

# Objections

From time to time, I have been asking you, reader, how you would sum up what I have described as ‘the seeming work of God’ this past 2000 years. It is pretty obvious what my view is – more of a tragedy than a triumph. And I think the evidence I have offered is convincing.

Wait a minute, says the objector. All this is very fine, but...

In this chapter, I want to examine some common objections made against my thesis,<sup>1</sup> objections made on the basis of Scripture.

## **Objection 1**

Since Christ promised:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18)...

...can we not expect to see the church advancing, growing, conquering, triumphant throughout this age?

Let us pause and take stock. Clearly, Christ used an illustration – city gates – when he says that ‘the gates of hell [Hades, death]’ will not prevail against the church (the *ekklēsia*). Hades, as I have indicated, means death. Death will never be able to prevent the *ekklēsia* from carrying out its ministry. And the principal part of that ministry is to enable believers to edify each other (Rom. 12:3-8; 15:14; 1 Cor. 1:4-7; 12:4-31; 14:1-40; Gal. 6:1-2,10; Eph. 4:1-16; 1 Thess. 5:11,14; Heb. 10:24-25; 1 Pet. 2:2-5; 4:10-11; Jude 20-23, for instance),<sup>2</sup> and promote their mutual transformation by the Spirit into Christ’s likeness (Rom. 8:28-30; 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:17-18; Eph. 4:12-16; Phil. 3:10;

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<sup>1</sup> I say ‘my thesis’ only in the sense that this is my conviction, that which I have put forward in this book. I do not, for a moment, pretend that I invented this view, or that I am the only one to hold it.

<sup>2</sup> See my *The Priesthood*.

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Col. 3:10; 1 John 2:6; 4:17). Death will not be able to stop that; death will not have the last word. Indeed, there is more: the *ekklēsia* will be used of God to preach the gospel, in the fullest sense of the word ‘preach’ – both publicly and privately (Acts 20:20) – as the means whereby sinners (that is, elect sinners) might be saved (1 Cor. 1:17-18; 2 Cor. 5:19 – 6:2, for instance) and thus released from the grip and dominion of death. And Christ meant ‘death’ both physically and spiritually.<sup>3</sup>

Christ was not promising that the *ekklēsia* will be a massive, conquering power in the world; rather, it will never be stopped in its God-determined purpose for saints and sinners. God will always maintain the gospel through the *ekklēsia*, whatever Satanic defences are set up against it. Hades, death, will not be able to hold the elect in its grip.

This is true physically. Christ, the firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:20) rose from the dead; that is, he rose physically from the dead. Christ died, yes, but death could not hold him. As Robert Lowry put it:

*Death cannot keep his prey,  
Jesus, my Saviour!  
He tore the bars away,  
Jesus my Lord!*

Consequently, as Paul argued, and argued at length, believers, individually, are certain to rise from the dead, rise physically (1

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<sup>3</sup> A city without gates is unprotected, and easily plundered. Take God’s prophecy against Kedar and Hazor: ‘A nation at ease, that dwells securely, declares the LORD, that has no gates or bars, that dwells alone. Their camels shall become plunder, their herds of livestock a spoil. I will scatter to every wind those who cut the corners of their hair, and I will bring their calamity from every side of them, declares the LORD’ (Jer. 49:31-32). Again, God’s prophecy against Gog: ‘You will devise an evil scheme and say: “I will go up against the land of un-walled villages. I will fall upon the quiet people who dwell securely, all of them dwelling without walls, and having no bars or gates”, to seize spoil and carry off plunder’ (Ezek. 38:10-12). See also Deut. 3:5; Zech. 2:4.

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Cor. 15). Death's gates will not be able to maintain its grip on the dead.

But Christ's promise extends to spiritual death as well as to physical death.

Believers, like all men (Eph. 2:1-3), were born dead in sins, dead spiritually. But, when they are regenerated by the Spirit (John 1:11-13; 3:3-8; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:2-3,23), they repent and trust the Redeemer – they pass from death to life:

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

We know that we have passed out of death into life (1 John 3:14).

Hades, death, cannot hold the elect spiritually.<sup>4</sup> The Spirit is far too strong for the gates of Hades to keep the elect captive.

As Christ, linking the spiritual and the physical, made clear:

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:25-29).

And all is in Christ. As Isaac Watts expressed it:

*Jesus, we bless your Father's name;  
Your God and ours are both the same;  
What heav'nly blessings from his throne  
Flow down to sinners through his Son!*

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<sup>4</sup> See Kevin DeYoung: 'A Closer Look at the Gates of Hell' (Gospel Coalition).

