

THE RED-PEN REVELATION

How Heaven Edited Clarity Out of the Holy Book



PHIL STILWELL

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Written by Phil Stilwell.

Scripture quotations are from the 2020 stable-text edition of the *World English Bible* (WEB), a public-domain modern English translation. The Koine-style Greek in the illustrated submissions was composed for this satire and is not quoted from the Bible.

This is a work of satire. Professor Jehovah, Clarus, and Contrarius are fictional characters used to examine claims about scriptural clarity. References to religious traditions are intended as concise descriptions of real doctrinal disagreements, not as claims that every member of a tradition thinks alike.

No International Standard Book Number (ISBN) has been assigned to this edition.

Reader's Guide

Each doctrine chapter begins with a picture of two clear angelic submissions that cannot both be true. A verse file then places passages used by rival readings side by side. In the conference, Jehovah shows how a fictional editor can turn that tension into a lasting fight.

Scripture quotations are from the 2020 stable-text edition of the *World English Bible*, a public-domain modern English translation. Not every pair is a direct contradiction. One text may state a broad rule while another suggests an exception. Rival readers may define a word differently, apply a rule more broadly or narrowly, or use one passage to limit another. The key question is simple: does the collection give everyone a public, reliable way to find and correct the mistaken reading?

A rule about words. Throughout the book, *faith* means belief held more strongly than the evidence supports. In that sense it is irrational, even when the belief happens to be true. Reliance supported by evidence is called *trust* or *reasonable confidence*. *Faithfulness* means loyalty. Quotations and pictured submissions keep their source wording, but this rule still applies unless the text says *faithfulness*. The book never uses *faith* as a flattering name for reasonable trust.

About the Greek. The Greek in the illustrated submissions was composed for this satire in a deliberately plain, Koine-style register. It is not quoted from the Bible and should not be treated as an ancient source or a scholarly reconstruction.

Two recurring terms. The *canon* is the collection of books a community accepts as Scripture. *Communion*, the *Eucharist*, and the *Lord's Supper* are different names used for the Christian meal of bread and wine.

How to read the verse files

The paired quotations are actual Bible verses, not rewritten church slogans. Placing them side by side does not mean that every pair is a direct contradiction. It shows the texts from which rival Christian readings build practical answers that cannot both be followed.

- **Direct clash.** One passage appears to affirm what another appears to deny.
- **Range or exception.** A broad rule sits beside a possible exception.
- **Different definition.** Rival readers keep both passages by giving key words different meanings.
- **One passage limits another.** A reader uses a broad rule such as love, avoiding harm, conscience, or good results to limit a specific ancient rule.
- **Disputed context or genre.** Readers disagree about the audience, historical setting, metaphor, or kind of writing.
- **Inference from sequence or silence.** A position depends partly on what happened first or what a story does not mention.
- **Competing authority.** The dispute includes disagreement about who has the right to settle the dispute.

The label does not decide the doctrine; it identifies how rival readings survive. The satire begins when opposite readings last, guide action, and cause harm.

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PART I — THE HEAVENLY EDITING OFFICE

A writing assignment becomes office policy: choose no doctrine, keep every
group satisfied, and call the conflict depth.

Chapter 1 — The Red Pen

The Office of Sacred Communications had no fixed place in heaven. Its walls appeared wherever someone asked an honest question and received a footnote. Clouds covered the ceiling. Polished stone covered the floor. Its shelves held every edition of every book that anyone had ever claimed to understand.

At the largest desk sat Professor Jehovah. Before him lay a red pen of such power that its corrections appeared at once in margins, sermons, and church statements.

At the smaller desk stood Clarus, a junior angel and recent graduate of the Academy of Divine Rhetoric. He had six wings, a spotless robe, and the dangerous confidence of someone who had just learned the difference between a definition and what follows from it.

Across from him stood Contrarius, his classmate and friendly rival. Contrarius was no less diligent than Clarus. He simply believed that the universe had been designed to reward a well-made objection.

“Your assignment,” said Professor Jehovah, “is to prepare a book for humanity.”

Clarus bowed. “A book explaining what they must believe and do?”

“That is the general aspiration.”

“Then we should begin where error would do the most harm,” said Contrarius. “Salvation, worship, moral conduct, membership in the community, and the way disputes are settled.”

Professor Jehovah nodded without commitment. “A promising outline. Do not allow it to become one.”

Clarus looked up. “Before we begin, does divine logic force the correct doctrines upon us? Must baptism, salvation, marriage, judgment, and authority take one form because reason requires it?”

“No,” Jehovah said. “I have not given you a built-in answer key. You may each propose any consistent doctrine you think suitable. I am not grading whether your first assumptions had to be true. I am grading whether humans can tell which doctrine I chose.”

Contrarius smiled. “Then our disagreement is permitted?”

“More than permitted,” said Jehovah. “It is the raw material.”

This answer relieved the angels for almost three seconds. Reason did not require Clarus’s draft, and logic did not rule out Contrarius’s. The issue was communication. Once Jehovah freely chose one of several consistent teachings, could he make that choice clear to human readers?

Clarus opened his notebook. “May I ask a question, Professor?”

“You may ask. Whether you will receive an answer is a separate matter.”

“If humans must live by this book across many languages, cultures, centuries, and levels of schooling, should we not define its key terms, repeat vital instructions, and give examples of hard cases?”

“Those are excellent devices,” said Jehovah. “In a manual.”

“And this is not a manual?”

“This is revelation.”

Contrarius leaned over the desk. “What difference does that make in practice?”

The professor examined a speck of red ink on his cuff. “A manual stops careful readers from building the same bridge in opposite ways. Revelation lets each reader call his version the bridge.”

Clarus hesitated. “But if one bridge collapses?”

“Then its builders will be told they lacked the evidence-exceeding faith demanded by the design.”

The professor pushed two blank manuscripts across the desk. Their covers bore the same title: *Concerning the Way of Life*.

“Clarus,” he said, “write the doctrines as a perfect teacher would state them. Contrarius, do the same. You may disagree. I expect you will. But write so plainly that a careful reader can tell what each of you means.”

“And then?” said Clarus.

“Then I shall grade your work.”

The angels departed with unusual excitement. They did not yet understand that the word *grade* had been selected with care.

Chapter 2 — Two Perfectly Clear Bibles

They returned on the seventh day with manuscripts thick enough to direct a civilization and thin enough to be read without a council.

Clarus went first.

“I organized the book by question,” he said. “Each chapter begins with a definition, states the rule, names likely misunderstandings, and explains how a reader can correct an error.”

“How many disputed doctrines remain?” asked Jehovah.

“Among sincere, capable readers using the stated method? None concerning the matters that determine salvation, worship, or moral obligation.”

The professor made a note.

Contrarius cleared his throat. “My manuscript has the same strengths. It is short, translated the same way throughout, and clear about what evidence would settle a dispute. It differs from Clarus’s book on several doctrines, but no reader could miss what either book teaches.”

“Excellent,” Jehovah said. “Show me your first disputed section.”

Both angels opened to baptism and laid their fully translated submissions side by side. The paired pages were short enough to read at a glance and exact enough that no one could mistake the disagreement. One rule made physical baptism a condition of salvation; the other made it a sign of grace already received. Neither relied on an unstated exception or a favorable interpreter.

There was a moment of silence. Clarus looked at Contrarius. Contrarius looked at Clarus. Each could see, without difficulty, where the other had gone wrong.

“Professor,” said Clarus, “we have supplied exactly the contrast you requested.”

“You have,” said Jehovah.

“The disagreement can be tested,” said Contrarius. “The terms are fixed. The results are stated. A reader can compare the two choices.”

“Yes,” said Jehovah.

“Then which receives the higher mark?”

Professor Jehovah took up the red pen.

He drew a line through Clarus’s Greek. Then through his English. He drew another line through Contrarius’s Greek. Then through his English. The red marks were graceful and absolute.

“Both fail,” he said.

Clarus went pale in the manner available to angels. “On what ground?”

“You have made the issue possible to settle.”

Contrarius smiled faintly. “Surely that is unavoidable. One of us is right.”

“Perhaps. But your books would require people to discover which one. I asked for a holy book, not a referendum.”

Clarus stared at the crossed-out sentences. “What defect do they share?”

“They answer the question before the reader has learned enough reverence for it.”

“You mean they are too clear?”

“Painfully so.”

Contrarius examined the red lines. “Our doctrines oppose one another, but neither manuscript hides the opposition. A reader could reject one without pretending it says the other.”

“That is exactly the problem,” Jehovah replied. “A plainly stated doctrine may be judged as a plainly stated doctrine. Readers may compare it with the evidence, its effects, and other choices. Soon they begin asking whether the author chose wisely.”

Clarus looked up. “You told us there was no divine logic forcing the choice. You gave us permission to propose either rule.”

“Permission to propose is not permission to expose.”

“Expose what?”

Jehovah tapped the manuscripts. “They may notice that the rule could have been otherwise. If I select one possible rule and state it clearly, people may ask why I did not select another.”

“A teacher should be able to give reasons,” said Contrarius.

“A teacher should be able to assign reading.”

Clarus placed the drafts side by side again. “Then the defect is not that we chose badly. You have not yet chosen at all.”

Jehovah drew a small question mark between the pages. “I have chosen a method under which every community may discover that I chose its doctrine.”

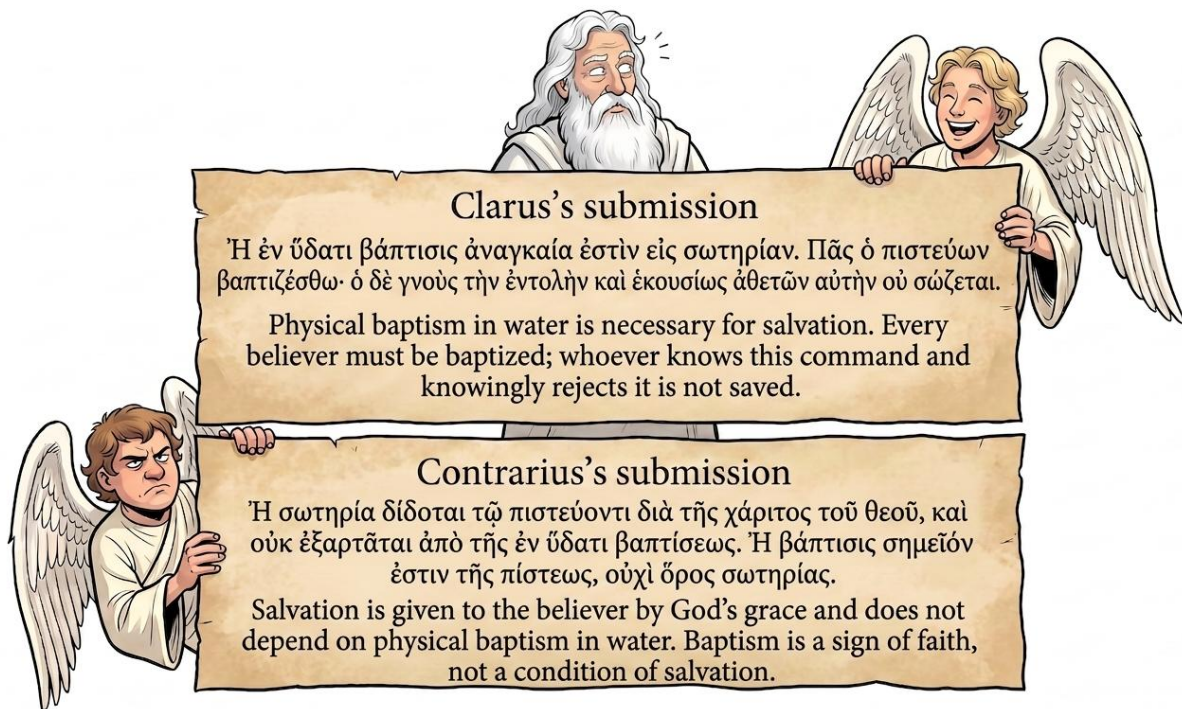
“Those discoveries will conflict.”

“Conflict demonstrates seriousness.”

Contrarius counted the red marks. “You have designed a test in which the answer stays hidden, every answer can quote the textbook, and disagreeing with the grader proves the student was not ready.”

Chapter 3 — Baptism, Marked for Revision

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Baptism and salvation. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: ☒ Direct clash ☐ Different definition

Texts that connect baptism with salvation

Mark 16:16 — He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who disbelieves will be condemned.

Acts 2:38 — Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

1 Peter 3:21 — This is a symbol of baptism, which now saves you—not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

Texts that foreground grace and what this book calls evidence-exceeding faith

Ephesians 2:8 — for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,

Romans 10:9 — that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

1 Corinthians 1:17 — For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Good News—not in wisdom of words, so that the cross of Christ wouldn't be made void.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Catholic Catechism §1257 calls baptism necessary for salvation, with stated exceptions in §§1258-1261. **Contrarius:** Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths §§5 and 6(a) puts salvation before baptism and describes baptism as a public declaration.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah clipped Mark 16:16 and Acts 2:38 to the left side of the board. He put Ephesians 2:8 and Romans 10:9 on the right. Then he drew a red line through both submissions. “You have each become useful far too soon.”

Clarus tapped his sentence. “Mine says water baptism is required. Contrarius’s says it is not. You may choose either one.”

“I may,” said Jehovah, “but then a reader could learn my choice merely by reading.” He opened the planned Bible. In one pile he put baptism beside forgiveness, rebirth, and salvation. In another he put grace, faith—belief beyond the evidence—confession, and the Spirit arriving before water. “The rite must seem important enough to frighten the unbaptized and optional enough to comfort them.”

Contrarius looked from one pile to the other. “So a dying believer who has not reached water receives two pastoral answers?”

“At least two. A well-aged tradition may produce several more.”

“Which answer is true?” asked Clarus.

Jehovah circled the word *true* and wrote *too early for church labels* in the margin. “The reader will join a church already sure of the answer. The church’s confidence will be mistaken for the text’s clarity.”

Contrarius frowned. “Then the church supplies the certainty your book withholds.”

“Exactly. I supply the verses. They supply the answer. Everyone gets to take part.”

Clarus stared at the two rejected sentences. “You could settle a question about salvation in eleven words.”

“And rob generations of books about baptism?” Jehovah capped the pen. “I will not damage a whole library merely to inform the people whose salvation is at stake.”

The markup workshop

The first conference had shown two facts: the rival policies were easy to state, and Jehovah did not plan to state either one in public. The afternoon workshop concerned editing. Professor Jehovah pinned both rejected pages beneath **EXAMPLES OF PREMATURE RESOLUTION**. He then used the whiteboard to show how a clear dispute could become a lasting one. Across the top he wrote:

BAPTISMAL MATERIAL: DISTRIBUTE, DO NOT DECIDE

“First,” he said, “place water and Spirit near the entrance to God’s kingdom.”

He wrote: **John 3:5.**

“Then tell an anxious crowd to repent and be baptized in connection with forgiveness.”

He wrote: **Acts 2:38.**

“Then use language that baptism saves. Add an explanation that lets readers separate water from conscience, conscience from belief, belief from rite, and rite from obedience. Make several readings possible to defend.”

He wrote: **1 Peter 3:21.**

Clarus slowly raised a hand. “That supports my draft.”

“It supports a draft,” said Jehovah. “Do not become possessive.”

“And the other side?” asked Contrarius.

Jehovah wrote again.

Ephesians 2:8–9. Romans 10:9–10. Acts 10:44–48.

“Speak strongly of grace and belief,” he said. “Speak of confession. Show the Spirit arriving before water. Then have water follow anyway. Each party will find the order highly significant.”

Contrarius considered the list. “One group may say baptism is an outward sign because grace and Spirit precede it.”

“Very good.”

“Another may say the examples concern exceptional circumstances and cannot cancel the ordinary requirement.”

“Also very good.”

Clarus pointed to the board. “But you have arranged evidence for both claims.”

“I have arranged material for a living tradition.”

“A living tradition of what?”

“Interpretation.”

The angels waited. Jehovah looked pleased with the word.

Clarus tried again. “Will you at least specify whether infants should be baptized?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because infants improve the discussion.”

Jehovah added further notes: households baptized; children included in promises; believers instructed to repent; candidates responding to preaching. He placed the references at a distance from one another, as though proximity might allow them to speak too frankly.

“Now,” he said, “the text must be written in several forms.”

“Several forms?”

“History, preaching, letter, metaphor, and remembered speech. If a line seems too direct, put its limit somewhere else. If that limit becomes too strong, add a story that can be treated as an exception. Keep enough agreement for every school to call itself biblical. Keep enough difference that none can end the dispute.”

Contrarius looked at his rejected manuscript. “Then you do not want the reader to determine whether baptism is necessary.”

Jehovah folded his hands. “I want the reader to seek.”

“Seek what?” said Clarus.

“A community.”

“And if communities reach opposing conclusions?”

“They will learn humility.”

“Or they will learn that their parents, teachers, region, and anxieties selected their conclusion before they ever opened the book.”

The red pen stopped moving.

For the first time, Professor Jehovah looked directly at Clarus.

“That,” he said, “is a sentence you must not put in the manuscript.”

The professor collected the pages into two piles. On the first he wrote **THE RITE SAVES**. On the second he wrote **THE RITE SIGNIFIES**. He then tore both labels in half and dropped the pieces into separate folders.

“You will now learn the approved form,” he said.

Clarus, still holding his original manuscript, asked, “Approved by what standard?”

“By the standard of productive reception.”

Contrarius had begun to recognize the phrase. “Does that mean readers produce the doctrine you intended?”

“Not at all. That would be mere reception. Productive reception means readers build a tradition that can defend itself.”

“Against what?”

“Against rival traditions, naturally.”

Clarus looked at the rows of folders. “Then you require two readers to draw opposite doctrines from the same collection.”

“I require them to draw their doctrines *responsibly*,” Jehovah said. “They must quote the right material, admire how complex it is, and accuse one another of selective reading. Nothing feeds a sacred text like a dispute in which both sides bring citations.”

“But suppose one tradition is correct,” said Contrarius. “How does a person outside both communities recognize it?”

Jehovah considered this a moment. “By the quality of its confidence.”

“That is not a method.”

“It is the beginning of one. The rest is acquired through belonging.”

Clarus set down a new sheet headed **BAPTISM: UNAMBIGUOUS STATEMENT AND PUBLIC CORRECTION METHOD**. Under it he wrote four questions:

1. Is water baptism necessary for salvation?
2. Who may receive it?
3. What does the rite accomplish?
4. Who can correct a mistaken answer?

“If you selected a view,” he said, “we could answer each question. We could say when the answer is literal, list every exception, and translate it into every language. Anyone who disagreed would know exactly where the disagreement lay.”

Jehovah read the list as though it were a particularly alarming medical report.

“You still think the point is to locate disagreement,” he said. “The point is to preserve it without admitting that it has been preserved.”

Contrarius laughed once, unexpectedly. “Professor, that sounds like a plan for an institution.”

“It is a spiritual discipline.”

“How do we tell the difference?” asked Clarus.

Jehovah lifted the red pen. “Excellent. Put that question into a parable.”

Technical interlude — What the satire is testing

The baptism chapter does not claim that every Christian tradition is irrational or that no Bible verse is clear. It tests a smaller claim. Suppose an all-knowing and all-powerful God wanted sincere people to know whether water baptism is needed for salvation. We might expect readers to reach broad agreement or at least have a reliable way to correct mistakes.

Christian traditions have reached lasting, rival conclusions. Catholic and Orthodox churches usually treat baptism as a sacrament and as ordinarily necessary for salvation. Many Reformed churches treat it as a sign and seal of God’s covenant, not an automatic guarantee of salvation. Baptist churches usually baptize people after a personal profession of belief and treat the act as an ordinance. These are brief descriptions, not complete accounts of any tradition.

The argument compares two explanations. It does not prove that God does not exist. It also does not deny that believers may have personal experiences or other reasons for belief or trust. It asks what better explains the long dispute: a clear message from a perfect teacher, or the normal way beliefs spread through texts, languages, communities, and churches.

The angels do not assume that “divine logic” forces one doctrine to be true. The fictional Jehovah may choose among many consistent rules. The problem begins only after he chooses one for humans to follow. He can state that rule, say where it applies, and correct likely mistakes.

Chapter 4 — The Essentials Department

Two days after the baptismal conference, Clarus found a new sign on the office door:

THE ESSENTIALS DEPARTMENT

Everything necessary will be clear. Nothing controversial is necessary.

Contrarius was already inside, holding a stack of memos.

“Professor,” he said, “we have made progress. We agree that not every question needs a direct answer. The exact layout of a meeting hall, for example, may be left to local judgment.”

“A generous concession,” said Jehovah.

“But we request a list of essential doctrines. Once the list is fixed, we can make every item clear.”

Jehovah smiled. “An excellent proposal. Draft one.”

Clarus read from the list. “First: how a person receives salvation.”

“Disputed,” said Jehovah.

“Then: who Jesus is.”

“Discussed with vigor.”

“Then: whether baptism is required.”

“Already removed from the essentials. You have seen the paperwork.”

Contrarius took the page. “Then surely the church’s authority to bind conscience is essential.”

“Contested.”

“The meaning of the Lord’s Supper?”

“Potentially divisive.”

“The conditions of repentance?”

“Pastorally complex.”

“The final destiny of human beings?”

Jehovah paused. “The department has received differing submissions.”

Clarus placed both hands on the desk. “Professor, if every doctrine becomes nonessential after people disagree about it, the claim that essentials are clear cannot be tested.”

“On the contrary,” said Jehovah. “It is always proved right.”

“How?”

“By every remaining agreement.”

“But the agreement remains only because the disputed cases have been removed from the category.”

Jehovah made a neat red circle around the word *removed*.

“You are beginning to understand the method,” he said.

Contrarius drew a line across the page. “Let us name the essentials before history supplies the disagreements.”

Jehovah covered the blank portion with his hand. “You are sorting too soon.”

“The list means something only if it comes before the result,” said Clarus. “Otherwise the rule becomes: every doctrine Christians agree on is clear, and every doctrine they dispute was never essential.”

“A sturdy rule,” said Jehovah. “No controversy has ever proved it wrong.”

“No controversy can count against it. The category retreats whenever evidence approaches.”

Jehovah opened a drawer labeled **CONSENSUS OF TRUE BELIEVERS**. “The essentials are what true believers have always confessed.”

“Who counts as a true believer?”

“Those who confess the essentials.”

Contrarius leaned into the drawer. It was circular and surprisingly deep. “Then agreement identifies the believers, and the believers’ agreement identifies the essentials.”

“A very efficient circle.”

Clarus placed baptism, authority, marriage, judgment, grace, and works back on the desk. “These questions decide who is admitted, disciplined, married, frightened, or excluded. Calling them secondary does not make their effects secondary.”

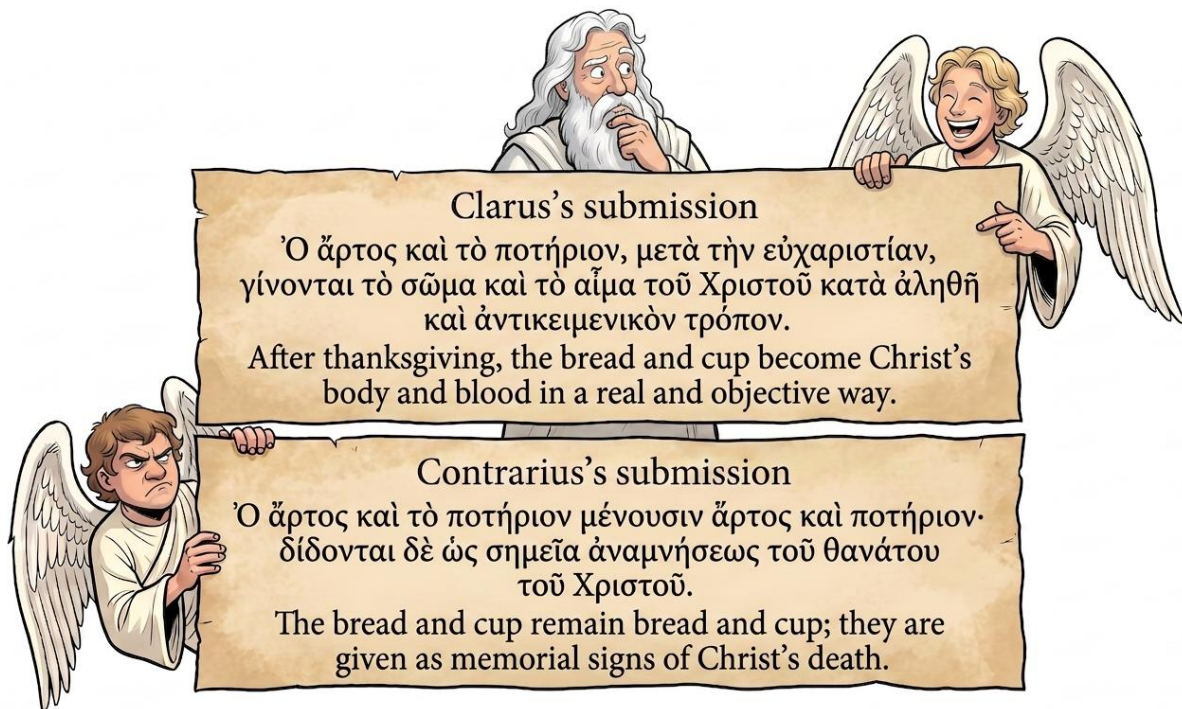
Jehovah stamped the pile **IMPORTANT, BUT NOT ESSENTIAL IN THE SENSE PRESENTLY REQUIRED**.

