “As then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.”

Be content that you shall inherit the promise, when the sons of the bondwoman shall be cast out. It is your mistaken assumption—that the suffering of the godly is a strange or unusual thing—that unsettles your heart and stirs up passion when trials come. But reason is silenced when passion rises. It is through this overwhelming of reason by passion and discontent that “oppression makes even wise men mad,” for passion is but a brief and partial

madness. In the grip of it, you may believe you are doing well, when in fact you are doing evil. You will not feel the force of clear and convincing truth, no matter how plain it is.

Remember this: the devil's great aim in persecution is not merely to harm your body, but to tempt your soul to impatience and sin. But if it may be said of you, as it was of Job, "In all this, he did not sin," then you have overcome—and are "more than conquerors."

Is it strange that "few rich men are saved," when Christ Himself says it is "as hard as a camel passing through the eye of a needle," and that "with man it is impossible"? Is it strange that rich men tend to be the rulers of the earth? Or that the world hates those who are "chosen out of it"? What about this should seem surprising? Expect it—it is the common lot of the faithful—and you will be better prepared to bear it.

Therefore, take care that you "resist not evil" by any revengeful or unlawful violence. "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers," and do not resist them, "lest you receive condemnation."

Imitate your Lord, who "when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously." He left us an example that we should follow in His steps.

Angry zeal against those who hurt us is so easily stirred and so hard to suppress that it becomes clear there is more of corrupt nature than of God in it. We are quick to imagine we may "call down fire from heaven" on the enemies of the Gospel—but Christ says, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of." Instead, He commands: "Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Do good to those who hate

you. Pray for those who spitefully use and persecute you, that you may be the children of your Father in heaven.”

You are nowhere forbidden to patiently endure wrong. Take care, then, not to entertain even secret desires that harm would come to your enemies. Do not return reproaches with reproaches. Do not allow yourself to be harmed by sin or sinful passion, simply because others have harmed you through slander or persecution.

Remain steadfast in your duty, and leave both your name and your life in the hands of God. Be diligent to preserve your innocence. In patience, possess your soul, and God will permit no harm to reach you except what He intends to turn for your good.

Read Psalm 37 carefully:

“Commit your way to the Lord; trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.

He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.

Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him. Do not fret because of the one who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass.

Cease from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it only leads to evil.”

Direction X:

Take Heed of Running from One Extreme into Another

When you are repenting of, or turning away from any extreme, do not do so without careful fear and caution of falling into the opposite extreme.

In matters of valuing and loving God—who is your ultimate end—there is no danger of excess. Nor in any area where your weakness, indifference, or spiritual impotence clearly show that you can never go too far. But sin lies on both sides of the rule and path. And nothing is more common than to swing from one sin to another, under the appearance of duty or reform.

This is especially common in matters of opinion. One person begins by thinking that God is nothing but mercy, and later comes to see Him only as strict justice. At first, they believe that almost all will be saved—later, that almost none will be. First, they take every profession of faith as credible; then they trust no one without exceptional proof. First, they believe Christ died only for the elect who will actually be saved; then, they claim He died equally for all. At one time, they deny that anyone today partakes of the Holy Spirit; and later, they assert that all true saints are not only enlightened and sanctified by the Spirit (who writes the Word on their hearts), but are also given new revelations apart from Scripture.

First, they believe that everything taught or practiced by Roman Catholics must be rejected; then, that no reformation was ever needed at all. Now, they fall into legal bondage; soon after, they slide into spiritual libertinism. Today, they allow no religious liberty to those who differ from them even in small matters; tomorrow, they argue for liberty for all. One year, they think all things are lawful; the next, they think nothing is lawful, and become entangled in endless scruples. One moment, they are devoted to elaborate, ceremonial worship; the next, they resist even the most basic, decent forms of

order that are left to the church's discretion. Sometimes they exalt nothing but free grace; then they make everything hinge on free will. They may begin with a discipline that exceeds the bounds of Scripture, and later abandon all discipline altogether. First, they cowardly conform to evil; then, they adopt a scornful, lawless contempt for authority.

Many such examples could be given.

The remedy for this disease is to proceed with thoughtfulness, and to receive or act upon nothing rashly or carelessly in matters of religion. For once you discover your first error, you will be tempted to swing too far in reaction—and fall into its opposite.

Therefore, look carefully on all sides: not only at the error you are now coming out of, but also at the one you are in danger of running into next. Seek the counsel of wise and experienced believers. Take warning from the misery of those who have fallen on both sides of the truth. Do not wait until you must learn by painful experience what you might have learned by sound instruction.

True moderation—true biblical balance—is the only safe path. Though we must beware of using that word to excuse negligence or lukewarmness, which are sinful even when disguised under the name of moderation.

Direct XI.

Be not too confident in your first apprehensions or opinions, but
modestly suspicious of them

Do not be overly confident in your first opinions about the difficult issues in religion, especially where Scripture is not entirely plain. Rather, hold your early impressions with modesty and a proper suspicion, knowing that your understanding is still unripe and may change with better instruction, evidence, and maturity.

I know that factionalists—who base their religion on the standing of their own party—oppose this instruction, believing that one must first align oneself with the right church and then strictly adhere to all its doctrines, never changing one’s mind. I also know that some libertines and half believers would twist this advice by extending it to the most obvious and essential truths, urging you to hold Christianity itself as nothing more than an uncertain, probable opinion.

But just as God’s foundation is sure, so must we be firmly built upon it. He who does not believe the essentials of Christianity, as a certain and necessary revelation of God, is not a Christian but an infidel. And he who does not accept everything he understands in God’s Word essentially believes nothing on its credit. Sincere faith may be weak at first, and such persons are apt to lament the remnants of their unbelief, crying, “Lord, increase our faith; help our unbelief.” But he who welcomes his doubts and considers the revelation uncertain—and therefore is unwilling to give it a firmer hold—I should hardly call such a man a Christian. Christianity must be received as divine, infallible revelation. Controversies over less necessary points cannot be determined conclusively by the ignorant or by young beginners, without devolving into hypocrisy or a diluted human faith masquerading as divine truth.

I do not intend to reduce your belief in all that you can understand of Scripture, nor diminish the credit due to any truth of God. The reasons for this instruction are these:

1. When it is evident that you have only a dark, uncertain grasp of any point, pretending to see it clearly is but self-deception born of pride. To decry all uncertainty as mere skepticism—which you cannot entirely cast aside—is to denigrate your own natural weakness and foolishly assume that every man can be as wise and certain as he wishes. Reason and experience show that a young, undeveloped understanding is unlikely to grasp the evidence of difficult points without closer examination and fuller advantage.
2. If your conclusions are peremptory, based solely on self-conceit, you may well be confidently in error—and in doing so, you set an example that seduces others and leads you to cast judgment on dissenters. Later, when you find yourself forced to admit your mistakes, you will have come to recognize that you were confident in error all along.
3. To be confident that you know what you do not know is to remain in ignorance and to bar further light from entering your mind. Once an opinion is fixed by prejudice and conceit, there is little room for learning or correction.
4. To be unreasonably confident at a young age means relying solely on your teacher's word, rather than developing a faith and understanding of your own. It also hinders your diligence in seeking greater knowledge. In this case, you may be inclined to abandon your studies and settle for accepting what those men—whose judgments become your religion—tell you, a path that is too easy and, in effect, unworthy.

5. If you never revise your first impressions, how can you grow in understanding? Will you remain no wiser in adulthood than you were in childhood, despite long study and experience? Both nature and grace incline us to increase our knowledge over time.

Indeed, if you remain so fixed in your early opinions, you cannot be expected to hold them until the end; for light is powerful and may change you whether you wish it or not. But prejudice will make you resist that light and hinder your understanding.

I speak from much experience and observation. Our first, unripe impressions of things will undoubtedly be greatly transformed if we are diligent in study and open to improvement. Consider, for example, controversies over grace and free will or other difficult points—when you are young, you are likely to see them one way; but with maturity, you will come to view them quite differently. For my own part, my judgment has evolved from many of my youthful, confident opinions. In cases where my conclusions remain the same, I now find that abundant arguments once accepted now appear vain and unsatisfying. And where I have maintained my views, my apprehension of them has deepened—I see a more satisfying light in many matters which I once held on trust alone. Had I resolved to stick to all my first impressions, I would have foregone much study and lost the truth I have since discovered; I would have chosen to live and die as a child rather than grow up in knowledge.

In short, hold fast to the substance of religion—every clear and certain truth that Scripture itself reveals. Also, honor your teachers, especially the universal church and the collective wisdom of godly men. Do not hastily form or adopt any private opinion, and certainly do not contradict the views of your rulers and teachers on minor or disputed matters. Instead, with a humble human faith, receive their

opinions until you acquire more understanding—with the expectation that time and study will likely alter your views. Always remain open to learning and do not rest content with those first impressions in which you were born.

Direction XII:

What to Do When Controversies Divide the Church — On the Silencing of Truth

If controversies arise where you live and bring division into the church, be careful to put the common good and the unity of the faith first. Let charity guide your actions. Do not become a heated partisan, nor harshly criticize those who remain peaceable, or the pastors who refuse to betray their own convictions simply to win your approval as “orthodox” or “zealous.” Rather, suspect your own immature understanding. Keep silent about your opinions until they are grounded and clear. And align yourself with the moderate and the peacemakers, rather than with those who stir up division and contention.

