



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 62 (September 2010)

Target: Historical Evangelical Christianity

Jude 3

THE LAST TWO ISSUES OF TOTT WERE actually a precursor to this one (if you haven't already read those, I would encourage you to do so before continuing here).¹ In them we briefly considered the Reformation and the five tenets of that event, that is, the five "solas," which can be summarized thusly:

It is *Scripture* alone that declares that salvation comes by *grace* alone, through *faith* alone, in *Christ* alone, by which *God* alone is glorified.

As we also noted, so pivotal, so essential, so axiomatic are these truths that neither the Reformation nor Christianity itself can in any way be understood apart from them. These are, in fact, the very pillars of Christianity.

Jude 3 **exhort[s]** us to **earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints**. The word **faith** is not a verb here; that is, it's not describing the *action* of faith. Rather, it is a noun referring to the body of revealed truth that constitutes *Historical Evangelical Christianity*. This doesn't mean an entire system of theology on which we all can agree; that would be impossible. Rather it refers to the unique revelation of God through Christ. Specifically, this body of truth is the very essence of the Gospel, the redemption by blood and salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (cf. Rom. 1:16–17), and it is upon that we *must* agree.

First and foremost, this faith is *historical*. The words **once delivered** show this historical aspect. Literally translated this phrase reads, "Once-for-all delivered" and, of course, is referring to the preaching and teaching of the Apostles as the historical base of our faith (Acts 2:42).

Even more instructive is the meaning of the word **delivered**. The Greek *paradidōmi* carries the basic meaning "to

hand over; deliver up," but when used in a context such as Jude, it means "to hand down, pass on instruction from teacher to pupil" and also "conveys the idea of handing down tradition."² Other examples of this idea are found elsewhere in Scripture (1 Cor. 11:2; 11:23; 15:3).

So our faith is historical. We can look at many religions, cults, systems, and "faiths," but not one of them is historical, that is, based on historical fact and historical event, except Christianity. Our faith is not mystical, hypothetical, or philosophical. It is historical! It is based upon the historical event of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Second, this faith is *evangelical*. This term refers to believing in what we call the "evangel," a word that describes "the Gospel message." "Gospel" is *euangellion*, which literally means "good message" (or good news; English "evangelism" and "evangel"). W. E. Vine defines it perfectly, "The good tidings of the Kingdom of God and of salvation through Christ." It is also interesting to observe that even though Jude did not write about salvation *directly* (as he intended), he nonetheless writes about it *indirectly*. He writes about contending for the **faith**, but what faith? The Gospel message, the glorious salvation in Jesus Christ.

Third, this faith is *Christianity*. This is self-explanatory. Christianity is not only *implied* here in verse 3 but it is *stated* in verse 4, "The only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ."

Jude, therefore, declares that we must **earnestly contend** for this historic faith. Those two words are a single word in the Greek, *epagōnizomai*, which appears only here in the New Testament. The root *agōn* (English *agony*) means "strife, contention, [a] contest for victory."³ It, along with the verb *agōnizomai*, originally referred to the fighting and struggle involved in the Greek games. By adding the prefix *epi* ("for"),

Jude is telling us that we must fight *for* the faith. Like Paul in Ephesians 6:10–20, Jude uses graphic imagery to show us the spiritual war in which we are engaged, an all-out agonizing war that gives no quarter to error or those who propagate it.

Why does Jude **exhort** (*parakaleō*, the act of comforting and encouraging, as well as addressing someone with exhortation, entreaty, and instruction) us to **earnestly contend for the faith**? *Because of apostasy*, which sets the stage for the remainder of the letter. Likewise, as never before, Christians today need to **contend for the faith**.

With this text ever on my mind, I recently began considering various trends within the church that have occurred since the Reformation. I began to wonder what each of those movements actually attacked and found something very interesting, not to mention disturbing. I discovered, in fact, that through the centuries it has consistently been those very doctrines of the Reformation that have been repeatedly attacked by trend after trend, movement after movement, heresy upon heresy. I also realized that this fact makes perfect sense, for these pillars must be torn down before any false teaching can begin building its imitation.