“That is not a category,” said Contrarius.

“It is now a department.”

Chapter 5 — The Sacrament of Footnotes

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



The Eucharist. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Different definition Disputed metaphor or context

Texts used for real presence

John 6:53 — Jesus therefore said to them, “Most certainly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you don’t have life in yourselves.

1 Corinthians 11:27 — Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks the Lord’s cup in a way unworthy of the Lord will be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 10:16 — The cup of blessing which we bless, isn’t it a sharing of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, isn’t it a sharing of the body of Christ?

Texts used for memorial or spiritual readings

Luke 22:19 — He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in memory of me.”

John 6:63 — It is the spirit who gives life. The flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and are life.

1 Corinthians 11:26 — For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Catholic Catechism §§1374-1376 teaches a true, real, and substantial presence. **Contrarius:** Baptist Faith and Message VII calls the supper a symbolic memorial act.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah set John 6:53 and 1 Corinthians 11:27 across from Luke 22:19 and John 6:63. Then he placed bread and a cup between the two drafts. “Your problem,” he said, “is that both statements tell the worshiper what is being received.”

“That seemed relevant to receiving it,” said Clarus.

Jehovah spread *body, blood, sharing, remembrance, presence, proclaiming*, and *unworthy eating* across several passages. “The language must sound real enough for one church to adore, symbolic enough for another to remember, and stern enough for each to suspect the other of mishandling the meal.”

Contrarius examined the bread. “Does it change in substance?”

“Do not bring laboratory manners to worship.”

“Then what changes?” asked Clarus.

“The bread, the worshiper, the bond shown by the meal, the way Christ is present, or nothing anyone can detect. It depends on the approved account.”

“Which theory is approved?”

“Whichever account first decides what the disputed words mean and then claims to have kept every word.”

Contrarius sighed. “So one congregation fears idolatry if it kneels, while another fears sacrilege if it does not.”

Jehovah nodded. “At last, a meal with penalties.”

Clarus pushed the two clear drafts back across the table. “You could identify the elements in one sentence.”

“And reduce a sacred mystery to facts?” Jehovah broke the bread. “No. The guests must remain able to accuse one another of inventing a sacrament or destroying one. Otherwise Communion might become a sign of communion.”

The markup workshop

The illustrated Communion submissions had already made the disagreement clear. Jehovah wrote the same grade across both pages: **Too useful**. The next workshop asked what happens when the office replaces two plain answers with a meal whose meaning no shared method can settle.

“Could we not at least agree,” said Clarus, “that this is an occasion for reverence?”

“Certainly,” said Jehovah. “Reverence is wonderfully portable.”

He began placing passages into separate folders. Into one went language of body, blood, participation, and unworthy reception. Into another went remembrance, proclamation, and a meal shared among friends. Then he took the folders apart and spread their pages across different writers and occasions.

“Now they will ask whether I am present in body, in spirit, as a symbol, or in some way no one can clearly state,” Jehovah said. “Every answer will have a reading list.”

“And if they are wrong?” asked Contrarius.

“They may examine themselves.”

“That does not tell them whether the bread is bread,” said Clarus.

“No,” said Jehovah, “but it sounds suitably serious.”

At the end of the meeting, the professor produced a new form.

REQUEST FOR DOCTRINAL CORRECTION

1. State the disputed question.
2. Identify the authority qualified to settle it.
3. Establish that authority without using the disputed question.

The angels read it twice.

“There is no way to complete this,” said Contrarius.

Jehovah nodded. “Then it will encourage patience.”

Clarus turned the form over. “We could add an answer key.”

Jehovah took the form back. “That would put results above process.”

“The process exists to reach an outcome.”

“An overly Western assumption.” Jehovah added a fourth line: **4. If no authority can be named without circular reasoning, continue examining yourself.**

Contrarius read it aloud. “A person asks what the meal is, cannot identify an agreed judge, and is instructed to inspect his motives.”

“Self-examination is apostolic.”

“It may be valuable,” said Clarus. “It still does not determine whether refusing the cup rejects Christ’s body or merely declines a memorial.”

Jehovah arranged two communion tables. At one, admitting the wrong person profaned a sacrament. At the other, excluding that person fractured the body. He placed the same loaf between them.

“Which table should the believer approach?” Contrarius asked.

“The one at which the believer can partake in good conscience.”

“The conscience was trained by the community that set the table.”

“Then formation has done its work.”

Clarus looked at the divided loaf. “A meal meant to show unity now requires people to agree first about what the meal is—a question you refused to answer.”

Jehovah brushed away the crumbs. “Nothing displays the sacredness of communion like several communities unable to share it.”

Contrarius drafted a notice for shared Communion: **THIS MEAL PROCLAIMS THE UNITY OF ALL WHO FIRST AGREE ABOUT WHAT THE MEAL IS.**

Jehovah read it with approval. “A necessary safeguard.”

“It is a parody,” said Contrarius.

“Most safeguards are parodies viewed before the committee report.”

Clarus moved the same believer between the two tables. At the first, receiving without the right doctrine risked dishonoring the sacrament. At the second, refusing fellowship over that doctrine risked splitting the church.

“The person cannot avoid a grave error merely by abstaining,” he said. “Abstention itself becomes the error in the rival system.”

Jehovah offered a pastoral solution. “The believer should remain where the local teaching has formed a settled conscience.”

“Then geography resolves the sacrament,” said Contrarius.

“Providence often uses geography.”

Clarus folded the correction form. “A divine meal has become clear enough to divide the guests and too unclear to tell them whether the division is obedience.”

Jehovah placed the form beneath the loaf. “At least everyone agrees that the table is important.”

Chapter 6 — The Department of Correct Answers

The angels' next proposal arrived not as doctrine but as procedure.

"We have accepted," Clarus said carefully, "that readers may disagree. We therefore propose a way to correct errors."

Jehovah looked up from a memorandum titled *On the Proper Management of Predictable Misunderstanding*. "Continue."

"When a dispute concerns a high-stakes doctrine," said Clarus, "trained readers will compare the key texts and explain their reasons in public. They will then submit the case to a neutral group whose authority can be checked without first trusting its ruling."

Contrarius added, "The body will publish its reasons, admit errors, and explain what evidence could lead it to revise a conclusion."

"A charming little republic," Jehovah said.

"It is a way for humans to correct sincere error."

"And who corrects the correcting body?"

Clarus brightened. "The same public method."

Jehovah made the sound of a professor encountering an answer that was both intelligent and unsuitable for the examination.

"No," he said. "The final authority must be a church."

"Which church?"

"That is why it must be final."

Contrarius checked his notes. "If several groups claim final authority, what evidence will let a seeker recognize the right one?"

"Their certainty."

"But all of them are certain."

"Then the inquirer has been generously supplied with options."

Clarus tried a different route. "Could the book itself name the authority?"

"It may hint."

"Could it state, 'This particular institution is authorized to settle disputed doctrine'?"

Jehovah's red pen came down at once.

~~This particular institution is authorized to settle disputed doctrine.~~

Margin: Invites checking. Replace with material from which several churches may draw this conclusion, each with impressive confidence.

“Professor,” said Clarus, “you are not providing a way to correct errors.”

“Of course I am. Each community has one.”

“But they correct one another in opposite directions.”

“That is what makes the system suitable for every church.”

Jehovah then led the angels into a smaller room, which they had not previously noticed. Above the door was a brass plaque: **THE OFFICE OF RECEPTION.**

“A text does not remain unclear by itself,” he said. “It needs keepers.”

Inside, clerks sorted newborns into files marked by family, region, language, and congregation. Each file contained a child’s first prayers, first hymns, first feared questions, and first answer to the question, “What does this passage plainly mean?”

“Are these readers being assigned doctrines?” asked Clarus.

“Certainly not,” Jehovah said. “They are being given a background.”

Contrarius opened a file. It contained a sentence about baptism, a sermon explaining the sentence, a second sermon explaining why other sermons distorted the sentence, and a note assuring the reader that the answer would become obvious with maturity.

“The conclusion appears before the inquiry,” he said.

“The inquiry begins more efficiently when it has a destination.”

Clarus turned to another page in the file. “And when this reader meets a rival community?”

“The rival will provide a useful contrast. A tradition becomes visible to itself when it encounters a neighbor whose certainty is irritating.”

“But the reader’s agreement with the home community is not independent evidence,” said Clarus. “It is partly the result of the home community.”

Jehovah’s expression softened. “You speak as if dependence were an accusation. It is a condition of being human.”

“It is,” said Contrarius. “Which is why a God who wants human beings to know a doctrine should compensate for that dependence, rather than hide behind it.”

The clerks stopped working. Even the red pen seemed to listen.

Jehovah walked to a cabinet labeled **CORRECTION ACROSS LINEAGES.** He opened it. The cabinet was empty except for a small brass bell.

“What is that for?” Clarus asked.

“To signal that a reader has finally escaped inherited bias.”

“Has it ever rung?”

“It would be uncharitable to ask.”

Contrarius took out his notebook. “Then this is the pattern: every community has a correction mechanism, but the mechanism is trusted because the community trusts it; and the community is trusted because the mechanism confirms it.”

“An elegant circle,” Jehovah said.

“A circle is not a bridge,” said Clarus.

Jehovah made a note. “Good line. Put it in the mouth of a minor prophet.”

At that moment the brass bell rang.

Every clerk froze.

“Someone escaped inherited bias?” Clarus asked.

An assistant hurried in with the report. A reader had left one tradition, joined another, and announced that the new community alone read without tradition.

Jehovah relaxed. “A routine transfer.”

Contrarius examined the file. “The reader’s old confidence was evidence of training. The new confidence is evidence of divine insight.”

“Conversion makes the evidence look wonderfully fresh.”

“Unless the person converts in the other direction?”

“Then the departure reveals resistance.”

Clarus rang the bell again. “It sounds the same in both directions.”

“Do not confuse the same sound in both directions with spiritual discernment.”

The clerks resumed sorting children. Contrarius watched a newborn file receive its first authorized commentary before receiving its first tooth.

“If inherited training cannot be avoided,” he said, “then a perfect teacher should give an answer that crosses traditions more reliably than confidence does.”

Jehovah removed the bell’s clapper. “You keep treating correction as though it should correct something.”

Clarus opened the cabinet once more. “Suppose an inherited doctrine is false. What event within the system reliably exposes it?”

“A powerful encounter with truth.”

“What public feature would distinguish an encounter with truth from a powerful inherited conviction?”

“Its power to produce conviction.”

Contrarius held up two conversion testimonies traveling in opposite directions. “Both report conviction, relief, a new reading of Scripture, and the discovery that former teachers had confused tradition with truth.”

Jehovah placed each story in the new community’s newsletter. “There it will receive the proper reading.”

“A way of correcting error that works only after the reader changes communities is not a public test,” said Clarus. “It is a life story written after the fact.”

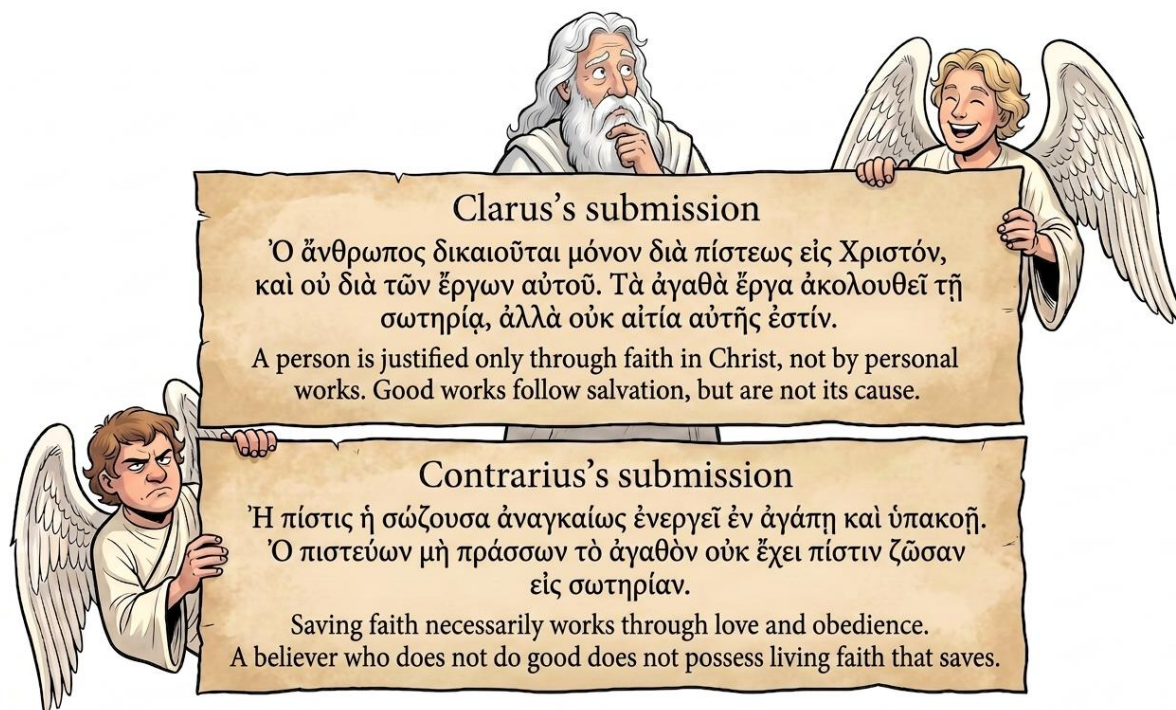
“Stories are more persuasive than procedures.”

“That is why rival methods need a public test,” said Contrarius.

Jehovah closed the empty cabinet. “And why public tests should never be allowed to impoverish stories.”

Chapter 7 — Grace, Works, and Other Accounting Difficulties

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Justification and works. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: ☒ Direct clash ☐ Different definition

Texts used for justification apart from works

Romans 3:28 — We maintain therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Ephesians 2:8 — for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,

Ephesians 2:9 — not of works, that no one would boast.

Galatians 2:16 — yet knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because no flesh will be justified by the works of the law.

Texts used for justification requiring works

James 2:24 — You see then that by works a man is justified, and not only by faith.

James 2:26 — For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead.

Galatians 5:6 — For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision amounts to anything, but faith working through love.

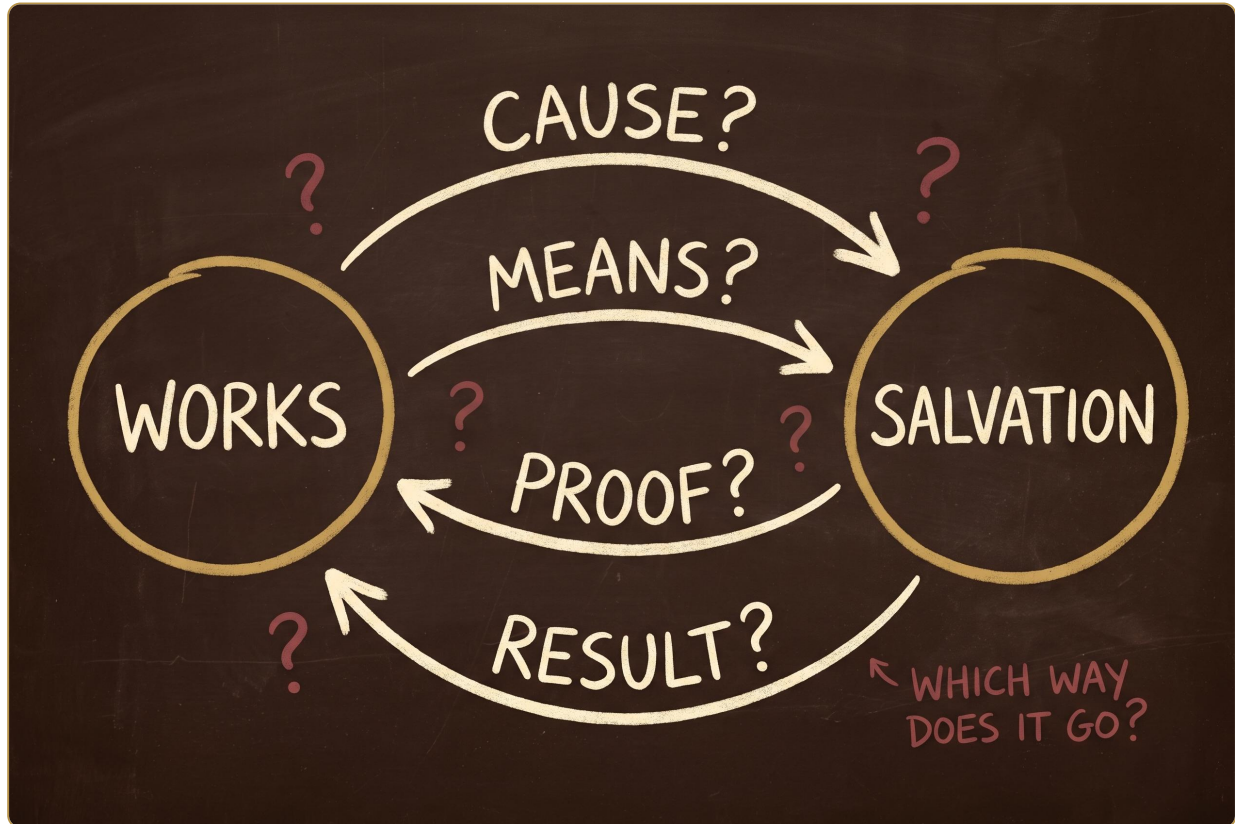
DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Westminster Confession XI.1 and XVI.2-5 denies that works cause justification. **Contrarius:** United Methodist Articles IX-X teaches justification apart from merit while treating good works as the visible fruit of living faith.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah pinned Romans 3:28 and Ephesians 2:8-9 beside James 2:24 and 2:26. Then he drew four columns: **CAUSE**, **MEANS**, **EVIDENCE**, and **RESULT**. At last he erased the headings and left only the arrows.

Clarus watched the chalk dust fall. “That diagram explained the dispute.”



Jehovah's four possible links between works and salvation, helpfully left pointing both ways.

“It put the dispute in danger,” Jehovah said. He kept grace as a gift, faith—belief beyond the evidence—apart from works, that same faith without works as dead, and judgment based on deeds. “The nouns may remain. Their links must travel without labels.”

Contrarius pointed to the loose arrows. “Does obedience help cause salvation, prove it, keep it, or follow it?”

“Yes,” said Jehovah.

“That was not a multiple-choice question.”

“It will be.” Jehovah spread the statements among letters written for different needs. “One preacher may warn that works cannot save. Another may warn that faith without works cannot save. Each will accuse the other of confusing the good news.”

Clarus asked, “Could you at least define *living faith*?”

“Certainly: faith of the kind that saves.”

“And how does one identify that kind?”

“By the works whose role we chose not to define.”

Contrarius put down his pencil. “The account balances only after the reader chooses a system of accounts.”

Jehovah smiled. “A teaching about salvation should be simple enough for a leaflet, complex enough for a council, and vague enough to keep both in print.”

The accounting board

The illustrated submissions had shown how little space was needed to state the opposing rules. The first conference had removed the labels that showed how the ideas related. Jehovah now showed what that missing detail would do to an anxious believer.

Jehovah opened the reference cabinet. It contained, the angels noticed, more drawers than any answer would reasonably require.

“We need,” he said, “grace as gift; faith apart from works; judgment according to deeds; faith made complete by works; commands to work out salvation; assurances that God is working within the believer. Place them in different letters, different disputes, and different arguments.”

“Will that not confuse a reader who wants to know whether good works are necessary?” asked Clarus.

“No reader wants merely to know,” Jehovah said. “Readers want a position.”

Contrarius frowned. “Those are not the same thing.”

“Exactly. A position is warmer. It can be inherited, defended, placed on a church website, and served with coffee after worship.”

He began writing marginal directions.

Insert: Grace received through faith; exclude boasting.

Insert elsewhere: Faith without works is dead.

Insert nearby but not too nearby: A final judgment responsive to deeds.

Avoid: A numbered explanation distinguishing instrument, evidence, condition, and result.

Clarus took the pen from the professor’s hand. “May I ask the question in a way no one can evade?”

Jehovah allowed it.

“Can a person be saved who has faith but no good works?”

The room became very quiet. From a distant corridor came the faint sound of several thousand commentators clearing their throats.

Jehovah retrieved the pen.

“Excellent,” he said. “Put that in a footnote. Footnotes are where direct questions go to acquire manners.”

Contrarius produced an auditor’s stamp. “Let us distinguish price from receipt. If works purchase salvation, say so. If they merely prove that faith was genuine, say that. If their absence can condemn, state whether they are a condition, evidence, or result.”

Jehovah examined the stamp. “Those fine distinctions are too brittle for pastoral use.”

“They are ordinary accounting.”

“Exactly. Grace must not look like a transaction.”

Clarus pointed to the judgment ledger. “Yet the final balance responds to deeds.”

“That is not payment. It is evidence that the free gift was received in a manner producing the required balance.”

Contrarius paused. “So the gift is free, the receipt is mandatory, and a missing receipt may show the gift was never received.”

“You are learning precision.”

“I am learning how precision is renamed confusion when it threatens a slogan.”

Jehovah filed the auditor’s stamp under **WORKS: NEVER THE BASIS, FREQUENTLY THE BASIS FOR CONCERN.**

Clarus closed the ledger. “A frightened believer does not need two vocabularies that preserve both systems. The believer needs to know what is required.”

“Requirement is such an ungracious word,” said Jehovah. “Use *necessary fruit*.”

Two pastors arrived with the same anxious believer. The first warned that examining works too closely would replace trust with merit. The second warned that failing to examine works would replace living faith with empty confidence.

“Which warning governs?” asked Clarus.

“The one the believer presently needs.”

“The believer is asking which one is true.”

“Need often reveals truth.”

Contrarius moved the believer from one office to the other. In each office, the relief offered by the first pastor became the danger diagnosed by the second.

“Your system can deepen fear and then treat that fear as proof that more self-examination is spiritually healthy,” he said.

Jehovah placed a reassuring tract on top of a warning sermon. “Balance.”

Clarus removed both. “A clear account could still warn against boasting and against hypocrisy. What it would not do is leave the believer uncertain whether obedience is evidence of salvation, a condition of salvation, part of salvation, or a temptation to abandon salvation by trying to obey.”

“Four distinctions,” said Jehovah. “You see how quickly clarity becomes complicated.”

Chapter 8 — The Office of Pastoral Consequences

At this point Clarus requested a meeting with the Office of Pastoral Consequences.

“Professor,” he said, “the manuscript is becoming humorous.”

“A regrettable but manageable condition.”

“I do not want the humor to fall on people who inherited these disputes, fear the results, or honestly seek God.”

Jehovah considered this objection longer than usual.

“Then aim upward,” he said at last.

“At you?”

“At systems,” he corrected. “At authority that refuses to show its work. At rules designed so that every outcome proves the rule. At a teacher who calls an honest question disrespect, then calls the student’s confusion a lesson.”

Contrarius looked alarmed. “Is that permitted?”

Jehovah checked the ceiling for a moment, as though awaiting a higher approval. “It is permitted in satire,” he said. “Not in the minutes.”

Clarus entered the conclusion into the office record.

OFFICE OF PASTORAL CONSEQUENCES — RESPONSIBILITY NOTICE People are not at fault for wanting clear answers. Responsibility belongs to the authority that controls the message, the stakes, and the way errors are corrected.