You may be certain of this: that division tends to the ruin of the church, the hindrance of the Gospel, and the harm of our shared interest in the Christian faith. Scripture strongly condemns such schisms. Experience shows they are usually fed by pride, uncharitable spirits, and passionate tempers—and that the devil rejoices in them, as he gains the most from our disunity. But on the other hand, you are not easily certain which side is right in a

controversy. And even if you could be sure, you cannot be sure that the issue is worth the cost of division. Or, if it is, you must still ask whether the truth might be better served by peaceful persuasion than by open controversy, which tends to harden opposition and inflame passions.

No matter the case, you should certainly understand this: young Christians—who still lack maturity, knowledge, experience, and sound judgment—are not fit to take sides in controversies. Even less should they become the loudest champions of a cause, pushing their teachers (who know far more than they) to take positions for the sake of winning their approval. Even if some controversial task must be undertaken by one who is qualified and prepared, it is clearly not for you. So wait patiently until you are more equipped.

I know that those who want to draw you into contentious zeal will tell you that theirs is “the cause of God,” and that if you do not show great zeal for it, you are betraying God himself. They will say it is only “flesh and blood” that urges moderation and peace. They will accuse you of hypocrisy and lukewarmness for your quietness, and claim that true faith demands the greatest zeal and self-denial.

All this would be true—if it were indeed the cause of God. But you must also be sure that you are not neglecting greater works of God under that pretense; and that your zeal for the faith, and for love and unity, exceeds your zeal for opinions. In my experience, most of those who loudly cry out “The cause of God! The cause of truth!” understand little of what they claim. Many such causes are nothing but the offspring of a proud and ignorant mind—ideas that any thoughtful Christian would be ashamed to defend.

Some are rash and zealous before they have the wisdom or time to consider a matter well. Others are carried away by a teacher or party

that has captivated them. Some are led by personal offense or dissatisfaction. Many, out of ambition or love of the world, are blinded by self-interest. Some, moved by pride, latch on to a distinctive opinion simply because it feels like their own—as if originality made it true. And many, after long experience, end up confessing that what they once claimed was the “cause of God” was actually their own mistake.

So when one cries, “Here is Christ!” and another says, “There is Christ!”—when one declares, “This is the cause of truth,” and another says, “No, that is”—then any man who cares for his conscience and the honor of his profession will think carefully before he follows. He will not run blindly after those who beckon him with great words and empty claims.

It is a sorrowful thing to spend years opposing, censuring, and misleading others—misusing your time, your talents, your prayers, and your influence—only to realize too late how much damage you have done in ignorance. And like Paul, to say at last, “I was mad in persecuting the truth and the servants of God, though I thought I was zealous for him.”

Would it not be far better to pause, to examine your footing, and prevent such long and grievous sin, than to escape it only by bitter repentance—leaving behind the poisonous fruit of your errors? And worse still, what if you never repent at all?

Your soul and the souls of your brethren are too precious to risk on untested, dangerous paths. The church will not be healed if you someday say, “I thought I was doing right.” Let the battles of controversy, judgment, and party alignment be left to those more mature in faith and understanding. Warfare is not for children.

You, instead, should suspend judgment until you can truly inform it. Serve God with charity, quietness, and peace. And in time, it is very likely that those who once tried to pull you into their conflicts will come to regret their losses—and either learn to commend your peacemaking, or cause you to give thanks that God kept you from their strife.

In all this, I do not deny that every truth of God is to be held in the highest regard. And he who remains neutral when matters of faith or godliness are in controversy—especially if he does so only for worldly advantage, to preserve his own comforts by compromise—is a hypocrite at heart, and no true believer at all.

But at the same time, I must warn you: not everything that this or that impassioned party—be they Autonomian-Papist, Antinomian-Libertine, or otherwise—declares to be a matter of faith or godliness actually is. While we must take care not to despise even the smallest truth, we must even more carefully avoid the great sins we might commit in defending an error.

There are times when some truths, though never to be denied, must be temporarily silenced—when arguing for them is unseasonable and would harm the church. If you were teachers in the church, your duty would not be to speak every truth at all costs, especially not in a way that harms your hearers. Just as a physician must not overdose his patient, even with good medicine, your task is not to destroy, but to edify. The health of the soul is the purpose of your instruction.

Not every truth must be spoken by every person, nor at every moment. Whoever acts otherwise—who thinks it carnal to withhold what is unseasonable—only disguises folly and sin with the name of zeal and duty. Such a one may set the whole house on fire to boil an egg, or, like the Pharisees, prefer the outward rest of the sabbath to

the preservation of a brother's life. Take great care, therefore, how you act when God's honor, men's souls, and the peace of the church are at stake.

Let me also speak from personal observation. As far as I have been able to discern, those who have sought peace and moderation have usually been the most judicious—those who best understood themselves and the matters at hand in nearly every controversy I've witnessed among sincere Christians. On the other hand, those who angrily censured the moderate as lukewarm or compromised were most often the ones full of error, pride, and misjudgment—driven more by passion than wisdom.

Indeed, I will add this: in our day, we have seen it too clearly. The church has long suffered between two destructive forces—on one side, profane and formal adversaries; on the other, ignorant, self-conceited disputers, who mistake their private opinions and heated temperaments for courageous defense of the truth. The former are the persecutors of the church; the latter, its dividers and disturbers.

Mark well what the Holy Spirit says in such cases: “But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they breed quarrels. And the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all” (2 Tim. 2:23–24). Again: “Do all things without murmurings and disputings, that you may be blameless and harmless, children of God, without fault, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:14–15). And again: “If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree to sound doctrine—the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the teaching that accords with godliness—he is proud, knowing nothing, but sick with a morbid craving for controversies and disputes about words. From these arise envy, strife, slander, evil suspicions, and

constant friction among people of corrupt mind” (1 Tim. 6:3–5). And also: “Give no heed to fables and endless genealogies, which promote speculation rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:4–5).

Yet I must also add this: if any false-hearted, worldly-minded hypocrite—one who chooses the side that offers the greatest safety or advancement—should twist my words as an excuse to betray his conscience and sell his soul, and then slander others as “furious zealots” simply because they will not join him in his unfaithfulness, let that man know he has no cover from anything I have said. His sin is his own. He may delude his conscience and protect himself before men with outward advantages, but he will find no defense at the judgment seat of God.

Direction XIII.

What Godliness Is — The Best Life on Earth. How Satan Tries to Make It Seem Hard and Joyless.

Know this: true godliness is the best life one can live on earth, and the only path to perfect happiness. Always regard it and practice it as such. And with all diligence, resist every temptation that would make it seem burdensome, confusing, or unpleasant.

In a holy life, all things come together to make it the most delightful life for any rational and purified soul—so long as it is not enslaved to

the flesh or feeding on vanity. The object of the godly life is none other than the eternal God himself—the infallible Truth, the only satisfying Good. And he draws near to us in the wondrous and fitting person of a Mediator—one who redeems, reconciles, teaches, governs, sanctifies, justifies, and glorifies all who belong to him.

The goal of godliness is to please and glorify our Maker, Redeemer, and Sanctifier—and in so doing, to gain eternal joy for ourselves and others. Its rule is the sure and divine revelation of God, given through the prophets, the Son, and the apostles, recorded in Holy Scripture and sealed by the miracles and mighty workings of the Holy Spirit, who inspired them.

The very work of godliness is a life lived unto God—a preparation for eternal life by seeing, tasting, seeking, and rejoicing in the everlasting happiness that awaits us in his presence. It is a life that walks by the Spirit and shuns the filth, deceit, and miseries of the world and the flesh. No life is more noble, useful, or delightful to the nature of man than the one God has called us to through his Son. And if we truly knew it, we would pursue it with constant eagerness and joy.

So take care to see godliness as it truly is—not as it is misrepresented by the devil or the ungodly. For more on this, read what I have written in *A Saint or a Brute*.

As long as a man understands religion for what it really is—a sweet and joyful life—he will pursue it willingly and from the heart. He will shrug off the temptations of worldly gain and carnal pleasure. He will be sincere—not merely pulled along by others or pushed by fear, but drawn by the beauty of religion itself and the glory of its end. Then he will perform every duty of the Christian life with cheerfulness and be most likely to persevere to the end.

Do not expect your heart or will to be inclined toward God and godliness unless your understanding sees them as truly good. Indeed, unless you see in them a surpassing goodness, far above all this world can offer, your heart will be drawn away by the pleasures of created things.

Even brute animals show us how powerful perception is in moving the will. If your horse is headed home to his stable or pasture, he will press forward eagerly through mud and difficulty. But if he is unwilling, the journey will be hard, and every step will be slow. And so it will be with you on your way to heaven.

It is therefore one of the devil's chief designs to hide from you the goodness and delightfulness of the Christian life, and to make it seem burdensome, confusing, or miserable. By this strategy, he keeps many from ever entering the path of godliness, and by this same tactic, he tries to turn back those who have begun to walk in it—frustrating your early steps and undermining your hope. If he can distort your understanding of religion, he will soon alienate your heart, corrupt your practice, and drive you back into the world to seek your pleasure elsewhere. Then, at best, you'll be left clinging to a cold, formal lip-service, maintaining only a deceptive hope of salvation.