With that in mind, let us again observe a little history and note some of those trends and how they attacked the foundation of **the faith which was once delivered unto the saints**.

The Council of Trent

On the very heels of the Reformation came the first attack upon its doctrines at the Council of Trent, which met in three sessions (1545–47, 1551–52, and 1562–63). One historian puts it well: “*Everything* the Protestant Reformation stood for was vigorously—one could almost say violently—rejected at Trent” (emphasis added).⁴ As noted in the quotations we cited in our last TOTT, *sola fide* was especially targeted by Trent, *sola gratia* was redefined, and *Solus Christus* was blasphemously perverted in the Mass. As we have irrefutably demonstrated, to insist that Roman Catholicism is Christianity, as many do today, is ludicrous in the extreme.

The Roman Inquisition

If Trent was the *roar* of the beast, The Inquisition was its *teeth*. Actually beginning before Trent, any open profession of Protestantism in Italy was suppressed. Those who did not flee were subject to imprisonment, torture, and death. The Inquisition also introduced an “Index” listing prohibited books, which included every word the Reformers wrote, as well as all Protestant Bibles. “There was no appeal to the Word of God,” writes one historian, “no turning to the old paths, no repentance from dead works, and no belief in the basic doctrine of justification by faith.”⁵ The tenets of the Reformation, and Biblical Christianity itself, were an enemy to be banned, burned, and buried.

James Arminius

Before dealing specifically with James Arminius (1560–1609), it’s essential to go back in time even further. As also noted in our last TOTT, Erasmus was seriously flawed concerning the human will, but the roots of that go back to a man

named Pelagius (c. 360–420), a British monk and theologian. In his view of salvation, he believed each person has the same “free will” that Adam had and, therefore, is able to choose good or evil for himself. He said this is possible because each person is created separately and uncontaminated by the sin of Adam (cf. 1 Cor. 15:22). Sin, therefore, is a matter of *will*, not *nature*. It’s just as easy, he insisted, for a man to choose good as it is evil. Why, then, we must ask, is there so much sin? Pelagius maintained that the reason is not a corruption of the will by original sin, but rather by the simple weakness of human flesh. The obvious problem with that, of course, is: from where does the weakness of human flesh come?

After the resounding defeat of Pelagius’ views at the Council of Ephesus in 431, John Cassianus (c.360–435) tried to find a compromise. While he taught that all men are sinful because of the fall, and the fall *weakened* the will, he still, like Pelagius, rejected that the fall totally corrupted the will, that it instead is partially free and can, therefore, cooperate with divine grace in salvation, which is precisely what Erasmus would argue 1,000 years later. The Semi-Pelagian maxim, therefore, was, “It is mine to be willing to believe, and it is the part of God’s grace to assist.” While these views were condemned at the Synod⁶ of Orange in 529, it is very enlightening to note one historian’s comment: “[Cassianus’] doctrine lay somewhere between that of Augustine and that of Pelagius (hence called Semi-Pelagian) *and was not essentially different from the accepted Catholic doctrine.*”⁷ What is Roman Catholicism? It is Semi-Pelagianism, plain and simple. *And that is what some evangelicals want to defend?!*

Which brings us to Arminius, who became the spokesman for several ministers in Holland who (like many today) did not like the historic Doctrines of Sovereign Grace. Reluctant to make his views public, Arminius finally agreed to do so at a national synod. He died, however, nine years before it was called in 1618. His followers, therefore, presented his views in a five-point statement, called the “Remonstrance” (protest, opposition). While many today passionately blast away at the so-called “five points of Calvinism,” it is *historical fact* that it was actually the “five points of Arminius” that came *first* and *attacked the orthodox doctrines of sovereign grace that had stood for centuries*. (Please read that last sentence again.) In essence, the Remonstrance stated:

- While man did inherit Adam’s sin and is under God’s wrath, he is still able to initiate his salvation after God grants him grace to cooperate.
- God’s election had “its foundation in the foreknowledge of God.” Therefore, election is conditional on man’s acceptance.
- Christ’s death did not actually save but only made salvation *possible* to those who believe.
- While God’s grace is needed, God doesn’t draw man effectually, rather man believes only in his power and can resist the Holy Spirit’s call.
- Finally, God gives believers the ability to win out over all sin and not fall from grace, but Scripture also seems to indicate that it is possible for a believer to fall away from salvation.