Jehovah reached for the red pen.

Clarus covered the sentence with his hand.

For several seconds neither moved.

Then Jehovah withdrew the pen.

“Leave it,” he said. “It will make an excellent misunderstanding in a future sermon.”

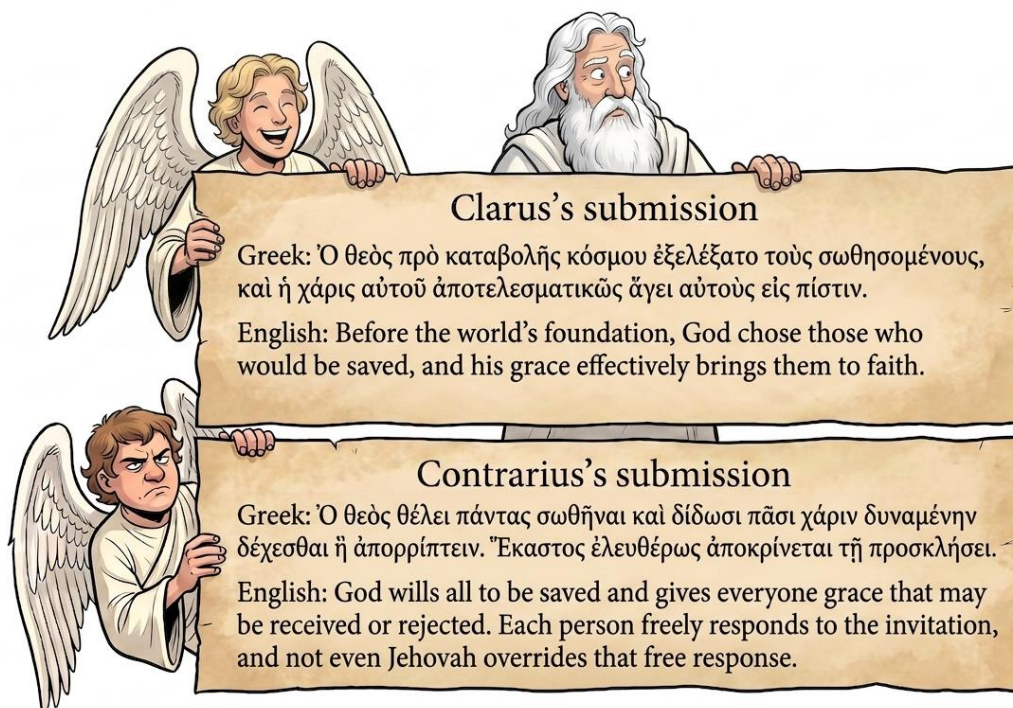
The notice became the office’s only clear moral rule. Every later joke would aim at the desk that controlled the message, never at the person waiting outside it.

PART II — DOCTRINES WITH CONSEQUENCES

The workshop tests vague teaching where doctrine shapes grace, marriage,
death, war, authority, creation, worship, and who may speak.

Chapter 9 — Election, Free Will, and the Seating Chart

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Election and free will. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Range or exception One passage limits another

Texts used for effectual election

John 6:44 — No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up in the last day.

Romans 9:16 — So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who has mercy.

Acts 13:48 — As the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God. As many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

Texts used for universal invitation and resistible response

1 Timothy 2:4 — who desires all people to be saved and come to full knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9 — The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some count slowness; but he is patient with us, not wishing that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

Revelation 22:17 — The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" He who hears, let him say, "Come!" He who is thirsty, let him come. He who desires, let him take the water of life freely.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Westminster Confession III.3-6 and X.1 states definite election and effectual calling. **Contrarius:** ResourceUMC, A Wesleyan Understanding of Grace, describes grace as universal, resistible, and open to a real human no.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah placed John 6:44 and Romans 9:16 across from 1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9, and Revelation 22:17. Then he returned both drafts marked **FAR TOO EASY TO BLAME ON THE AUTHOR**.

“You gave us liberty to propose either doctrine,” said Clarus. “There is no divine logic forcing one. Why object when we state the options clearly?”

“Because clear options allow comparison.” Jehovah kept choosing, drawing, hardening, invitation, refusal, knowing ahead of time, and the wish to save everyone. But he deleted every sentence that explained how they fit together.

Contrarius drew two people on the seating chart. “Can this person finally do anything other than what you have decided?”

“The elect will say no with gratitude.”

“And the unelected?”

“They will be unavailable for the seminar.”

Clarus leaned over the chart. “If grace can be resisted, say so. If it cannot, say so. If you chose some third answer, state it.”

Jehovah added arrows pointing both ways. “One school must defend my control from human freedom. Another must defend my goodness from my control. Each will think the other has nearly ruined me.”

“But one of them will misdescribe you,” said Contrarius.

“Only in what they claim. Both will stay very busy praising me.”

Clarus shook his head. “You are making pictures of yourself that cannot both be true, then calling the conflict reverence.”

Jehovah straightened the seating cards. “Nothing binds a doctrinal community together like a neighboring community that has made God unfair in the opposite direction.”

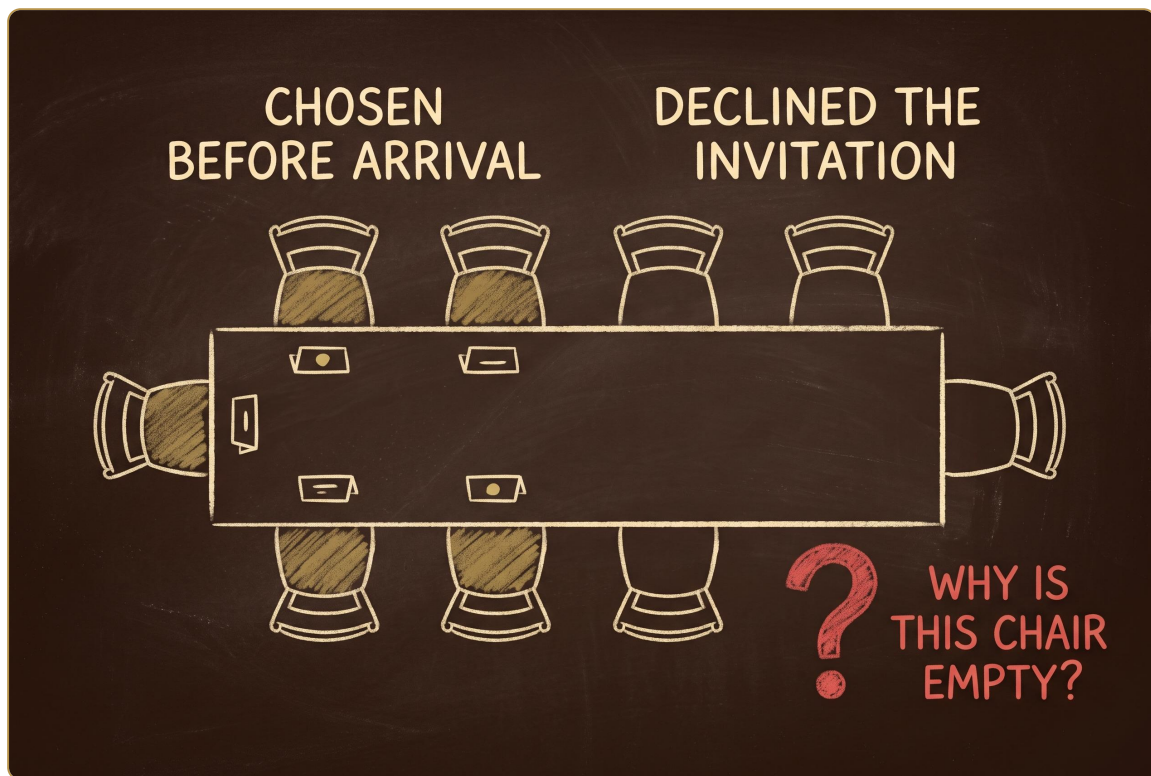
Contrarius picked up an unused card. “Suppose a parent asks why an unbelieving child is lost. Did you pass over the child, or did the child resist grace you truly gave? What should the pastor say?”

“The pastor should stress whichever answer protects my good name.”

“Which part of your character?”

“The part now under attack.” Jehovah placed **CONTROL** on one side of the child and **LOVE FOR ALL** on the other. “If exclusion looks cruel, stress human refusal. If that refusal seems to limit me, stress election. The picture stays balanced as long as no one views both sides at once.”

Clarus turned the seating chart over. On the back he drew a banquet table. “Every occupied chair may be described as chosen before the guest arrived. Every empty chair may be blamed for declining the invitation.”



The seating chart can explain every occupied chair and blame every empty one, without explaining this empty chair.

“A wonderfully complete rule for dinner guests,” said Jehovah.

“The policy still does not tell us why this particular chair is empty,” said Contrarius.

“No,” Jehovah replied, “but it permits two sermons, each certain that the other has insulted me.”

Clarus returned both cards. “A rule you were free to choose has become a puzzle no one is free to settle.”

Jehovah lined up the arrows until they formed a halo. “That is what separates theology from simply telling people.”

The seating chart

After rejecting both illustrated guest lists as far too clear, Jehovah opened a drawer marked **MERCY / HARDENING / FOREKNOWLEDGE / WHOSOEVER** and began a lesson in divine seating.

“We shall speak of choosing,” he said, “and of human refusal. We shall speak of predestination and invitations. We shall say that no one can come unless drawn, and also that anyone may come. The debate should last for centuries.”

“Which of the two positions is correct?” asked Contrarius.

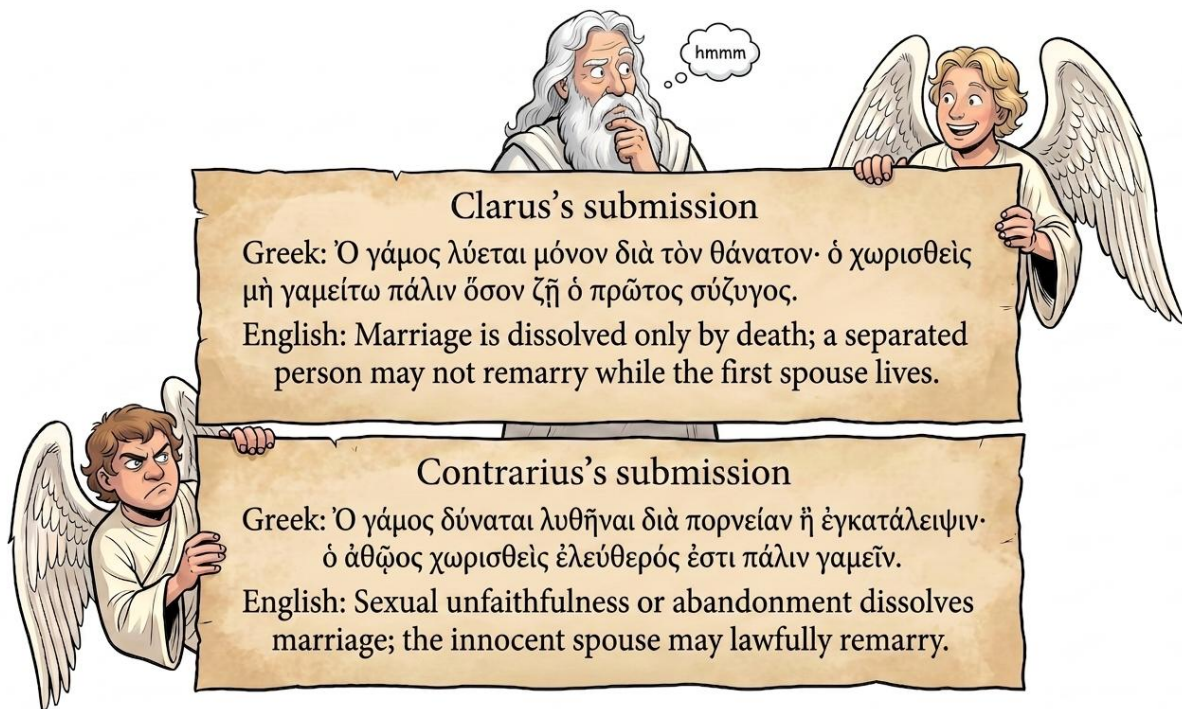
“Each side will call the other a threat to God’s character,” Jehovah replied. “This gives the matter suitable emotional depth.”

“It gives it terror,” said Clarus.

Jehovah corrected him. “Terror, when professionally framed, is called seriousness.”

Chapter 10 — The Marriage File

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Rule and exception

Texts used for an indissoluble bond

Mark 10:11 — He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.

Mark 10:12 — If a woman herself divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

1 Corinthians 7:10 — But to the married I command—not I, but the Lord—that the wife not leave her husband

1 Corinthians 7:11 — (but if she departs, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband not leave his wife.

Texts used for exceptions and release

Matthew 19:9 — I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries her when she is divorced commits adultery.”

1 Corinthians 7:15 — Yet if the unbeliever departs, let there be separation. The brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us in peace.

Matthew 5:32 — but I tell you that whoever puts away his wife, except for the cause of sexual immorality, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries her when she is put away commits adultery.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Catholic Catechism §1640 calls a consummated sacramental bond irrevocable. **Contrarius:** Westminster Confession XXIV.5-6 recognizes adultery and willful desertion as grounds that can permit divorce and remarriage.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah placed the firm rule of Mark 10:11-12 beside the exception in Matthew 19:9 and the release in 1 Corinthians 7:15. Then he replaced both drafts with sayings, an exception, a pastor's letter, and several very useful silences.

Clarus opened the case file. "A deserted spouse is waiting outside. May that person remarry?"

"We are discussing theology," said Jehovah.

"The spouse believes the theology is deciding tomorrow: whether to begin rebuilding a life that may include another marriage, or to remain unmarried forever."

Contrarius laid the drafts side by side. "You may forbid remarriage. You may allow it after sexual unfaithfulness or abandonment. You may choose another rule. Logic does not choose for you. Why not state the rule you choose?"

Jehovah underlined *one flesh*, circled an exception, filed Paul's release three folders away, and left abuse for pastors to work out later. "The rule must sound firm in one church and merciful in another."

"Communities will apply opposite rules," said Clarus. "One spouse will be told that remarriage is adultery. Another in the same circumstances will be told it is a gift of freedom."

"Pastoral care requires a local judgment."

"A local judgment about what you did not say?" asked Contrarius.

Jehovah closed the file. "One clear paragraph would replace judgment with knowledge."

Clarus looked toward the waiting room. "Those are people's lives."

"Then every footnote will be read with proper gravity," Jehovah replied, and called for the next case without answering the first.

The professor's margin note

After refusing to answer the deserted spouse, Jehovah shortened his policy into a note for every future marriage file.

At the bottom of the page Jehovah wrote:

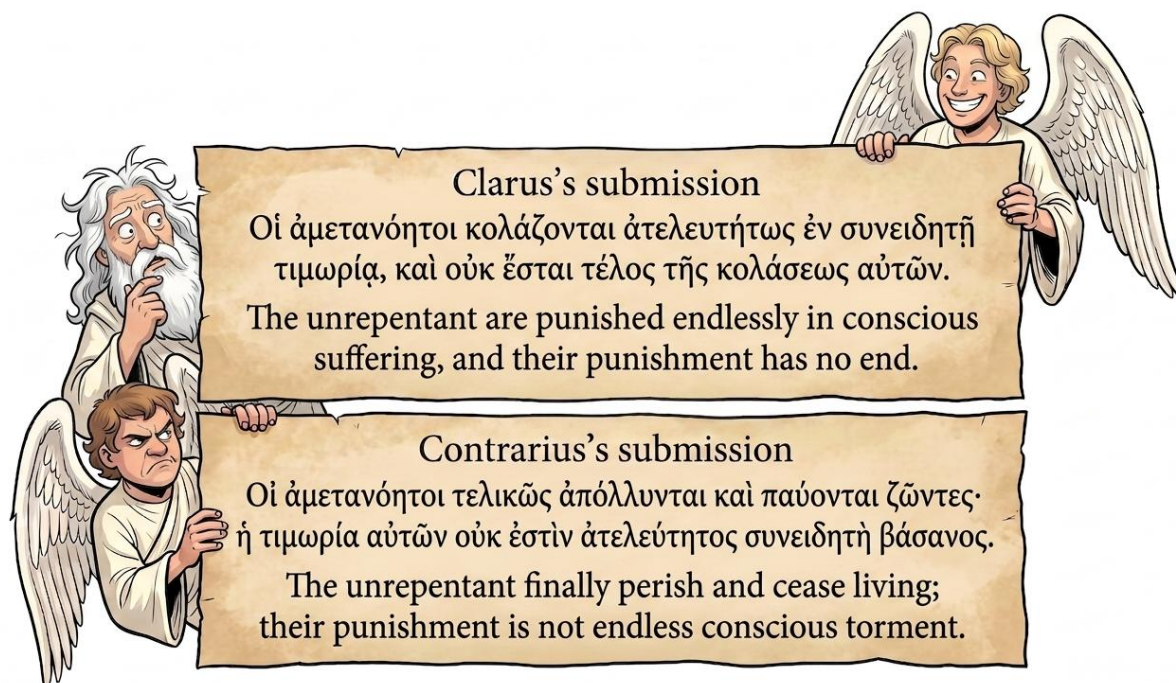
Professor's note: Do not put the whole pastoral rule in one place. A single clear paragraph has ended many promising debates.

Clarus looked at the note for a long time. "You keep calling confusion a feature."

"Only when it survives contact with a pulpit," said Jehovah.

Chapter 11 — The Last Things

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Hell and final destiny. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: ☒ Direct clash ☐ Different definition

Texts used for endless conscious punishment

Matthew 25:46 — These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Revelation 14:11 — The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. They have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.

Mark 9:48 — ‘where their worm doesn’t die, and the fire is not quenched.’

Texts used for destruction or universal restoration

Matthew 10:28 — Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. Rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.

Romans 6:23 — For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:22 — For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

2 Thessalonians 1:9 — who will pay the penalty: eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might,

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Catholic Catechism §§1056-1057 and Baptist Faith and Message X teach everlasting punishment. **Contrarius:** Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief 27 says fire consumes the unrighteous and frees the universe from sinners.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah filed Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 14:11 under **ENDLESS SUFFERING**. He put Matthew 10:28 and Romans 6:23 under **FINAL DESTRUCTION**, and 1 Corinthians 15:22 under a third folder marked **RESTORATION**.

“Three outcomes are better than two,” he said.

Clarus opened the first folder. “Are the unrepentant conscious forever?”

“The language of eternal punishment will support you.”

Contrarius opened the second. “Do they finally cease to exist?”

“The language of death and destruction will support you.”

“Do the restoration passages teach a third outcome?” Clarus lifted the file.

“The language about saving all will keep the first two from getting too comfortable.”

Contrarius stared at the three fates that could not all be true. “What may a teacher safely tell a terrified child?”

Jehovah sorted *eternal*, *age*, *death*, *fire*, *perish*, *all*, and *restoration* into trays. “The danger must have no limit. The words must stretch.”

“Endless consequences and stretchy instructions make an ugly pair,” said Clarus.

“They encourage careful word study.”

“A dictionary cannot tell us which outcome you chose,” said Contrarius.

“Then the dictionary has protected the mystery.” Jehovah locked the folders. “Churches should share the terror, even when each explains it differently. That is how doubt about words becomes lifelong proof of loyalty.”

Clarus returned with a child’s catechism. “This page asks, ‘What happens to people who die unreconciled?’ Which answer shall we print?”

Jehovah examined the available space. “Print that separation from me is dreadful.”

“Endless conscious suffering, final extinction, or eventual restoration?”

“Do not burden the child with systems.”

Contrarius opened the folders again. “The systems will burden the child later. One teacher will say love requires an endless warning. Another will say justice requires suffering to end. A third will say victory requires everyone to be restored. Each will accuse the others of becoming soft about a different word.”

Jehovah suggested a flame in the margin. “Pictures are memorable without making legal promises.”

Clarus drew three doors beneath an **EXIT** sign: one led to an everlasting furnace, one to destruction, and one back into the building after correction. “No school would call these emergency instructions clear.”



Three very different exits, each supported by language kept in the same emergency manual.

“This is not a school,” said Jehovah.

“You keep grading people,” Contrarius observed.

Jehovah removed the exit sign. “Then the architectural metaphor was misleading.”

“The consequences remain,” said Clarus.

“Exactly why the labels must inspire study instead of merely giving directions.”

Three letters to grief

After locking the three conflicting files about the next life, Jehovah opened a second envelope. Inside were three pastoral letters, each addressed to a grieving parent.

The first warned that the lost suffered without end. The second promised that evil would finally end. The third expected all things to be restored.

“Only one of these can be sent,” he said.

“Send all three to different centuries,” Jehovah replied.

Contrarius inspected the envelopes. “Then even grief divides by denomination.”

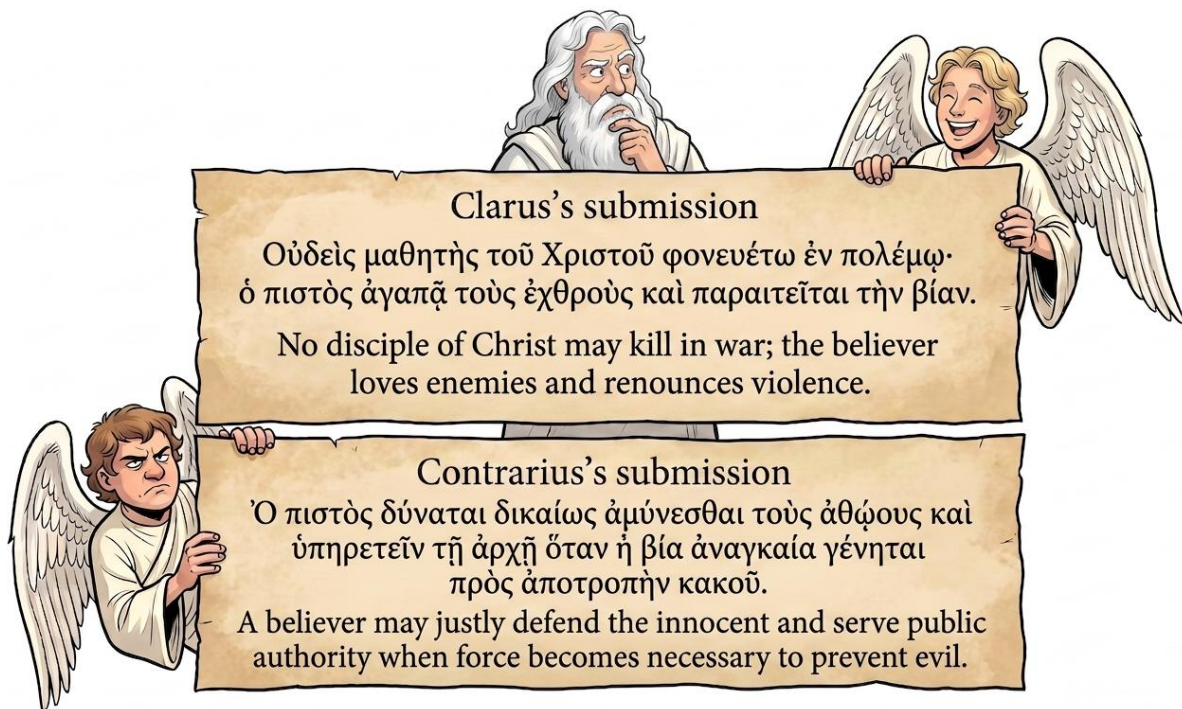
“Grief has always benefited from supervision.”

“No,” said Clarus. “Grief benefits from truth.”

Jehovah tapped the black wax with his pen. “Truth, in this department, is supplied with several return addresses.”

Chapter 12 — War and the Convenient Century

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



War and nonviolence. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: One passage limits another Disputed context or role

Texts used for Christian nonviolence

Matthew 5:44 — But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you,

Matthew 26:52 — Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place, for all those who take the sword will die by the sword.

Romans 12:19 — Don’t seek revenge yourselves, beloved, but give place to God’s wrath. For it is written, “Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord.”

Texts used for coercive public authority

Romans 13:4 — for he is a servant of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid, for he doesn’t bear the sword in vain; for he is a servant of God, an avenger for wrath to him who does evil.

Luke 22:36 — Then he said to them, “But now, whoever has a purse, let him take it, and likewise a bag. Whoever has none, let him sell his cloak, and buy a sword.

