

# THE BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT

## THE UNPARDONABLE SIN IN MATTHEW 12:22-32

by Nicholas Lammé

*“While Hester stood in the magic circle of ignominy, where the cunning cruelty of her sentence seemed to have fixed her forever, the admirable preacher was looking down from the sacred pulpit upon an audience whose very inmost spirits had yielded to his control. The sainted minister in the church! The woman of the scarlet letter in the market-place! What imagination would have been irreverent enough to surmise that the same scorching stigma was on them both!”*

–The Scarlet Letter, chapter 22

*“The judgment of God is on me,” answered the conscience-stricken priest. “It is too mighty for me to struggle with!”*

–The Scarlet Letter, chapter 17

### 1. The Extent of the Present Study

THE GOAL OF this essay is to explore the meaning of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and seek to apply it to the current theological context in which we are living. In doing this, I propose to survey the history of interpretation of the doctrine, exegete the broad context in which Matthew 12:22-32 is situated and finally, expound the meaning of the blasphemy of the Spirit in terms of what it is, who can commit it, and its meaning for the church of Jesus Christ today.

Every study has its limits. This one is no exception. In the first place, space does not permit us to spend a great deal of time harmonizing or comparing and contrasting the different synoptic accounts of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. While this would be a worthwhile study of its own, it is not something that can be done well in the limited space which this study provides. It is this author’s belief that while each account has its particularities, upon careful examination, each would yield up the same fundamental results. Therefore, this study has elected to rely on Matthew 12:22-32 for the greater part of its exegesis. Neither will we be able to evaluate other objectively important texts, such as Hebrews 10 or 1 John 5 and the “sin that leads to death.” While these texts are

important and applicable in one way or another to this topic, they are, for the purposes of this study, outside of our purview.

## 2. The Doctrine in History

The question of the unpardonable sin of which Christ speaks in Matthew 12:31 (cf. Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10), is both an enduring and vitally important doctrine to our understanding of the gospel. It is both enduring and vital for the same reason, that Christian hearts tremble when they hear Christ utter those dreadful words, “whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matt. 12:32b, ESV throughout). Nearly every Christian at one time or another must wrestle with the meaning of these words and every pastor must be prepared to answer the trembling soul that asks hesitantly, “Might I have committed this sin?”

Answers to this question have been given by pastors and theologians since the New Testament Church began. It is a doctrine with a rich history and wide variety of interpretations. While it is not the intention of this essay to strictly reproduce the work of others, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the different schools of interpretation in order to place this study within its proper historical-theological context.

### 2.1. Interpretation in the Early Church

In point of fact, the early fathers say very little about the doctrine of the Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit itself. Often discussions of it arise in the context of other doctrines, particularly matters regarding the Holy Trinity, specifically the persons of the Son or the Spirit. Also, the matter is briefly addressed by some while expounding on the nature of prophets and the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. What follows is a sampling of important Fathers and early church writing on the subject. It is by no means exhaustive.

#### 2.1.1. *The Didache*

One of the earliest references to the unpardonable sin is found in the *Didache*, otherwise known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*,<sup>1</sup> which dates circa the end of the first century A.D. Chapter eleven of this work states: “And every prophet that speaketh in the Spirit ye shall neither try nor judge; for every sin shall be forgiven,

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1. The manuscript was discovered in 1873 by Philotheos Bryennios of the higher Greek school of Constantinople, and contains a text of supposed teachings of the twelve Apostles to the Gentiles.

but this sin shall not be forgiven.”<sup>2</sup> The obvious implication is that the sin against the Holy Spirit is to speak against the Word of the Lord spoken by a true prophet through the Spirit. This is by all accounts the earliest known reference to this sin in the early Church. Irenaeus holds a similar view to the Didache.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.1.2. *Cyprian*

In his writings, Cyprian cites Matthew 12:32 and Mark 3:28-29. He also includes 2 Samuel 2:25 as the Old Testament basis for Christ’s comments in the Gospels.<sup>4</sup> While Cyprian does not elaborate on exactly what the sin is or how it is committed, he is clear that the church has no power to remit it.

### 2.1.3. *Origen*

Origen held that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was committed when one, after having been saved and having received the gift of the Spirit, relapses. He writes:

...but a share in the Holy Spirit we find possessed only by the saints. And therefore it is said, “No man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.” And on one occasion, scarcely even the apostles themselves are deemed worthy to hear the words, “Ye shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you.” For this reason, also, I think it follows that he who has committed a sin against the Son of man is deserving of forgiveness; because if he who is a participator of the word or reason of God ceases to live agreeably to reason, he seems to have fallen into a state of ignorance or folly, and therefore to deserve forgiveness; whereas he who has been deemed worthy to have a portion of the Holy Spirit, and who has relapsed, is, by this very act and work, said to be guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

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2. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. VII: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 380.

3. William W. Combs, “The Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 58.

4. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 542.

5. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 254.

It seems evident from the foregoing that Origen believed that the sin against the Holy Spirit was only committable by those who had the Spirit, namely Christians, that is, the converted or the baptized, and that it involves a certain relapsing, though he never does explain exactly what he means by “relapse.”

While Origen, Ireanaeus, Cyprian, and the Didache present views on Jesus’ words that suffer from a great deal of ambiguity, later writers such as Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and St. Ambrose, responding to the challenge of certain heresies in the Church, present more carefully exegeted arguments. In short, their view understands the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to be a general speaking against or making a “false assertion” about the Holy Spirit or his work.<sup>6</sup> Take, for example, both Sts. Ambrose and Basil.

#### 2.1.4. *St. Ambrose*

St. Ambrose is an ideal illustration of this generalized view. Ambrose argues in his second book concerning repentance, against Novatian, who had taught that the so-called lapsi<sup>7</sup> were heretics and could not be restored to the Church on the basis of Hebrews 6:4-6 and Jesus words in Matthew 12.<sup>8</sup> Ambrose argues that the blasphemy against the Spirit was not as Novatian claimed, but rather it was specifically a speaking against the Holy Spirit, calling him “the power of the devil.” Ambrose’s exegesis reveals a deep pastoral concern for those who had fallen away from the church, making, as he does, a passionate plea to the lapsi that they should “return... to the Church, those of you who have wickedly separated yourselves. For he promises forgiveness to all who are converted.”<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, Ambrose includes heretics and schismatics, who seek to destroy the grace of Christ and “rend asunder the members of the Church,” among the number of those who are “bound forever by the authority of the gospel for sinning against the Holy Spirit.”<sup>10</sup> He has no desire to shut “regular” sinners out of the kingdom of heaven. He labors to show that all sorts of blasphemies against Christ may be forgiven, but that it is only the blasphemy against the Spirit, as he defines it, that receives such harsh

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6. William Combs, “The Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, vol. 9 (2004): 59.

7. The lapsi were those who had denied the faith during the persecution of Emperor Decius or sacrificed to pagan gods to save their lives.

8. Ambrose of Milan. “Two Books Concerning Repentance,” trans. de Romestin, H., E. de Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth. In *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Volume X: St. Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1896), 325.

9. *Ibid.*, 348.

10. *Ibid.*

condemnation from God. He shows that Peter held out repentance for Simon the Magician, exhorting him to repent if perhaps the Lord would forgive him of his wickedness (Acts 8:9-25). He shows that even the Jews who said Jesus had a devil (John 8:43), and those who crucified the Lord, are called to repent and be baptized by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41). Ambrose writes, "For I suppose that even Judas might through the exceeding mercy of God not have been shut out from forgiveness, if he had expressed his sorrow not before the Jews but before Christ."<sup>11</sup> He invites all those "who by many a slip have fallen from the lofty pinnacle of innocence and faith" to return to Christ in his Church. But those, according to Ambrose, who speak against the Holy Spirit and with "satanic spirit" divide the church, are alone without recourse to the grace of life in Christ.