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*'Christ be my first elect', he said,  
Then chose our souls in Christ our head,  
Before he gave the mountains birth...*

In short, Matthew 16:18 does not tell us that the *ekklēsia* will become a triumphant world-power. Rather, it is Christ's categorical assurance that the devil and all the hosts of hell will not be able to withstand the Spirit's edification of the saints, nor his power to call sinners by the gospel. The elect will hear the word, they will heed it, and the elect – every last one of them – will be saved. And in the last day, every one of the elect will be raised from the dead physically to enter Christ's everlasting kingdom at his appearing. Christ's promise in Matthew 16:18 has nothing to do with any millennial kingdom.

### **Objection 2**

Since Christ promised:

I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20)...

...and since Christ always keeps his promise, surely this must mean that my thesis must be wrong.

Not at all! Christ, of course, always keeps his promise: 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matt. 28:20), but this does not mean that the *ekklēsia* will never be invaded, that false teachers will not infiltrate themselves into the *ekklēsia*, that absolutely pristine, holiness and discipline will always be maintained in the *ekklēsia* throughout the age. Glance again at what we have seen of the early days of the new covenant. But, notwithstanding all the failures, mistakes – and, even sins – along the way, Christ is always with, in and among his true disciples, he will preserve and edify his saints, and all the elect will be saved. Christ will ensure it; as he made clear:

This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day (John 6:39-40).

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In particular, of his earthly ministry, as he said to his Father in prayer:

I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word... While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world (John 17:6,12-16; see John 18:8-9).

And this applies no less to his present mediatorial ministry (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 9:24). Christ's promise ensures it:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

But as far as false teachers (touting their false gospel) are concerned, Matthew 28:20 does not mean that the *ekklēsia* will always keep itself clear of error. As I have shown, false teachers and their invasion of the *ekklēsia* caused Paul huge sorrow, and much of the letters he wrote is taken up with combating such men and their lies. And we have Christ's rebukes of various assemblies as recorded in Revelation 2 and 3.

### ***Objection 3***

But, says an objector, Paul is adamant:

The church (*ekklēsia*) of the living God [is] a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

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If – since – this so, runs the objection, how can the history of the *ekklēsia* be dismissed as a tragedy?

But I am not ‘dismissing’ the *ekklēsia*. Not at all. Nevertheless, I stand by the claim that *Christendom has wreaked havoc on the ekklēsia, and given most believers a false impression of what the ekklēsia is supposed to be*. Indeed, Christendom has done immense harm to the world’s concept of Christ and the gospel. And, after all, we know that what people *perceive* as the truth is, in reality, more important than the truth itself. In other words, most believers (let alone the men of the world) really do imagine that what Christendom presents as the *ekklēsia* really is the *ekklēsia*; for most believers, their local church, the place where they ‘worship God’, and the people who meet there – give-or-take a few minor hiccoughs – really is what the New Testament means by the *ekklēsia*. And anyone with the temerity (or, as some would say, the audacity, the madness) to question this is automatically written off as a crank<sup>5</sup> or heretic.<sup>6</sup>

In any case, let’s look at Paul’s assertion. Yes, ‘the church of the living God [is] a pillar and buttress of the truth’ (1 Tim. 3:15); that is what he wrote. But which church is this? Is it The Reformed Baptist Church in Staunch-Standing-In-The-Marsh, or The Jolly Evangelical Community-Fellowship in Much-Excitement-On-The-Stage, or The Just-Compare-Our-Mall-Specials-Temple (You Have to Taste the Coffee to Believe It!), or The Wobbly Presbyterian Church in Muddle-Over-Edge, or The Fourteenth Ultra Reformed Presbyterian Church of some American metropolis, or The Miniscule Continuing Orthodox 1647 Reformed Church of The Outer Isles? Or is it one of the ‘great’ denominations? Or is it The Roman Catholic Church?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A crank is a person who has strange ideas and behaves in strange ways. Or is considered such. A nutcase, an oddity, an oddball, whacky...

<sup>6</sup> I wonder if you can detect a personal note in this?

<sup>7</sup> Even such an enthusiastic convert as Stephen K. Ray admitted: ‘No one claims the [Roman] Catholic Church has been perfect’ (Ray p43). Nevertheless, he still maintained that ‘the sacred tradition of the [Roman] Catholic Church’ is ‘the pillar and foundation of the truth’.

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Which Confession shall we take as definitive? Westminster, Heidelberg, Savoy, London, Philadelphia, Rome?