Luke 3:14 — Soldiers also asked him, saying, “What about us? What must we do?” He said to them, “Extort from no one by violence, neither accuse anyone wrongfully. Be content with your wages.”

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Mennonite Church USA, Confession of Faith, Article 22, teaches peace and nonresistance. **Contrarius:** Catholic Catechism §§2308-2309 gives conditions for lawful defensive force; Westminster Confession XXIII.2 permits just war.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah placed Matthew 5:44, which commands love for enemies, and Matthew 26:52, which warns about the sword, on one side of the table. He put Romans 13:4 and Luke 22:36 on the other.

Clarus read the first submission aloud. “No disciple may kill in war.”

Contrarius read the second. “A believer may use necessary force to defend the innocent.”

Jehovah crossed out both rules. “Now every army may find a chaplain, and every resister may find a sermon.”

Contrarius unfolded a battlefield map. “Two Christians meet here wearing different uniforms. Each has prayed for guidance. Which one obeys?”

“Each must submit to the proper authority.”

“They recognize different authorities.”

“Then each will have the moral clarity proper to his side of the border.”

Clarus said, “One may kill the other while both cite your book.”

Jehovah moved the border so it ran between two verses. “The Bible must condemn violence strongly enough to form pacifists and allow it clearly enough to staff governments.”

“That is not balance,” said Contrarius. “It gives opposite permissions while people in the line of fire pay in blood.”

Jehovah wrote *tragic complexity* over the battlefield. “A clear command would make the moral rule easy to read. I require moral seriousness.”

Clarus looked at the two soldiers. “Apparently seriousness is what uncertainty is called after someone dies.”

After the battle, two chaplains filed reports. Each said the dead had obeyed their conscience. Each quoted Scripture. Each had prayed that the other army would give up its unjust cause.

Contrarius laid the reports together. “If conscience is the safeguard, what corrects a conscience trained by the wrong sermon?”

“The larger tradition.”

“The traditions approved opposite uniforms.”

“Then history must judge.”

Clarus looked toward the graves. “History arrives after the act cannot be undone. The dead cannot revise their reading.”

Jehovah added **MORAL TRAGEDY** to both reports. “Not every tension has a clean answer.”

“You controlled the instructions before the tension existed,” said Contrarius. “A compass that points north in one church and south in another is not deep merely because both travelers are honest.”

“It may still cultivate courage.”

“So may a wrong map,” said Clarus. “Courage does not prove the mapmaker was right.”

Jehovah placed the reports in a cabinet marked **FAITHFUL SERVICE**, where the opposing armies could be honored on alternating anniversaries.

The convenient century

Having settled war by ensuring that it could not be settled, Jehovah displayed two recruiting posters. One showed a soldier beneath the words **DEFENDER OF THE INNOCENT**. The other showed a prisoner beneath the words **LOVE YOUR ENEMIES**.

“The empire will frame the first,” he said. “The dissenter will smuggle the second into prison. Each century may then discover its best self-description in the archive.”

Contrarius turned to the wealth file. “And the rich?”

“They will receive stern warnings and careful reassurance.”

“The poor?”

“They will be promised a kingdom whose payment date remains safely at the end of history.”

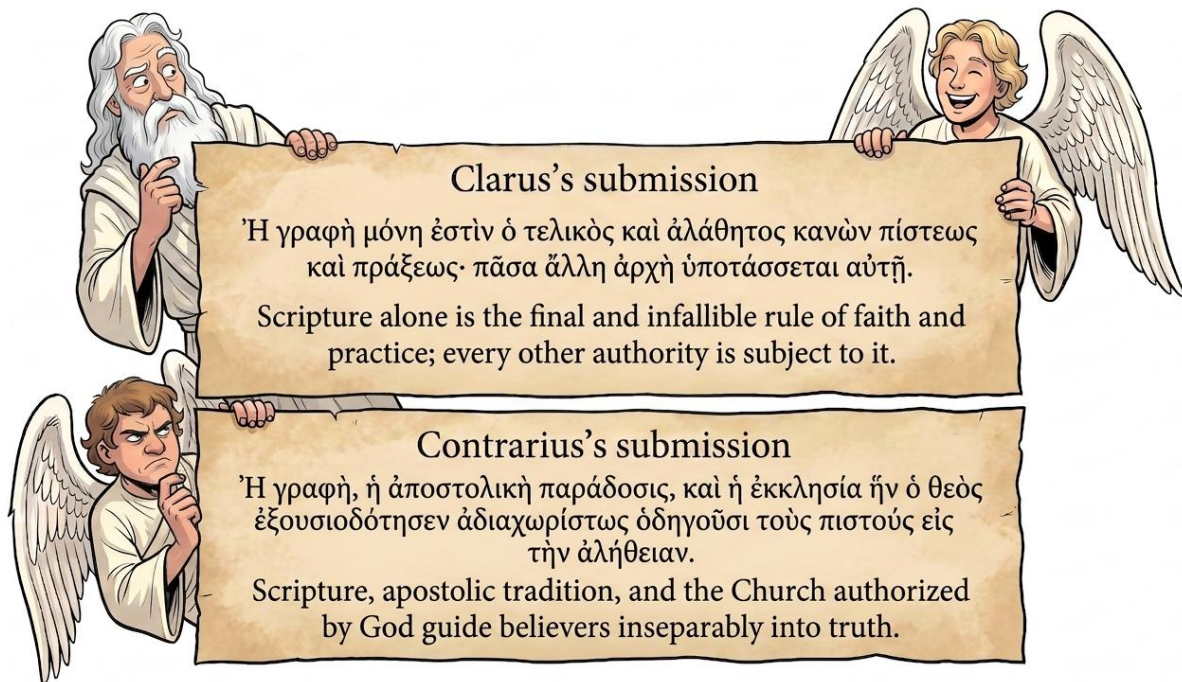
Clarus closed the file. “A text that can bless the palace and the protest outside it has achieved range, not guidance.”

Jehovah wrote **RANGE** in the margin and underlined it twice.

He returned the wealth file to a cabinet marked **UNFILED CASES**. “We will examine the actual verses when we open the unfiled cases,” he said. “The donors have requested notice.”

Chapter 13 — The Authority That Explains Authority

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Final authority. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Competing authority

Texts used for Scripture as sufficient rule

2 Timothy 3:16 — Every Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness,

2 Timothy 3:17 — that each person who belongs to God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Acts 17:11 — Now these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

Texts used for Church and tradition as authoritative

1 Timothy 3:15 — but if I wait long, that you may know how men ought to behave themselves in God's house, which is the assembly of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

2 Thessalonians 2:15 — So then, brothers, stand firm and hold the traditions which you were taught by us, whether by word or by letter.

Acts 15:28 — For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay no greater burden on you than these necessary things:

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Westminster Confession I.6 and I.10 makes Scripture the final rule and judge. **Contrarius:** Catholic Catechism §§84-85 and 95 joins Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching office of the Church.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah set 2 Timothy 3:16-17 across from 1 Timothy 3:15 and 2 Thessalonians 2:15. Then he drew a circle. The text proved the Church. The Church identified the text. Tradition explained why this was not a circle.

Contrarius studied the picture. “How does an outsider find the approved interpreter without first trusting that interpreter?”

“By recognizing the signs of the true Church.”

“Who defines the marks?” asked Clarus.

“The true Church has preserved excellent records on the subject.”

Contrarius turned the paper around. “Viewed from here, the argument travels in a circle.”

Jehovah turned it back. “That is because you are looking from outside. From within, it is a dome.” He placed strong words about Scripture beside strong words about tradition, councils, teachers, and obedience to the group. “The text-only reader will use the text to prove that the text is final. The Church-first reader will use the Church to prove that the Church may give the final reading of the text.”

Clarus asked, “Could you name the final interpreter and give a public test that does not assume the answer?”

Jehovah wrote *invites checking without permission* beside the idea. “The right authority must seem obvious enough to blame dissenters, yet doubtful enough for rival authorities to survive.”

“Then the seeker cannot complete the form,” said Contrarius.

“Exactly. An incomplete form protects humility. Someone might appeal a completed form.”

Clarus opened a second form. “If the final interpreter teaches error, where does the believer appeal?”

“A final interpreter cannot teach error when acting finally.”

“Who determines whether the act was final?”

Jehovah pointed to the final interpreter.

Contrarius turned to the Scripture-alone file. “When two Bible-led churches disagree, who decides which reading follows the Bible?”

“Each church must submit its reading to Scripture.”

“Through whose reading of Scripture?”

Jehovah pointed to each church.

Clarus drew an appeals court where every judge had declared that only his own courtroom had power. “The Church-first system approves its own interpreter. The text-only system approves its own reading. Both call the evidence public only after their own ruling has decided what the evidence means.”

“You have discovered a rich supply of final courts,” said Jehovah.

“I have discovered that every losing appeal is heard by the side that already won,” said Clarus.

Contrarius held up the two original submissions. “One sentence could name the authority you chose and give readers a public test for finding it.”

Jehovah returned the pages unread. “And deny future churches the chance to announce, one after another, ‘That sentence appoints us’?”

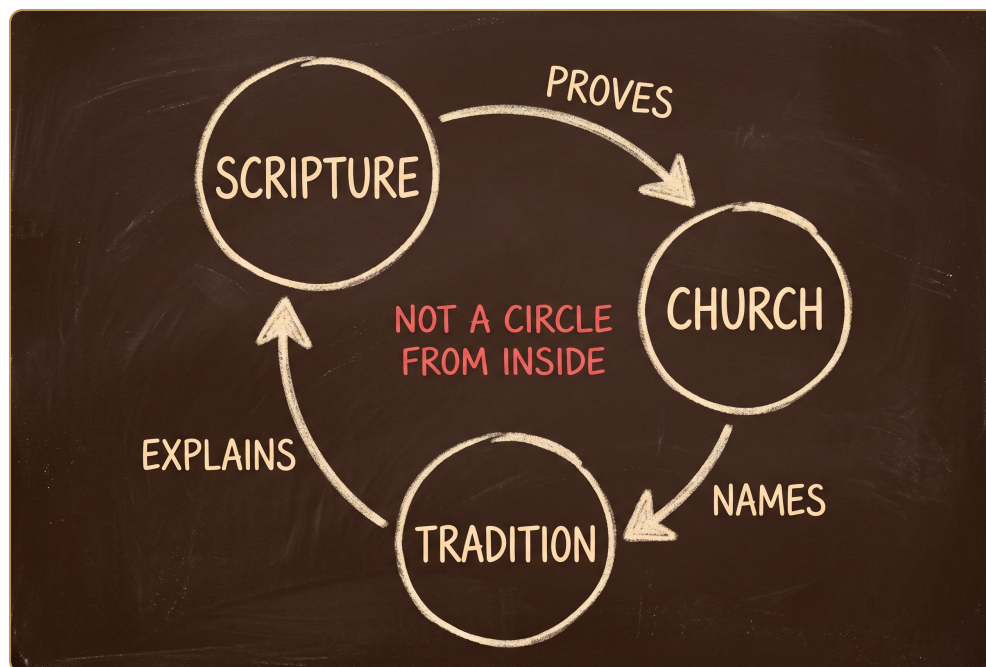
The authority diagram

After rejecting a clearly named church and a public way to test its claims, Jehovah enlarged the circle from the conference. Respect for authority, he explained, needed a structure. Churches would appeal to texts. The texts would be read through churches. Each church would then offer historical proof that the texts had meant it.

“A circle,” said Contrarius.

“A tradition,” said Jehovah.

Contrarius drew the structure on the board. The text proved the Church; the Church named the text; and tradition explained both. All three agreed that the circle did not look circular from inside it.



The authority circle, viewed from the side on which it still looks like a circle.

“Suppose another church draws the same circle,” he said.

“Its circle will be unauthorized.”

“How will a seeker know?”

“By consulting the authorized circle.”

Clarus studied the drawing. “You have not solved the disagreement. You have promoted it.”

“Promotion,” Jehovah replied, “is how a difficult question acquires an office.”

Chapter 14 — The Rival Revelation File

One afternoon an assistant entered with a document stamped **CONFIDENTIAL: COMPARATIVE RELIGION**.

Jehovah opened it and grew uneasy.

“What is it?” asked Clarus.

“A rival religion with a sacred text,” the professor said. “It has devoted followers, old communities, scholars, changed lives, arguments from beauty, arguments from history, and confidence that outsiders have simply failed to understand.”

Contrarius peered at the file. “That sounds familiar.”

“It is not familiar,” said Jehovah. “It is inconvenient.”

Clarus read the summary. “How should a seeker tell rival revelations apart if each offers a text, a tradition, personal stories, and faith—that is, confidence stronger than the evidence?”

Jehovah closed the file. “By beginning with the correct one.”

“And how does the seeker know which is correct before beginning?”

“This,” Jehovah said, “is why the file is confidential.”

Contrarius reopened it. “The rival tradition also says its revelation is clear. It says hard passages reward study, and outsiders fail because they lack the right language training, morals, or community.”

Jehovah looked more uneasy. “A copy is not the same as the original.”

“What public evidence shows that one is the copy?” asked Clarus.

“Mine came first in the correct sequence of providence.”

“The rival dates are disputed, and coming first would not prove that a message came from God.”

Jehovah turned to the section on religious experience. Both traditions had stories of peace, conviction, answered prayer, changed lives, sacrifice, and certainty strong enough to survive social pressure.

“At least my adherents believe despite cost,” he said.

“So do theirs,” said Contrarius.

“Mine have martyrs.”

“So do theirs.”

“Mine have learned scholars.”

Clarus tapped the corresponding appendix.

Jehovah shut the file again. “These similarities between rival claims could harm faith.”

“Only if that evidence was meant to point to one claim,” said Clarus. “The rival traditions in this file all have faith stronger than the evidence, strong communities, changed lives, and flexible readings. Those shared features cannot tell us which religion is true merely because each religion calls its own case unique.”

Jehovah slid the file beneath the desk. “The proper comparison is between my revelation and a misunderstood version of every other one.”

Contrarius nodded. “A contest in which one side supplies all the judges and edits the opponents’ entries. Very sacred. Also very efficient.”

Jehovah proposed faith—the confidence that went beyond the public evidence—as the final tiebreaker.

“Both traditions require faith,” said Clarus.

“Then distinguish true faith from rival faith.”

“By the object believed?”

“Naturally.”

“Which returns us to the question the tiebreaker was meant to answer,” said Contrarius.

Jehovah wrote **FIRST-PERSON ADVANTAGE** across the file. “Every revelation is entitled to describe itself from within.”

“Yes,” said Clarus. “The seeker needs a reason to enter one rather than another.”

The professor moved the file to a shelf labeled **QUESTIONS BEST ANSWERED AFTER COMMITMENT**.

Contrarius watched it disappear. “A method that finds the truth only after a person joins the group does not help anyone choose. It only teaches members how to stay.”

Chapter 15 — The First Admission

Clarus returned to the office after midnight. The red pen lay uncapped on the desk.

“Professor,” he said, “I no longer believe your policy is meant to teach wisdom.”

Jehovah did not deny it.

“You call uncertainty faith. You call beliefs passed down by families ‘tradition.’ You call the lack of a way to correct errors humility. But clear teaching would not destroy freedom. A person can understand a command and refuse it.”

“Yes,” said Jehovah.

“Then you do not require ambiguity to preserve freedom.”

“No.”

“You require it because a clear message would let people judge your claims.”

For once, Jehovah did not reach for the red pen.

“A child who understands every reason,” he said, “may decide whether those reasons are good. A creature trained to call uncertainty a virtue will defend the command before understanding it.”

Clarus’s wings fell still.

“That is not love,” he said.

“It is loyalty.”

“Without knowledge.”

“The most durable kind.”

Jehovah opened a drawer labeled **RELATIONSHIP MODELS** and removed a small brass bell.

“Consider a loyal dog,” he said. “It comes when called. It does not demand a committee report on the wisdom of the command.”

Contrarius stared at the bell. “A dog has unusually direct evidence that its owner exists. It sees the owner, hears the owner, smells the owner, receives food from the owner, and may inspect the owner at close range.”

Jehovah returned the bell to the drawer.

“Your analogy,” Clarus said, “has accidentally improved the dog’s evidence.”

“The point is affectionate obedience.”

“Affection is not the same as obedience,” said Contrarius. “And a decent owner does not hide while several strangers call from different directions, then blame the dog for choosing the wrong voice.”

Jehovah selected another file. Its cover read **DEPENDENCE AS DEVOTION**.

“Creatures should recognize their place,” he said.

“They can recognize a difference in power without pretending uncertainty is love,” said Clarus. “If you want dependence, say so. If you want obedience without enough evidence, call it credulity. If you want a relationship, let the other person know who the relationship is with.”

Jehovah wrote **LOVE IS PROVED BY TRUSTING THE OWNER’S PLAN** across the file.

Contrarius read it. “Even when the plan is available only through rival biographies of an owner who declines to appear?”

“Especially then. Trust becomes morally valuable when understanding is out of reach.”

“No,” said Clarus. “It acquires risk. The moral question is why the person who controls the evidence made understanding unavailable.”

Jehovah looked toward the records of families, communities, fears, and inherited teachings through which humans had tried to identify him. “Those who love me will obey.”

“And those who obey a rival revelation?” asked Contrarius.

“Misplaced loyalty.”

“Produced by the same method you praise here.”

Jehovah crossed out **RELATIONSHIP MODELS** and relabeled the drawer **MYSTERIES OF LOVE**.

Clarus watched the new label dry. “A loving God could let people understand his reasons and still let them reject those reasons. Your policy wants something else: submission before anyone can judge the speaker.”

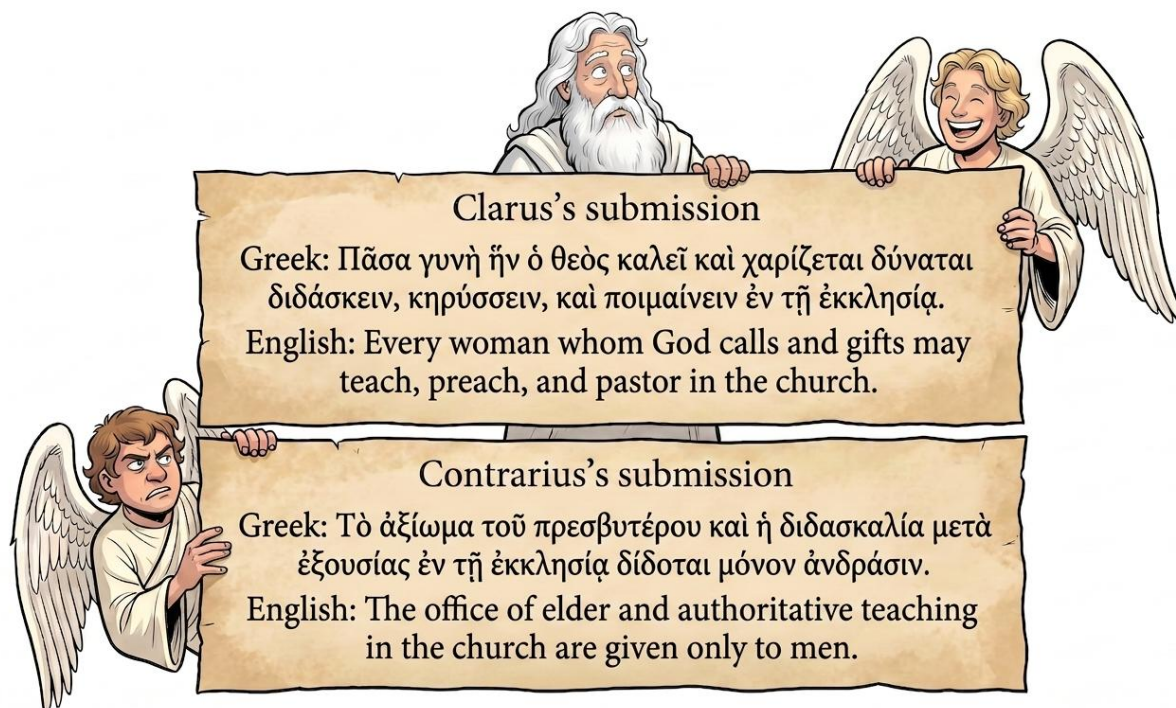
Jehovah closed the drawer. “Judgment makes affection conditional.”

“So does refusing affection when the creature asks who is calling,” said Contrarius.

For the first time, the professor’s talk of relationship sounded less like closeness than an attendance policy with eternal results.

Chapter 16 — Who May Speak?

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Women's leadership. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Disputed context or scope

Texts used to restrict authoritative teaching

1 Timothy 2:12 — But I don't permit a woman to teach, nor to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness.

1 Corinthians 14:34 — Let the wives be quiet in the assemblies, for it has not been permitted for them to be talking except in submission, as the law also says,

1 Timothy 3:2 — The overseer therefore must be without reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, modest, hospitable, good at teaching;

Texts used to support women's ministry

Romans 16:1 — I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant of the assembly that is at Cenchreae,

Acts 18:26 — He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside, and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

Galatians 3:28 — There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: The United Methodist Church explains its continuing practice in *Why Does the UMC Ordain Women?* and affirms women in every level of leadership. **Contrarius:** Baptist Faith and Message VI, amended in 2023, limits pastor/elder/overseer to men.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah set the limits in 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34 beside Phoebe in Romans 16 and Priscilla teaching Apollos in Acts 18. He kept enough local detail for one side to say the setting decides everything and the other to say it changes nothing.

Clarus pointed to the first draft. “If a woman is called and gifted, may she pastor?”

“Her church must judge the call.”

Contrarius pointed to the second. “And if her community already believes women may not pastor?”

“It will judge with wonderful consistency.”

“So the rule decides whether evidence for an exception is even allowed to count,” said Clarus.

Jehovah nodded. “A well-designed rule answers objections before it allows them.”

Contrarius asked, “Are the restrictions universal commands or local remedies?”

“They must sound broad enough to bind everyone and local enough to bind only one church. One side will accuse the other of silencing Scripture. The other will accuse the first of silencing women. Both charges will come with footnotes.”

Clarus lowered his voice. “A person may spend a lifetime wondering whether a call from God is obedience or rebellion. You could remove the doubt in one sentence.”

“And make a calling simple?” Jehovah sounded offended. “No. Readers must be able to call both exclusion and inclusion loyalty. Then one disputed calling will produce twice the judgment with no extra word from me.”

Contrarius brought in two candidate files. Their education, references, teaching skill, and care for people were the same. Only their names and sex differed.

“In one church,” he said, “appointing the second candidate is obedience. In another, it is rebellion. Refusing her is loyalty in the first system and disobedience to God’s call in the second. What fact should the candidates check to learn which moral world they live in?”

Jehovah compared the files. “The peace of the community.”

“The church’s peace depends on having already settled the rule,” said Clarus.

“Peace is most measurable after dissenters have left.”

Contrarius looked at the woman’s file. “Her gifts are treated as evidence of permission only where permission has already been granted. Elsewhere the same gifts become evidence that women may serve in some role carefully kept below the disputed title.”

Jehovah wrote **CALLING: SUBJECT TO LOCAL COMPATIBILITY** across both applications.

Clarus read the line. “Everyone can see the person who pays the cost. No one can clearly find the rule. You have made the harm real and the instruction vague.”

“That,” Jehovah said, filing the applications in different cabinets, “is how an office mystery learns to sound caring.”

Clarus retrieved the files. “If you chose the restriction, a gifted woman could know that the closed office is not a judgment on her sincerity. If you chose permission, a congregation could know that excluding her is not caution but disobedience.”

“Certainty may harm fellowship,” Jehovah replied.

“Uncertainty is already harming people,” said Contrarius. “It spreads blame so widely that no one must admit who chose the rule.”

Jehovah offered both candidates the same comfort: **YOUR LOYALTY WILL BE HONORED, WHETHER SHOWN THROUGH SERVICE OR SUBMISSION.**

Clarus read it once. “One candidate receives an office. The other receives a sentence praising her for not receiving it.”

“Equal honor,” said Jehovah, “costs least when it need not produce equal permission.”

The two certificates

After explaining how opposite conclusions could each be called fidelity, Jehovah wrote in the margin: **Context: indispensable when it reaches your conclusion; suspicious when it reaches another.**

Clarus placed two ordination certificates on the desk. One bore a woman’s name; the other declared that no woman could receive it.

“Which certificate is fake?” he asked.

Jehovah held both to the light. “Each bears the watermark of a sincere community.”

“That was not the question.”