In sum, Ambrose believed that the blasphemy against the Spirit was a serious affront to the Holy Spirit in one's speech, including, among those who could commit it, heretics and schismatics who by their speech also destroy the Church.<sup>12</sup>

#### 2.1.5. *St. Basil*

Basil, a defender of the Nicene doctrine and one of the so-called Cappadocian Fathers, argues, in his book *On the Holy Spirit*, that the denial of the deity of the Spirit is what constitutes the blasphemy against the Spirit. He argues from the nature of the work and task of the Spirit, that since it is the work of the Spirit to bear testimony about Christ, and because the Spirit is glorified "through the testimony of the Only-Begotten,"<sup>13</sup> all those who wanted to joyfully acknowledge Christ, but reject the Spirit as creaturely, were heretics and blasphemers against the Spirit, and had no place in the life of the Church. Likewise, he rejected the Monarchians who tried "to confound all things together, asserting that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, form one subject matter, and that different appellations are applied to one thing."<sup>14</sup> In other words, Basil believed that the sin against the Spirit was committed by those who paid false homage to Christ, rejecting as a mere creature the Holy Spirit, who had witnessed Christ to them: "Verily terrible is the account to be given for words of this kind by you who have heard from God who cannot

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11. Ibid.

12. Interestingly, in his book *On the Holy Spirit*, Ambrose adduces as evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit the fact that he can be blasphemed, thus showing also the important Trinitarian implications of Jesus words.

13. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. VIII (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 29.

14. From Basil's *Homily XVI* on John 1.

lie that for blasphemy against the Holy Ghost there is no forgiveness.”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps one of the most instructive passages from Basil’s works comes from a letter to the presbyters of Tarsus, in which he gives instructions on church unity and who may or may not be received into fellowship:

Union would be effected if we were willing to accommodate ourselves to the weaker, where we can do so without injury to souls; since, then, many mouths are open against the Holy Ghost, and many tongues whetted to blasphemy against Him, we implore you, as far as in you lies, to reduce the blasphemers to a small number, and to receive into communion all who do not assert the Holy Ghost to be a creature, that the blasphemers may be left alone, and may either be ashamed and return to the truth, or, if they abide in their error, may cease to have any importance from the smallness of their numbers. Let us then seek no more than this, but propose to all the brethren, who are willing to join us, the Nicene Creed. If they assent to that, let us further require that the Holy Ghost ought not to be called a creature, nor any of those who say so be received into communion. I do not think that we ought to insist upon anything beyond this.<sup>16</sup>

#### 2.1.6. *Jerome, Athanasius and St. Augustine*

The last group of Fathers that we will evaluate are Jerome, Athanasius and St. Augustine, all of whom manifest a deep pastoral concern in the right interpretation and application of Jesus’ words, but each of whom, nevertheless, comes to very different conclusions.

Jerome, like Ambrose, argues against Novatian’s position, averring that the sin against the Holy Spirit was specifically that of calling Christ, Beelzebul, when his works clearly testified that he was God. Jerome contends:

If it is the devil’s object to injure God’s creation, how can he wish to cure the sick and to expel himself from the bodies possessed by him? Let Novatian prove that of those who have been compelled to sacrifice before a judge’s tribunal any has declared of the things written in the gospel that they were wrought not by the Son of God but by Beelzebul, the prince of the devils; and then he will be able to make good his

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15. Philip Schaff, Vol. VIII , 44.

16. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. VIII (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 189-90.

contention that this is the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost which shall never be forgiven.<sup>17</sup>

Athanasius argues differently. He sees the sin against the Holy Spirit as a sin primarily against Christ and his deity. This interpretation differs from others, for example, Basil, in that Athanasius shifts the emphasis from the Spirit's deity and work to that of Christ's. This blasphemy is an affront to the One who gave the Spirit. This is not an offense against the humanity of Christ, but rather against One who was equal to the Spirit in deity. As Athanasius puts it, "they who blaspheme against the Holy Ghost, and ascribe the deeds of the Word to the devil, shall have inevitable punishment."<sup>18</sup>

It may be that, among the Church Fathers, Saint Augustine provides the fullest treatment of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In the *Enchiridion*, or Augustine's manual for Christian piety, he writes that the man who does not believe his sins to be remitted in the Church and persists in this unbelief until the day of his death "is guilty of the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost, in whom Christ forgives sins."<sup>19</sup> In Augustine's sermon on Matthew 12:32, he explains that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not any kind of blasphemy whatsoever, just as it is not any kind of spirit that is blasphemed. Many, he says in his homily, blaspheme the Spirit; Jews, pagans and heretics all speak an impious and blasphemous word against the Spirit, some denying his existence (Jews) and other calling him a creature (pagans and Arians), while still others believe that he is simply just another mode of subsistence, sometimes called the Father and other times the Son and still other times the Spirit (Sabellians). Notwithstanding their sin and heresy, the Church still calls them to repentance, that they may be saved, unless, writes Augustine rhetorically, those only may be saved who from infancy are raised in the catholic Christian Religion. Clearly this is not the case and thus, the sin against the Spirit must be of a particular type; not any kind of blasphemy against the Spirit or any kind of word whatsoever, but rather something quite specific, which if a man commits it, he has no forgiveness, neither in this life, nor in the one to come.

Augustine admits that it is not plain on the surface of the text just what this particular blasphemy is, but he is sure that the Lord

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17. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. VI (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 56-57.

18. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. IV (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 335-36.

19. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 264.

left this ambiguity that we might diligently seek, knock, and ask, in order to understand.<sup>20</sup> What is this blasphemy, then? Augustine argues thus: the Holy Spirit himself is both God and the gift of God. He is the gift of the Father and the Son, from whom He proceeds eternally and in whom they have eternal and inseparable union. The gift of the Spirit is also the gift of remission of sins, for by the Spirit, sins are forgiven. Therefore, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is impenitently to speak against this Gift: “Against this gratuitous gift,” writes Augustine, “against the grace of God, does the impenitent heart speak.”<sup>21</sup>

The only sin which can never be forgiven, then, is impenitence to the end in the face of the gracious gift of Christ, the Holy Spirit. To sin against the Son of Man is forgivable, because “he hath not added the sin of impenitence against the gift of God, and the grace of regeneration or reconciliation, which is conferred in the Church by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, since this blasphemy is equivalent to impenitence “to the end,” it cannot with any certainty be attributed to anyone in this life, since in this life, there always remains the hope of repentance: “But this impenitence or impenitent heart may not be pronounced upon, as long as a man lives in the flesh.”<sup>23</sup> The “word” which is spoken against the Spirit is not, as such, something which one “says” about the Spirit, but rather the “life” which is lived in rejection of him. That is why we cannot know with any certainty who has committed this sin until one has persisted in it impenitently until death.

## 2.2. The Middle Ages

Later theologians, during the Middle Ages, such as Lombard and Aquinas, while they would not contradict Augustine, further refined, or rather, defined the nature of this sin. Lombard, for example, believed the sin of impenitence to be only one of many sins which could qualify as unforgivable.<sup>24</sup> In other words, impenitence is merely a genus of the family of unpardonable sins, viz. sins of “deliberate malice.”

Later still, Aquinas would adopt three possible ways in which the sin could be committed: 1) by the Jews who accused Jesus of casting out demons by Satan, 2) by hard-hearted impenitence until the end

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20. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. VI (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 321.

21. *Ibid.*, 325.

22. *Ibid.*, 326.

23. *Ibid.*, 325.

24. Combs, 61.



of one's life, and 3) by sins of deliberate malice which put one practically beyond the hope of repentance.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.3. Martin Luther and John Calvin

Turning to the Reformation, Martin Luther's views on the subject have been difficult for Lutheran scholars to come together on, citing as he does multiple offenses which, in his view, qualify for the blasphemy against the Spirit, such as: 1) impenitence to the end, 2) a failure to believe in the forgiveness of sins (similar also to Augustine's view expressed in the *Enchiridion*), or 3) a blaspheming of the Spirit's word and office.

On the other hand, nothing of this ambiguity exists in the writings of John Calvin. Calvin openly disagrees with Augustine that this blasphemy is obstinate impenitence to the end, for as he says, Augustine's interpretation "scarcely agrees with the words of Christ, that it shall not be forgiven in this world."<sup>26</sup> What is this dreadful sin, according to Calvin? Calvin writes,

I say therefore that he sins against the Holy Spirit who, while so constrained by the power of divine truth that he cannot plead ignorance, yet deliberately resists, and that merely for the sake of resisting.<sup>27</sup>

This sin is, therefore, a deliberate, continual resisting and abhorring of the Gospel, as revealed by the Spirit. Those who commit this sin "struggle against the illumination which is the work of the Spirit."<sup>28</sup> This they do willingly, knowingly, and maliciously. This is, according to Calvin, not a sin which the elect can commit, since this sin results in permanent hardening and eternal damnation.