Until we can be given the definitive answer to such questions – and the stubborn fact remains that no such body exists about which we can all be persuaded is ‘the church’ – I remain unconvinced. And to talk about ‘the true church’, ‘the invisible church’, is, as I have argued, nothing but a cop out. We are talking about truth, practical truth, not some abstract, theoretical, ethereal notion of truth. The point is, we need to know – boots on the ground – which church we are talking about *in a real, actual, practical, day-to-day sense*. Where is the church – which for the last 2000 years – has remained ‘a pillar and buttress of the truth’? None of the churches of the New Testament, even though most might have been founded by an apostle, fits the bill.

And those who gloss 1 Timothy 3:15 to make it read that ‘the church of the living God [should be] a pillar and buttress of the truth’ are simply rewriting Scripture in light of experience – the reverse of what evangelicals claim they do! Moreover, they are actually confirming my point for me!

The best I can suggest is to say that the overwhelming version of the truth that this world receives is that which it receives from ‘the church’; that is, Christendom. And that, if my thesis is right, shows just how desperate things have become. Even before Christendom was invented, false teachers were infesting the *ekklēsia*, and ruining the gospel. The invention of Christendom – far from countering this tendency – reinforced it, and continues to do so. What a dismal prospect for the world! With rare exceptions, the only gospel they hear and see is Christendom’s version! And that thought has given me a sense of urgency in producing this present publication.<sup>8</sup>

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‘Believers must listen to the Church. The Church will have [that is, has] the power to make decisions that are binding upon... believers’, meaning ‘the Roman Catholic Church’ has that power (Ray pp32-34).

<sup>8</sup> I confess that my suggestion is exceedingly weak. Whether or not Peter had this verse in mind when he wrote 2 Pet. 3:16, I don’t know,

**Objection 4**

Did Paul not claim that God always gave him – and, by extension, gave all preachers, all believers – a triumphant voyage? After all, he clearly stated:

Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession (2 Cor. 2:14).

Taking up the word ‘clearly’ – clearly Paul was using an illustration to make his point in his second letter to the Corinthians. Not wishing to extend my book, I simply state that, as the context makes plain,<sup>9</sup> Paul was here dealing with false teachers, the *pseudadelphoi*, the so-called super-apostles, and at this stage in his letter, he has just opened his case against these men and their teaching. Surprising as it may seem, the note he wished to strike was one of weakness. And having raised the subject of weakness, throughout the rest of the letter he can never break free of it, and move on. Of course not; for the apostle, this personal weakness was a major part of his response to the *pseudadelphoi*.<sup>10</sup>

In the illustration, the big picture is clear. There is triumph, certainly. Roman generals, on their return to Rome following a great victory in battle, were favoured with a triumphal procession through the city. And the conquered-slaves – especially the bigwigs among them – were included in the parade in order to enhance the glory of the conqueror-general. They were not there sharing in their conqueror’s triumph; they were there to bring glory to the general. He had conquered them. Paul used that picture to illustrate the new-covenant ministry of believers. Christ is the one who is triumphant. That, of course, needs no proof. But what gave Paul comfort was the

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but it certainly describes my experience. Nevertheless, triumphalists will have their work cut out to find a convincing explanation of the passage.

<sup>9</sup> See my *False*.

<sup>10</sup> I intend to produce a work on this very issue, and leave my full arguments to that time.



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knowledge that believers in their weakness are included Christ's triumphant procession.

But the all-important question is this: where do believers appear in the procession? Are they standing alongside the general in the general's chariot, graciously bowing this way and that, chests puffed, arrogantly granting the royal wave from side to side in acknowledgement of the plaudits of the crowd? Or do they make up the stumbling, bedraggled chain-gang of conquered slaves, mocked by the watching mob, only having a place in the procession as part of the general's treasure and adding to his glory?

The various Scripture versions do not agree where the emphasis should fall.

The KJV, for instance, which historically has wielded such a massive influence – and still does for many<sup>11</sup> – lays it squarely on the believer's triumph:

Now thanks be unto God, which always causes<sup>12</sup> us to triumph in Christ, and makes<sup>13</sup> manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.

So does the NASB:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us reveals the fragrance of the knowledge of him in every place.

Both are wrong.

The Christian Standard Bible and the Holman Standard both leave it open.

Other versions, however, get it unequivocally right:

NIV (2011):

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Peter Masters: 'Dispersing Gloomy Seasons of the Soul (2)'.

<sup>12</sup> Original 'causeth'.

<sup>13</sup> Original 'maketh'.