Here are some of the methods Satan uses for this end:

1. He will try to overwhelm you with difficulties and doubts, making religion seem confusing and unfulfilling. This is one of his most dangerous assaults, especially against the weak and the newly converted. He uses both intellectual difficulties and emotional agitation to break your orderly, joyful pursuit of salvation. When you read Scripture, he will draw your attention to every hard saying or seeming contradiction, making you feel as though you'll never truly

understand it. He will inject thoughts of unbelief and blasphemy into your mind, tempting you to dwell on them. If you do not cast them off with abhorrence but begin to dispute with the devil, he hopes to outwit you—especially while you are still young and unarmed. If you do resist and refuse to engage him, he will try to convince you that your unwillingness to argue means your faith is weak, and that if your cause were strong, you wouldn't fear the objections. Either way, he seeks to draw you into unbelief—or at the least, to terrify and disturb you with the very presence of such temptations. He wants you to think you are abandoned by God simply because such blasphemous thoughts have passed through your mind.

He will also use the same tactic in your study of other good books, drawing your mind only to what you find difficult, to confuse and discourage you. In meditation, he tries to keep your focus on fearful or perplexing things, scattering your thoughts so they cannot be brought to any profitable order or conclusion. In prayer, he attempts to overwhelm you with distractions, doubts, and questions—about God, your sin, the right manner of prayer, or whether God will even hear you. In self-examination, he tries to leave you more confused than when you began, making you fear to look inward, as if your soul were a haunted house. In short, he tries to make all your religion feel like untangling a hopelessly knotted thread, until you are tempted to give up in weariness and despair.

The remedy against this temptation is to remember that you are still young in the faith and knowledge, and ignorance brings with it darkness, doubts, and fears. These will fade as your understanding grows. Therefore, be patient, and wait for maturity before expecting full clarity. In the meantime, focus your heart on the great, fundamental, plain, and necessary truths—those on which your

salvation depends, and which match your present level of strength and understanding.

Do not be eager to gnaw on theological bones before you have been weaned from the milk of the Word. If you are not content to remain a child while you are one, you'll find such matters too hard for you, and they may discourage or harm you. Keep your soul fixed on God in Christ. Love and obey what you do understand, and delight in the glorious truths already revealed to you. You already know what end you must seek, where your happiness lies, what Christ has done to prepare it for you, and how you are to be justified, sanctified, and walk with God. You have God, Christ, heaven, and the promises of the Gospel to dwell on. Will you cast these aside as ordinary, and instead torment yourself with every hard or obscure passage you come across?

Clear the path before you as you walk, and give thanks for the mercies you already have. Obey what you already know, and the difficulties will begin to fade as you move forward.

2. Another tactic of Satan is to trouble you with the noise of sects and divisions in the church. One party says, "You must be part of our church to be saved." Another says, "No, ours is the true church." And when you find so many opinions and cannot answer their arguments, you are in danger either of embracing their errors or becoming paralyzed by confusion, unsure which church or faith to follow.

But consider this: there is only one universal church of true Christians in the world, and Christ alone is its head and king. Every believer is a member of this one body. You were admitted into this universal church through baptism, and truly made a member of it by the new birth through the Spirit. You have the Gospel's promise that whoever believes in Christ will be saved, and that every living

member of this body is loved by Christ as part of himself. Christ will present them blameless to the Father, for he is the Savior of his body. “By one Spirit we are all baptized into one body.”

If you have faith, love, and the Spirit, you are certainly a Christian, a member of Christ, and of the universal church of believers. If there were any other church outside of this one, it would not be universal, and Christ would have two bodies—which is impossible. You are not saved by being a member of the Church of Rome, or Corinth, or Ephesus, or any other local body, but by being united to Christ in his universal church.

To claim, as sects do, “Ours is the true church,” and to deny all others, is as foolish as arguing over which room in your house is the whole house—whether it be the hall, the kitchen, or the parlor. A child knows the house includes them all. The Roman Catholics who claim to be the only true church and condemn all others who are not subject to the Pope are asserting a cruel, irrational, and baseless usurpation. Such a sweeping condemnation of the vast majority of Christ’s body deserves rejection more than debate. If this threat could truly terrify people, other bishops would try it too—declaring all who aren’t subject to them as damned.

If you wish to see more clearly the foolishness and danger of Popery—especially in this point—I refer you to my works: *The Treatise of the Catholic Church*, *A Key for Catholics*, *Safe Religion*, *Disputations against Johnson*, and *A Winding-Sheet for Popery*.

3. Another temptation that may confuse you in your faith is the burden of excessive scrupulosity—constantly doubting every step you take, so that instead of joyfully serving your Master, you are always questioning whether this or that action is right or wrong. The remedy for this is not to cast off all concern for pleasing

God, or to dull your conscience by carelessness. Rather, obey God cheerfully and peacefully in all that you clearly know to be his will. Be humbly eager to understand more, and gratefully receive the Gospel's pardon for your failings and imperfections.

Be faithful in your obedience, but rest always in Christ. Do not imagine that you will ever attain to a level of holiness that removes your need for his merits or for daily forgiveness. Do your best to know and do the will of God. And when you know the essentials of the faith and follow them sincerely, let not your remaining weaknesses rob you of the joy of so great a mercy, which confirms your right to eternal life.

In your pursuit of deeper knowledge and obedience, let your care be focused on what helps you grow and reach your goal. Avoid that excessive worry which only robs you of joy and thanksgiving, and leads to confusion rather than progress. If you are on the right path in the main things, thank God for that, and let your further concern be only what helps you forward—not what hinders you.

If you send a servant on a journey, you'd rather he keep moving as best he can, than stop at every step to question whether to move his right foot or his left, or how far he should stride each time. In the same way, needless scruples do not please God.

4. Another way Satan tries to confound your faith is by pushing you into overdoing it—adding burdens and duties that God never required. When a sincere soul is most eager to please God, the devil may tempt him with false religious zeal—pressing him into "voluntary humility" or "will-worship," as Paul describes in Colossians 2:18, 20–23. He may lead you to make unnecessary or even harmful vows, or to engage in imagined works

of supererogation. This is what Solomon meant by being “righteous overmuch.”

Many have made burdens for themselves that God never placed upon them, and called something sinful that God never forbade. The Roman Catholic religion has become full of such human traditions and commandments. As if Christ had not given us enough work, people are eager to invent more. And some ministers, instead of simply teaching Christ’s laws, act as though their office is pointless unless they also invent new rules and add to God's Word.

Some of the very people who despise God's commands as too rigid are the quickest to burden others with countless unnecessary precepts of their own. In this way, religion is made both wearying and uncertain, opening the door for men to multiply burdens at will. Indeed, Roman Catholicism is well-suited to lull sleeping consciences with false comfort and torment awakened consciences with endless doubt.

There is also a natural tendency in our fallen hearts to invent religious duties of our own making, thinking that God will be most pleased with something that came from us. Many Christians rashly bind their consciences with vows over things indifferent—such as giving certain amounts, observing certain hours for fasting and prayer, or abstaining from things that are lawful—only to find that changing circumstances later make those actions necessary or unavoidable. These self-imposed vows then become lifelong burdens on the conscience.

Some go so far as to teach that indifferent things are the best subjects for vows: singleness, poverty, solitude, and the like. But while lawful things, once vowed, must be performed, it is still unwise to make vows about things that are not already necessary or beneficial. If

something is truly the best, then it is not indifferent—it is your duty to choose it already.

Vows are meant to bind us to what God has already commanded. They are not intended to create new religious duties. We express our consent and resolve to obey God—not to legislate religion for ourselves.

To avoid these traps, be careful not to corrupt your faith with self-made burdens and mixtures. You are called to obey God's laws, not to invent your own. You can trust his commandments to be righteous and wise—your own may be foolish and harmful. When you obey him, you may look for his blessing. But if you obey yourself, you must reward yourself too.

It is more than enough to keep God's commandments without piling on extra duties of your own invention. Do not label something a duty if God has not commanded it, or a sin if God has not forbidden it. Be cautious about making vows. Let them only concern necessary duties, and include proper exceptions when they deal with things that may change. If you are already tangled in such vows, seek out the most wise, capable, and impartial counselors you can, that you may be delivered without harm to your soul. It will take both sound judgment and sincere humility to get free. Whatever you do, avoid sin. Sinning is never the way to escape a snare. And for the future, be wise and lay no more traps for yourself. Don't weigh yourself down with your own inventions. Instead, gladly obey what God has commanded. His "yoke is easy," his "burden is light," and "his commandments are not grievous." If what you carry feels heavy and grievous, do not blame God, but yourself.