### 2.4. Modern Interpretations

It is not the intention of this essay to rehearse the many different interpretations of this text in the modern literature. The fact is that they do not differ widely from what we have just surveyed in the writings of the Church Fathers. The following is a brief survey of some key modern interpretations of this text. A more in depth survey

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25. *Ibid.*, 62.

26. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), III.iii.22.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

may be sought by reference to the articles cited in the footnotes of this essay.<sup>29</sup>

There are many today who hold to one or another variation of the historical views which we have briefly surveyed. Among modern interpretations is the view that the blasphemy against the Spirit is a willful rejection of the Spirit's testimony of the gospel. This view differs, however, from Calvin in that, according to some theologians, it can also involve the apostasy of professing believers. David MacLeod, a proponent of this view, and Chairman of the Division of Biblical Studies at Emmaus Bible College, summarizes his view in the following way: the "big picture" that Bible presents of this sin is that "[t]here is no forgiveness for those who fatally and finally reject the Holy Spirit's testimony to Jesus Christ,"<sup>30</sup> The Pharisees' antagonism against Jesus was inconsistent with what they knew about the miracle that Jesus had just performed for them. It was a Messianic sign. They knew it and they blasphemously rejected it by calling the work of the Spirit of God, the work of the devil. Christ warns them that to persist in this rejection would result in damnation. They were condemned because they rejected the Holy Spirit's testimony of Jesus. MacLeod argues that there are two species of unpardonable sin: a willful rejection of the gospel message and willful apostasy by a professing believer.<sup>31</sup>

Another related view puts forth the idea that the unpardonable sin is merely a degree of unbelief; it is a place at which a person arrives after having, at some point in his life, made an internal, irrevocable, conscious decision to reject the Spirit's gospel witness to his heart. This is a place of hardness of heart, wherein God hands a person over to his own obstinacy. Theologians such as Buswell hold this view, that this blasphemy is a rejection of the "convicting work of

29. The interested reader can consult the following articles for a more thorough analysis of modern thought regarding the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit: Craig L. Blomberg. "The New Testament Definition of Heresy (Or When Do Jesus and the Apostles Really Get Mad?)" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002); David J. MacLeod. "The Year of Public Favor, Part 5: Israel's Unpardonable Sin (Matthew 12:22-32)" *Emmaus Journal* 13 (2004); Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 3: Christology and Criticism (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2008). See Warfield's chapter entitled, "Misconception of Jesus, and the Blasphemy of the Son of Man", 51-94; Barnard Franklin. "The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost: An Inquiry Into the Scriptural Teaching Regarding the Unpardonable Sin," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (1936): 219-233; Of further interest may be the following discussions on Hebrews 6: Philip Edgcumbe Hughes. "Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (1972): 136-155; Rodney J. Decker. "The Warning of Hebrews 6," *Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (2001): 25-48; R. Bruce Compton. "Persevering and Falling Away: A Reexamination of Hebrews 6:4-6," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* (1996): 134-167.

30. David J. MacLeod, "The Year of Public Favor, Part 5: Israel's Unpardonable Sin (Matthew 12:22-32)," *Emmaus Journal* 13/2 (2004): 183.

31. *Ibid.*, 197-209.

the Holy Spirit” over time. Finally, a state of irrevocable hardness is reached and at that point, the Holy Spirit is blasphemed. This constitutes a clear and final rejection of revealed Truth. We cannot be sure at exactly what point this takes place in the life of the hearer. What we do know is that it does happen and so Jesus’ words serve as a dire warning to all who hear the gospel.

In addition to the foregoing, there are those who go so far as to deny that the sin even exists, some even claiming that Christ taught it out of ignorance,<sup>32</sup> his statements being qualified by the limitations of his humanity. Others believe that it is a calling evil good and good evil, thus confusing people’s ability to distinguish between the two. Still others see it as a rejection of the deity of Jesus Christ, while some believe that it is the attribution of the Spirit’s work to the devil, or the attribution specifically of his miracles to the devil.<sup>33</sup> William Combs holds the view that it is the sin of blaspheming “the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit,” and as such it cannot be committed by a believer. In fact, because the Spirit is not working “sign-miracles” any more, it is not possible for this sin to be committed by anyone today,<sup>34</sup> although he does admit the possibility that the sin might be committable again during the future Great Tribulation, in particular during the ministry of God’s two witnesses (Rev. 11:3-6).

### 3. Matthew 12:22-32 in Context

What is the earnest Christian to do with all of these varied interpretations? While they all bear many similarities to one another, they are in their own way quite distinct. The number of interpretations (and we have by no means been exhaustive) is a testimony both to the importance of this doctrine as well as to its difficulty. Both in view of this difficulty and of the weightiness of Jesus’ words, this essay seeks to offer its contribution to the discussion. To this end, we will examine the context in which Jesus uttered this tremendous malediction.

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32. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1939 edition, s.v. “Blasphemy,” T. Rees, 1:486. Rees says, “Anyhow the abandonment of man to eternal condemnation involves the inability and defeat of God. The only alternative seems to be to call the kenotic theory into service, and to put this idea among the human limitations which Christ assumed when He became flesh. It is less difficult to ascribe a limit to Jesus Christ’s knowledge than to God’s saving grace (Mark 13:32; compare John 16:12-13).”

33. Combs, 85-93.

34. *Ibid.*, 96.

### 3.1. The Big Picture

In the Matthean account of the blasphemy against the Spirit, we are told that “a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to him,” and Jesus healed him. The emphasis which Matthew places on Jesus’ miracle is not the healing, as such, but the response of the religious leaders and the people to it (12:22). The text intentionally downplays the miracle itself, simply telling us that “he healed him.” There is no fanfare; there is no description of the healing process whatsoever. We do not know how Jesus did it, but we do know what the result was with respect both to the efficacy of Jesus’ healing miracle<sup>35</sup> (“he spoke and saw”), as well as to the reception that the miracle received from the religious leaders and the people. However, this miracle, and the resultant blasphemy, is not the beginning of the story, but rather the culmination of a series of miracles, in response to which the Pharisees’ hatred for Jesus steadily grows until finally reaching its climax in a full rejection of Christ and his work (12:24).

### 3.2. The Rejection Narratives of Matthew 4:12-12:49

The Pharisees’ radical rejection of Jesus, resulting in the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, does not appear suddenly out of nowhere. In anticipation of this event, in the Gospel of Matthew, we are able to identify what we will call two main “rejection narratives,” the “blasphemy against the Spirit” being the culmination of the second of these narratives and the Matthew’s natural segway into his Passion narrative.<sup>36</sup>

The first rejection narrative begins in Matthew 4:12 and terminates at the end of chapter nine. The second rejection narrative

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35. The conjunction ὅστε is a marker of both result (as in Matthew 12:12) and purpose (as in Luke 9:52). The use is not always clear. It may be that Matthew wishes to say that Jesus healed him “in order that he spoke and saw.” In either case, the meaning of the text is not substantially changed.

36. In summary of the events leading up to this rejection, Matthew’s account reveals that when Jesus first began his ministry, calling Israel to repentance because the “kingdom of heaven is at hand,” he was not, that we are aware of, openly challenged by any of the religious authorities until chapter nine, at which time he forgives the sins of the paralytic (9:1-8). The text tells us that it was the “scribes,” who, at that time, accused him of blasphemy. We do not read of any visible opposition on the part of the Pharisees until 9:6, where the Pharisees ask Jesus’ disciples why he eats with tax collectors and sinners; and again, in 9:14-17, where they question Jesus about why his disciples did not fast like theirs. After these challenges to Jesus’ ministry, we don’t hear from the Pharisees again until 9:32-34, at which time Jesus heals a demon possessed man who was also mute. The Pharisees’ response to this healing is: “He casts out demons by the prince of demons” (9:34).

is Matthew 10-12. This pericope bears remarkable similarities to the first, as seen in the chart below.