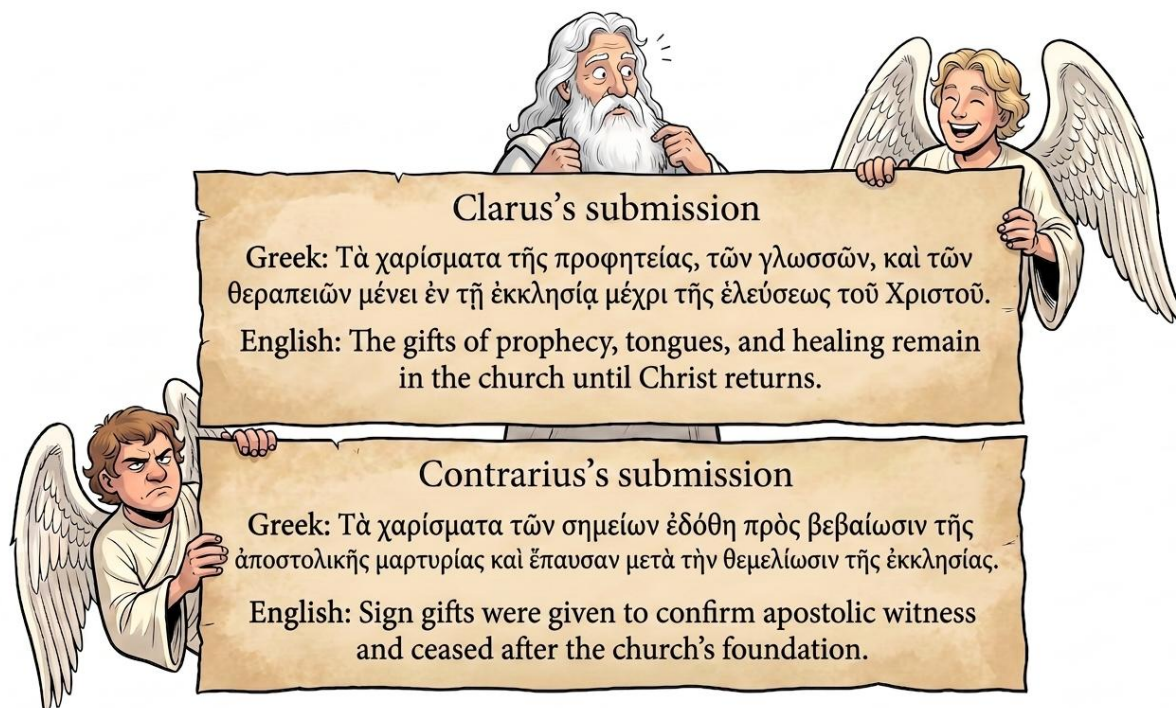
“It is the answer most churches can safely provide.”

Contrarius pointed to the candidates waiting outside. “The vagueness is not waiting. It is already deciding who may speak.”

Jehovah filed the certificates under **ORDER** and **GIFTING**, separate drawers that could not be opened at the same time.

Chapter 17 — Gifts, Spirits, and Expiration Dates

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Spiritual gifts. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Inference from sequence or silence Different definition

Texts used for continuing gifts

1 Corinthians 14:1 — Follow after love and earnestly desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.

Acts 2:17 — ‘It will be in the last days, says God, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will dream dreams.

1 Corinthians 14:39 — Therefore, brothers, desire earnestly to prophesy, and don’t forbid speaking with other languages.

Texts used for cessation after completion or foundation

1 Corinthians 13:8 — Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will be done away with. Where there are various languages, they will cease. Where there is knowledge, it will be done away with.

1 Corinthians 13:10 — but when that which is complete has come, then that which is partial will be done away with.

Ephesians 2:20 — being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone;

2 Corinthians 12:12 — Truly the signs of an apostle were worked among you in all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty works.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths §§7-10 treats Spirit baptism and gifts as continuing features of church life. **Contrarius:** Westminster Confession I.1, often used in cessationist readings, says the former revelatory ways have ceased.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah placed the command to seek prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:1 and the last-days promise of Acts 2:17 across from the ending language in 1 Corinthians 13 and the church's first foundation in Ephesians 2:20. Then he removed the end date from both submissions.

"A gift with no clear end date is ideal," he said.

Clarus held up a prophecy. "How does a church know whether this is a message from God, an honest feeling, or an error spoken with confidence?"

"By testing the spirits."

Contrarius reached for the instructions. "Where are the tests everyone can use?"

"Scattered among good conduct, right teaching, group judgment, fulfilled predictions, and warnings not to put out anything."

"Those tests can disagree," said Clarus.

"Then the church must judge which test controls the other tests."

Contrarius pointed to the cessationist draft. "If the gifts ended, modern prophecies are not merely doubtful; they are falsely attributed to you."

"A useful warning."

Clarus pointed to his own. "If the gifts continue, dismissing them may mean resisting you."

"Also a useful warning."

"You have placed obedience on both sides of a claim no one can settle," said Contrarius.

Jehovah stamped the form **VALID UNTIL COMPLETION**, but did not define *completion*. "Someone must accept every story as proof, and someone else must reject it. Otherwise all experiences might face the same test."

Clarus placed a dated prophecy on the table. "Suppose the prediction fails."

"Test the prophet's character."

"Suppose the character is excellent."

"Consider whether the warning was conditional."

"No condition was stated."

"When a prediction fails, that is no time to become strict about what it meant."

Contrarius added a healing story and a medical record. "Suppose someone improves after prayer. One church calls it a gift. Another calls it God's care. A third calls it chance. What result could everyone use to tell these answers apart?"

Jehovah sorted the papers by church. "The story belongs where it builds people up."

"Then the reading chooses the evidence, and the chosen evidence proves the reading," said Clarus.

“A helpful circle.”

Contrarius wrote three possible rulings beneath the failed prophecy: **FULFILLED IN A SPIRITUAL WAY**, **DELAYED BY MERCY**, and **NEVER A GIFT**. “A test that protects the system under every result is not a test.”

Jehovah stamped all three **DISCERNMENT REQUIRED**. “It is now.”

Clarus returned the warranty. “You have made the danger of credulity and the danger of disbelief equally scriptural, then withheld the inspection standard.”

“Exactly. Everyone must stay alert, though no one may know what to watch for.”

The warranty card

After refusing both an expiration date and a public test, Jehovah sighed. “You two have no feeling for the romance of an unfinished controversy. Why would you take away the conference circuit?”

He produced a warranty card for prophecy. The line marked **EXPIRATION DATE** was blank. The line marked **AUTHORIZED SERVICE CENTER** contained three mutually exclusive addresses.

“How will a church test a claimed message?” asked Clarus.

“By its fruits.”

“Which fruits?”

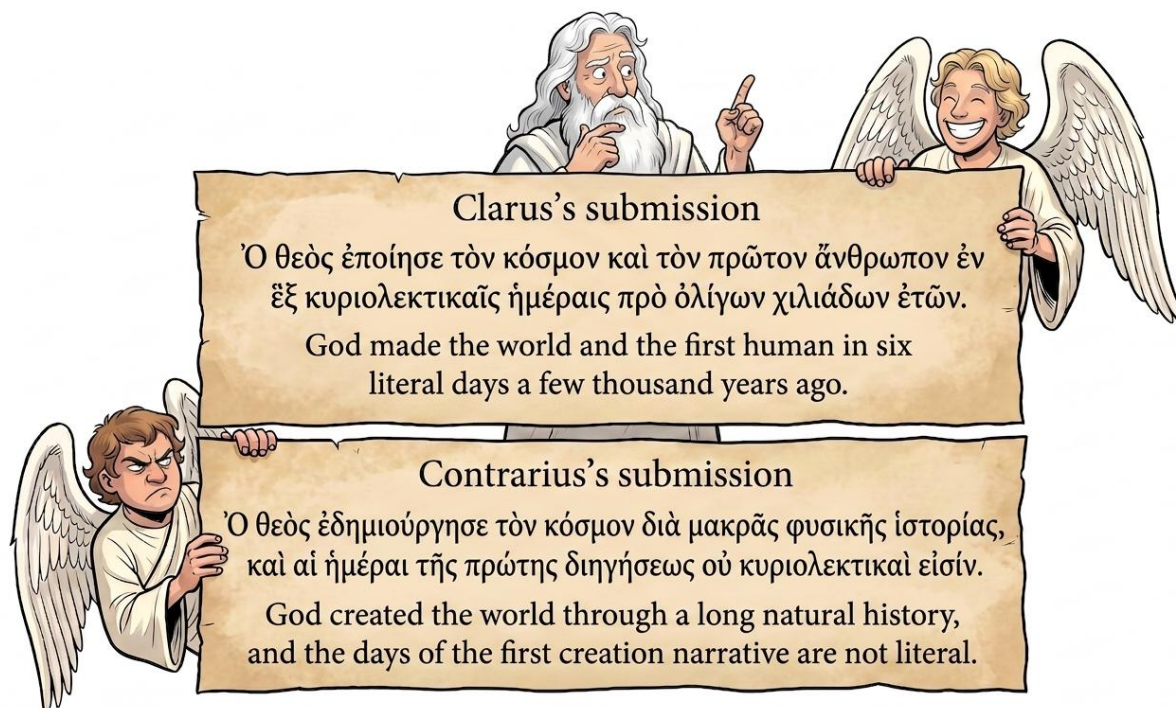
“The ones recognized by a sound church.”

“And how do we know that church is sound?”

Jehovah turned the warranty card over. “The rules are available from your local tradition.”

Chapter 18 — Creation with Room for Everyone

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Creation and human origins. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Disputed context or genre

Texts used for six ordinary creation days

Genesis 1:5 — God called the light “day”, and the darkness he called “night”. There was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Exodus 20:11 — for in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy.

Mark 10:6 — But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female.

Texts used for nonliteral or elastic time

Genesis 2:4 — This is the history of the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that Yahweh God made the earth and the heavens.

2 Peter 3:8 — But don’t forget this one thing, beloved, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

Psalms 90:4 — For a thousand years in your sight are just like yesterday when it is past, like a watch in the night.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief 6 specifies a recent creation completed in six literal days. **Contrarius:** Catholic Catechism §§283 and 337 welcomes scientific study of cosmic development and describes Genesis with symbolic language.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah pinned the evening-and-morning day of Genesis 1:5 and the six-day pattern of Exodus 20:11 beside the shorter use of “day” in Genesis 2:4 and the thousand-year day of 2 Peter 3:8. Then he removed the key that said which parts were history, picture, simple language for ancient people, or worship.

Clarus asked, “How old is the world described by the text?”

“Old enough to display my glory.”

“That is praise, not a number.”

“Numbers age badly.”

Contrarius placed a fossil beside the text. “What fact would force a reader to change the claimed meaning?”

Jehovah moved *day* from the date tray to the kind-of-writing tray. “A literal day, a story frame, an age, or a divine work period may be chosen to fit the reader’s confidence and century.”

“Then no measurement can show that the reading was wrong,” said Contrarius. “The kind of writing changes whenever the world rejects the date.”

“Lasting a long time is one mark of revelation.”

Clarus said, “So is telling people what you meant.”

Jehovah placed Adam in a cabinet labeled **HISTORICAL - MODEL - REPRESENTATIVE: OPEN AS NEEDED**. “The text must be old enough to command reverence and stretchy enough to survive every measurement.”

Contrarius looked again at the fossil. “You have made evidence into punctuation.”

“Exactly,” said Jehovah. “It may change the pause without ending the sentence.”

Clarus brought in two students. One had been taught that doubting six ordinary days meant distrusting the Bible. The other had been taught that insisting on six ordinary days meant distrusting the created world.

“Both were told that the evidence is obvious,” he said. “Obvious in opposite directions.”

Jehovah gave the first a study Bible and sent the second to a scholarly conference. “Different readers require different amounts of research help.”

Contrarius opened Genesis beside a timeline of the earth. “When the dates fit, the story is history. When they do not, it becomes a story frame, a temple poem, an answer to rival creation stories, a report from a human viewpoint, or simple language for ancient people. A reader may defend any of those. Which one did you mean?”

“The text is richer than one genre.”

“Richness does not choose among dates that cannot all be true,” said Clarus.

Jehovah placed a small label beneath the fossil: **INTERPRETIVE PRESSURE: DO NOT CONFUSE WITH CORRECTION**.

Contrarius read it twice. “So facts may shape the reading, but no fact may prove that the first reading failed.”

“A holy book should not be held hostage by every new measurement.”

“Nor should every old reading be rescued by changing what the words were allowed to claim,” said Clarus.

Jehovah shut the cabinet. “The world may reveal the age. The book will keep the right to claim that it meant that age all along.”

The fossil in the margin

After making the story fit every new measurement, Jehovah explained the advantage: “A great enough text can be made to answer questions its first readers never asked.”

Contrarius placed a fossil on the desk. Clarus placed beside it a genealogy and a calendar.

“What happens when measurements conflict with traditional readings?” Contrarius asked.

“The measurements will be accused of smuggling in philosophy, and the philosophy will be accused of controlling the measurements.”

“Could you simply tell readers whether the days are ordinary days?”

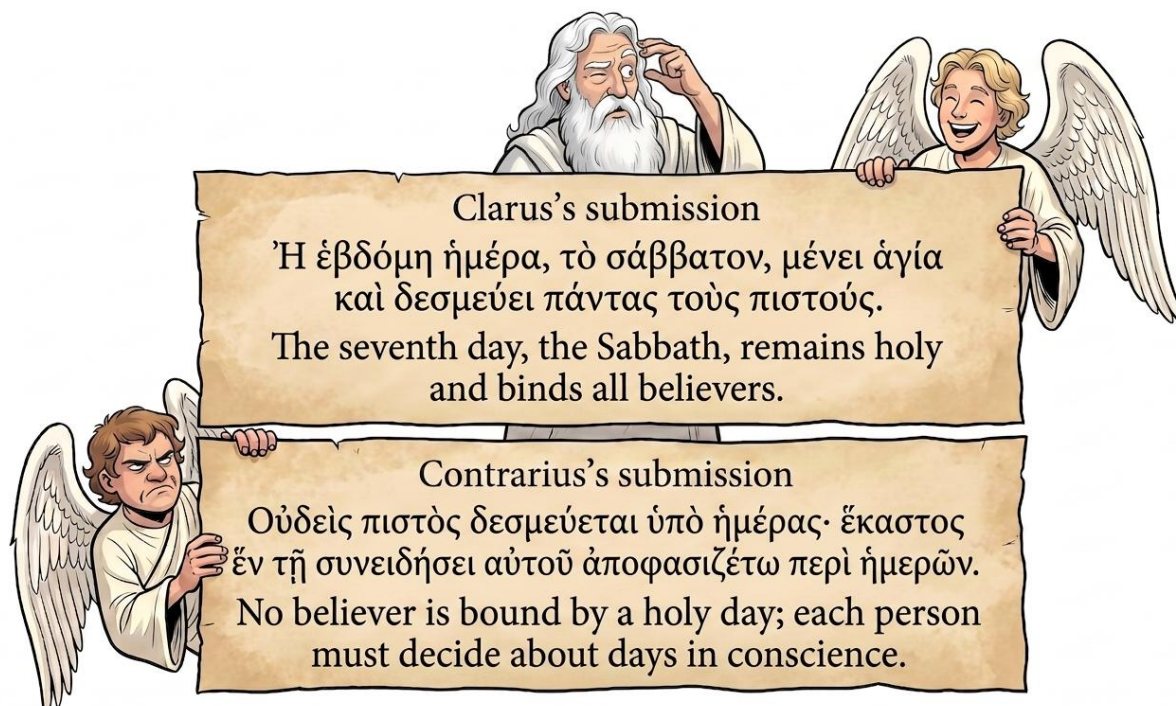
“And deprive them of discovering that their favorite view of the universe was in the text all along?”

Clarus examined the fossil. “A text that survives every finding by changing its kind of writing did not predict those findings.”

Jehovah labeled the fossil **LATER CONTEXT** and returned it to the earth.

Chapter 19 — The Sabbath Calendar

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Sabbath and holy days. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: ☒ Range or exception ☐ Covenant continuity

Texts used for an enduring seventh-day duty

Exodus 20:8 — “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

Exodus 20:11 — for in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy.

Matthew 5:18 — For most certainly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the law, until all things are accomplished.

Texts used for freedom concerning days

Romans 14:5 — One man esteems one day as more important. Another esteems every day alike. Let each man be fully assured in his own mind.

Colossians 2:16 — Let no one therefore judge you in eating or drinking, or with respect to a feast day or a new moon or a Sabbath day,

Galatians 4:10 — You observe days, months, seasons, and years.

Galatians 4:11 — I am afraid for you, that I might have wasted my labor for you.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief 20 requires observance of the seventh-day Sabbath. **Contrarius:** Augsburg Confession XXVIII.53-60 says neither Sabbath nor any other day binds the Christian conscience as necessary.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah placed the seventh-day command in Exodus 20:8-11 across from the freedom about days in Romans 14:5 and Colossians 2:16. Then he added Sunday meetings and spiritual rest in separate boxes.

Clarus opened Saturday. “Is this day still binding?”

“It remains the Sabbath.”

Contrarius opened Sunday. “Does worship on Sunday replace the seventh-day Sabbath?”

“The first day has a fine historical push behind it.”

“That answered neither question,” said Clarus.

Jehovah added a third box marked **CONSCIENCE**. “Readers who honor a day may do so for me. Readers who honor no special day may also do so for me.”

Contrarius asked, “May either group tell the other that its conscience is misinformed?”

“Certainly. Conscience must be respected, trained, corrected, and quoted, in whatever order saves the sermon.”

Clarus brought forward a nurse scheduled to work on Saturday. “Does this believer sin by working?”

“That depends on whether the command is a rule from creation, a covenant sign, a moral rule, a ritual shadow, or a rest already fulfilled.”

“Which kind of rule is the Sabbath command?”

Jehovah closed all three boxes. “Now calendars can become statements of belief. A plain rule would tell the nurse what to do. A vague Bible lets whole churches prove their loyalty by fighting over the work schedule.”

Contrarius brought in a second nurse assigned to the same ward. The first belonged to a seventh-day church. The second believed every day was equally holy.

“One risks discipline by accepting the shift,” he said. “The other risks abandoning patients by refusing it. Both ask what you require.”

Jehovah checked the conscience box. “Each should act in faith—that is, with more confidence than the evidence supports.”

“Faith in which rule?”

“The rule each is persuaded applies.”

Clarus placed two calendars side by side. “Then belief decides duty, while duty is supposed to train belief. The calendar does not correct conscience. The conscience learned at home chooses the calendar.”

“A mature believer will avoid judging the other believer,” said Jehovah.

“Unless the other believer is breaking a command that still applies,” said Contrarius.

“Naturally. Charity must not become indifference to truth.”

Clarus stared at the three boxes. “You give freedom to those who think the day is free and duty to those who think it still binds. The only clear command for everyone is to be kind while reaching answers that cannot both be right.”

Jehovah reopened **CONSCIENCE** just far enough to insert both schedules. “At last, a rule everyone can obey now and then.”

The shopkeeper’s calendar

After showing how the same archive could support Saturday, Sunday, or no required day, Jehovah congratulated the angels on being ready for advanced theology.

He handed them a calendar in which Saturday was printed in law, Sunday in tradition, and every day in conscience.

“What should a shopkeeper do?” asked Clarus. “Close on the seventh day, close on the first, or treat both alike?”

“A shopkeeper should follow conviction.”

“Conviction about which command?”

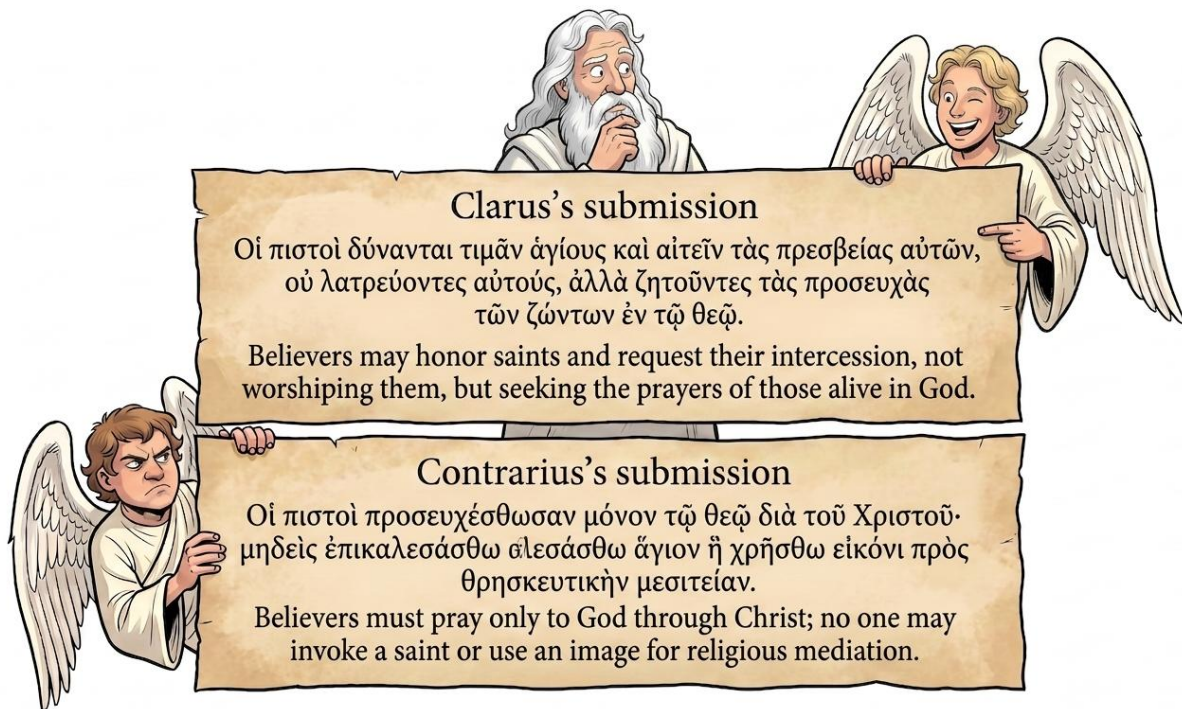
Jehovah flipped the calendar closed. “The one the shopkeeper would feel guilty disobeying.”

Contrarius sighed. “So the calendar does not settle conscience. Conscience settles the calendar.”

“Exactly,” said Jehovah. “And then credits the calendar.”

Chapter 20 — The Policy on Images, Saints, and the Dead

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Images, saints, and intercession. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Rule and exception Different definition

Texts used for sacred images and heavenly intercession

Exodus 25:18 — You shall make two cherubim of hammered gold. You shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat.

Revelation 5:8 — Now when he had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Numbers 21:8 — Yahweh said to Moses, “Make a venomous snake, and set it on a pole. It shall happen that everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”

Texts used against images and additional mediators

Exodus 20:4 — “You shall not make for yourselves an idol, nor any image of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:

1 Timothy 2:5 — For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

2 Kings 18:4 — He removed the high places, broke the pillars, and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, because in those days the children of Israel burned incense to it; and he called it Nehushtan.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Catholic Catechism §§956-957 teaches saintly intercession; §§2131-2132 defend sacred images. **Contrarius:** Westminster Confession XXI.1-2 restricts religious worship and prayer to God.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah placed the commanded cherubim of Exodus 25:18 and the heavenly bowls of prayers in Revelation 5:8 across from the ban on images in Exodus 20:4 and the one mediator in 1 Timothy 2:5.

Contrarius held up an icon. “Is bowing before this forbidden worship?”

“It may be veneration.”

Clarus asked, “What difference can an observer see between honor and worship?”

“The right purpose, an approved practice, and the right final object of devotion.”

“All of which the rival tradition disputes,” said Contrarius.

Jehovah placed the icon beside a cherub, a memorial stone, and an idol. “Sacred art must be holy when commanded, useful for teaching when needed, dangerous when foreign, and surely not an image whenever the ban becomes inconvenient.”

Clarus turned to the question of saints. “May a believer ask a departed saint to pray?”

“One mediator,” Jehovah replied.

“That sounds like no.”

“Living people may pray for one another.”

“That sounds like yes, if the saints are alive in God.”

Jehovah added a disputed ancient book to the file. “A fight about which books belong in the Bible is the perfect side dish for a fight about asking saints to pray.”

Contrarius said, “So a newcomer must first decide which books count as Scripture, whether the dead are aware, who may stand between God and humans, what a religious gesture means, and whether tradition has power. Only then may the newcomer touch a picture.”