5. Another of Satan's strategies is to make religion seem miserable and oppressive by drowning you in fear and

sorrow. Sometimes he tempts you to think that the essence of religion lies in excessive sorrow—leading you to believe that God is most pleased when you make yourself miserable. At other times, he takes advantage of a timid, sensitive nature and makes every thought of God or act of devotion feel terrifying. “Fear has torment,” says the Apostle. In some emotionally frail, melancholy people, this temptation gains such control over the body that even a holy soul can do little to resist it. Though they sincerely love God, his ways, and his people, fear tyrannizes them to such an extent that they can scarcely feel anything else. It’s no wonder religion becomes unpleasant to them.

But the cause of this grief lies in yourself. God has not commanded such a miserable path. The life he calls you to is one of love, joy, and hopeful progress toward everlasting joy—not endless torment. He only requires as much fear and sorrow as is necessary to drive you from sin and teach you to treasure the cure. The Gospel offers abundant reasons for joy and peace. If you would only receive them as they are offered, these would become the very character of your soul.

Religious fear, when excessive and destructive, is sinful. It runs contrary to the purpose of religion and must be resisted like any harmful passion. Get to know Christ and his promises more intimately. You will find in him all that is needed to calm your soul and give you boldness before God. The Spirit he gives is not one of bondage, but of adoption—of love, peace, and confidence.

6. Another reason why religion seems burdensome is the presence of unmortified, sensual desires. If you continue to indulge your lusts, they will constantly resist the Gospel, just as the works of the Spirit resist them. Every spiritual duty will feel

unpleasant to you, to the extent that your heart remains carnal—because it runs contrary to your carnal inclinations and cravings. Therefore, cast off your cherished disease, and both your spiritual food and your physician will become less bitter to you. "Put to death the deeds of the flesh," and you will find yourself more inclined to the things of the Spirit. "For the carnal mind is enmity against God; it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be."

7. Another source of confusion and weariness in religion is the presence of actual, unrepented sin—dealing falsely with God and wounding your conscience through renewed guilt, especially when sinning against knowledge and deliberate conviction. If you continue in known sin, unhealed and unrepented, it is no wonder that spiritual work feels hard and that you grow weary in the way. But it is your sin and your folly that ought to grieve you—not that which is contrary to them, and would remove the very cause of all your trouble.

If you will resolutely turn from willful sin, and return through "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ," you will discover that when the thorn is removed, the pain will cease. Then you will see that the source of your burden was not God or his service, but your own sin.

8. Finally, to make religion seem joyless and oppressive, Satan seeks to keep you ignorant or inattentive to the true substance of the Gospel. He tries to hide from your view the marvelous love of God as revealed in our Redeemer—the treasures of saving grace, the greatness of your deliverance, the privileges of the saints, and the sure hope of eternal life. He would have the kingdom of God appear to you as nothing more than dry doctrines, trivial

disputes, empty ceremonies, or mere bodily exercise, which “profits little.”

But if you would ever taste the sweetness of faith and holiness, you must labor above all to know God as he is revealed in the infinite love of Christ. Read the Gospel as the divine act of pardon—God’s gracious covenant through Christ, in which he gives eternal life to all who believe. In every duty, approach God as your reconciled Father, the object of your everlasting love and joy.

Understand and practice religion as it truly is—not as it is misunderstood or corrupted—and it will not appear to you as something harsh, tedious, or confusing.

Direction XIV:

Mortify the Flesh, and Rule the Senses and Appetites

Be diligent in putting to death the desires and pleasures of the flesh. Keep a constant watch over your senses, appetites, and lusts. Do not cast yourself into temptations, or into situations that might give opportunity to sin—remembering that your salvation depends on your perseverance in this fight.

The lusts of the flesh and the pleasures of the world are the common enemies of God and of souls. They are the cause of ruin for those who perish. And there is no stage of life more vulnerable to these temptations than the prime of youth and strength. When your senses are sharp, and your desires and appetites are at full strength, how

great is the danger—and how great must your diligence be if you hope to escape!

In the aged and infirm, lust and appetite are weakened alongside the body; they do not present the same danger. As physical strength wanes, so does the pull of carnal pleasure. For such people, less vigilance is required. Where nature has already begun to subdue the flesh, there is less left for grace to mortify. It does not take much grace to keep the aged and weak from falling into fornication, excess in entertainment, or the carnal mirth of the young. Drunkenness and gluttony, too, are far more common temptations in youth.

Especially for those whose bodies are not only youthful and strong, but also inclined by temperament toward lust, laughter, or reckless mirth—such people need great watchfulness, resolution, and self-control. Lust is not like a false belief that can be corrected with a flash of truth. It is a brute desire that, while reason can and must govern it, will not be completely rooted out—even by the best reason. It remains within, and is always ready to rise when stirred by what the senses or imagination present to it.

It is like a wild torrent or an untamed horse—if not reined in from the beginning, it will be difficult to stop once it breaks loose. If you are raised in modesty and temperance, away from places of temptation—where there is no excess of feasting, no immodest company, no drunkenness or coarse jesting—you may think your nature is free of these desires. But when you come into settings where lust is inflamed—by companions, entertainment, excess, and vanity—you may then discover to your sorrow how much watchfulness you lacked, and how much corruption was only sleeping within you.

Just as a man walking through gunpowder with a lit candle must never be careless, you who are young and full of strong desires must remember that you carry fire and fuel with you wherever you go. You are never safe so long as the enemy is within.

And if once you allow the spark to catch—if you kindle the fire—you may soon find it spreading beyond your control. "Each one is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death" (James 1:14–15). The fish does not know, while nibbling at the bait, that it is swallowing the hook that will drag it from the water. Likewise, when you gaze upon the cup, or fix your eyes on alluring beauty, or begin to toy with sensual pleasures—you may be drawn much farther than you ever intended. The wound may be deeper, the pain more severe, and the healing more difficult than you imagined.

If you care for your soul, take the apostle Paul's counsel: "Flee youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22). Keep far away. Don't play near the bait. If you once wound your conscience with a willful and grievous sin, what misery you will fall into! Secret prayer will feel lifeless. God, who should be your joy, will become the dread of your soul. You will lose the sweetness of his presence and the peace of his ways. You will be torn between the tyranny of your lust, the sting of guilt, the accusations of conscience, and the fear of divine judgment. In one moment, much of your love, faith, and zeal for heaven may be quenched.

I will say more about this later. For now, let every young believer who desires to be saved hear this charge: **"Mortify the flesh, watch always, and avoid temptations."**

Direction XV:

Be Wary in Choosing Both Your Teachers and Your Companions

Be exceedingly careful not only in choosing the teachers to whom you entrust the care of your soul, but also in selecting the company you keep. Do not associate closely with those who would corrupt your mind with error, or weaken your heart with vice, irreverence, indifference, or with a feverish and divisive zeal. Instead, if possible, choose as your ordinary companions and intimate friends those who are wise, godly, heavenly-minded, humble, blameless, and self-denying—especially in those closest to you, such as your family and household.

It is of great importance whom you choose as your spiritual guides. In this, the free grace of God makes a marked difference among men. Just as many heathens and unbelievers have no teacher beyond what can be learned from the book of nature—if even that—so, too, among professing Christians, people often have no choice but to follow the ministers imposed by civil authority or chosen by the custom of their country. And it is rare indeed when such imposed ministers represent the truth and holiness of the Gospel.

Yet, where and when it pleases God in mercy, he raises up wise and holy pastors, who labor with compassion and diligence for the salvation of souls. And none are deprived of such help but those who are obstinate or malicious.

If you are given the freedom to choose, do not choose proud, ambitious, covetous, or ungodly men as your teachers. In a land

where true religion is respected and supported by authority or the majority, some graceless men may appear outwardly orthodox and even be useful in preaching or defending sound doctrine—especially in teaching or disputing. But even then, it is far better to seek out spiritual and experienced men. Those who truly feel what they preach are more likely to reach the hearts of others. Those who love and believe in God and holiness themselves are most likely to lead others to faith and love. Living men speak more powerfully than the dead.

In most parts of the world, ungodly ministers oppose the very power of the Gospel they claim to preach. Their lives contradict their message. They resist the truth, corrupt the authorities, and—once they gain influence—become the fiercest persecutors of the sincere. Among the Papists, it is especially evident: the lure of power, honor, and wealth has corrupted their clergy so that they preserve a worldly religion, propping up a tyranny and false worship. Against all reason, history, and Scripture, they entrap the ignorant and carnal-minded, and—through misled rulers and crowds—persecute those who will not follow them into sin and ruin. Take heed, then, of proud and worldly teachers.

Yet not everyone who claims piety and zeal should be accepted as your teacher. Instead, look for those:

1. Who preach the core truths of the Christian faith—those doctrines in which all true believers agree.
2. Who aim to stir your soul to love God and live a holy, heavenly life—and who are boldly opposed to known sin.
3. Who do not deny any essential truths by introducing their own errors, nor undermine godliness through twisted or malicious

teaching.

4. Who do not seek power or influence for themselves, but humbly desire your salvation.
5. Who are not eager to convert you to their own peculiar opinions—remember Paul’s warning to the Ephesians: “From among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”
6. Who are zealous, but with wisdom—and wise, but not cold or indifferent.
7. Who have experience in the things of God—not novices or recent converts.
8. Who respect the wisdom and judgment of the broader body of godly, mature Christians, and are careful to preserve the unity of the church—not those who seek to divide or draw you into a faction, even if that faction seems popular or powerful.
9. Who are gentle, peaceable, and charitable—not those consumed by hatred toward their fellow Christians, nor driven by ungodly or harsh zeal.
10. Whose lives match their teaching—who show by their actions that they believe what they preach and feel the power of the truth in their own hearts.