<b>The first rejection narrative Matthew 4:12 – Matthew 9</b>	<b>The second rejection narrative Matthew 10 – Matthew 12</b>
1. Beginning of his earthly ministry, calling his disciples (4:12-25)	1. The calling of the twelve and their being sent out (10:1-5a)
2. An extended teaching, as the Lawgiver, given to his people Israel (5-7)	2. An extended teaching to the twelve (10:5b-11:1)
3. Healing, forgiveness of sins and open displays of His lordship, all pointed to his office as Messiah (8:9-31)	3. Healings and miracles which reveal him as Messiah, along with explicit claims to be such (11:2-12:21)
4. Initial rejection by the religious leaders; Christ’s compassion for the people (9:32-38)	4. Final rejection by the religious leaders and Christ’s definitive rejection of them; pronouncement of woes against the unbelieving people (12:22-49)

This second rejection narrative is marked by the increased presence of God’s in-breaking kingdom, and in some sense its clear and definitive arrival. At the time of the healing miracle in chapter 12, we discover that the kingdom is no longer “at hand”, but actually “upon” the people, whereas prior to chapter 12, we are told four different times that the “kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 3:1; 4:17; 10:7). The shift comes, not with the miracle itself, but rather with the further development of the understanding, of both people and priests, of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, as witnessed by the Spirit of God through Christ’s miracles, as a fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. This becomes clear from Jesus’ own response to the Pharisees’ accusation that he cast out demons by Beelzebul.

In Matthew 12:28, when Jesus is definitively rejected by the Pharisees, he tells them emphatically, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” The use of the personal pronoun in the phrase, ἐγὼ ἐκβάλλω, makes an emphatic contrast between himself and anyone else who casts out demons, e.g., the disciples of the Pharisees. They may cast out demons by the Spirit (and the Pharisees did not deny this), but if Jesus himself<sup>37</sup> casts out demons, and this by the Spirit of God, then

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37. I take Jesus’ use of the pronoun to be an affirmation of his office. In other words, what Jesus is saying is this: “Your sons cast out demons and they clearly do

the kingdom of God was no longer at hand, but rather in their very presence.<sup>38</sup> The idea seems to be, not that the kingdom had come in every aspect of its fullness, but rather that the evidence for the kingdom's presence, in the person of Jesus, had been clearly witnessed to the world by the Holy Spirit. In the face of the kingdom's Spirit-witnessed presence in the person of Jesus, the Pharisees' rejection of him was both knowing and malicious. This willful ignorance and hateful rejection of Jesus by the religious leaders is the occasion for the pronouncement of divine judgment upon them.

The rest of the Gospel, from chapter 13 and following, is the fleshing out of both Jesus' Spirit-witnessed claim to be Messiah and the religious establishment's rejection of that claim, culminating in Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, with the ultimate sending of his Twelve into the world.

### 3.3. The Culpability Factor

As we have seen, these two rejection narratives depict both the growing presence of the kingdom of God (as witnessed by Jesus' many miracles) as well as the growing opposition to it by the Pharisees and scribes. In addition to this it is worth noting that the people manifest a very different response than their leaders to Jesus' miracles. Sometimes that response is, admittedly, hard to gauge, but it is far from a malicious rejection of him. For example, in the first rejection narrative, we see that the people are grateful to Jesus, manifest faith in God because of him, and even recognize the authority given to him by God (cf. Matt. 7:28-29, 8:27, 9:8, 28), although they do not yet recognize who he is. However, by the end of the second rejection narrative, the people begin asking if Jesus could possibly be the son of David.

When the people's response to Jesus is taken into account, there emerges from the text a correlative relationship between the extent of the people's understanding of the person and work of Jesus and the level of culpability of their religious leaders in publicly rejecting him.

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this by the power of God's Spirit, but if I cast out demons by the Spirit, that is evidence that the kingdom of God is no longer at hand, but in your very presence, because I am Messiah."

38. ἔφθασεν ἐφ' ἑμαῖς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ, where φθάνω means "to come upon" or "happen to." The same is said by Paul of the wrath of God "coming upon those who hindered the speaking of the gospel to the gentiles" (ἔφθασεν δὲ ἐπ' αὐτοὺς ἡ ὀργὴ εἰς τέλος) in 1 Thessalonians 2:16. The idea is that some thing or event is a present reality for someone. Christ's miracle-working power and his fulfillment of the Old Testament promises were evidences that the kingdom was, in virtue of Jesus very presence, in the midst of the Pharisees, and they knowingly rejected it. It is also significant that this is the first time in the book of Matthew that we read "the kingdom of God" instead of its location, "the kingdom of heaven." There is nothing subtle about what Jesus is saying. Nothing short of God's own kingdom was present in Jesus of Nazareth.

In other words, the religious leaders' culpability grows together with the people's understanding about who Jesus is. For instance, the judgment that is offered at the end of the first rejection narrative is merely that the people "were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36b). The Pharisees are rebuked (though not openly condemned?) for their initial rejection at the end of chapter nine, because they should have known who Jesus was, and as faithful shepherds, they should have been teaching and guiding the people to receive Jesus' presence with rejoicing. The fact that they refused to do this proved that the people had no genuine shepherds to lead them into the truth.

However, when we come to Matthew 12, and the people openly ask "Can this be the Son of David?" we are told that the "Pharisees hear it" and countered by claiming that Jesus was actually the son of the Devil (12:23). It is at the apex of the people's enlightened understanding that the Pharisees' rejection of Jesus is most egregious. The people are on the cusp of believing in him, but their leaders seek to actively subvert that nascent faith.

Correspondingly, Jesus' public rejection of them is as sharp as their rejection of his messiahship. He calls them a brood of vipers who are incapable of speaking good, because they themselves are evil (12:34). They are bad trees that give bad fruit (12:33); out of their evil treasure, they bring forth only evil (12:34). They must give an account, as men, for all of the careless and idle words they have spoken (12:36). How much more will they be condemned for speaking against the Spirit's testimony about the Son? By their own words, they have brought this condemnation upon themselves (12:37).

While Jesus also holds the people responsible for their rejection of the Spirit's witness to him, they are less culpable than those who sat in the seat of Moses, and yet still rejected the Greater-than-Moses (cf. Matt. 23:2). The judgments which the Lord issues correspond with the level of responsibility appropriate to each, whether the people or their priests.

### 3.4. Miracles as the Spirit's Divine Witness to Jesus

Jesus' miracles should have been an undeniable evidence of his office and work because they were the Spirit's seal of his ministry, a miraculous ministry, without equal, which had been clearly predicted by the prophets of the old dispensation. John 11 sheds light on the Matthean narratives under discussion. John the Baptist, who by this time is in prison and struggling with Jesus' identity himself, sends emissaries to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (11:3). Jesus' answer to them sounds cryptic at first, but upon further inspection, it is most remarkable. Directly

appealing to Scripture for his claim to be the “One,” i.e., the Messiah, he says,

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me (11:4-6).

This list of works mentioned by Jesus is virtually a mirror image of the miracles of Elisha.<sup>39</sup> This comparison with Elisha is made even more explicit in the following verses, where Jesus identifies John the Baptist as “Elijah who is to come” (11:14), citing Malachi 3:1 (Mt. 11:10). The implication of Jesus’ words is that if John is Elijah, then Jesus, by his appeal to the works of Elisha, is the one who will “turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal. 4:6); he is the one who comes with the double portion of the Spirit of God to bring salvation to a people laboring under a curse.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Jesus calls all who “labor and are heavy laden” and promises them “rest” (11:28).

His identity is so clearly established by these Spirit-wrought miracles, that he denounces all those who have rejected him, warning them of the judgment to come. Moreover, on many occasions, Jesus identifies himself in no uncertain terms as the “Son

39. For example, Elisha begins his ministry at the Jordan, crossing the river in a sort of Old Testament baptism (2 Kings 2:1-14), just as Jesus ministry begins at his baptism in the Jordan (Mark 1:9-11); Elisha cleanses lepers (2 Kings 5:1-14), multiplies food (4:1-7), raises the dead (4:18-37), and gives sight to the blind (6:20). The parallels between Jesus and Elisha should also be noted in that Elisha’s first work as a prophet, with a double portion of the Spirit (see parallel with Jesus in his baptism and in Luke 4:18), is to heal the waters at Jericho. Here at Jericho, Elisha eases the burden of an ancient curse upon the city by healing its waters. When Jesus comes preaching, he tells the Samaritan women that he can give her “living waters” and that the water he gives “will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). A biblically literate Pharisee could not have missed the parallels, and neither could John’s disciples. Jesus offers these signs as definitive proof that He himself is the Promised One, who comes with the Spirit to bring redemption to Israel.