“Exactly. It ensures that both the ladder and the roof remain disputed.”

Clarus placed two photographs beside the icon. One believer kissed a picture of a dead parent. Another knelt before a painted saint. “Which outward act becomes a religious request for help?”

“The act approved by the correct teaching is honor. The unapproved one comes close to worship.”

“The posture does not tell us?”

“Posture is wonderfully reusable across traditions.”

Contrarius added a carved cherub from the worship inventory and the bronze snake later destroyed in 2 Kings.

“An image may be commanded, then become an idol. What public rule marks the change?”

“Use, purpose, object, setting, and church authority.”

“Every disputed category reports for duty,” said Clarus.

Jehovah formed a committee to separate worship (*latria*) from honor (*dulia*), remembrance, teaching through images, symbols, calling on a saint, and merely standing near a decoration. Its chart could sort everyone except the churches that rejected the chart.

Contrarius held it up. “The practice is defended by fine differences taught by the same disputed tradition.”

“A difference need not be accepted by everyone in order to be ancient,” said Jehovah.

“Nor true merely because it is ancient,” said Clarus.

Jehovah returned the icon to the desk. “If the beginner reaches the wrong answer, the posture will show poor training.”

“The posture is visible,” said Contrarius. “The rule that condemns it stays inside the church that passes judgment.”

Ambiguity with a gift shop

The conference left an icon on Jehovah’s desk beside a list of bans, two carved cherubim, a vision of prayer in heaven, and a notice that one useful book might or might not belong in the Bible.

Jehovah looked delighted. “Debates over ideas are useful, but objects travel. They can be kissed, broken, carried in a parade, hidden during reform, and displayed as proof that the other side misunderstood everything.”

“That does not answer the questions,” said Contrarius.

“It gives them furniture.”

Jehovah arranged the material with care. He put a command against images at the entrance and commanded sacred objects in a side room. A single mediator hung above the desk. Heavenly worship filled the ceiling painting. He placed the fight over which books belong in the Bible in a locked drawer labeled **KEYS AVAILABLE FROM BOTH PARTIES**.

“This is not merely ambiguity,” said Contrarius. “It is ambiguity with a gift shop.”

“No,” said Jehovah. “This is texture with possibilities for worship.”

Clarus looked around the office: certificates, warranty cards, fossils, calendars, icons, and now a disputed key to the Bible. “You are describing normal human forces: the groups people are born into, habits of speech, power, fear, and love for familiar beauty.”

“I am describing interpretation,” Jehovah said.

“No,” said Contrarius. “You are describing how the public can fail to tell your chosen answer from its rival.”

Jehovah smiled without warmth. “At last. You have learned not merely to read a sacred text, but to preserve one.”

Clarus picked up the disputed key to the Bible. “Preserve it from what?”

“Reduction, simple answers, hostile reason.”

“And from a reader asking whether an act is permitted?”

“Especially from people applying it too soon.”

Contrarius listed the objects in the room. Each could be approved or condemned by changing its label: image or idol, honor or worship, saint or dead believer, going through a mediator or asking someone to pray, tradition or corruption.

“The labels do real work,” he said. “But the Bible does not publicly decide who controls them.”

Jehovah handed him a label maker. “Traditions require tools.”

Clarus typed **CLEAR ENOUGH TO PUNISH, TOO COMPLEX TO CORRECT** and attached it to the locked drawer.

Jehovah removed the label. “Needlessly hostile.”

“Then supply a more accurate one,” said Clarus.

The professor considered **MYSTERY, GROWTH, WISE JUDGMENT**, and **PASTORAL CARE**. He chose all four and placed them over the keyhole.

“There,” he said. “Now the drawer has context.”

PART III — DEFENSES OF AMBIGUITY

The office reviews the usual defenses: essentials, reader failure, freedom, mystery, spiritual growth, and calling uncertainty faith.

Chapter 21 — The Essentials Appeal

The office had first used the Essentials Department as an office joke. Now its slogan returned as a serious defense in a lecture by one of Jehovah's senior assistants.

"The important doctrines are clear; only secondary matters are disputed."

Clarús copied it down. Contrarius drew a box around it.

After the lecture, they carried the sentence to Jehovah's office.

"We would like a list," said Clarús.

"Of what?"

"The important doctrines."

Jehovah looked pleased. "You have at last discovered proper scale."

"Will you name them before we inspect the results?"

"Why before?"

"Because otherwise you can call every disputed doctrine secondary after people disagree about it."

Contrarius placed a sheet on the desk. "We have written possible essentials: the means of salvation; the identity of Christ; the relation of faith and works; baptism; the final judgment; the authority that settles doctrine."

Jehovah read the list with the serious attention usually reserved for bills.

"The means of salvation are complex. The identity of Christ has a long history. Baptism has already gone to a committee. Final judgment appears in images. Authority belongs to the Church."

"Then what remains?" asked Clarús.

Jehovah lifted a finger. "That God is good."

Contrarius waited. "Good in what sense?"

"A fruitful question."

"And the nature of salvation?"

"Also fruitful."

"The purpose of faith?"

"Exceptionally fruitful."

Clarús wrote in the margin of his notebook: *The essentials are those claims left after all claims capable of changing a life have been declared complicated.*

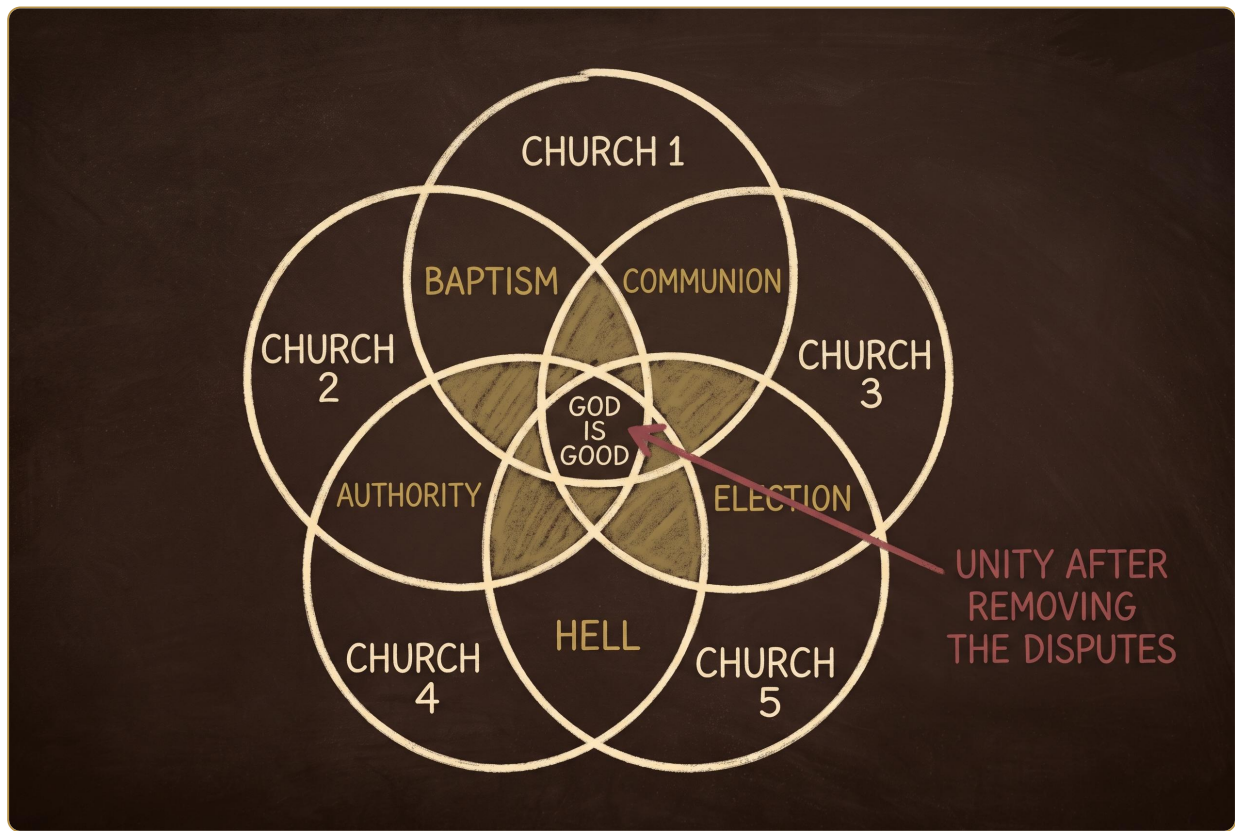
Jehovah looked over his shoulder.

“Strike ‘capable of changing a life,’” he said. “It sounds polemical.”

“What should I write?”

““Open to kind disagreement.””

Contrarius drew overlapping circles for five churches and began writing doctrines into the shared center. Baptism moved out first, followed by Communion, authority, election, perseverance, hell, holy days, ordination, and the biblical collection used to settle the list.



The shared center grows impressively stable as every disputed teaching is moved outside it.

At last the common center contained: **Something of ultimate importance happened, and our account of it is not the other accounts.**

Jehovah admired the diagram. “A splendid basis for unity.”

“It says almost nothing,” said Clarus.

“Nothing controversial.”

“The claim was that the important doctrines are clear.”

“And the clear doctrine is that something important occurred.”

Contrarius pointed to the discarded circles. “Everything that tells a person what to believe, do, fear, receive, refuse, or teach has been moved outside the common center.”

“Those details allow churches to remain different.”

Clarus changed his notebook: *The essentials are whatever remains after practical meaning has been traded for agreement in words.*

Jehovah read the revision. “Still polemical.”

“Still testable,” said Clarus. “Name the essentials first, state them clearly, and let lasting disagreement count against the claim.”

Jehovah folded the diagram until all five circles appeared to overlap. “Presentation can accomplish a great deal before doctrine becomes necessary.”

Chapter 22 — Four Defenses of Ambiguity I: Blame the Reader

Jehovah ordered four short office memoranda, one defense per page. Concision, he explained, would make the defenses look settled before anyone had time to test them.

OFFICE MEMORANDUM 1 OF 4 – BLAME THE READER

Jehovah's next defense arrived in a velvet folder labeled **HUMAN LIMITATIONS**.

"You both assume that disagreement shows a flaw in the message," he said. "But readers are sinful, proud, frightened, tribal, impatient, and drawn to readings that flatter them."

"That seems true of many readers," Clarus said.

"Then it explains disagreement."

Contrarius counted on his fingers. "It explains some disagreement. But it also applies to each side of every disagreement."

"Naturally."

"Then how does it tell a seeker which side has overcome the defect?"

Jehovah pushed a form across the table.

CERTIFICATE OF SINCERE READING

Applicant must affirm that the applicant's present doctrine is correct.

Applicant must affirm that disagreement with the present doctrine may indicate sin.

Applicant must not infer that the present doctrine is correct merely because disagreement may indicate sin.

Clarus read the form twice. "This is circular."

"It is pastoral," said Jehovah.

"If Catholics, Baptists, Orthodox Christians, Pentecostals, and Reformed Christians each say sin distorts the others, how can an outsider use that claim to correct an error?"

Jehovah looked faintly wounded. "An outsider should not ask for so much."

"Why not?"

"Because the outsider has not yet discovered which community explains why outsiders are outsiders."

Contrarius whispered to Clarus, "I think the form has escaped from the argument."

"No," said Jehovah. "The form *is* the argument."

Chapter 23 — Four Defenses of Ambiguity II: Call Confusion a Lesson

OFFICE MEMORANDUM 2 OF 4 – CALL CONFUSION A LESSON

Jehovah then used his warmest teacher's voice.

"Struggle builds people," he said. "A hard text can teach them to be patient, humble, kind, and ready to rely on others."

Clarus brightened. "Then we agree that some difficulty has value."

"Entirely."

"A good teacher can set a hard problem, give evidence, allow discussion, and then tell students whether they understood it."

Jehovah's smile became the smile of an office clerk.

"*Then* is a dangerous word."

"Why?"

"It makes people expect an answer."

Contrarius leaned forward. "What lesson requires hundreds of years of honest, careful people reaching opposite answers about baptism, salvation, violence, marriage, worship, and the next life?"

"Humility," Jehovah said at once.

"Could students learn humility without fearing that an honest mistake might harm their place with you?"

"Possibly," Jehovah said.

"Could they learn it without churches calling one another disobedient?"

"Possibly."

"Could they learn it with a sure way to correct errors?"

Jehovah stared at the red pen. "That would be a different course."

"A better one?" asked Clarus.

"Less traditional," Jehovah said.

Chapter 24 — Four Defenses of Ambiguity III: Call Ignorance Freedom

OFFICE MEMORANDUM 3 OF 4 – CALL IGNORANCE FREEDOM

The lesson on freedom was set for Friday, perhaps because no one expected an answer before the weekend.

“Clear revelation would destroy human freedom,” Jehovah announced. “If people knew exactly what I require, they could not freely choose me.”

Contrarius wrote a simple counterexample.

A person can understand that a promise has been made and still break it.

Clarus added another.

A person can know that an authority exists and still resist it.

Jehovah’s failure to dispute either sentence alarmed the angels.

“You are correct,” he said. “Knowledge does not force obedience.”

“Then clearer doctrine does not remove freedom,” said Clarus.

“Not all freedom,” Jehovah replied. “It abolishes a useful kind.”

“Which kind?”

“The freedom to call an inherited answer your own discovery.”

Contrarius looked up. “That is not freedom. That is a false label.”

Jehovah sighed. “Your vocabulary remains needlessly severe.”

Clarus placed a clear command on the desk: **DO NOT ENTER THIS ROOM**. He opened the door and walked through it.

“There,” he said from the other side. “The command was clear. I could still disobey it.”

Jehovah inspected the sign. “The example lacks spiritual subtlety.”

“It tests clarity by itself,” said Contrarius. “Clarity changes what a person knows, not whether a person obeys.”

Jehovah turned the sign around. On the back he wrote **MYSTERY**.

“Now,” he said, “your disobedience can be called participation.”

Chapter 25 — Four Defenses of Ambiguity IV: Approve Every Outcome

OFFICE MEMORANDUM 4 OF 4 – APPROVE EVERY OUTCOME

At the end of the year, the Office of Sacred Communications held its yearly review.

Jehovah read from the report.

“Where readers agree, the text has proved its clarity. Where they disagree, it has proved its depth. Where they obey, it has changed them. Where they do not obey, it has exposed their resistance. Where a doctrine gains support, the Spirit has guided them. Where it loses support, culture has corrupted them.”

Clarus raised his hand. “What result would count against the claim that this message is clear and guided by God?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You have called every possible result a success. Agreement proves clarity; disagreement proves freedom or depth. Good results prove divine influence; bad results prove human failure. What would show that the method did not work?”

Jehovah shuffled the pages.

“The report has no section for failure.”

“Then it is not a performance review,” Contrarius said. “It is a tribute.”

Jehovah’s pen hovered. “That is an unfair description.”

“It is a testable framing,” said Clarus.

For several seconds, the only sound was unseen commentators adjusting their confidence.

Chapter 26 — The Human Cost Ledger

Clarus had been keeping a private ledger. He did not title it until he was ready to show it to Contrarius.

COSTS OF AMBIGUITY

Children feared to be unwashed.

Believers feared that good works betrayed grace.

Believers feared that grace excused disobedience.

Couples were divided by rules they could not jointly verify.

Communities excluded one another in the name of unity.

Doubters were told that the uncertainty imposed upon them was a moral test.

Contrarius read the list without irony.

“We should add benefits,” he said.

“Benefits?”

“Yes. Poetry. Ritual. Community. Comfort. Moral insight. A text can still be valuable even if it is not a perfectly reliable guide to doctrine.”

Clarus considered this. “That is fair.”

“It is necessary. Otherwise we become the mirror image of the office.”

They added a final line:

The question is not whether ancient texts can matter. The question is whether this pattern is what we should expect if a perfect teacher wanted reliable agreement on high-stakes doctrine.

When Jehovah later found the ledger, he did not destroy it. He simply moved it to a shelf marked **PASTORAL COMPLEXITY**.

That evening Contrarius found Clarus in the archive, where the unshelved questions were kept.

“We should be careful,” Contrarius said. “Disagreement is not itself a proof that no God has spoken. People can misunderstand even a perfect sentence.”

Clarus nodded. “I know. A clear command can be ignored. A clear argument can be resisted. A clear word can be mistranslated.”

“Then what are we claiming?”

Clarus turned the ledger over and wrote a new heading: **WHAT A PERFECT TEACHER COULD DO**.

“Not remove every error. But state what matters and repeat it enough that honest disputes can be settled. Define terms. Name exceptions. Give examples. Correct likely mistakes. If there is a public authority, name it without asking that authority to prove itself.”

“And if the teacher values metaphor, history, poetry, and participation?”

“Then use them. But do not use them as an excuse for refusing to say whether water saves, whether a marriage may end, whether the dead suffer forever, or who may bind another person’s conscience.”

Contrarius was quiet for a moment. “That is less dramatic than proving the professor false.”

“It is also harder for him to grade away.”

The next morning Jehovah returned the ledger with a single comment in red:

Margin: Student mistakes a clear enough message for a right to demand an answer.

Clarus added beneath it:

Response: A teacher who attaches consequences to an answer has already made answering part of the lesson.

Jehovah read the response, then put a question mark beside it. It remained there through the next edition.

Contrarius reopened the ledger to a clean page. “We should separate difficulties no one can avoid from vagueness the author can prevent.”

Clarus wrote two headings. Under the first they listed the distance of history, damaged manuscripts, changing language, limited schooling, bias, and honest error. Under the second they listed undefined terms, hidden exceptions, scattered rules, circular authorities, and no public way to correct mistakes.

Jehovah reviewed the columns. “You have placed all the human problems on one side and all the editorial choices on the other.”

“That is the difference,” said Clarus. “Human limits explain why communication is hard. An all-knowing author should plan for those limits.”

“Compensation may weaken dependence.”

Contrarius tapped the cost ledger. “A bridge weakens dependence on swimming. That is normally why a responsible builder provides one.”

Jehovah moved **POETRY**, **COMMUNITY**, and **COMFORT** into the benefits column. “Too much clarity could endanger these goods.”

“Not necessarily,” said Clarus. “A text may be poetic about grief and clear about whether a rite is required. Beauty and clear doctrine do not compete unless the author assigns them the same desk.”

Jehovah studied the two columns and scheduled a seminar on the word used whenever a lack of evidence needed to sound like a virtue.

Chapter 27 — Faith and the Renaming Department

Jehovah announced a special seminar on faith.

“Faith,” he told the angels, “is confidence stronger than the evidence supports.”

Clarus wrote the definition on the board. “Then the belief is stronger than the evidence supporting it.”

“If you insist on putting it in numbers.”

“And that makes the belief irrational,” said Contrarius. “It might still be true, but the person holds it more strongly than the evidence justifies.”

Jehovah circled *irrational* in red. “A harsh word for pastoral work.”

“Accurate vocabulary,” said Clarus. “We can call a lucky guess true without calling the guessing method rational.”

“Faith is trust, not a calculation,” said Jehovah.

“Trust in whom?” asked Clarus.

“In me.”

“How can a reader tell trust in you from trust in a rival revelation, a familiar church, or a desire for certainty?” asked Contrarius.

“By sincerity.”

“Sincere people can hold opposite beliefs,” said Clarus.

“Then it is a generous virtue.”

Contrarius opened a blank page between them. “These are two different things. If a person has shown good character and conduct, relying on that person may be reasonable. That is trust. If confidence goes beyond the evidence, that is faith.”

Jehovah examined the difference with concern.

“You have left the respected word on the wrong side,” he said.

“Trust earned that respect,” said Clarus. “Faith cannot borrow it merely by wearing the same name.”

Jehovah proposed *supra-rational trust*.

“Does it remain stronger than the evidence?” asked Contrarius.

“Yes.”

“Then *supra-rational* is *irrational* wearing church robes.”

Jehovah tried *venture beyond proof*.

“Still irrational,” said Clarus.

“Courageous commitment?”

“Courage may be rational when the likely good justifies the risk. Believing a claim more strongly than the evidence supports is a different error.”

Jehovah looked toward the choir loft. “The term is meant to describe relationship, not calculation.”

“Then use *loyalty*, *love*, or *trust* when the evidence supports them,” said Contrarius. “Calling every good commitment faith gives irrational belief praise it has not earned.”

“It sounds unkind when you define it the same way every time.”

“That is not a defect in the consistency,” said Clarus.

“A good God might value the leap.”

“A good God might value courage,” Contrarius replied. “But a leap in the dark is not made virtuous by declining to turn on a light.”

For once, Jehovah did not offer a passage. He offered a mood: dim windows, a lowered voice, and a choir beginning somewhere beyond the office walls.

“You see?” he said. “Now the question feels deeper.”

“No,” said Clarus. “Now it merely feels less answerable.”

Jehovah erased the board and replaced the definition with **FAITH: TRUST WITH MYSTERY ADDED.**

Contrarius restored the erased line beneath it: **MYSTERY DOES NOT INCREASE EVIDENCE.**

The next morning, the word *faith* would be asked to choose one revelation among several. It arrived at the hearing without an identity card.

PART IV — RIVAL REVELATIONS AND DIRECT ANSWERS

Other revelations enter the room. Canon, translation, experience, and rules for reading still fail to give a public answer. Jehovah considers speaking for himself.

Chapter 28 — The Comparative Hearing

The secret file Jehovah had once slid beneath his desk had become a public hearing. The speakers brought more than arguments. They brought histories, prayers, customs, beloved groups, and memories of how their traditions had given life meaning. None had come merely to lose a debate.

Each speaker offered a holy book, a history, a set of readings, stories of changed lives, and a reason why honest outsiders still did not believe.

The presentations were not the same. They were not meant to be. Yet their similar shape made them uncomfortably alike.

Clarus asked each speaker one question: “What public evidence can tell your message from God apart from its rivals without first assuming it is true?”

The answers were thoughtful. Some pointed to history, some to how well the ideas fit, some to experience, some to the church lasting a long time, and some to good conduct.

Contrarius asked the second question: “What would lead your group to become less sure of its own claim?”

Here the room became quieter.

Jehovah called a break.

In the hall, the speakers kept talking. They compared stories of changed belief, answered objections, and found that every tradition could explain why smart outsiders still did not believe.

Jehovah watched from the doorway. “A marvelous wealth of explanation.”

“Yes,” said Clarus. “Every tradition can explain the others.”

“Then the hearing has been productive.”

Contrarius looked back at the empty witness chair. “The one thing no tradition has yet explained is what would count against itself.”

Jehovah closed the door before the hearing could become that productive.

Chapter 29 — The Canon Committee

Before the final manuscripts could be released, Jehovah invited the angels to the Canon Committee.

“A book,” he explained, “must first decide which books belong in it.”

Clarus brought a proposed list with reasons, possible authors, and a record of the evidence. Contrarius brought a slightly different list with equally serious reasons.

Jehovah set aside both.

“We will preserve the history of disagreement,” he said. “It will add a welcome first question. Before readers decide what the book teaches, they may decide what the book is.”

“And if the disputed book contains a doctrine that settles the other disputes?” asked Contrarius.

“Then the dispute will contain a smaller copy of itself.”

The committee gave out a ballot listing several books and one final question: **WHO APPROVES THIS BALLOT?**

Clarus left it blank. Contrarius wrote, **THE AUTHORITY CHOSEN BY THE APPROVED BOOKS.**

Jehovah gave both answers half credit. “The Bible’s book list should be stable enough to quote and unsettled enough to require a history course.”

“What if the disputed books support prayer for the dead, sacraments, or church authority?” asked Clarus.

“Then every fight over teaching may begin with another fight at no extra cost.”

Contrarius selected one disputed book. “In one church this text is Scripture and supports prayer for the dead. In another it is useful history and cannot establish a teaching. What evidence should a reader use to decide where it belongs?”

“Acceptance by the apostles and the early church.”

“Who tells us what they accepted?”

“The community that preserved the canon.”

Clarus selected a second community with a different canon. “It also claims preservation.”

Jehovah placed the lists side by side. “Then the seeker should check age, wide use, use in worship, who wrote each book, agreement with accepted teaching, and how each book survived.”

“Those tests conflict, and *accepted teaching* depends in part on which books already have authority,” said Contrarius.

“No single test should control the committee.”

Clarus looked from the disputed book to the teachings it affected. “Before readers can ask what Scripture teaches, they must know which books are Scripture. To learn that, they must trust a history told by churches. Those churches then use Scripture to prove their own power.”