Your close companions have great power either to help or hinder your salvation, just as your teachers do. It matters far less whom you happen to meet in passing, or travel or trade with, than whom you choose as your intimate, familiar friends. Such companions have not only influence over your affections, but the added advantage of

constant nearness and familiarity. And if they also possess greater understanding than you, they may become powerful instruments for your good—or your harm.

If you have a close friend who defends you from error, helps you resist temptation, gently reproves your sin, and speaks from the heart of God and eternity, with words that flow from deep faith and holy experience, such a friend may be of more benefit to you than the most learned or powerful people in the world. How sweetly their words will carry the flavor of the Spirit that breathes them! How deeply they may pierce a careless heart! How mightily they may awaken in you a love and zeal for God and his commandments! How timely their counsel may be to expose temptation, prevent a fall, correct an error, and restore your soul! How faithfully they will watch over you! How profitably they will stir you up, pray with you when you grow cold, and remind you of the truth, duty, and mercy you are prone to forget! It is a great mercy indeed to have a wise, grounded, and faithful companion on the journey to heaven.

But if your ears are daily filled with vain talk and foolishness—with filthiness or idle stories, with cursing and swearing, with angry or scornful speech against the godly, or with the subtle arguments of deceivers—can this leave any wholesome impression on your mind? Can such company not affect your heart and life, just as tainted air or unhealthy food leaves its mark on the body? He is ungodly who delights most in such companions. He is proud and presumptuous who willingly places himself among them, trusting that he will remain unharmed. He is careless who does not make it his business to avoid them. Few who spend much time with such company come away without spiritual loss—unless they grieve over their sin and misery, like Lot in Sodom; or, like Christ among publicans and

sinner, seek their salvation with holy zeal; or unless they are constrained by providence and have no power to withdraw.

One of the greatest dangers is from those who are eager to win you to their party or persuade you to embrace unsound doctrine. Because they are convinced they are right, and because they act out of love, and because they believe it concerns your salvation, and because they speak often of truth and godliness—this all makes the danger worse, if what they propose is not true godliness indeed. No one is more at risk than those who are ungrounded and inexperienced, yet overly confident in their own judgment, certain they can distinguish truth from error, and hardly aware of how easily they might be deceived. I have spoken of this before.

The same danger applies to familiar company with the lukewarm or profane. At first, you may be troubled by their sinful or empty speech and resist it somewhat. But soon, your spiritual fervor may cool and grow dull—and others will begin to notice the change. First, you will tolerate their talk more easily. Then, you will grow indifferent to their company. Then, you will laugh at their sin and folly. Then, you will begin to speak as they do. Then, you will grow cold in prayer and other holy duties. And unless God intervenes, your judgment may grow blind, and you may begin to think this is all acceptable.

But of all corrupting company, the closest is the most dangerous. If you bring such people into your home, or choose them as your closest companions in marriage or family, you are pouring water on the fire. You are chaining yourself with fetters that will chafe and grieve you, if they do not halt you altogether. You are choosing a life of constant, heavy temptation. But your grace, comfort, and salvation could be greatly helped by the company of those who are wise, gracious, and well-suited to your spiritual needs. To have a constant

companion to open your heart to, to pray with, to speak of heavenly things, to faithfully confront your sin, and yet be patient with your weaknesses—that is a mercy few understand or value, except those who walk the narrow way.

Direct. XVI.

What Books to Prefer and Read, and What to Reject

Be very careful in choosing the books you read. Let the Holy Scriptures always have first place—above all others—and next to them, read solid, lively, heavenly writings that best explain and apply the Scriptures. After these, give time to trustworthy histories, especially those concerning the Church, and then to useful works on the various sciences and arts. But beware of the poisonous writings of false teachers, which will corrupt your understanding; and avoid vain romances, plays, and fabricated stories, which may enchant your imagination and defile your heart.

As the Holy Scriptures bear a greater stamp of the Spirit of God than any other writings, they also have more power to convey the Spirit to the soul, and to make us spiritual by impressing divine truth on the heart. The more of God there is in a book, the more it will bring us to know him, draw us nearer to him, and make us reverent, serious, and heavenly-minded. Let the Scriptures be first in your heart and your hands. Let every other book serve only as a help to understanding and applying the Word of God.

The devil's and the Papists' efforts to keep Scripture from you show how necessary and valuable it is. When they argue that heretics misuse the Bible, they are only admitting that it is the common rule of all Christians, which even those in error must claim for their side—just as every lawyer, even those with the worst causes, must appeal to the law. But we do not discard or hide the laws of the land simply because they are misused. In denying or dishonoring Scripture, these critics reveal themselves to be worse than any of the heretics they warn against.

When they say that the Bible is misunderstood or twisted by many to support error, they may as well argue that the sun should be darkened, because the half-blind misuse its light; or that the earth should be overturned, because it sustains wicked men; or that highways should be closed, because criminals use them to travel; or that food should be banned, because it nourishes both the healthy and the sick. If they can show us a law—made by pope or council—which no evil man can misunderstand, twist, or break, then we may consider giving that law our preference. But until then, Scripture stands alone.

The writings of faithful ministers are, in essence, the Gospel preached to the eye, just as sermons are preached to the ear. Vocal preaching has the advantage in stirring the affections and in being shaped to the needs of the congregation—it is like warm milk directly from the breast. But books have their own advantages: you may read the works of an able preacher, even if you can only hear a weak one. Not every church has the most powerful or wise preacher, but every believer may read the works of the most powerful and wise.

Preachers may be silenced or driven away, but books can remain in your hands. Books are also less costly to keep than teachers. You can

choose books on the very subjects that concern you most, whereas you cannot control what subject the preacher will address. You can read good books at any time, while sermons are limited to appointed hours. And if a sermon is forgotten, it is gone—but a book can be reread again and again until it is remembered. And if forgotten, you can return to it whenever you please.

So then, good books are a very great mercy to the world.

The Holy Spirit himself chose the method of writing to preserve his doctrine and commandments for the Church, knowing how much safer and more reliable a way this is—compared to oral tradition, which would have left us with as many disputes about the wording as there are people to remember and pass it on.

Books, when well chosen, are like personal, present, constant, discerning, and powerful sermons—and they are of great benefit to your soul. This is especially true when preaching is lacking, or when ministers are ignorant, ungodly, dull, or silenced under persecution.

You will need a wise guide to help you discern which books to read and which to avoid. Even among good books, there are distinctions. Some are very sound and full of life. Others are good but weak—plain, somewhat dull, and lacking depth. And some are excellent in part, yet contain a mix of error or unguarded, careless expressions that may puzzle more than profit those who are young in the faith. I hesitate to name books of this latter sort (of which many have appeared lately), but for young beginners in religion, I can confidently recommend (next to a sound catechism): *Mr. Rutherford's Letters*, the works of *Mr. Robert Bolton*, *Mr. Perkins*, *Mr. Whateley*, *Mr. Ball on Faith*, *Dr. Preston*, *Dr. Sibbes*, *Mr. Hildersham*, *Mr. Pink's Sermons*, *Mr. Joseph Rogers*, *Mr. Richard Allen*, *Mr. Gurnall*, *Mr. Swinnock*, and *Mr. Joseph Symonds*.

To be grounded against the errors of Popery, I commend *Dr. Challoner's Codex Credo Ecclesiae Catholicae*, *Dr. Field on the Church*, *Dr. White's Way to the Church* (and its *Defence*), *Bishop Ussher's Answer to the Jesuit*, and *Chillingworth*, along with *Drelincourt's Summary*. For sound principles regarding redemption and related doctrines, read *Mr. Truman's The Great Propitiation*, and on the subjects of natural and moral inability, *Mr. William Fenner on Wilful Impenitency*, and *Mr. Hotchkis on the Forgiveness of Sin*. There are many more excellent works, but I will refrain from listing too many here.

A mature, discerning reader who is well-equipped to evaluate what he reads is in little danger from the writings of deceivers. For such readers, these works merely expose how weak and transparent the arguments are for a bad cause. But young Christians—unskilled in these spiritual battles—are often shaken by mere sophistry, or by forceful condemnations of dissenters (which every sect is quick to pronounce), or by bold and boastful assertions, or by ideas that wear the appearance of truth or piety.

Those lacking discernment are rarely able to answer the arguments of false teachers. And when they cannot respond, they are tempted to think they must yield—as if the problem lies with the truth itself, and not their own immaturity. As though Christ had no wiser followers or better defenders of his cause! Do not dabble with spiritual poison until you are better trained to handle it, and then only when necessary.

As for plays, romances, and idle tales, I have already shown in my *Book of Self-Denial* how harmful they are—especially to the young and to those with shallow, empty minds who have never learned what it means to be truly human, or what their work is in this world.

These books are clever snares of the devil. They keep better, more necessary things out of the mind, push more profitable books out of the hands, and poison the soul with subtle danger, because they are read with so much delight.