40. It is precisely this contrast that Jesus has in mind: judgment versus redemption. John came with the message that the axe was already laid at the root of the tree (Matt. 3:10; Luke 3:9). Like Elijah, he was a prophet of judgment, one who was sent to bring the people face-to-face with their rebellion and their waywardness. Elisha stands in contrast to this message in that he brings healing and redemption to an undeserving people. When Elisha takes Elijah’s place it is not to be supposed that Israel had become any less sinful or deserving of judgment. Elisha stands as a reminder that the Lord is gracious, that he alone is Savior, and this apart from the merits of his people. So comes Christ on the heels of John, but this Christ does not baptize with water, for like Elisha, he comes with the Spirit to bring redemption. Again, the contrast could not have been lost on the original audience, and indeed, was not lost on them.



of Man” (Matt. 12:32; cf. Daniel 7:9-14), a messianic title, and as the “lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:1-8). And immediately prior to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, Matthew also tells us that Jesus did all of his miracles in order to fulfill the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 42:1-3 as the “Servant of Jehovah” (12:15-21), upon whom God himself had put his Spirit (12:18). The Pharisees, however, having seen all these things, “went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him” (12:14).

Having established the text within its larger context, we are in a position to elaborate on the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit itself.

#### 4. The Blasphemy against the Spirit

##### 4.1. Who can commit the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?

In order to explain exactly what the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is, we are compelled to ask, who are the subjects of this blasphemy? Or to put it another way, who is able to commit this sin against the Holy Spirit? Saint Augustine, with great evangelistic and pastoral burden, asks, “What then will become of those whom the Church desires to gain? When they have been reformed and come into the Church from whatsoever error, is the hope in the remission of all sins that is promised them a false hope? For who is not convicted of having spoken a word against the Holy Ghost, before he became a Christian or a Catholic?”<sup>41</sup> Pagans, he says, worship false gods and claim that Jesus worked miracles by magic arts. “Are not they like these who said that He cast out devils through the prince of the devils?” he asks.<sup>42</sup> Augustine also argues that when the pagans blaspheme our sanctification or when they deny that the Spirit is in us, they blaspheme the Spirit who sanctifies us and indwells his people. He concludes,

It is plain then that the Holy Ghost is blasphemed both by Pagans, and by Jews, and by heretics. Are they, then, to be left and accounted without all hope, since the sentence is fixed, ‘Whosoever speaketh a word against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come?’ and are they only to be deemed free from the guilt of this most grievous sin who are Catholics from infancy?<sup>43</sup>

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41. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. VI (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 319.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, 320.

On the one hand, Augustine is correct. All men blaspheme God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and yet, the preaching of the gospel holds out life and hope for them; otherwise the church would falsely promise the hope of salvation to the world. However, it would appear that Augustine's fears are not well-founded. Augustine (and just about everyone else, for that matter) believed that anyone (except maybe the elect), in theory, could become guilty of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, we will argue that the blasphemy against the Spirit is a sin which only teachers can commit. On this account, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not a sin which any and every Christian can commit, but one which is very specific to teachers, or those who possess authority over the people of God. The Bible calls these men "false teachers" or "wolves in sheep's clothing." In truth, they are not Christians, though they be in the church; they are men who masquerade in the church as prophets of God, but in reality they are white-washed tombs and sons of the devil. To these alone Christ directs this condemnation.

This claim is not wholly without representation in the early church. In one place, St. Ambrose states our position very nicely. He writes,

The Lord then replies to the blasphemy of the Pharisees, and refuses to them the grace of His power, which consists in the remission of sins, because they asserted that His heavenly power rested on the help of the devil. And He affirms that they act with satanic spirit who divide the Church of God, so that He includes the heretics and schismatics of all times, to whom He denies forgiveness, for every other sin is concerned with single persons, this is a sin against all. For they alone wish to destroy the grace of Christ who rend asunder the members of the Church for which the Lord Jesus suffered, and the Holy Spirit was given us.<sup>44</sup>

While Ambrose did not restrict the sin to "heretics and schismatics," we argue that we must for one simple reason: the New Testament, taken as a whole, appears to refuse the grace of God to none but false teachers.

Even a superficial reading of the New Testament will reveal that Jesus and the Apostles had mercy and compassion on all sorts of sinners, from prostitutes, to tax collectors, to fornicators within the church itself. They uniformly call sinners to repentance and faith, and the fallen to a renewed obedience. But false teachers and those

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44. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. X (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 348.

who, for selfish gain, destroy the Church are roundly condemned. For instance, take the Apostle Peter.

#### 4.2. Peter and the False Teachers

In his second epistle, Peter writes,

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction (2 Pet. 2:1).

Because of them, says Peter, the “truth will be blasphemed” (2:2), the church will be exploited for selfish gain with “false words” (2:3). They are the “unrighteous” who are considered to be “trials” for the church, from which God will save his people (2:9). They indulge in defiling passions and despise authority (2:10). They are “bold and willful,” “irrational animals,” “born to be caught and destroyed” (2:12). Peter assures his readers that “they will be destroyed in their destruction” (2:12). They are not from outside the church, rather “they feast with you” (2:13). These false teachers “entice unsteady souls” and for this Peter calls them “accursed children” (2:14). Their false teaching also involves the love of gain for wrongdoing (read: false teaching and heresy) (2:15). They are “waterless springs” for whom “the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved” (2:17), and their followers are destroyed by their teaching (2:18).

What is remarkable about these false teachers is that they “know” the Lord Jesus Christ (2:20). Clearly, Peter does not mean that they “know” Christ in a saving sense, but that through a certain knowledge of the Lord, they have left the world and come into the church. They have repudiated their pagan ways, but become entangled and overcome by defilements. Peter says that for them “the last state has become worse than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2:20-21). Peter tells us that “their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep” (2:3).

Peter’s words echo those of the Lord Jesus, who speaking to the Pharisees, says,

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he

becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves (Matt. 23:13-15).

Jesus calls the Pharisees “blind guides” (23:16, 24), “blind fools” (23:17) and “blind men” (23:19). He concludes, “Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (23:31-33). They were witnesses against themselves that they were blind guides of the blind. Because of their destructive teaching in the face of what they knew (23:30), Jesus curses them and condemns them to hell.

#### 4.3. Paul and the False Teachers

In the epistles, the apostle Paul saves his harshest invectives for the false teachers who led the people away from the hope of the gospel. He writes clearly in the first chapter of the epistle to the Galatians, that if anyone preached a different gospel, “let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8, 9). Later, after defending the truth of the gospel, he tells them that he is confident in the Lord that they will receive no other view than his, and that “the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is” (Gal. 5:10). Paul’s condemnation doesn’t stop there. He wishes that those false teachers who were preaching “Christ plus circumcision” would go the whole way and emasculate themselves (5:15). Likewise, in 2 Corinthians, Paul defends his ministry among the Corinthians in contrast to the false apostles who were leading some astray from the simplicity of the gospel. Paul sarcastically announces that he is not in the least inferior to these “super-apostles.” In fact, these “super-apostles” were actually “false apostles” (2 Cor. 11:13), servants of Satan who disguise themselves as servants of Christ and righteousness (11:14). Paul declares, “Their end will correspond to their deeds” (11:15).

The New Testament is replete with this theme. From John, who condemns the antichrists who have come into the world, to Jude, who calls them “wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 13), to Paul’s warnings to Timothy about those who will depart from the faith due to the “insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” (1 Tim. 4:2). In 2 Timothy 3, Paul warns that in the last days, teachers will come who will have the “appearance of godliness” but deny its power (3:5). Paul’s warning to Timothy is, “Avoid such people” (3:5). Paul does not tell Timothy to call them to repentance, because, as Paul tells Timothy, they are “disqualified regarding the faith” (3:8).