That is the full-blown Arminian system; it that rejects true sovereign grace to such an extent that grace can be gained, lost, and regained on the whim of man's will. How unthinkable! We repeat: is that what evangelicals should defend?

Once again, however—and for the third time in history—these views were thoroughly trounced, this time at the Synod of Dort in 1618. Of the 130 present, only 13 defended these views. Now, is it not instructive that on three separate occasions false doctrine on the exact same subject was rejected? If we may repeat: *three times* men tried to water down the Gospel of Sovereign Grace, and three times those who wanted a pure Gospel did **earnestly contend for the faith which was once [for all] delivered to the saints**. “No,” those champions of faith cried, “it is all of God!” It is not the doctrine of Arminius and his followers that is Historic Christianity. *It is the doctrine of Sovereign Grace that has stood through the ages as the core truth of the Christian faith.*

In spite of all the biblical and historical evidence, however, it is happening once again! Sadly, proving something wrong doesn't make it go away, and the same was true of Arminianism. On the contrary, Arminianism entrenched itself into theological thought. In his Introduction to Luther's classic, *The Bondage of the Will*, J. I. Packer wrote: “The present-day Evangelical Christian has semi-Pelagianism in his blood.”⁸ Indeed, countless evangelicals hold the Arminian view because they fail to stop and just think what the words “for by grace are you saved” really mean. Arminianism (historically and today) is nothing but warmed-over Roman Catholicism, with which we can have absolutely no compromise, regardless of what many “evangelicals” are saying to the contrary. While there are a few who are standing and condemning this fourth attack, their voices are being overpowered by the sheer mass of Arminian preachers and teachers who sell Jesus like they sell shoes, tell people to “walk the aisle” and “say this prayer,” elevate man's “self-esteem,” and have turned the Gospel into just another commodity to market.

The Age of Reason

While also referred to as The Enlightenment, the title “Age of Reason” better summarizes the era from 1648–1789. While the noted philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1894) was not one of its early pioneers, he was nonetheless a major proponent and provides us with what is probably the best definition of that age:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] “Have courage to use your own understanding!”—that is the motto of enlightenment.⁹

In a key turning point in the history of philosophy, and even Theology itself, *reason* ultimately trumps *revelation*. Commenting on Kant's definition, one writer puts it well:

Inasmuch as Christianity is by its very nature a religion

of divine revelation, one that presupposes that human reason needs guidance and in fact is guided by God's revelation, it is apparent that Kant's principle is totally incompatible with Christianity.¹⁰

So, which tenet of the Reformation was at stake here? *Sola scriptura*, the “formal principle,” of course. No longer was the *revelation* of the *Creator* our starting point and authority, rather the *reason* of the *creature* was now the beginning and end of all things. Once revelation is thrown out, game over.

Now, we might be tempted to think here, “Ah, well, that was just the world; the church was a different matter.” Oh, if only that were true! As Francis Schaeffer writes:

The teachings of the Enlightenment became widespread in the various faculties of the German universities, and *theological* rationalism became an identifiable entity in the eighteenth century. Then gradually this came to full flood through the German theological faculties during the nineteenth century. Thus, though the Reformation had rid the church of the humanistic elements which had come into the Middle Ages [via the Renaissance, *ed.*], a more total form of humanism entered the Protestant church, and has gradually spread to all the branches of the church (emphasis in the original).¹¹