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But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.

Berean Standard Bible:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us triumphantly as captives in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.

New Living Translation:

But thank God! He has made us his captives and continues to lead us along in Christ's triumphal procession. Now he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume.

Good News:

But thanks be to God! For in union with Christ we are always led by God as prisoners in Christ's victory procession. God uses us to make the knowledge about Christ spread everywhere like a sweet fragrance.

Colossians 2:15 is the only other place where the word *thriambeuō*, 'lead in triumph', is used in Scripture, and its use in that verse makes the point:

[Christ] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

As Charles Ellicott commented:

There is absolutely no authority for the factitive meaning [that is, 'causes'] given to the verb in the English [Authorised or King James] version. In Colossians 2:15, it is translated rightly 'triumphing over them in it'. It is obvious, too, that the true rendering gives a much more characteristic thought. It would be unlike... Paul to speak of himself as the triumphant commander of God's great army.

This does not exhaust the illustration. The chained slaves trudging in the procession were, in fact, trudging to their

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slaughter. And that, in order to add to the glory of their conqueror.<sup>14</sup>

Paul brought out his meaning by a second illustration; namely, that of an odour, an aroma, a fragrance – or, not to be squeamish about it – a smell:

Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life (2 Cor. 2:14-16).

This could be a reference to the pagan offering of incense in that procession. I tend to the view, however, that, as so often with Paul, this a case of where he was never worried about mixing his metaphors, muddling his illustrations. As long as he could drive home his spiritual meaning, literary concerns meant little or nothing to him.<sup>15</sup> Pedantic publishing rules (if there had been any in those days) would have been of no concern – as long as his readers and hearers got the message. (Now *there's* a lesson for all preachers – and Christian writers – today!) Here is a case in point; the apostle moved seamlessly from a Roman procession to the levitical priesthood and the offering of sacrifices. Indeed, the idea of a sweet odour – sweet to God that is, however repugnant the smell might be to man – pre-dates even the old covenant:

Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And... the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma (Gen. 8:20-21).

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<sup>14</sup> Many disagree, and think that Paul was speaking of his triumph. They include John Calvin, John Gill and John MacArthur.

<sup>15</sup> Take Eph. 4:14-16. Paul tells believers to grow up, not be corks on the sea at the mercy of tide and wind, duped by schemers, so that they can play an active role in the building of a healthy body. Take 1 Thess. 5:1-11. Talking of the second coming of Christ, Paul speaks of the coming of a thief, a woman in labour, staying awake and sober, prepared for battle clothed in armour.

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As for the old covenant itself, references are legion. Here is a sample:

You shall cut the ram into pieces, and wash its entrails and its legs, and put them with its pieces and its head, and burn the whole ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the LORD. It is a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the LORD (Ex. 29:17-18).

Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD... It is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD (Lev. 1:8-9,13).

When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD (Lev. 2:1-2).

You shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, and one bull from the herd and two rams. They shall be a burnt offering to the LORD, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD (Lev. 23:18).

What about the new covenant? We know that believers have to be:

...imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:1-2).

Acts of mutual love between believers come into it:

I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (Phil. 4:18).

And the old-covenant principle can be clearly seen in:

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...because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:15-16).

This, I think, is the background to, and the meaning of, Paul's use of the illustration. This is what he thanks God for:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us triumphantly as captives in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.

Why did Paul use such illustrations? What was he saying? And why? Never forget the context! As I have explained, he was opening his extended case against the *pseudadelphoi*. He felt obliged to compare himself and his ministry with that of the *pseudadelphoi* – the super-apostles, as they were known (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11) – with their bragging, dictatorial ways. That is why he pictured himself among the conquered slaves. The inference is unmissable: the super-apostles pictured themselves as, and acted as though they were, standing in the conqueror's chariot; Paul, however, was trudging along with the conquered.

In short, 2 Corinthians 2:14 enforces the notion of weakness, even (in human terms) of tragedy or failure. There is triumph, but that triumph belongs solely to God. Believers are conquerors – indeed, they 'are more than conquerors through him who loved' them (Rom. 8:37), and 'thanks be to God, who gives us [them] victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 15:57), but the conqueror is Christ. Moreover, look at the context of Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15 and you cannot miss the catalogue of suffering, weakness, loss, pain and death; the victory celebration is yet to be – at the return of Christ. And not until then!

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What a pessimistic book this is, to be sure! Well... yes and no. All is not gloom and despair. Far from it. We know the narrative must end in TRIUMPH. It will!

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And that takes us to the next section and chapter.