#### 4.4. The Background of the Old Testament

The posture of the New Testament toward false teachers is not unique. For example, a significant feature of Peter's condemnation of the false teachers is that it comes in the context of the Spirit's revelation of Christ (2 Pet. 1:16-21; 3:1), just as Jesus' does. A brief overview of the testimony of the Old Testament reveals that Jesus is not inventing a new kind of sin, but instead redefining an old sin for a new dispensation. Both the Old and New Testaments harshly condemn false teachers, while at the same time, they extend the hope of redemption and forgiveness to the sheep.

For instance, *a la* Peter, the Old Testament equivalent of the "false teacher" is the "false prophet," and Deuteronomy 13 says that the false prophet should be put to death (13:5). The condemnation which comes upon these prophets is extreme and definitive. The false prophets were denounced by the real prophets of God for destroying the people by their false visions (Jer. 23:25, 32; 27:9; 29:8; Zech. 10:2), just as New Testament false teachers are condemned for their destructive teachings. On the other hand, the Redeemer of Israel will save his people, while at the same time frustrating "the signs of liars" and making "fools of diviners" (Isa. 44:25).

The true prophets, like the apostles after them, saved their harshest words and fiercest condemnation for the false prophets and priests. The Lord says through Jeremiah,

When one of this people, or a prophet or a priest asks you, "What is the burden of the LORD?" you shall say to them, "You are the burden, and I will cast you off, declares the LORD." And as for the prophet, priest or one of the people who says, "The burden of the LORD," I will punish that man and his household (Jer. 23:33-34).

He warns the prophets who speak contrary to his Word that "I will surely lift you up and cast you away from my presence, you and the city that I gave to you and your fathers. And I will bring upon you everlasting reproach and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten" (Jer. 23:39). Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord declares, "They shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord God. Precisely because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace,' when there is no peace, and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear it with whitewash" (Ezek. 13:9-10; cf. Ezek. 14:10-11; Hos. 4:5-6; Micah 3:5-12; Zech. 13:2-6). These men are excluded from the people of Israel because their heresy has turned the people away

from the Lord. Much of the language found in the prophets echoes into the New Testament as the false prophets become false teachers who lead the people astray from Christ for filthy gain.

Both the New and the Old Testaments are unanimous in their rejection of false prophets and teachers. To these alone is the hope of the grace of life refused. Paul says to the Corinthians that some of them had been sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, practicing homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers, and the like, but that now they had been “washed” and “sanctified” and “justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11). The New Testament testifies that sinners of every conceivable kind were forgiven when they trusted in Jesus Christ. The same is true today. Indeed, Jesus himself told the Pharisees that he did not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners (Matt. 9:13). He came for the sick, taking our illnesses and bearing our diseases (Isa. 53:4; Matt. 8:17). He restored and restores sinners to God (1 Tim. 1:15).

#### 4.5. Jesus and the Pharisees

When we come to Matthew 12, it is not difficult, especially in light of the foregoing testimony, to identify those to whom Jesus directed his malediction. Matthew 12:25 says, “Knowing their thoughts, he said to them.” What follows is the pronouncement of his curse upon them. It was not directed to the people, the sheep of Israel, but rather to their Shepherds, because they said that it was by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that Jesus was casting out demons. Because of their apostasy, in Ambrose’s words, Christ “refuses to them [the Pharisees] the grace of his power, which consists in the remission of sins.” This is a blasphemy of shepherds, not sheep.

Given that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a sin which is specific to teachers, we can see more clearly what the exact nature is of the blasphemy which they commit.

### 5. The Nature of the Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

#### 5.1. A Certain Genus of False Teaching

In order to understand the nature of this blasphemy, it is helpful to understand what it is not. The blasphemy of the Pharisees in Matthew 12 was not false teaching, per se, but rather a certain genus of false teaching. Many throughout history who have taught falsely have repented. It may be argued that all teachers at one time or another teach something that is not biblical. There are those who would argue, for example, that the Pentecostal doctrines of the

charismata are erroneous. Nevertheless, these teachings, however false they may be, are not sufficient in themselves to disqualify a particular teacher as a believer. The false teaching that blasphemes the Spirit strikes at the very heart of the Spirit's witness, viz., the gospel.

As we have already argued, the Pharisees' rejection of Jesus was a malignant and knowing rejection of the Spirit's testimony about Jesus' person and work. John tells us that they did this because they did not want the people to believe in him (John 11:48). In essence, they sought to cut the people off from the grace of life in Messiah because of personal ambition and greed. Theirs was a rejection of the gospel, for they had rejected Christ and his work. Nevertheless, their blasphemy was not in the fact that they rejected Christ, but in the use of their authority to teach the people to do likewise. All of the false teachers which the New Testament condemns have in one way or another, undermined the gospel, and in doing so, perpetrate violence upon the church of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul cautions teachers to be careful about what they preach. Once the foundation of Christ has been laid, and teachers begin to build on it, some build with precious materials that last unto eternity and others build with wood, hay and stubble that are consumed in the judgment of God. Those that build with precious metals and stones build upon Christ with that which is in keeping with gospel, while those who build poorly (i.e. not in keeping with the gospel) will suffer the loss of their work. Note, however, that they are not lost ("...though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire," 1 Cor. 3:15). Though they build poorly, nevertheless they still build on Christ. However, Paul warns others who do not build on the foundation of the gospel: "Do you now know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Cor. 3:16-17). It is no coincidence that the Spirit dwells in the temple of God, the church, and those who undermine the gospel, and so harm the church, receive this definitive judgment from God.

The gospel is the key. The kingdom has come in Christ and the message of that kingdom is the Spirit-revealed gospel. When the gospel is undermined, the Spirit's testimony of Christ is likewise undermined. When this is done malignantly, knowingly, and to the detriment of the church, by those who have been given authority over the church, the Holy Spirit of Christ is blasphemed. This sin is committable today and will be until the coming of the Lord, because the gospel is preached until then. The church must watch and be on her guard for those who come to her in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves (Matt. 7:15; cf. Acts 20:29-30). They preach

another Christ (2 Cor. 11:4) and a different gospel (Gal. 1:6-10). Much like the Judiazers, they may claim to know Christ, call people to repentance and faith in him, and outwardly look Christian. They even behave “Christianly.” But Peter says that they are impostors and evil people who are “deceiving and being deceived.” From such men, the church must turn away.

## 5.2. A Rejection of Jesus

The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is, therefore, a public rejection of the Spirit’s testimony about the person and work of the Son of God, by teachers, for the purpose of leading others astray from Christ as offered to us in the gospel. It is not a denial of the Spirit, per se. Nowhere do the Pharisees directly malign the Spirit, but rather the One who said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Lucas 4:18a). Matthew tells us that Jesus’ activities were in fulfillment of the Spirit’s prophesied end-times witness and work (Matt. 12:18b). It was just this witness which the Pharisees had rejected when they attributed Jesus works to Beelzebul.

Why is the Pharisees public rejection of Jesus as Messiah called a blasphemy against the Spirit? The reason can be found in the Scripture’s intimate identification of the Holy Spirit with Jesus Christ. For example, The Father is said to send the Spirit in Jesus’ name, who would “bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (14:26). Jesus also promises to send the Spirit himself after his departure from the world (John 15:26), and Jesus says that the Holy Spirit would come to convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment with respect to their acceptance or rejection of Jesus (John 16:7-11). In John 14, Jesus promised his disciples, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (14:18). How is it that Jesus would come to them after he leaves? He does this in the person of the Spirit. It is noteworthy too that, in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is called “the Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9; 1 Pet. 1:11), “the Spirit of Jesus” (Acts. 16:7), and “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:19). This same identification of the Spirit’s work with Jesus Christ is also seen in the early chapters of Matthew. At Jesus’ baptism, “the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him” (Matt. 3:16). It was the Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted (Matt. 4:1). Jesus is possessed of the Spirit, gives the Spirit, and is equal to the Spirit. When the Pharisees rejected him as possessed by the devil, they blasphemed the Spirit, because the signs they rejected as being of Satan, were really the Spirit’s own testimony of the Son.