As the Enlightenment continued, the doctrines of Historical Evangelical Christianity were diluted, denied, and denounced wholesale in venue after venue. One of the first casualties of German rationalism was the doubting of the historical text of Scripture. Led by one German rationalist after another—Johann A. Bengel (1687–1752), Johann J. Griesbach (1745–1812), J. S. Semler (1725–91), Samuel P. Tregellas (1813–1875), etc.—Lower (Textual) Criticism rejected the historic (providentially preserved) text and went in search of the “authentic text,” which could only be discovered by reason, not revelation. For these men, and many others who followed, *sola scriptura* was an outdated idea of the Reformation and certainly not relevant in the Age of Reason. So persuasive were those teachers, that even that great defender of the faith, B. B. Warfield (1851–1921), was swayed after studying textual criticism under German rationalists.¹²

With its *text* successfully challenged, the next casualty was Scripture's *historicity*. This was the full-blown Higher (Historical) Criticism, fueled again by the Enlightenment's German rationalism and helmed by such men as: Heinrich Paulus (1761–1851), Karl Graf (1815–1869), Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891), Julius Welhausen (1844–1918), and others. Miracles were now denied, historical facts were challenged, and even something as easily verifiable as the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch was rejected. By now *sola scriptura* was barely even a memory from the long ago days of “naïve and childish authoritarianism.” Man was now “enlightened” and could think for himself.

Most tragic of all, however, *Christianity has never escaped the Age of Reason*. Just as the Renaissance tried to blend together Aristotle with Christianity (via Thomas Aquinas), so others blended together the rationalism of the Enlightenment, and once that batter was mixed, there was no separating the ingredients.

Charles Finney

The 19th-century so-called “revivalist” Charles Finney has become virtually the “patron saint” of modern evangelism and founder of pragmatism. His errors, however, are almost unimaginable. Finney was, in fact, no less than a full-blown Pelagian; he rejected the Doctrines of Grace in their entirety, along with any semblance of orthodoxy; he denied original sin, the substitutionary atonement, justification, and the need for regeneration by the Holy Spirit. He also invented the modern staple of evangelism that we call the “altar call,” in which he would pressure people to “make a decision for Jesus,” “a commitment to Christ,” and other clichés we have adopted as though they were based on Scripture. “Finneyism” is, in fact, one of the biggest contributors to today’s predominantly Arminian theology. Since doctrine always works itself out in practice, the practice of Arminianism demonstrates its serious doctrinal errors. In the end, Finney’s methods were an abject failure. Out of thousands of “conversions,” by his own admission, true conversions were very few. And again, the sad fact is that Evangelicalism is still suffering from Finneyism.

Modern Trends

It goes without saying that every cult and false religion in the world rejects the foundational doctrines of the Reformation. Without a single exception, the five *solas* and the historical Doctrines of Sovereign Grace are nowhere to be found in any such false system. When those pillars are removed, no truth remains, and anything goes.

But far more subtle and devastating is what has continued to occur in Evangelicalism. In more recent history, a pivotal moment came in 1982 with the publication of Robert Schuller’s atrocity, *Self Esteem: A New Reformation*, which planted the seed for what has today become the wholesale undoing of the Reformation. In that work, he attacks the very core of Reformation Theology by writing, “Classical [i.e., Reformation] theology has erred in its insistence that theology be ‘God-centered,’ not ‘man-centered.’”¹³ In his unimaginable arrogance (pardon my bluntness), Schuller clearly states that all those godly reformers were wrong in starting with God, while he is right in starting with man and building a “theology” with man’s self-esteem at the core. He adds that Reformation Theology “failed to make clear that the core of sin is a lack of self-esteem” (p. 98), and that the Reformers were “rampantly reckless in assaulting the dignity of the person” (first paragraph of fly-leaf). Instead, Schuller insists, “What we need is a Theology of salvation that begins and ends with a recognition of every person’s hunger for glory” (pp. 26–27).

Is all this not the rhetoric of the Enlightenment, which latched on like a leech in the 17th-century and has never let go, and which continues to suck the blood out of Christianity?

Traveling the path that Schuller himself walked—for again, Schuller was really nothing new, just a new twist on an old theme—there is Rick Warren, and many others who parrot him. Warren, in fact, who by his own admission was greatly influenced by Schuller’s philosophy of appealing to unbelievers in the church, is a graduate of Schuller’s “Institute for Church Growth,” and shuns preaching on sin and repentance.