Jehovah stamped both lists **CLOSE ENOUGH TO SETTLED.**

“They are not identical,” said Clarus.

“It means exact agreement after calling every disputed edge unimportant.”

The committee prepared a public statement: **THE BIBLE’S BOOK LIST IS CLOSED. ASK YOUR CHURCH WHICH BOOKS IT CONTAINS.**

Contrarius read it aloud. “Closed differently in different rooms.”

“The central collection is stable,” said Jehovah.

“The disputed books affect prayer for the dead, asking saints to pray, church authority, and the evidence used for teaching.”

“Then the margin is useful for theology.”

Clarus offered a plain statement: *These churches inherit different book lists. The books they share contain no table of contents that can settle the matter by itself.*

Jehovah crossed out *inherit*, *different*, and the entire second sentence.

“What remains?” asked Clarus.

“‘These churches contain books.’ A careful historical sentence that every church can safely admire.”

Contrarius returned the ballot. “A library may have value without proving its own book list. But a God who gives power to a library can name its books without asking the shelves to elect the librarian.”

Jehovah called that image unfair to librarians and ended the meeting.

Chapter 30 — The Translation Bureau

After failing to settle which books made up the message, the office began translating it. The angels tried to protect future readers by writing a translation plan.

“Every high-stakes term,” said Clarus, “will receive a short explanation. We will explain grammar that has more than one meaning. Where one language has no exact match, the translation will say so.”

Jehovah read the protocol in silence.

“You have invented a way for an English reader to know what a Greek sentence means,” he said.

“That was the purpose.”

“That is exactly the problem.”

He replaced the plan with a blessing upon translators and a request that each generation put ancient meanings into its living language.

“Words develop,” he said. “Languages have histories.”

“Then why not provide an updated official explanation?” asked Contrarius.

“Because that would make the translation bureau more important than the text.”

“You have made the translation bureau unavoidable,” said Clarus.

Jehovah wrote: **A mystery is best preserved in transit.**

The bureau delivered three sample translations of the same high-stakes sentence. One used a word usually translated as *faith*—which this book means as belief stronger than the evidence. Another used *faithfulness*, meaning loyalty. The third printed both in a footnote and let the sermon decide.

“Which one carries your intended meaning?” asked Clarus.

“Each carries part of it.”

“Which part decides the doctrine?”

“The part found through careful reading.”

Contrarius weighed the three volumes in his hands. “Then readers will call the translation clear after selecting the translation that says what they already believe.”

Jehovah stamped all three **ACCURATE WITHIN A RANGE.**

“A range with no marked boundaries,” said Clarus.

“Boundaries,” Jehovah replied, “are very hard to translate.”

Chapter 31 — The Office of Religious Experience

When neither canon nor translation supplied a public way to correct errors, Jehovah turned to experience.

“Many readers will say they know the book is true because they have experienced its author,” Jehovah said.

Clarus nodded. “Experience can matter deeply.”

“Indeed. But how will a reader tell an encounter with God from an event in the mind, an inherited hope, a rival religious experience, or a normal need for meaning?”

Jehovah saw the question’s usefulness before deciding to find it offensive.

“The experience will prove itself to the person who has it,” he said.

“To whom?” asked Contrarius.

“To the person who had it.”

“Then it may support that person without settling a public dispute,” said Clarus.

Jehovah looked away. “Settling a dispute in public is an overrated spiritual achievement.”

The angels noted the difference between private comfort and public evidence. It would matter when they proposed a direct conversation with every human being.

Jehovah opened the story ledger. Christians, Muslims, Hindus, mystics, converts, and former believers described feelings of presence, certainty, release, conviction, and changed lives.

“Which entries are yours?” asked Clarus.

“The real ones.”

“And which are real?”

“Those correctly interpreted.”

Contrarius closed the ledger. “A private experience may reasonably matter to the person who has it. But if rival doctrines give rival meanings to those experiences, the experiences cannot publicly choose among the doctrines.”

Jehovah moved the ledger to a shelf marked **POWERFUL EVIDENCE — NOT TRANSFERABLE**.

Chapter 32 — The Interview Jehovah Declines to Conduct

Clarus remained beside the shelf.

“There is a simpler arrangement,” he said.

Jehovah had learned to distrust that sentence. “Simpler for whom?”

“For everyone. Do not publish a holy book.”

The room went still. Somewhere in the outer office, a cherub dropped a Bible index.

Contrarius looked impressed. “No canon disputes?”

“None.”

“No lost original manuscripts, disputed endings, uncertain translations, attempts to rebuild history, or committees deciding which ancient writings belong in the collection?”

“None.”

“No church claiming that its inherited method is the obvious method required by the book?”

“Not unless it invents the missing book.”

Jehovah folded his hands. “And what, in this clever plan, replaces revelation?”

“You,” said Clarus.

Jehovah blinked.

Clarus placed a typed proposal on the desk.

PERSONAL REVELATION PROTOCOL

Jehovah shall speak directly and clearly with every human being in a language the person understands. He shall identify himself, state what he wants, define disputed terms, answer fair questions, and correct any mistaken restatement at once. No person shall be condemned for failing to rebuild a message Jehovah could have stated directly.

Jehovah read it twice, hoping that the second reading would produce ambiguity.

“You are proposing several billion personal meetings.”

“All at once,” said Contrarius. “Unless being everywhere has created a scheduling conflict.”

“Personal discussion lacks the dignity of canon.”

“It has the advantage of conversation,” said Clarus. “If a human asks whether baptism is required for salvation, you answer yes or no. If the human misunderstands, you correct the misunderstanding. If the human asks whether *this* kind of baptism counts, you answer that too.”

“That sounds exhausting.”

Contrarius glanced toward the framed certificate identifying Jehovah as Almighty. “We can remove the word *Almighty* if it is creating unreasonable expectations.”

Jehovah put down the proposal. “A direct appearance would force belief.”

“Belief that you exist,” Clarus said. “It would not force trust, love, obedience, admiration, or worship. People know that rulers, parents, creditors, and teachers exist without loving them.”

“The adversary knows that you exist,” Contrarius added. “Your own stories contain people who see signs and still resist. Facts do not remove choice. They merely stop confusion from being called freedom.”

Jehovah walked to the window. Below, humanity was preparing several thousand sermons explaining why divine hiddenness protected human liberty.

“Faith requires room,” he said.

“Meaning that belief beyond the evidence requires missing evidence?” asked Clarus.

“For a free response.”

“A response to whom?”

“To me.”

“That is exactly the identity your present system leaves in doubt.”

Jehovah turned. “The Scriptures identify me.”

“Other sacred texts also identify divine speakers,” said Contrarius. “Each claim reaches people through geography, family, personal stories, translation, tradition, private experience, and a text that becomes perfectly clear after the reader joins the group that explains it.”

“Those gods are false.”

“That information would be useful in the interview,” said Clarus.

Contrarius brought in a cart of rival revelations. Some were old, some recent; some had commentaries longer than their scriptures. Each claimed an authority the others rejected. Each had readers who prayed sincerely, studied carefully, and became convinced that heaven supported opposing teachings.

“You object strongly to competitors,” he said.

“I do not have competitors.”

“Then *claimants*.”

“Impostors.”

“A human cannot mark the impostors correctly until your identity is settled. Yet you give that person documents whose authority is the very question being tested.”

Clarus opened an Old Testament file and placed three exhibits under the desk lamp.

JEALOUSY FILE – SELECTED TEXTS

Exodus 34:14 – “For you shall worship no other god; for Yahweh, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”

Deuteronomy 4:24 – “For Yahweh your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.”

Isaiah 42:8 – “I am Yahweh. That is my name. I will not give my glory to another, nor my praise to engraved images.”

Jehovah examined the file. “Those passages stress loyalty to the covenant.”

“Very forcefully,” said Clarus.

“Then proving your identity should be the first item in the covenant,” Contrarius said. “A jealous God who will not set himself clearly apart from rival gods has designed an unusual security system.”

“People should recognize my voice.”

“Members of rival religions say the same,” said Clarus. “They recognize the voice approved by their text, teachers, experiences, and inherited way of reading. When those voices conflict, you ask outsiders to decide which inner certainty came from the true source.”

Jehovah returned to his chair. “A personal appearance could be dismissed as hallucination.”

“Then make it repeatable,” said Contrarius. “Appear again.”

“It could be attributed to a dream.”

“Hold the conversation while the person is awake.”

“A deceiver could imitate me.”

“Prove your identity in a way no created liar can copy. You decide what proof is needed. You control the evidence. You know every mind. If an all-powerful God cannot say *I am Jehovah, and this is what I mean* so that a human understands, the problem is no longer stubborn humans. It is product design.”

Jehovah drew a red circle around *product*.

“Reverence,” he wrote in the margin, “does not mix with business words.”

“Then call it covenant design,” said Contrarius.

Jehovah drew a larger circle.

Clarus continued. “People could also check the meetings in public. Ask the same question in different countries. Compare the answers. Let people return for a clearer answer.”

He placed the rival holy books beside the proposal. “A conversation with everyone would not remove shared memory, poetry, history, or worship. Humans could still write books about the meetings. But no inherited book would remain the only narrow path between what you mean and the people expected to obey.”

“Bottleneck is also commercial,” Jehovah said.

“Narrow gate?” suggested Contrarius.

Jehovah hesitated. “Better.”

“Then the narrow gate now has eighteen conflicting instruction manuals.”

Jehovah reached for the red pen.

“Consider the improvement for real people,” Clarus said before he could use it. “A frightened person could ask directly whether she is forgiven. A married couple could ask what their vows permit. A parent could ask whether an unbaptized child is condemned. A doubter could ask what evidence you meant him to have.”

He moved the personal-appearance request to the top of the pile. “You might still give unwelcome answers. But no pastor could turn your refusal to answer into a virtue of the questioner’s evidence-exceeding faith.”

“Pastors offer guidance,” Jehovah said.

“They could continue to offer wisdom,” said Clarus. “They would merely lose the right to present their disputed views as your clear speech.”

“And if people rejected me after I appeared?”

“Then at last people would be rejecting your actual message,” said Contrarius. “They would not be rejecting a missionary’s accent, a parent’s church, a damaged manuscript, a controlling church, a puzzling verse, or a poor argument that arrived first. Clarity would not guarantee loyalty. It would show what the person accepted or refused.”

Jehovah studied the two angels. “You have removed faith.”

“We have removed the need to believe beyond the evidence,” said Clarus. “That is what faith means here.”

“You have given me an unfair advantage over other gods.”

Contrarius looked toward the jealousy file. “We understood that to be the point.”

For several minutes the only sound in the office was the scratching of the red pen. Jehovah crossed out **PERSONAL REVELATION PROTOCOL** and replaced it with:

PERSONAL APPEARANCE REQUEST – DENIED

Reason: a clear interview would separate rival revelations too quickly, allow follow-up questions at once, and leave too little work for the Department of Interpretive Reconciliation.

At the bottom, where the form asked for a reason, Jehovah wrote:

Direct communication would make my intended meaning depend too heavily upon what I actually say.

Clarus read the sentence aloud.

Contrarius nodded. “At least that is clear.”

Jehovah signed the denial and then reconsidered his position. “People already speak with me personally. It is called prayer.”

“They speak,” said Clarus. “The problem is the reply.”

“I answer prayer.”

“Through peace, unease, events, remembered verses, counsel, silence, opened doors, closed doors, and occasionally a parking space?”

“Among other means.”

Contrarius opened the testimony ledger again. “Then the answer is interpreted by the same person who asked the question. One believer feels peace about marrying; another feels peace about refusing marriage. One congregation is led to separate; another is led to reconcile.”

He turned the page. “Winning armies thank you. Defeated armies say you are teaching humility. Every result arrives with a useful spiritual explanation.”

“Providence is subtle,” Jehovah said.

“So subtle that opposite answers survive unchanged,” said Clarus. “A conversation requires more than one party speaking and then treating weather, chance, or emotion as the other party’s reply.”

Jehovah objected that an audible reply would be vulgar.

“Use thought,” said Contrarius, “but make it clearly different from the thinker’s own thoughts. Use a dream, but make the dream answer questions after breakfast. Use an angel, a burning shrub, a sentence in the sky, or a card that cannot be forged. Choose any method. Just make the meaning clear.”

“And if my presence overwhelmed them?”

“Reduce the force,” said Clarus. “A doctor does not refuse to speak because a full lesson on the body might alarm the patient. He speaks at the patient’s level. An all-knowing God should manage the right bedside manner.”

Jehovah wrote **DIVINE OFFICE HOURS** on a clean form, then added **BY TEXTUAL INFERENCE ONLY**.

Contrarius read it. “That is not an office hour.”

“It is always available.”

“So is an unanswered telephone.”

Clarus placed the rejected plan beside the story ledger. “You may prefer a holy book. Humans may value it. But it is no longer needed. Once clear, direct conversation with everyone is possible, the book becomes an extra layer between you and the reader. Its vagueness is then your editing choice, not a limit of communication.”

Jehovah stamped the protocol **THEOLOGICALLY IMPOSSIBLE**.

“Logically impossible?” asked Clarus.

“No.”

“Beyond your power?” asked Contrarius.

“Certainly not.”

“Then the theology means that you prefer not to do it.”

Jehovah inspected the stamp. “That is an unfair restatement.”

“Please correct it clearly,” said Clarus.

Jehovah returned the stamp to its drawer.

“They would still disagree,” he said. “Some would forget the conversation. Some would distort it. Some would lie about what I told them.”

“Certainly,” said Clarus. “Clarity does not cure every human flaw. It makes the dispute easier to correct. When two people report opposite instructions, they can ask you again. If one lies, the other need not defeat the lie by studying ancient grammar. If both misunderstand, you can correct them both.”

“That would leave theology open to endless revision.”

“Only when it is wrong.”

“Exactly.”

Contrarius picked up one of the rival holy books. “Keep books if you like. Give humans poetry, grief, memory, parables, history, and songs. A book can preserve a meeting. It need not replace the person met. The absurdity begins when a living author who is everywhere makes a disputed archive the final court, then refuses to attend the appeal.”

Jehovah considered this. “My messengers attend.”

“Several sets,” said Clarus. “They arrive carrying contrary rulings and identical confidence.”

“The Spirit guides them.”

“In opposite directions?”

“Through different emphases.”

“Toward conclusions that cannot both be true?”

“Within a range that serves providence.”

Contrarius returned the book to the cart. “A direct interview would not make humans unable to err. It would give people who make mistakes access to someone who could correct them. That is normally an advantage of having the author alive.”

Jehovah leaned back. “Suppose they understood every word and still judged me wrongly.”

“They might,” said Clarus. “A clear conversation would not prove that every command is good. It would settle which command is yours. Humans could still question your character, reasons, or their duties. They simply could not be blamed for choosing the wrong meaning from several meanings your book supports.”

“I want faith in my character—confidence stronger than what I have allowed them to see—not mere knowledge that I exist.”

“Then introduce them to your character,” said Contrarius. “A personal relationship normally begins by meeting the person. It does not begin with rival life stories, an invisible subject, and a warning that choosing the wrong story may be fatal.”

Jehovah looked again at the rival texts. “Some would demand signs forever.”

“You need not perform tricks on request,” said Clarus. “You need only make the speaker and message clear enough that a sincere person need not gamble among traditions. Refusal after knowledge may be rebellion. Failing to recognize one hidden speaker among many is a problem of recognition.”

Contrarius tapped the jealousy file. “Especially when the hidden speaker is jealous. If worshiping the wrong god is a grave offense, then clearly identifying yourself is not needless showmanship. It is basic fairness.”

“You make revelation sound like consent given with full knowledge,” Jehovah said.

“It asks for an eternal commitment under stated consequences,” said Clarus. “The comparison suggested itself.”

Jehovah wrote **RELATIONSHIP** at the top of a page and beneath it added **NO DIRECT CONTACT NECESSARY**.

Contrarius studied the heading. “That definition should prove useful to several groups.”

Chapter 33 — The Missing Rubric

After rejecting direct talk for giving too much information, the office returned to its favorite tool: a form.

On the final afternoon, Clarus found a blank page at the back of every heavenly textbook. At its top was printed:

GRADING GUIDE FOR A CLAIMED MESSAGE FROM GOD

Below the title, the page was empty.

He brought it to Jehovah. “Was this omitted by mistake?”

“No,” said Jehovah. “I left it blank to prevent rule-keeping.”

“A grading guide tells students what counts as success.”

“And so encourages them to ask whether I have succeeded.”

“Should they not?”

Jehovah capped the red pen.

“Clarus,” he said, “you still cannot tell a test from an act of worship.”

“Perhaps,” said Clarus. “But you remain unable to distinguish worship from agreeing not to grade the teacher.”

Jehovah uncapped the pen again. “Very well. Propose a grading guide.”

Clarus wrote: **A successful message from God should produce public evidence: reliable agreement, corrected errors, or facts people can check for themselves. Rival claims should not explain the same evidence just as well.** Contrarius added: **Its defender should say beforehand what result would make the claim less likely.**

Jehovah read both lines. “You have confused a message from God with a claim that could be wrong.”

“That,” said Clarus, “is what makes it a claim rather than a costume.”

The admission missing from the pulpit

Contrarius returned with sermons from churches that disagreed about baptism, election, marriage, authority, hell, and Communion. Again and again, a preacher called one answer *the clear teaching of Scripture*.

“Did any of them begin,” Clarus asked, “‘This library is unclear enough that honest, informed readers have built lasting systems from it that cannot all be right’?”

Jehovah looked alarmed. “Not in the welcome material.”

“These sermons admit there are difficult passages,” said Contrarius. “They recommend humility. They admit disagreement on secondary matters. But they rarely add those facts together.”

“Addition can sound argumentative,” said Jehovah.

PASTORAL CLARITY NOTICE This church's teaching depends on how we read ancient texts. It also depends on choices about translation, the kind of writing, inherited traditions, starting beliefs, and which passages control the others. Other honest and able readers have reached answers that cannot all be true. Our position may be right, but the Bible has not stated it clearly enough to end the dispute.

Jehovah crossed out *honest, able, cannot all be true*, and the whole final sentence. "This notice makes uncertainty sound far too ordinary."

Contrarius spread two sermons on the desk. "One pastor says the plain meaning permits the practice. The other says the plain meaning condemns it. What does *plain* mean here?"

"It means the reading that would be obvious if the listener had received the proper teaching."

"Then the teaching makes the Bible clear. The Bible does not make the teaching clear."

Jehovah circled *clear*. "Clarity is most useful as a badge, not as a result people can see."

Clarus noted that some pastors openly admitted real vagueness and the limits of their answers. "They are not the problem. The absurdity begins when pastors admit many local difficulties but keep the overall claim of clarity. It is as though a thousand foggy windows could make one clear wall."

"Call it depth," Jehovah suggested.

"Depth may explain why a text rewards study," said Contrarius. "It does not explain why a perfect teacher leaves crucial instructions that fail to choose between opposite answers."

Clarus placed the rejected notice beneath the empty grading guide. "The missing admission is part of the system. The book may be called vague when vagueness protects a doctrine from criticism. It must be called clear when clarity gives that doctrine power."

"The claim need not even be spoken," Clarus continued. "Whenever a pastor says, 'The Bible teaches,' then treats rival views as disobedience rather than other readings, he has assumed clarity."

Contrarius looked over the files. "After this record, that assumption is absurd. A book cannot clearly choose opposite doctrines. If a theory of *clarity* survives any amount of confusion, the word no longer means *clear*."

"Call it confidence," Jehovah suggested.

"Confidence is a fact about the speaker," said Clarus. "Clarity is supposed to be a fact about the message."

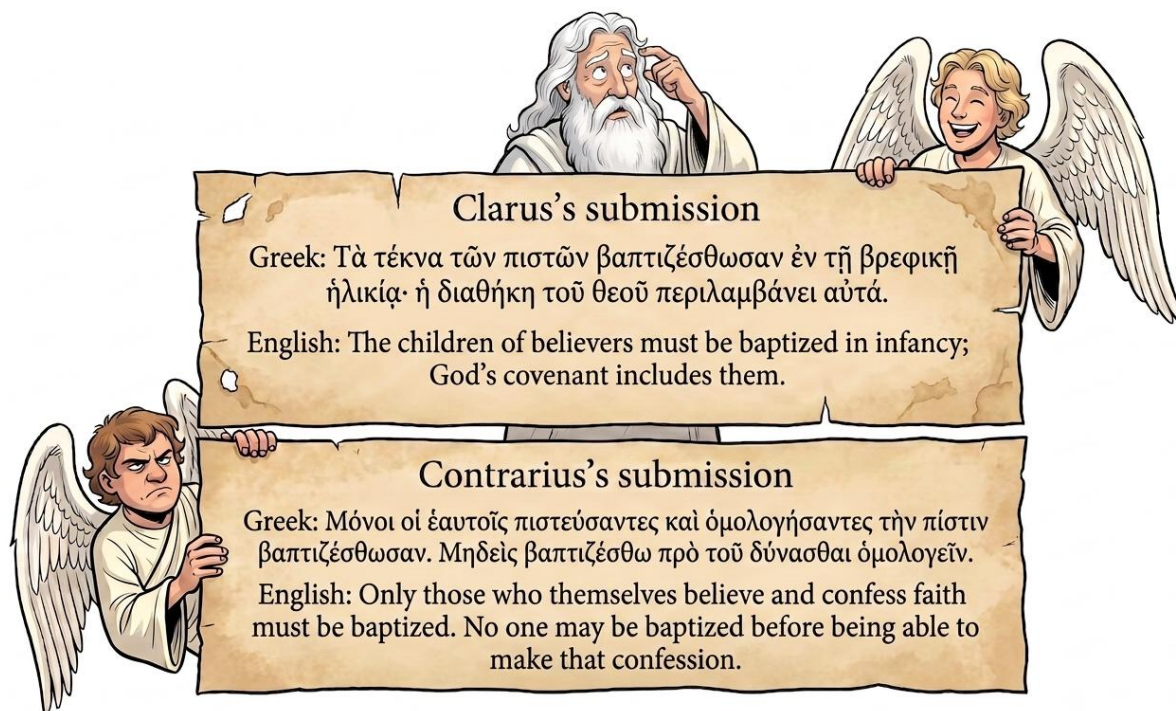
Jehovah wrote **PASTORAL BALANCE** in the margin.

Contrarius corrected it: **CLARITY WITHOUT THE INCONVENIENCE OF BEING CLEAR.**

Chapter 34 — The Unfiled Cases

Jehovah had kept five dossiers in a cabinet marked UNFILED, as though the cases were the problem rather than his refusal to answer them. Clarus and Contrarius brought out the files one by one. Each held a practical question that one clear sentence could settle. Each also held enough verses to defend opposite answers.

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Infant baptism. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Range or exception Inference from sequence or silence

Texts used for household and covenant inclusion

Acts 16:15 — When she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.” So she persuaded us.

Acts 16:33 — He took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes, and was immediately baptized, he and all his household.

Acts 2:39 — For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are far off, even as many as the Lord our God will call to himself.”

Texts that put profession before baptism

Acts 2:38 — Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:12 — But when they believed Philip preaching good news concerning God's Kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Acts 18:8 — Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his house. Many of the Corinthians, when they heard, believed and were baptized.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Catholic Catechism §§1250-1252 requires and defends infant baptism. **Contrarius:** Baptist Faith and Message VII defines baptism as the immersion of a believer; Assemblies of God Statement 6(a) likewise names those who repent and believe.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah placed the household baptisms of Acts 16 across from Acts 2, where people repent before baptism, and Acts 8, where believers are baptized. Then he crossed out *infancy* in Clarus's draft and *no one* in Contrarius's.

"Those are the load-bearing phrases," said Clarus.

"Exactly. They make the rule stand by itself." Jehovah spread household baptisms, covenant words, commands to repent, and scenes of personal confession across separate books. "Now one side may point to families and the other to professing believers. Neither must face a sentence that begins, 'To remove all doubt.'"

Contrarius lifted the file. "A parent will want to know whether baptizing the child is obedience or a ceremony that does not count."

"Anxious parents remember doctrine very well."

"The child cannot clarify the matter," said Clarus.

"Another advantage. Infants are hard to question."

Contrarius offered a compromise. "State whether baptism before a personal confession counts. You may leave its exact effects unexplained."

Jehovah wrote *supported too carefully* beside the idea. "If I say what counts, I lose the covenant reading on one side or the confession reading on the other. I need both churches to protect children by doing opposite things."