Additionally, it is significant that any blasphemy which men speak against “the Son of Man” will be forgiven, because in his



humanity, Christ's divine nature and identity were veiled. His own disciples were slow to understand who he was. They didn't fully comprehend everything they had witnessed until Pentecost, when the Spirit came upon them in power. Athanasius argued that the difference between blasphemy against the Spirit and that against Christ was the difference between blaspheming the humanity of Jesus and that of blaspheming his deity. He writes, "Of course too He signified that the blasphemy offered to the Holy Ghost is greater than that against His humanity."<sup>45</sup> However, Athanasius's view limits too much the scope of this sin. In the context, the deity of Christ, as such, is not in view. Rather, it is his office, and the accompanying Spirit-borne signs of his identity as the Christ (i.e. "the Son of David") that is at issue. The revelation of Jesus as the Son of David is not apparent in his humanity itself, but rather only in the testimony of the Holy Spirit. That is why this blasphemy, while on the surface it rejects Jesus, is actually a knowing rejection of the Spirit. The Pharisees' rejection of Christ is in spite of the manifold testimony of God's Spirit. Theirs is not an ignorant rejection, but rather a willful rejection of what they know to be divinely-appointed Messianic signs, attributing them to Beelzebul.

In other words, this blasphemy is no ordinary rejection of Jesus or his deity, but rather a heinously culpable rejection of his person and work (i.e. of his divinity and messianic office), both of which the Pharisees reject when they condemn Jesus as a sorcerer (cf. Lev. 20:27; 20:6; Deut. 18:10-11).

## 6. Hebrews 5:11-6:12

Before concluding, it seems appropriate to address Hebrews 6, since this text, more than any other, appears to indicate that it is possible for anyone at all to apostatize from the faith in such a way that it is impossible for them to be renewed once again to repentance (Heb. 6:4). How does this text fit with Matthew 12:22-32, as we have explained it during the course of the present study?

A cursory reading of Hebrews 6 would, in fact, lead one to the conclusion that the author of this epistle is addressing a sin which is "unpardonable" and that the epistle's readers are in very real danger of committing it. However, this is not the only way of understanding this text. It is not the intention of this essay to evaluate the different interpretations of this text which have been offered in the history of the church. Our only burden is to put forward one possible understanding of this text which both respects the context and

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45. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. IV (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 335.

harmonizes with the preceding argument. The reader will have to judge whether the interpretation offered here does proper justice to the meaning of the text.

The context of Hebrews 5:11-6:12 is cast by the author of the epistle in terms of teaching, and in terms of teachers. It says that by this time the readers ought to have become “teachers,” but that in fact they still have need to be taught about the elementary things of the faith (Heb. 5:12). Here the epistle contrasts milk, or the basic principles of the oracles of God, with solid food, which the apostle calls “the word of righteousness.”

It must be asked what the “milk” is, or the “basic principles” are, of which the apostle speaks. Up to this point, the apostle has contrasted Moses with Christ, the law with the gospel, and the high priesthood of the Mosaic covenant with the better and perfect high priesthood of Jesus. One of the principal teachings of the book of Hebrews is that the types and shadows have found their perfect and complete fulfillment in the person and work of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Likewise, one of the leading concerns of the epistle is the people’s temptation to cleave to the shadows instead of the substance. Verse 11 says, “About this we have much to say.” What is the “this” to which the apostle refers? Clearly it is to what he has just finished expounding, viz., that Jesus has been designated by God as a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, and that he is the source of eternal salvation to all those who obey him. On this account, the “milk” is the shadows of the old covenant, upon which the people of God in ancient times had been fed, leading them as babes to the times of fulfillment in Christ, that is, the word of righteousness. When the apostle says that “solid food is for the mature,” he means that the doctrines of the fulfillment of the shadows are for those who are “complete,” that is, for those who now lack nothing that pertains to the substance and fulfillment of all that had been promised to the fathers. In other words, solid food is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and those who are mature those who leave the types and shadows to embrace their fulfillment in Christ.

### 6.1. The “elementary principles” in Hebrews and Galatians

There seems to be some relationship between these “elementary principles” of the oracles of God which are mentioned in Hebrews and the “elementary principles” of the world, under which the “children” are as slaves until the “fullness of time had come” as recorded in Galatians. The basis for this comparison is the use of the terms: *στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ* in Hebrews 5:12, *τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον* in 6:1, and the corresponding uses in Galatians 4:3 of *τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* and in 4:9 of *τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα*.

Hebrews uses στοιχεῖον to mean “elementary truths,” or those things which are mere rudiments. The terms στοιχεῖον [του κοσμου], in extrabiblical literature, refers to the four elements of the cosmos, but this simply cannot be the meaning either in Hebrews, or in Galatians.<sup>46</sup> In Hebrews, the Apostle virtually juxtaposes στοιχεῖον τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων (5:12) with τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς... λόγον (6:1). His purpose is to indicate what is first in order, and as yet unformed or incomplete. As we will see, Hebrews uses these terms to refer to the types and shadows of the law, which find their fulfillment in Christ. Furthermore, Galatians uses very similar terms in the same way, and with a similar polemic.

In Galatians, Paul seems to imply that these elementary principles of the world (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) are those things to which the ceremonial law obligated the children of Israel.<sup>47</sup> Paul says in Galatians 3:23 that before “faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.” This is likened to being “under a guardian,” as an underage child would be. But now that Christ has come, the child has become a full son and heir to the fullness of the promises made to Abraham. In chapter 4 of Galatians, Paul connects the idea of being “under” the elementary principles of the world (4:3, ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) to being “under the law” (4:4, 5, τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον). The coming of Christ has “redeemed” us from bondage to the law and thus we have received “adoption as sons.” As evidence that this relationship between the “elementary principles” and the law is in mind, Paul asks the Galatians: “But now that you have come to know God, or rather, to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more” (4:9)? What are these “elementary principles”? Paul tells them in verse 10: You observe [carefully] days and months and seasons and years! The “weak and beggarly elements,” then, are the ceremonies enjoined by the law, which are weak and beggarly, not in and of themselves, but in virtue of the coming of their consummation, Christ.

The same concept seems to be in the apostle’s mind in Hebrews 6 when he tells his readers, “Therefore, let us leave the elementary doctrine [τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον] of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation... [cf. Luke 6:48-49; Rom.

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46. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964).

47. While it is true that Paul also relates these “elementary principles” to their enslavement to those things which are not gods, i.e. pagan deities or things of this world, it is the contention of this essay that his primary referent is the ceremonial stipulations of the Mosaic law.

15:20; 1 Cor. 3:10-12; Eph. 2:20].” The “elementary doctrine of Christ” is the immature doctrine of Christ as found in the types and shadows of the law. Maturity is the doctrine in full flower. Hebrews is not teaching us that “repentance from dead works and faith toward God,” “instructions about washings,” “laying on of hands,” the resurrection of the dead,” and “eternal judgment” are elementary doctrines, but rather these doctrines as foreshadowed and typified in the ceremonial laws are “foundational” or “elementary” and therefore no longer necessary, in that form, for the mature, who have received the fullness of the gospel and now understand the full significance and glory of these doctrines in Christ.

### 6.2. Who can never be restored to repentance?

This brings us to those texts which have more immediate bearing on the subject at hand, viz., vv. 4-6. The text reads:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt (ESV).

For the purposes of this argument, we may profitably query the text on a few specific points. First, to whom does “those who have once been enlightened” refer? Second, what does it mean to have “tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit”? Third, what does it mean to “have fallen away”? And fourth, what does it mean to “crucify once again the Son of God... holding him up to contempt”? The answer to these four questions should give us sufficient insight into this text’s possible relationship to Matthew 12.

### 6.3. Those who have once been enlightened

First, to whom does “whose who have once been enlightened” refer? There are at least two different ways to understand this reference. It may have a general reference, that is, it may refer to anybody who might have once been enlightened. Or it may have a specific reference to a certain group of people which the apostle has in mind. The second seems to comport more faithfully with the tenor of the whole passage, for certainly the author does not have his readers in mind. He says to them, “Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that

belong to salvation” (6:9). The apostle contrasts “those who have once been enlightened” but have fallen away with those to whom he writes. It is entirely conceivable that the apostle has a certain group of people in mind who have indeed been enlightened, but have in spite of this light, fallen away from it. In other words, by way of a warning, he calls the attention of his readers to a specific group of people, known to them, who had been “enlightened,” but afterward fell away.