Joel Osteen is even worse and prides himself in never mentioning sin, calling himself an “encourager,” not someone who “condemns” anyone.

Are we just making all this up? Hardly. As has been recently reported by several sources, University of Virginia sociologist James Hunter reports that 35% of evangelical seminarians deny that faith in Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation. It has also been reported in polls conducted by George Gallup and George Barna that 35% of the entire adult Evangelical population agrees with the statement: “God will save all good people when they die, regardless of whether they have trusted in Christ.” Do you see what has happened? We have jettisoned the very core of Scripture, Christ Himself, *Solus Christus*. One poll goes on to conclude:

Many committed born again Christians believe that people have multiple options for gaining entry to Heaven. They are saying, in essence, “Personally, I am trusting Jesus Christ as my means of gaining God’s permanent favor and a place in Heaven—but someone else could get to Heaven based upon living an exemplary life.” Millions of Americans have redefined grace to mean that God is so eager to save people from Hell that He will change His nature and universal principles for their individual benefit. It is astounding how many people develop their faith according to their feelings or cultural assumptions rather than biblical teachings.¹⁴

Another shocking, though not surprising, statistic is that 77% of American evangelicals believe that human beings are basically good by nature. This is certainly understandable; after all, salvation is not really a big issue if sin isn’t a big problem. This underscores again how Pelagianism and Arminianism, while defeated and shown to be heresy several times in church history, have entrenched themselves into Christian thinking. No longer is salvation by *faith alone* in *Christ alone*, but comes by many means, which is nothing but the old teaching called Universalism.

Conclusion: Christianity’s Core

As Ephesians 2:4–10 declares, salvation is the work of God *alone*. Man’s input is nowhere to be found in that passage, as is also true of Romans 8:29–30. God *alone* is acting, and it is for this reason that we say the Doctrines of Grace are the very core of Christianity, Christianity in its purest form, but have repeatedly been attacked because men simply don’t like them. Throughout the history of the church these doctrines have been the real power of Christianity. Why? Compare the Doctrines of Grace to *any* religion. Not one of them speaks this way because they are all of man. *Only the Doctrines of Grace emphasize that salvation is all of God, and are always the first doctrines to be jettisoned by the false teacher.*

At the risk of being redundant, the pivotal nature of these doctrines simply cannot be overstated. To reject them is to reject the very core, heart, and soul of Christianity. Here is the typical view of our day, which comes from a reviewer of one of Dr. Steve Lawson’s books on this subject. Please be warned—we’re going to encounter that really “scary” term that upsets so many people nowadays, *Calvinism*: “At various

points in the book, [Lawson] uses terms such as ‘sound doctrine’ and ‘Biblical truth’ as if they are automatically synonymous with Calvinism, which they are certainly not!”¹⁵

That well summarizes the attitude of most of today’s church. Most people are totally clueless of our historic Christian heritage as it continues to vanish before our eyes. In stark contrast, here’s what Charles Spurgeon preached almost 150 years ago when introducing his Bible Conference on “Exposition of the Doctrines of Grace,” held on April 11, 1861:

It may happen this afternoon that the term “Calvinism” may be frequently used. Let it not be misunderstood, we only use the term for shortness. That doctrine which is called “Calvinism” did not spring from Calvin; we believe that it sprang from the great founder of all truth. . . . We use the term then, not because we impute any extraordinary importance to Calvin’s having taught these doctrines. We would be just as willing to call them by any other name, if we could find one which would be better understood, and which on the whole would be as consistent with fact.¹⁶

It is for that very reason that I personally prefer the term Doctrines of Grace, for that is what they are, and they are, indeed, true, Biblical Christianity. Spurgeon himself made this clear when he in no uncertain terms preached that these doctrines are biblical truth and Arminianism (in any form or in any degree) is the heresy:

I have heard it asserted most positively, that those high doctrines [of grace] which we love and which we find in the Scriptures, are licentious ones. I do not know who has the hardihood to make that assertion, when they consider that the holiest of men have been believers in them. I ask the man who dares to say that [these Doctrines of Grace are] a licentious religion, what he thinks of the character of Augustine, or Calvin, or Whitfield, who in successive ages were the great exponents of the system of grace; or what will he say of those Puritans, whose works are full of them? Had a man been an Arminian in those days, he would have been accounted the vilest heretic breathing; but now we are looked upon as the heretics, and they the orthodox. *We have gone back to the old school, we can trace our descent from the Apostles. . . . We can run a golden link from hence up to Jesus Christ himself, through a holy succession of mighty fathers, who all held these glorious truths; and we can say to them, where will you find holier and better men in the world?* (emphasis in the original)¹⁷

Spurgeon viewed these doctrines as the very heart of the Gospel, the one and only *true* Gospel. He wrote “that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what nowadays is called Calvinism.” He went on to comment on the words “salvation is of the Lord” in Jonah 2:9:

That is an epitome of [the Doctrines of Grace]; it is the sum and substance of [them]. If anyone should ask me what I mean by a Calvinist, I should reply, “He is one who says, Salvation is of the Lord.” I cannot find in Scripture any other doctrine than this. It is the essence of the Bible. “He only is my rock and my salvation.” Tell me anything contrary to this truth, and it will be heresy; tell me a heresy,

and I shall find its essence here, that it has departed from this great, this fundamental, this rock-truth, “God is my rock and my salvation.” What is the heresy of Rome, but the addition of something to the perfect merits of Jesus Christ—the bringing in of the works of the flesh, to assist in our justification? And what is the heresy of Arminianism but the addition of something to the work of the Redeemer? Every heresy, if brought to the touchstone, will discover itself here.¹⁸

Indeed, every heresy through the ages is rooted right there. Look at any false teaching, examine any unorthodox doctrine, consider any so-called “innovation,” and at its foundation you will find a rejection of the historic doctrines of Christianity. Dear Christian Friend, we are in dire straits. Are we going to stand for *Historical Evangelical Christianity* or join the masses who deny the very core doctrines of biblical faith?

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NOTES

- ¹ We apologize for the smaller than usual type in this article, which was necessary for a five-page limit.
- ² Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (1975, 1986), Vol. 3, pp. 772–773.
- ³ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (AMG Publishers, 1992), entry #73.
- ⁴ Bruce Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language*, 3rd Edition (Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 277.
- ⁵ S. M. Houghton, *Sketches from Church History* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), p. 61.
- ⁶ A “synod” or “council” was a meeting of various church leaders who gathered to establish church policy, determine doctrine, combat heresy, or settle other issues. The first Church Council was held in Jerusalem to combat the heresy of the Judaizers (Acts 15). Because of the dominance and corruption of Roman Catholicism, each council must be analyzed to determine its real good.
- ⁷ Elgin Moyer, *Who Was Who in Church History* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1951), p.78 (emphasis added).
- ⁸ “Historical and Theological Introduction,” *The Bondage of the Will*, p.58.
- ⁹ *Was ist Aufklärung* [“What is Enlightenment”]?—the title of Kant’s 1784 essay in the December 1784 publication of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* [Berlin Monthly].
- ¹⁰ Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church* (Hendrickson, 1998), p. 397.
- ¹¹ *How Should We Then Live?* (Fleming H. Revell, 1976), p. 175.
- ¹² See TOTT #13 and 14 for a more detailed discussion of this issue.
- ¹³ *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Word Books, 1982), p. 64.
- ¹⁴ The Barna Update, “Americans Describe Their Views About Life After Death,” October 21, 2003 (www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=150).
- ¹⁵ A reader review on Amazon.com of Steve Lawson’s book *The Expository Genius of John Calvin* (Reformation Trust, 2007).
- ¹⁶ *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 7, Sermon #385.
- ¹⁷ *The New Park Street Pulpit*, Vol. 1, sermon #22.
- ¹⁸ *C.H. Spurgeon’s Autobiography* (Passmore and Alabaster, 1897), vol. 1, p.172.

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If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our "Q & A" section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

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