They intoxicate the imagination and fill the heart with vain dreams, diverting the reader from the serious thoughts of salvation. And, not least, they rob the reader of great portions of precious time—time given for better purposes—time they will bitterly wish they had used more wisely.

Yes, the frivolous will argue that these things are innocent, and that one may learn much good from them (just like a man who claims he must go to a brothel to learn chastity, or accompany thieves to learn to hate robbery). But I simply ask them, as before God:

1. Could you not spend that time better?
2. Would not more edifying books and activities benefit you more?
3. Are those most in love with romances and plays also those who most love the Word of God and the holy life?
4. Does your delight in these vanities increase your love for Scripture, mortify your sin, and prepare you for eternal life—or the opposite?

Let no one speak against the voice of experience and reason. Let no one talk themselves into damnable impenitence with clever excuses. Do not play the fool with your soul, using cheap words to defend what you know is false. If these warnings do not persuade, the day is not far off when they will be answered—by God himself, and in a way no argument can resist.

Direction XVII:

Do Not Mistake Libertinism for Free Grace

Be careful not to receive a doctrine of libertinism under the name of the Gospel, nor to conceive of Christ as an encourager of sin. Do not use the doctrine of free grace as an excuse for carnal security or spiritual laziness. To do so is to set up a different gospel and a different Christ—or rather, to pit the doctrine and works of the devil against Christ and His Gospel. It is to turn the grace of God into a license for sin.

Because the devil knows you would never accept his teaching in his own name, his usual method is to present and preach it in the name of Christ, knowing you reverence that name. If Satan did not conceal his identity in every temptation, it would ruin his scheme. The more excellent and splendid the appearance of his teaching, the more powerful the temptation. Those who paid attention to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons surely thought well of those spirits and teachings—especially when they appeared strict. (For the devil has his own kind of strictness too.) As Paul says, *“forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving.”* But the devil’s strictness is always a scheme to make men loose. He would have them strict like the Pharisees in traditions, rituals, and outward shows—like building the tombs of the prophets and decorating the graves of the righteous—so that they may, with greater self-righteousness, hate and persecute the living saints who worship God in spirit and in truth.

Licentiousness is the devil's true doctrine, and all his outward strictness is aimed at promoting it. To accept such principles is dangerous; but to attribute them to Christ and the Gospel is blasphemous.

The Libertines, Antinomians, and Autonomians of this age have given you more than enough examples. The Libertine says, "The heart is what matters; so you may deny the truth with your tongue, attend false worship (like the Mass), and you don't need to suffer to avoid speaking a falsehood or signing an error or doing something outwardly wrong. As long as you keep your heart set on God and mean well—or have a mental reservation and are pressured by others—you may say, subscribe, swear, or do anything, as long as you privately apply a lawful meaning to it in your own mind, or conform outwardly to avoid offense and save yourself."

The Antinomians claim that "The moral law is abolished, and that the Gospel has no law." But if there is no law, there is no governor, no government, no duty, no sin, no judgment, no punishment, and no reward. They teach that the elect are justified before they are born, repent, or believe; that their sin is pardoned before it is committed; that God considered them as having fulfilled the law in Christ, as if they themselves had done it in Him. They claim that we are justified only in our consciences by faith—that justifying faith is merely believing that we are justified. They assert that each person must believe his sins are forgiven in order for them to be forgiven in his conscience, and that this is the meaning of the creed's phrase, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins"—*that is, "I believe my sins are already forgiven." And they say that all who believe this are indeed forgiven.

They argue that it is legalistic and even sinful to do anything in pursuit of salvation; that sin, once pardoned, no longer needs to be confessed or lamented; or at least that we need not ask for pardon daily or for the same sin repeatedly. They say that God's chastisements are not punishments, and that no punishment is threatened for believers' sins. Consequently, they argue that Christ has not obtained pardon for any sin after belief, but has made all future pardon unnecessary. Therefore, they say, we should not ask forgiveness, or do anything to obtain it. They even claim that fear of hell should play no role in our obedience or in restraining us from sin.

Some go so far as to say that if a man cannot repent or believe, he should comfort himself in the idea that Christ repented and believed for him—a clear contradiction.

Many such doctrines of licentiousness have been promoted by those who abuse the doctrine of grace.

Do Not Set Christ Against Himself: The Danger of Self-Made Religion

The sect that imitates the father of pride—seeking to be free from God's rule and to make themselves lawgivers and rulers over others (whom I therefore call the *Autonomians*)—is not only licentious, but far more dangerous. They resist Christ's rule as fiercely as they defend their own. They fill the world with wars and bloodshed, oppression and cruelty. They flood God's ears with the cries of martyrs and the oppressed—just to suppress the spiritual and holy discipline of Christ, to make seriousness in religion appear odious, or

to banish it from the earth altogether. All so that they might be taken as the center, the pillars, and the lawgivers of the church.

They want the consciences of all people to cast off any fear of offending God, in comparison to offending them. They demand absolute submission, and expect that no one hesitate over disobeying Christ, so long as they comply with their rule. They scorn and persecute those who strive for strict obedience to God's law. They regard those who fear God's judgment as fools frightened out of their senses. And anyone who seeks to obey God exactly—(and alas! who can do more than their best?)—they condemn as a hypocrite or someone being overly scrupulous.

But if anyone questions their authority, or refuses to submit to their laws (which they impose on the world—even kings and nations—without any true authority), that person is labeled a heretic, a schismatic, or a rebel like Korah and his company. This *Luciferian* spirit of the proud Autonomians has filled the Christian world with bloodshed and has been the greatest cause of misery on earth—especially in hindering and persecuting the Gospel. In its place, it raises up a Pharisaical religion that fights against Christ. It has drenched in blood the nations of France, Savoy, Rhaetia, Bohemia, the Low Countries, Switzerland, Poland, Hungary, Germany, and many more. By this, they prove how deeply they share in the devil's nature and how thoroughly they carry out his will.

Indeed, natural corruption itself contains the seeds of all these damnable heresies. Nothing is more natural to fallen man than to cast off God's rule and to make himself a lawgiver to himself and to as many others as he can. And to turn the grace of God into license.

This is why the profane—though they've never heard it from a heretic, only from themselves—make a creed that sounds like this:

“God is merciful, so we don’t need to fear His threatenings. He will be better than His Word.

It’s God’s job to save us, not ours—and so we can leave our souls in His hands, even if we don’t care for them ourselves.

If we’re predestined to salvation, we’ll be saved; and if not, we won’t—no matter what we do or how well we live.

Christ died for sinners, so since we’re sinners, He’ll save us.

God is stronger than the devil, so the devil won’t win most souls.

If something pleases the flesh and doesn’t seem to hurt God, it can’t be that serious.

We don’t need to try so hard to be saved, or rush to turn to God—since anyone who just repents at the end and believes that Christ died for him will be saved.

Christ is the Savior of the world, and His grace is great and free. So God forbid that only a few people who live strict and holy lives should be saved.

No one knows who will be saved or lost, so the wisest course is to hurt no one, live happily, and trust God with our souls.

No one is saved by their works, so our lives are just as good as the stricter ones.”

This is the creed of the ungodly. And by it, you can see just how natural it is for them to abuse the Gospel—twisting the grace of God to comfort themselves in sin and to embolden themselves in disobedience under the name of Christ.

But this is nothing less than setting Christ against Himself—using His mercy to overthrow His rule, using His death to undermine the very purpose of His death, setting our Savior against our salvation. They run from God and rebel against Him because Christ died to bring them back to God, and to give them repentance that leads to

life. They sin because He came to save His people *from* their sins, and to *purify for Himself a people zealous for good works*.

“Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. And the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” (1 John 3:8)

Direction XVIII:

Guard Against the Decline or Corruption of Grace

Be diligent to watch against the more obvious decline of grace—and also against its degeneration into counterfeit or carnal affections, or into something of an entirely different nature. The same applies to your religious duties.

No sooner are we warmed by heavenly fire than our natural corruption begins to cool us again—like hot water that loses its heat unless the fire is constantly maintained beneath it. Who has not felt, that as soon as his heart has been stirred a little with warmth in a sermon, or prayer, or holy meditation, it quickly returns to its former earthly state? Just a little slackness in duty, or distraction with worldly matters, and we grow cold and dull once more.

Be watchful, then, lest this decline go too far. Be constant in the means that keep grace alive. When faintness tells you your soul is empty, feed it again, lest your strength decay. You are rowing upstream against the current of the flesh; pause too long, and you’ll drift backward faster than you ever advanced by labor.

Now, the degeneration of grace is a kind of backsliding that is both common and rarely noticed. It happens not when grace grows cold outright, but when it is transformed into a carnal affection that resembles it in appearance—but is of another kind altogether. Like a man's body, which, instead of dying, takes on the soul of a beast rather than remaining a rational being.

Here are several examples:

1. **Have you believed in God and in Jesus Christ, and loved them sincerely?** You may think you still do, even while your mind has embraced a false image of them. In truth, it is no longer the same God and Christ that you believe in and love—it is something else entirely.
2. **Have you been fervent in prayer?** You may remain fervent outwardly—but if Satan corrupts your prayers by distorting your judgment or affections, you may begin praying for things contrary to God's will, even imagining you are defending His cause. If you mistake the faithful for troublemakers, and call evil good, you may pray fervently—yet fight against the people of God.