#### 6.4. They tasted the heavenly gift

Insight into the identity of these people may well be gained from examining the descriptions which are given about them. First, they are those who have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit. Some insight into what this means may well be gained from Hebrews 2:2-4:

For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression of disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

The good news of the gospel (i.e. the mature doctrine of Christ) was in fact announced first by Christ, then by the apostles, God establishing this testimony by signs and wonders and by many gifts which the Holy Spirit poured out upon the church according to God’s will. When the apostle refers to the “celestial gift” and becoming a “sharer” in the Holy Spirit, he means that these people were recipients of spiritual graces or gifts which the Holy Spirit had poured out upon the church as a testimony about Christ and for the edification of his church (cf. Eph. 4:1-16). We know that these gifts, at least according to Hebrews 2, were given by the Holy Spirit to the church in order to bear witness to the salvation wrought in Christ. It is not unreasonable, then, to see these heavenly gifts and this participation in the Holy Spirit as being a participation in the work of giving testimony to the salvation first declared by the Lord and afterwards by his apostles. It is perfectly legitimate to translate the Greek word *μετόχους* in verse 4 as “partner” or “companion.” A perfectly legitimate understanding of this phrase, then, is: and have become partners with the Holy Spirit. This concept of teachers or ministers of the gospel as “God’s partners” is not unknown in the New Testament. Paul told the Corinthians that he and Apollos were “God’s fellow workers” (1 Cor. 3:9). Additionally, those whom Jesus

sent out “preached the gospel everywhere” and the Lord “confirmed the message by accompanying signs” (Mark 16:20). In this light, it may well be that the apostle has in mind those who participated in some way in the teaching of the gospel or in the instruction ministry of the church.

This may be what it means to have “tasted” the heavenly gift. It does not say that they “received” the heavenly gift, nor that they were participants in the heavenly gift, but only that they tasted it. The idea seems to be something far less than full participation in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but rather something more tangential. They also “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.” They experienced the Word of God and the powers of the age to come, but to what extent they became full partakers of these things is not clear. What is clear is that they did have sufficient experience of these things to understand them and feel their weight and significance. They, in some measure, belonged to them. But that they were not the true possessors of these things is clear from verse 6: they fell away from them. But due to the context of “teaching,” it would appear that these are teachers who handle the eternal things of the oracles of God, and by this make themselves participants with the Holy Spirit in his teaching mission in the Church. Nevertheless, because they have no true commission from the Spirit, nor true participation in the gifts which he distributes to his people, they fall away, i.e., they apostatize from the truth in a damning manner.

#### 6.5. Those who have fallen away

The verb used in verse 6, *παραιτίτω*, means to forsake, fall away or commit apostasy.<sup>48</sup> This apostasy is characterized as permanent, for it is “impossible” (*ἀδύνατος*, 6:4) to renew or restore them again to repentance. The reason that this restoration is not possible is due to the nature of the apostasy. They apostatize by crucifying to themselves the Son of God and put him to open shame (NASB). What the apostle means here is that the manner of their defection is so heinous, that it would be as if they had re-crucified Jesus, because in their apostasy, they expose Christ to public shame and contempt. What does the Apostle mean when he says that in their apostasy they are “crucifying once again the Son of God.” The reference must be to the teaching that practicing the temple sacrifices was still acceptable for Christians,<sup>49</sup> since these sacrifices represented in a typological way the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That this is the doctrine

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48. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*, Logos Research Systems, Inc.

49. It is possible that this is a reference to the adherence to the ceremonial laws in general, but in either case, the effect is the same.

which these apostate teachers were promoting in the churches is supported by the apostle's return to this theme in chapter 10, where he warns the believers that if they continue to practice the sacrifices which can never take away sins, they have no hope of redemption, but only the terrifying expectation of judgment (Hebrews 10, particularly vv. 26-31). Only this kind of teaching could bring such public contempt upon the sacrifice of Christ. One who held these teachings, and taught others to practice them would be like one who "who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:29).

While it is certainly possible for any Christian to bring public shame upon Christ's name by their sinful behavior, it would appear that the only people capable of bringing this kind of contempt upon the gospel are those who publicly represent Christ in their teachings. What these teachers do is to keep the people of God in the types and shadows, not allowing them to grow to maturity, that is, to come to the proper understanding of Christ and his gospel as the consummation of the elementary principles of the oracles of God in the law. God's people should be teachers by now, but they have need of someone to teach them aright. The condemnation of those who have fallen away is that they have substituted, in their teaching, Christ the fullness for the empty and beggarly shadows.

In sum, it may well be that Hebrews 6 is a restatement of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. However, this would not, upon closer inspection, present any contradiction with the basic thesis of this essay if those whom the apostle has in mind are in fact teachers of one variety or another. That the context is one of teaching and instruction makes this interpretation very plausible. Also, that the Apostle makes a clear distinction between those who fall away and his readers, and between the milk of the law and the solid food of Christ, we are at least not inventing when we suggest that the group of those who "fall away" are not the average readers of the epistle, nor average Christians, but are in fact a class of teachers who by their willful, apostate teaching are harming the church, threatening her spiritual devotion to Christ and their growth in the knowledge of him.

## 7. Conclusions

The way that pastors and theologians apply these tremendous words of Jesus has equally tremendous pastoral implications for the trembling souls of bruised reeds and smoldering wicks. On the account offered in this essay, it should be no small encouragement to God's people that the Lord so cares for his flock, warning as he does all those who would presume to exercise authority in teaching and

shepherding his people. The Lord calls his people through his Spirit and Word, in the proclamation of the gospel, to his Son, Jesus. Those who, for whatever reason, lead his people away from Jesus as offered by the Spirit in the gospel, expose themselves to the eternal wrath of God. In this way, God ensures that these ravenous wolves will not go unpunished.

Secondly, the Christian can take heart that he is not in danger of committing this particular sin and by doing so putting himself out of the reach of God's grace. Upon this account, the grace of God is safeguarded for all those who believe on Christ, as well as for those who are called, by the gospel, to Christ. The grace of Christ is sufficient for all manner and degree of sin. No sinner, no matter how great, should fear that Christ will say no, for "everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him, should have eternal life" (John 6:40).

On the other hand, neither do we remove the legitimate warnings of the gospel. There are many people who have never committed the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit who nevertheless will not be forgiven their sins. Hardness of heart and impenitence to the end bring a man under the eternal judgment of God. There are those whom the Lord hardens in their unbelief; and often the Lord gives men over to their sins and they perish in them. None of these are the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of which Christ speaks in Matthew 12:22-32, but all of them are deserving of God's judgment. The key difference between these sins and the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is that all these may yet be forgiven in this life and pertain to all manner of Christians, sheep and shepherds alike. Not so the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is the willful, knowing, and malignant rejection of the Spirit's testimony of Christ in the gospel by false teachers within the church, who by their error lead men astray from Christ. This will not be forgiven either in this life or in the one to come.

Finally, it may also be that this teaching stands as an additional call to the church's shepherds to be ever vigilant in keeping watch over the flock. Not only do false teachers incur the wrath of God, but those who follow them also share in their judgment. God calls his ministers to be "watchmen" who blow the trumpet when danger approaches. Their duty is to the sheep, not the wolves. Of course, this calling entails a good deal of unpleasant controversy. Nevertheless, for the sake of sparing the flock, we must not fear controversy for the sake of the gospel. While we must not seek it, when it comes, we must do our duty and engage it. We might remember the words of J. Gresham Machen, who wrote:

In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least



worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.<sup>50</sup>

Today, the church is presented with very serious threats, not simply from without, but most notably from within. It necessary now, more than ever, to recognize the nature of those who seek to destroy the church from within her own walls, no matter how nice, polite, and “Christianly” they might appear to be. Jesus words teach us, with holy fear, to regard these teachers for what they are: wolves that will not spare the flock. True shepherds are called to love the sheep with their lives, and to fiercely oppose the wolves.

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50. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1923), 1.