The same can happen with preaching, discussion, or zeal. Once your purpose is corrupted, Satan himself will support your most passionate preaching or debating, so long as it serves to oppose God.

3. **Have you trusted in Christ's promise for your salvation?** Beware that this does not turn into carnal security—a groundless confidence in your own state, based on no solid reason.

4. **Do you have the hope of glory?** Be careful it doesn't turn into carelessness or presumption—merely laying aside all fear or caution, rather than truly hoping in God's promise.
5. **Do you love those who fear the Lord?** Watch your heart lest that love degenerates into something carnal or partial. Many young believers of opposite sexes begin with a chaste, godly affection—but by too much familiarity, it turns into fleshly love, becoming a snare and leading them into sin.

Others have honored those who fear God, but gradually began to admire only those who were wealthy, influential, or well-regarded by the world—forgetting that what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination to God. He values men by their holiness, not by their rank or success.

Many who once loved all Christians simply for the sake of Christ in them, gradually narrow their affections to only those in their particular sect or party—considering others to be unsound or unworthy. They think their love for the godly hasn't changed, but it has been corrupted into a factional love.

6. **Are you zealous for God, for truth, and for holiness—and against sin and error?** Take heed, or you may lose true zeal while imagining it is increasing. Nothing degenerates more easily than zeal. In thousands, it has turned from being pure, charitable, peaceable, gentle, fruitful, and heavenly—to being narrow, bitter, censorious, unloving, scandalous, combative, and destructive.

This zeal no longer heals, but harms. It begins to wish down fire from heaven, and stirs up confusion and every evil work. Read James chapter 3 carefully.

7. Are you meek or patient? Make sure this doesn't degenerate into dullness, indifference, or quiet contempt of those who cause you trouble. True patience is not being numb to affliction—but bearing its weight through faith, knowing that greater things are at stake.

How prone men are to corrupt and debase all the duties of religion is sadly too visible in the state of most of the Christian world. Throughout both the Eastern and Western churches—among the Papists, the Greeks, the Armenians, the Abassines, and too many others—though the essentials of religion, by God's mercy, are retained, yet how greatly the face of religion has been altered from what it was in the days of the apostles!

The ancient simplicity of doctrine has been replaced with a multitude of new and private opinions, introduced as necessary articles of faith—many of them, alas, false! So now, Christians are too proud to accept the ancient test of what it means to be a Christian. As a result, they cannot even agree among themselves on who is to be considered a Christian. They deny each other the name, destroy charity, divide the Church, and become a laughingstock to the unbelieving world.

Thus, the primitive unity, charity, and peace have been either lost or reduced to the internal peace and charity of various sects among themselves. The primitive simplicity of church government and discipline has, in most places, been turned into a forceful, secular system—one that exists to elevate a single man above others, to serve his will and appetites, and to make him the ruler of other men's lives—suppressing the true power and spirituality of religion.

Likewise, the primitive simplicity of worship has been buried under layers of ceremonial masking and bodily formalities. If an apostolic Christian were to walk into such a church today, he would scarcely

recognize the activity as the same worship once practiced—or even recognize it as religion at all, now dressed in such an antic disguise.

The once glorious and attractive face of Christianity has been so marred and disfigured that it is hidden from the eyes of unbelievers, who mock it as irrational or dismiss it as no different from their own religions. And the greatest hindrance to the conversion of heathens, Muslims, and other unbelievers is the corruption and deformity of the churches near them—those very churches that should be instruments of their conversion.

The most likely path to their conversion lies in the **true reformation** of the churches, both East and West. If those churches were restored to the ancient **spirituality, rationality, and simplicity** of doctrine, discipline, and worship—and if they walked again in **charity, humility, and holiness**, as those whose hearts and lives are fixed in heaven, trampling worldly glory underfoot—then they would shine again with such beauty and light that even the heathen and infidel would be drawn in. They would long to be such as these. Their light would shine before men, who would see their good works, glorify their Father in heaven, and embrace their faith.

The most common way that all religious duties degenerate is by becoming dead formality—a lifeless image of true religion. If the devil can succeed in robbing your worship of its life and spirituality, he will gladly let you appear very devout. He will encourage you to make much ado with outward actions, words, and beads. You may even feel great zeal for a dead religion or the corpse of worship, and deceive yourself into thinking it is alive.

Above all, beware of turning the worship of God into mere lip service. The most common causes of this are:

- A **carnal mind** (since fleshly people will always prefer a fleshly religion);
- Or a **lazy heart**, which prefers to settle for the easiest part of worship.

It is the work of a true saint—and a diligent one—to keep the soul itself actively and vigorously engaged with God. But merely repeating words by rote, or lifting up hands and eyes, is easy. Hypocrites, knowing they lack the life and spirituality of worship, try to compensate with outward formalities. They soothe their consciences and deceive their souls with an attractive but lifeless image of religion.

(I have spoken more on this in a separate book, *The Vain Religion of the Formal Hypocrite*.)

Yet don't swing to the opposite extreme. Do not think that the body should not worship God along with the soul, or that the decent and edifying arrangement of outward matters in worship is either unnecessary or sinful. A form of prayer, in itself—or even one imposed—is not unlawful. But let the soul and body of religion go together. Let those outward, changeable forms be used as changeable things, while always preserving the life and power of holiness.

Direction XIX:

Don't Count on Prosperity or a Long Life—Live as One Who Is Dying

Do not promise yourself long life, or prosperity, or great things in this world—lest your heart become entangled with what is fleeting. Such expectations may draw you into ambitions or covetous desires, steal your heart away from God, and extinguish your serious thoughts of eternity.

Our own experience—and the changes that come over most people as death draws near—prove how much the expectation of a short life helps us in our preparation and in the pursuit of holiness. Speak with a man on his deathbed, or a prisoner set to die tomorrow, and try to engage him in talk about riches, honors, lust, drunkenness, or any worldly excess—and he will think you mad or wildly out of place. If he is in his right mind, you will see how easily he despises these temptations—far more than many seemingly religious people do when they are healthy and prosperous.

Oh, how serious we become in repenting, reflecting on our past lives, tallying up our spiritual accounts, and crying out, “*What must I do to be saved?*” when we see death truly at hand, time spent and judgment near! Then, every sentence of Scripture seems full of life and power. Every word of exhortation tastes rich. Every rebuke of our sin and negligence is welcomed. Every thought of sin, of Christ, of grace, and of eternity pierces to the heart.

At that hour, time seems precious. Ask a dying man whether time is better spent in cards, dice, plays, feasting, and idle entertainment—or in prayer, holy conversation, reading and meditating on God’s Word, reflecting on the life to come, and using lawful labor for holy ends—and how easily he will be convinced of the answer! He will see clearly what even learning and reason could not persuade him of before.

In short, the expectation of soon standing in the presence of the eternal God—of entering into an unchangeable, everlasting state of joy or torment—is enough to awaken all the powers of the soul. If ever we will be serious, such a truth will make us serious in every thought, word, and duty.

For this reason, it is a great mercy of God that this life, though short, is also uncertain—and that frequent sicknesses and dangers remind us to stay awake and prepare for our departure. The sickly, who expect death, are often the most reflective. And it is a chief duty of those who are young and healthy to seriously consider their frailty, and the shortness and uncertainty of their lives—to live always as those who wait for their Lord's return.

And we have every reason to do so: we know for certain that death is coming soon; we are surrounded by dangers and weaknesses; we are never guaranteed another hour; and time passes so swiftly, is so easily lost, and is unrecoverable once it is gone. Common sense itself calls us to live in constant readiness to die.

But if youth or health leads you to presume you'll live long, and to push the thought of death far from your mind, this will do you great harm—even if you are otherwise serious. It will dull your soul, weaken the force of truth, drain the life out of your thoughts and duties, and turn everything into a mere form or habit. You will hardly keep your soul awake unless you keep death and judgment near to heart.

The certainty of your greatest change—and the eternal joy or misery that follows—will not rouse your heart unless you see it not only as certain, but as near. This becomes plain when we consider how differently most people think of death in health and in sickness. Those who could laugh at death or treat it lightly in health are often

radically changed when they know they are about to die—as if they had never heard they were mortal before.

This proves that to live in the house of mirth is far more dangerous than to live in the house of mourning. And it shows that the expectation of a long life is a great enemy to the work of grace and the safety of the soul.

And this expectation of long life is one of the greatest sources of strength for your temptations to luxury, ambition, worldliness, and nearly every other sin. When people think they will have many years left to repent, they are more inclined to sin boldly. When they believe they still have much time ahead, it tempts them to waste their days in idleness—to delay in their race, trifle in their work, and overvalue the pleasures, honors, and fleeting satisfactions of this world.

A man who believes his life is rooted in his house or land, or who holds it as an inheritance, will prize it more highly and invest more in it than if he thought he would have to leave it the next year. To someone who expects many years on earth, the favor of the powerful, the building of wealth, the advancement of his name or family, and the comforts of the flesh will seem like great matters—things worth striving for. These will carry great influence over his heart, and they will make self-denial feel like a burdensome, nearly impossible task.

Therefore, although good health is a tremendous mercy—because it enables a man to do his duty if he has the heart for it—it is, incidentally, a great danger and snare to the heart itself. It may easily turn one aside from the path of obedience. The best life for the soul is the one that puts it in the least danger—by denying the body its over-pleasing temptations. The safest life is that in which the flesh has the least occasion to rise up and contend against the Spirit.

This doesn't mean we should despise the large responsibilities or resources God may entrust to us. When He gives us the hardest work, He also offers the greatest help. But a life lived as in tents—in constant movement, with no settled dwelling, having little, needing little, never tasting so much comfort in created things that we say to ourselves, “*Soul, take your rest*”—this is, for most, the safest life. It gives us the clearest path and freest advantage toward heaven.

So I urge you, as you love your soul: **beware of falling into the snare of worldly hopes.** Do not give your heart to plans for rising in this world—accumulating riches, building your own name—and take no pleasure in meditating on or chasing these things. If you do, you are walking the straight path to destruction: to idolatrous worldliness, to a heart that secretly departs from God, and to an open door for every sin that seems necessary to advance your worldly ambitions.

This will lead to shameful hypocrisy—a religious mask to cover it all—and to a false peace of mind based on something that merely resembles true faith. Once you begin to speak in the language of worldly security, like the man in Luke 12:18–19—“*I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry’*”—you are only deceiving yourself. You are drawing near to being summoned by death, as a fool (vv. 20–21).

And when you go on planning, without sensing the frailty of life—saying, like those in James 4:13–14, “*Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, stay there a year, and trade, and make a profit,*” though you do not know what tomorrow will bring—you have

forgotten the nature of your life. It is “*a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes*” (v. 14).

So, **“boast not yourself of tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”**

Direction XX:

Let Your Religion Be Purely Divine—God First, Last, and All; Man
Nothing

Make sure your religion is purely divine—animated entirely by God as its beginning, its way, and its end. Let “**HOLINESS TO THE LORD**” be written first upon your soul, and then upon everything you possess and do. Take great care not to corrupt it by an inordinate, hypocritical regard for man.

To be holy is to be divine—to be set apart for God, devoted to His will and use. It means that our hearts and lives are not common or unclean. To be godly is to live unto God—as those who sincerely believe that He is truly God, that He is “a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6), that He is “our all-sufficient God, our shield, and our exceedingly great reward” (Gen. 15:1). That “from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things—to whom be glory forever” (Rom. 11:36).

As God is infinitely above all creatures, so living upon God and unto God must lift us far above the highest kind of worldly life. For this reason, religion is vastly superior to all sciences and arts. However

much of God is in you and upon you—by that measure you are more excellent than all the worldly perfection you could ever attain.

God must be your first, your last, and your all—in your mind, in your speech, and in your life. He must be the chief subject of your religion. Your understanding and will must be fixed on Him. When you awake, you should still be with Him. Your meditations of Him should be sweet, and your joy should be in the Lord.

Yes, creatures may rightly have a place in your religion—but only in reference to God, and never above Him. God must be the **author** of your religion—you must follow what He has instituted, if you expect Him to accept and reward it. God must be the **rule** of your religion—revealing His will in His Word. God must be the **ultimate end** of your religion—it must aim to please and glorify Him. God must be the **constant motive and reason** for your religion, and for everything you do. You should be able to say truthfully, *“I do this because it is His will. I do it to please Him, glorify Him, and enjoy Him.”*

God must be your **sovereign judge**—you must look entirely to His approval, seek His justification, and reject everything He condemns.

Can you take God as your Owner, your Sovereign, your Savior, your all-sufficient Protector, your Portion—your everything? If not, you are not godly, and you cannot be saved. If His authority does not outweigh the authority of the greatest men on earth, then you are atheistic hypocrites—not truly religious, no matter what you profess.

If “HOLINESS TO THE LORD” is inscribed upon you and all that is yours, then you are devoted to Him—you are His own special possession. If your name is engraved on your sheep, or plate, or

clothing, and someone tries to claim them, you would say, “That is mine—can you not see my mark on it?”

In the same way, **slavery to the flesh, the world, and the devil** is the mark written on the ungodly—on the foreheads of the profane, and on the hearts of hypocrites. And these powers all have their service. But if you are consecrated to God—if you bear His name and mark—then say to all who lay claim to you: *“I am the Lord’s. I am resolved to live for Him, to love Him, to trust Him, and to stand or fall by Him alone.”*

Let God be the very **life, meaning, and goal** of everything you do.

Beware of Living to Please Man More Than God

When once man gains too much of your regard—when you value his favor and esteem too highly, or fix your eyes too much on him in your profession and practice—then beware. If man's approval becomes too great a comfort to you, or his disapproval and criticism trouble you too deeply; if your fear, love, care, or obedience are overly consumed with pleasing man, then you are drawing away from God. You are becoming a servant of man, a friend of the world, turning again to bondage, and forsaking your Rock, your Portion, and your true excellency. The soul of religion is departing from you—it is dying and returning to dust.

If man takes preeminence over God in your heart or life—if he is preferred, feared, trusted, or obeyed before God—then you are dead to God and alive to the world. And if you take men for your gods, you must be content with the kind of salvation that men can give you.

If your almsgiving or prayers are done to be seen by others—to gain their good opinion or applause—then if you succeed, enjoy your reward, because your Judge has already said, *“Truly, I say to you, you have received your reward.”*

This does not mean that man should be utterly despised or disregarded. Certainly not. Under God, you are to obey your superiors, to do no one wrong, and to do good to all as far as you are able. You are to avoid causing offense, to set a good example, and, under God, to “become all things to all men, that by all means you might save some.”

But if you ever exalt man beyond his proper place—if you become overly dependent on him, or if you make too much of his opinions or words about you—then you are losing your godliness and turning your divine religion into people-pleasing and hypocrisy.

Whenever man stands in **competition** with God for your highest regard, or in **opposition** to Him, or even as an **equal** alongside Him (rather than under Him in full subordination), then man must be forsaken. Even good men—whom you should love, honor, and treasure for their fellowship and help—can become snares to you if you sinfully idolize their favor.

Your love and respect for them must not lead you to crave their praise too much, or to cling to their approval as if it were essential. If you do, you will find that while your eyes are fixed too much on man, you are losing sight of God and corrupting your religion at its very core.

And you may find yourself in the company of people who—though they are otherwise holy—may be seriously mistaken on matters of religion, promoting sin unknowingly. They may even be critical of

those who differ from them. Then, your desire to retain their esteem and avoid their criticism may become one of the greatest temptations of your life.

You will find that pleasing people is both a hard and fruitless labor.

So love Christ wherever He appears in His servants. Follow them as far as they follow Him. Value their approval only insofar as it agrees with Christ's. But above all, **make sure you are able to live on God's favor alone**—to find peace in His acceptance, even when man despises you. Be content that God is pleased, even when others are not. Rejoice in His justification of you, even when men condemn you with harsh slander, heap shame on your name, and cast you out as evildoers.

See that **God is enough for you**—enough without man, and enough against man. Then you will be able to say:

“If God is for us, who can be against us?

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.” (Rom. 8:31, 33)

“Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man?

If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Gal. 1:10)

The Lord has said:

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.

He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come.

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the

Lord.

He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.” (Jer. 17:5–8)

And again:

“Stop trusting in man, whose breath is in his nostrils—
for of what account is he?” (Isa. 2:22)

Final Exhortation: Take These Directions to Heart

Now that I have given you these directions, let me conclude with this warning: they are like food—they will not nourish you simply by sitting on your table; or like medicine—they will not heal you while left untouched in the box. They must be taken in and digested, or you will receive none of their benefit.

Merely reading them will not be enough to achieve the great purpose they are meant to serve: your safe progress and firm establishment as young believers in the faith. You will need **humility** to recognize your need for them, and **diligence** to learn, apply, and live them out.

Those who are spiritually lazy—who refuse the labor—must bear the sorrowful consequences of their neglect. Not one of these directions can be spared, as far as their substance is concerned. Study them. Understand them. Remember them as things that must be done.

If you are indifferent to your spiritual need, or if you wrongly assume that the Spirit will do the work without your labor and diligence, and so you dismiss these directions with mere approval but no action—the result may be far worse than you now imagine.

Even if I assume that you have the beginnings of true grace, I must still tell you: it would be a sad and burdened kind of life to walk in error, bring scandal to the Church, be a source of trouble, live with constant doubts, fears, and turbulent emotions, and become a burden both to others and to yourself.

Indeed, you have good reason to question the sincerity of your faith if you do not long to grow in grace—and are unwilling to use the means necessary to grow. He is not sincere who does not desire to be made perfect. And he does not desire it sincerely who is unwilling to pay the cost or labor to obtain it.

Therefore, I urge you—by the love you have for the peace, strength, and joy of being a wise and fruitful Christian, and by your desire to escape the misery of those spiritual diseases that would turn your life into weakness, unfruitfulness, and grief—take these directions seriously.

Study them. Engrave them on your minds, your memories, your hearts. Let the faithful practice of them be your highest concern, and the daily occupation of your life.

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