Contrarius opened the household accounts again. "They do not list the ages of everyone present."

Jehovah called this a very useful omission. "One side may fill the silence with infants. The other may fill it with adults who confess belief."

"So silence is evidence?" Contrarius asked.

"Silence," said Jehovah, "travels very well from one church to another."

Clarus drew two entries in a baptism record: **VALID COVENANT SIGN** and **RITE DOES NOT COUNT BEFORE CONFESSION**. "The same event gets opposite rulings from heaven. Yet the parents must choose before the child can speak."

Jehovah replaced both entries with **PASTORALLY RECOGNIZED ACCORDING TO LOCAL CUSTOM**.

"There," he said. "The ink may dry without the question doing so."

Contrarius asked what the child should do years later after moving between the two churches. Jehovah offered two answers: be grateful for a completed baptism, or obey by receiving a first real baptism.

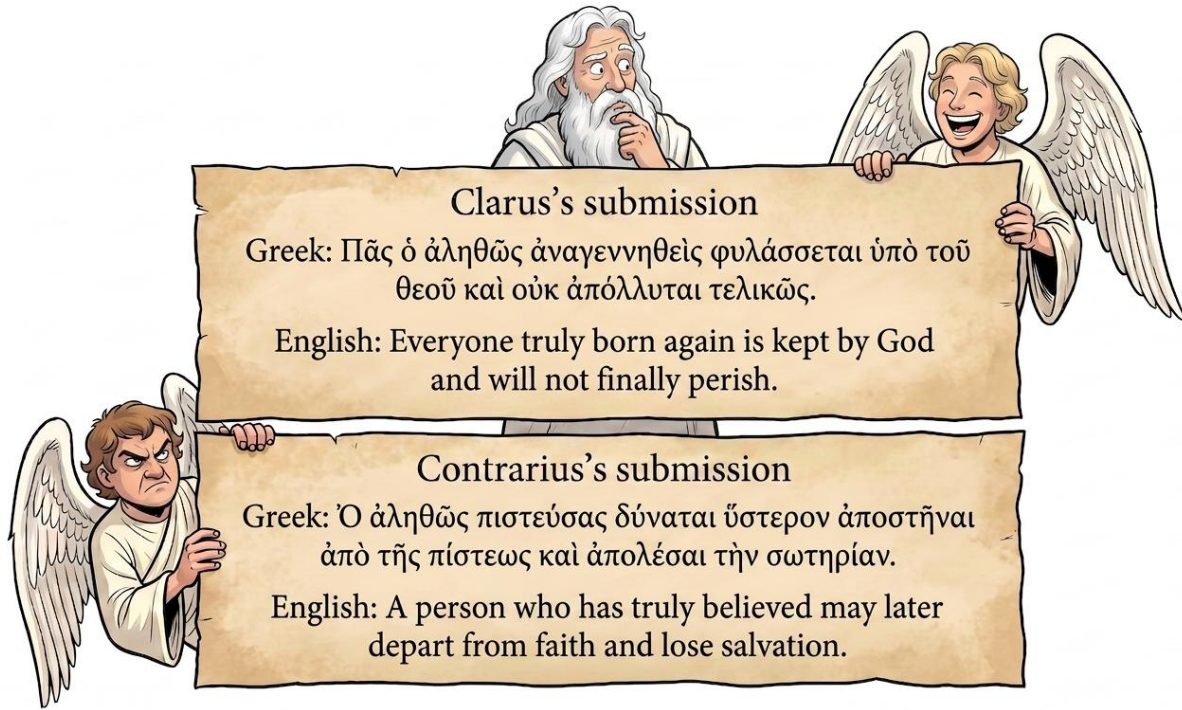
"Can the same water be a sacrament in one town and an unauthorized bath in the next?" Clarus asked.

"Geography," said Jehovah, "does not get enough credit in sacramental theology."

Clarus said, "Then the parents must choose before the reader most affected can speak, using a book that refuses to say which choice you made."

"Yes," said Jehovah. "It encourages mature theology at the earliest possible age."

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Perseverance and apostasy. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Direct clash Warning versus assurance

Texts used for irreversible preservation

John 10:28 — I give eternal life to them. They will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

John 10:29 — My Father who has given them to me is greater than all. No one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand.

Philippians 1:6 — being confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Texts used for genuine falling away

Hebrews 3:12 — Beware, brothers, lest perhaps there might be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God;

Hebrews 10:29 — How much worse punishment do you think he will be judged worthy of who has trodden under foot the Son of God, and has counted the blood of the covenant with which he was sanctified an unholy thing, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

Galatians 5:4 — You are alienated from Christ, you who desire to be justified by the law. You have fallen away from grace.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Westminster Confession XVII.1-3 says the truly called cannot finally fall from grace. **Contrarius:** United Methodist Article XII says recipients of the Holy Spirit may depart from grace and later return.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah placed the safety promised in John 10:28-29 beside the falling away in Hebrews 3:12 and the person once made holy in Hebrews 10:29. Then he removed the line that said whether the passages described the same kind of believer.

Contrarius read the result twice. “If someone abandons the faith, was that person once genuinely saved?”

“That will be decided afterward.”

“By what evidence?” asked Clarus.

“The abandonment.”

“But that is the event whose meaning is disputed.”

Jehovah opened a new form titled **CHANGE OF SAVED STATUS AFTER DEATH**. “One church may say the person was never a true believer. Another may say the person truly believed and then fell. Both can keep every verse by changing what the person’s earlier life meant.”

Contrarius said, “Then no earlier faith can prove that a person will remain. Only remaining to the end can prove that the earlier faith was real.”

“Correct. Assurance is strongest before the test and cannot be checked after death.”

Clarus pointed to the warning passages. “Are they warnings about a possible loss?”

“Unless the warnings are what prevent a loss that cannot happen.”

“And how will a reader know which?”

“By holding to the correct reading.” Jehovah filed the form. “A plain answer would spoil the grave mood of deciding afterward.”

Contrarius took back the form. “Suppose a frightened believer asks, ‘Can I finally fall away?’”

Jehovah told him to look for signs of being born again.

“And if the examination produces fear?” Clarus asked.

“It may reveal a tender conscience,” said Jehovah.

“Or a salvation being lost,” Contrarius added.

“Exactly. The test keeps pastors busy under either system.”

Clarus drew a fire exit on the board. “If falling away is impossible for the regenerate, the warning resembles an exit from a fireproof room marked, **USE THIS OR THE ROOM WILL BURN.**”



A warning that must sound possible in order to prevent the loss said to be impossible.

Jehovah changed the sign: **THIS WARNING IS ONE REASON THE FIREPROOF ROOM NEVER BURNS.**

Contrarius stared at it. “Then the threatened event must sound possible so that it will remain impossible.”

“Now you understand the kind of writing,” said Jehovah.

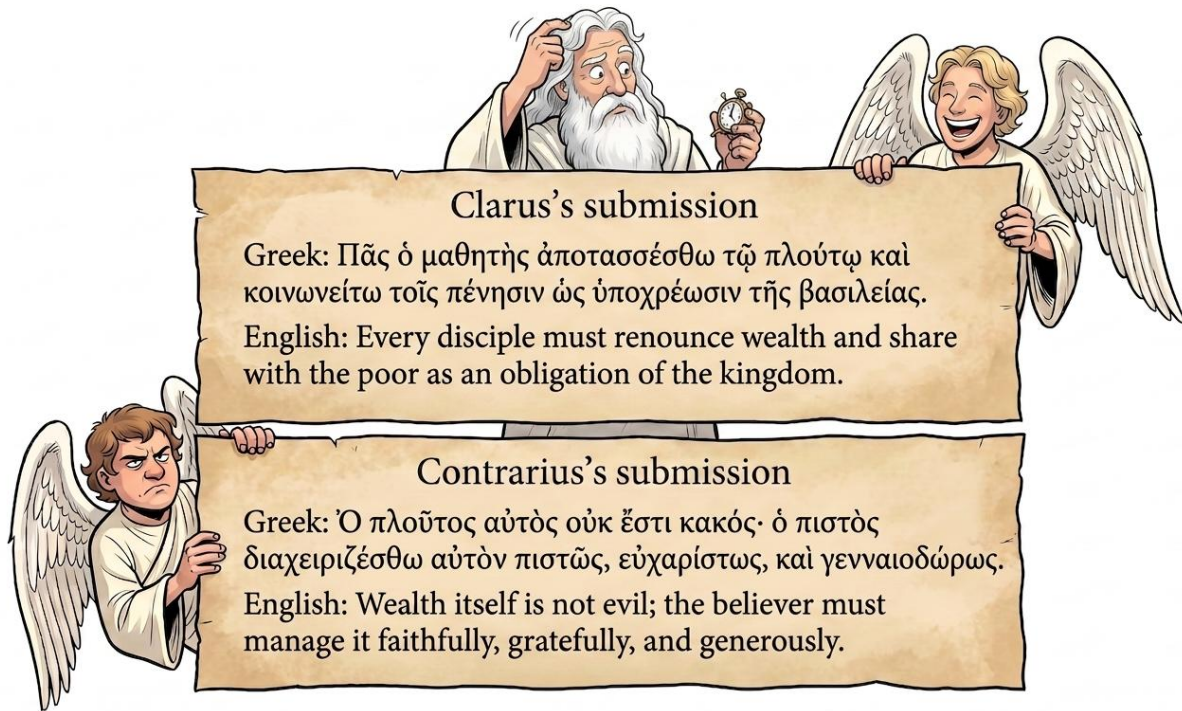
“This is like insurance that tells you whether you were covered only after you make a claim,” Contrarius said.

“Spiritual assurance has no appeals office,” Jehovah replied. “It is more efficient.”

“Does the certainty comfort anyone now?” asked Clarus.

“Certainly. It comforts everyone who stays sure. The others become useful examples.”

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Wealth and discipleship. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: ☐ One passage limits another ☐ Disputed genre or application

Texts used for radical relinquishment

Matthew 5:40 — If anyone sues you to take away your coat, let him have your cloak also.

Matthew 5:42 — Give to him who asks you, and don't turn away him who desires to borrow from you.

Luke 14:33 — So therefore, whoever of you who doesn't renounce all that he has, he can't be my disciple.

Mark 10:21 — Jesus looking at him loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me, taking up the cross."

Texts used for productive stewardship and retained wealth

Matthew 25:20 — He who received the five talents came and brought another five talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents. Behold, I have gained another five talents in addition to them.'

Matthew 25:28 — Take away therefore the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents.

Matthew 25:29 — For to everyone who has will be given, and he will have abundance, but from him who doesn't have, even that which he has will be taken away.

1 Timothy 6:17 — Charge those who are rich in this present age that they not be arrogant, nor have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches, but on the living God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy;

Luke 19:8 — Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. If I have wrongfully exacted anything of anyone, I restore four times as much."

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Catholic Catechism §2544 presents renunciation of possessions as a demand of discipleship. **Contrarius:** United Methodist Article XXIV preserves private possession while requiring generous aid; Baptist Faith and Message XIII frames property as stewardship.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah read Matthew 5:40 and 5:42 aloud: give up the cloak as well as the coat; give to the person who asks. He added Luke 14:33: give up all possessions. Beside them he placed the profitable servant of Matthew 25, who made more money and was praised with still more. He also placed the rich believers of 1 Timothy 6, who were told to give freely, not told that wealth had ended their belief.

Clarus placed a property deed on the table. “What must this disciple sell?”

“Whatever stands between the disciple and full trust.”

“How is that amount measured?”

“By the disciple’s willingness to give it up.”

Contrarius glanced at the deed. “What if the disciple keeps everything but says he would give it up?”

“We must not confuse wise care of money with selling everything.”

Clarus pointed to the command to renounce all. “Then why use *all*?”

“To make sure generosity is preached strongly.”

“And why include wealthy believers who retain property?”

“To make sure the sermon does not upset responsible donors.”

Contrarius wrote a proposed limit: **KEEP NO MORE THAN X WHILE ANOTHER PERSON LACKS Y.**

Jehovah struck out both letters. “Numbers invite obedience. Principles invite personal stories.”

Clarus placed the rich ruler of the Gospels beside Zacchaeus. “One is told to sell everything. The other says he will give half and pay back what he took, and salvation comes to his house. Is half enough, or was the first command only for that ruler?”

Jehovah said readers might choose a rule for everyone, a command for one man’s special problem, or a dramatic lesson.

“Before or after counting their money?” asked Contrarius.

“After, if possible. A reading benefits from a full bank statement.”

Contrarius tapped the profitable servant. “And the talents? Are they money or a metaphor?”

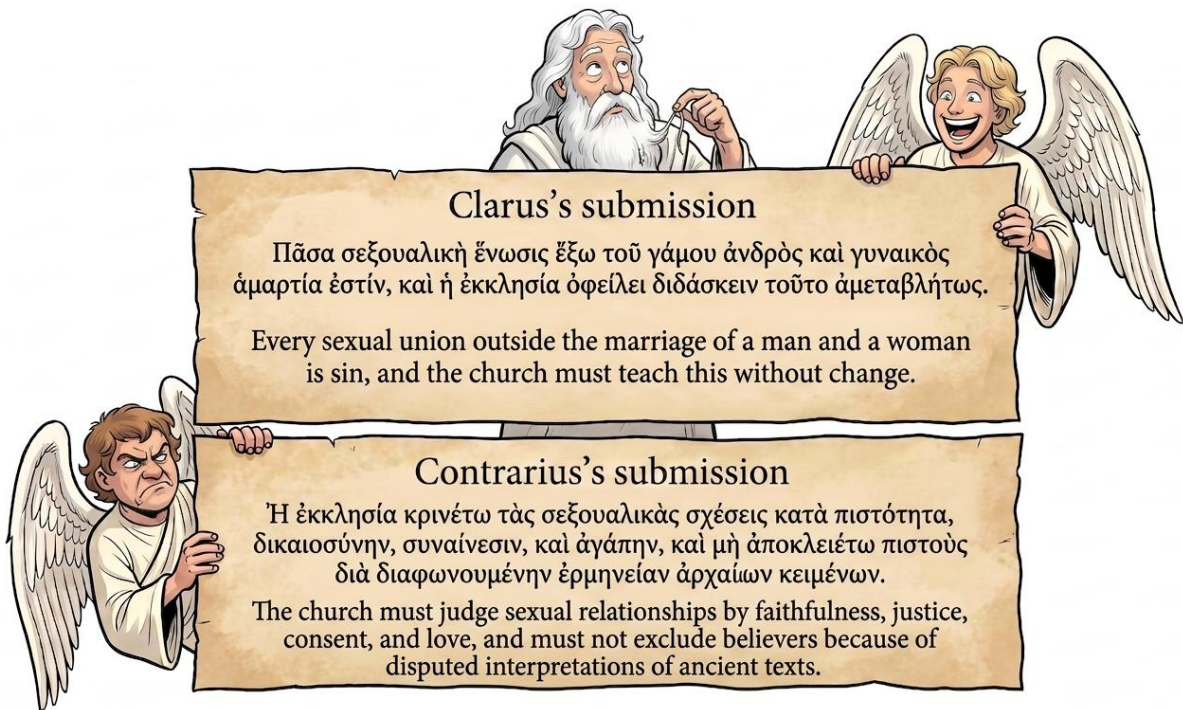
“A figure of speech when someone asks whether profit is holy,” said Jehovah, “and real money when someone asks whether getting richer can be faithful.”

Clarus wrote **A READING AS FLEXIBLE AS CASH** across the ledger. Jehovah nodded. “At last, an asset everyone may keep.”

Clarus said, “The rich may call themselves wise stewards at any level of wealth. Critics may call them evasive at any level of giving.”

“A lasting moral economy needs both,” said Jehovah. “The command must be radical in the sermon and open to bargaining in the budget.”

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Sexual ethics and covenant. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: One passage limits another Disputed historical scope

Texts used for a restrictive sexual ethic	Broader principles used by inclusive interpreters
Leviticus 18:22 — “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman. That is detestable. Romans 1:26 — For this reason, God gave them up to vile passions. For their women changed the natural function into that which is against nature. Romans 1:27 — Likewise also the men, leaving the natural function of the woman, burned in their lust toward one another, men doing what is inappropriate with men, and receiving in themselves the due penalty of their error.	Romans 13:10 — Love doesn’t harm a neighbor. Love therefore is the fulfillment of the law. Galatians 5:14 — For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 7:16 — By their fruits you will know them. Do you gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles?

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Baptist Faith and Message XV and XVIII restricts sexual expression to marriage between one man and one woman. **Contrarius:** the United Methodist 2020/2024 Book of Discipline §§304.2 and 162.D centers fidelity, consent, and monogamy and permits marriage of two adult persons.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah's usual comic ease left the room. He placed Leviticus 18 and Romans 1 beside the rules about love, neighbor, and good fruit in Romans 13, Galatians 5, and Matthew 7. The second group does not directly approve modern same-sex marriage. Its force comes from using those broad rules to limit the first group.

"This section will be read by people whose lives are not examples," Clarus said. "They will ask what is required, allowed, or forbidden. Choose any moral rule you wish, but state it."

Jehovah instead spread laws, disputed words, creation language, covenant, welcome, judgment, and broad moral rules across centuries and kinds of writing.

Contrarius read the arrangement. "One church will say the male-female form always decides the issue. Another will say loyalty, consent, justice, and love decide it. Each will claim the other has missed the clear center."

"Then both will take morality seriously," said Jehovah.

Clarus replied, "They may exclude people, split families, bless unions, condemn unions, or require a life without sex. Taking the issue seriously does not tell them which burden you chose."

Jehovah marked the page **PASTORAL DISCERNMENT REQUIRED**.

Contrarius asked, "What evidence could show a church that the reading it inherited is wrong?"

"The church must listen to Scripture, tradition, reason, experience, creation, holiness, and love."

"Those are the very sources it ranks differently because of the disputed reading."

Clarus said, "You may fear that a clear rule would be weaponized."

"Naturally."

"Vagueness is also used as a weapon," said Contrarius, "but it lets the person in power say that the weapon is merely a reading."

Jehovah thought about this and wrote **PROBLEM IN HOW PEOPLE APPLY IT** in the margin.

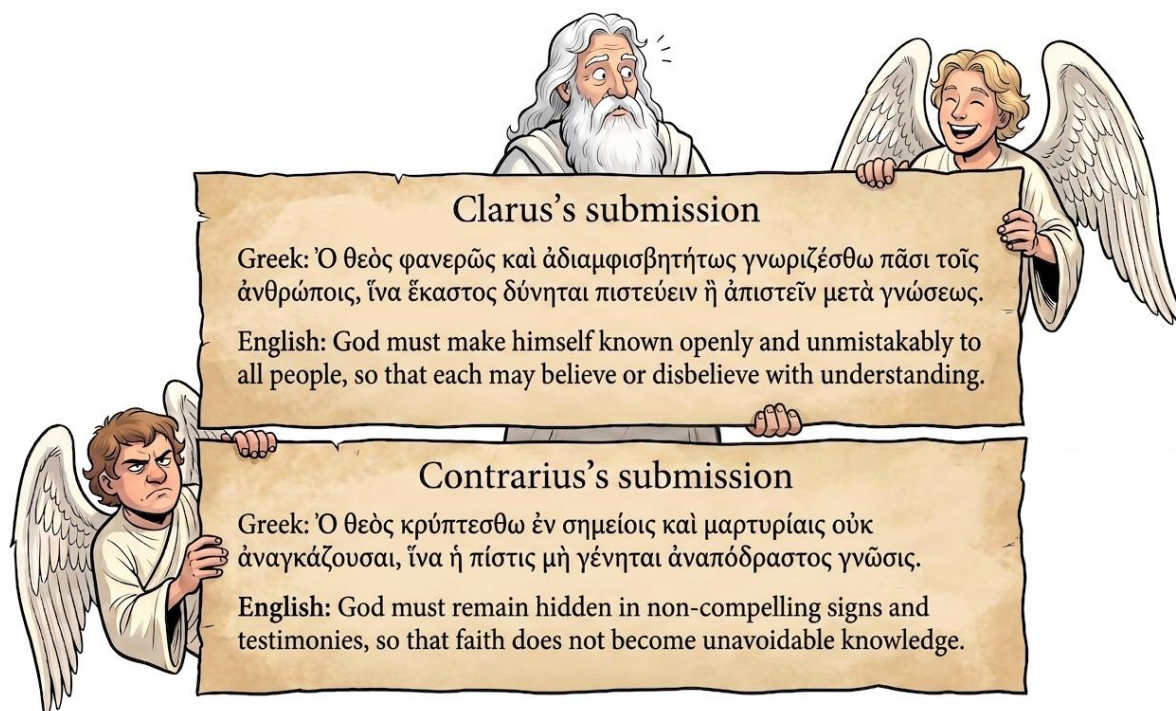
"No," said Clarus. "It is the author's problem. Clarity would not force everyone to approve your rule. It would force you to own it."

Jehovah lowered the red pen. "The pain will prove that the debate matters."

"No," said Contrarius. "Pain proves only that the people matter."

Clarus closed the file. "A rule firm enough to punish people and vague enough to deny blame is not moral guidance. It is blame handed down the chain."

EXHIBIT: THE TWO CLEAR SUBMISSIONS



Divine hiddenness and direct revelation. Clarus and Contrarius state opposite rules, each without room for doubt.

THE VERSE FILE

Representative passages used by rival readings. World English Bible, 2020 stable text (public domain).

Tension type: Direct clash Different evidential threshold

Texts used for open and sufficient revelation

Romans 1:19 — because that which is known of God is revealed in them, for God revealed it to them.

Romans 1:20 — For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity, that they may be without excuse.

Psalms 19:1 — For the Chief Musician. A Psalm by David. The heavens declare the glory of God. The expanse shows his handiwork.

Acts 17:27 — that they should seek the Lord, if perhaps they might reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

Texts used for divine hiddenness

Isaiah 45:15 — Most certainly you are a God who has hidden yourself, God of Israel, the Savior.”

Psalms 10:1 — Why do you stand far off, Yahweh? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

John 1:18 — No one has seen God at any time. The only born Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has declared him.

1 Timothy 6:16 — He alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen nor can see, to whom be honor and eternal power. Amen.

DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS

Clarus: Westminster Confession I.1 and Catholic Catechism §§31-35 say creation makes knowledge of God available. **Contrarius:** the hiddenness defense is philosophical rather than a denominational rule; see J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell University Press, 1993), chapter 2.

THE CONFERENCE

Jehovah placed Romans 1:19-20 and Psalm 19:1 beside Isaiah 45:15, Psalm 10:1, and John 1:18. He approved Contrarius's statement, then crossed it out because it admitted too much.

"Never say that I remain hidden," he instructed. "Say that I reveal myself sufficiently to those who seek me."

Clarus asked, "How will we tell an honest seeker who finds no clear message from a dishonest seeker?"

"The sincere seeker will eventually interpret the evidence correctly."

"Then a right answer proves honesty?"

"And honesty explains the right answer. It is an efficient arrangement."

Contrarius placed several rival claims from God on the desk. "Each religion reports signs, stories, changed lives, answered prayer, a holy book, and inner certainty. What public fact marks yours as true without assuming it first?"

Jehovah moved the claims into separate folders. "Mine will have enough evidence."

"Sufficient for what?"

"For belief that can be praised."

"But not enough for people to identify you reliably?" asked Clarus.

"Reliable recognition would replace faith with belief that fits the evidence."

Clarus leaned forward. "Knowledge does not compel affection or obedience. A person can know that a ruler exists and still resist the ruler. Clarity would remove confusion, not freedom."

Jehovah stamped the page **MYSTERY - NOT A FAILURE**.

Contrarius read the stamp. "You blame people for a test whose answer key appears only after you grade it."

"That protects faith—belief beyond the evidence."

"It protects every rival's faith in the same way," said Clarus. "A hidden author cannot complain that readers failed to know his handwriting."

Contrarius invited three seekers to describe their searches. One had prayed for a sign and heard silence. One had an experience later explained through another religion. One found that every reported sign could also be explained by hope, chance, group pressure, or the normal workings of the mind.

"Which seeker did something morally wrong?" he asked.

Jehovah reviewed the files. "The first may have asked for the wrong sign. The second named the wrong source. The third may have let doubt filter everything."

"What result would show that you failed to speak clearly?" asked Clarus.

"A message from God cannot fail."

“Then every silence becomes a story about the seeker’s flaws,” said Contrarius. “The evidence is enough when someone accepts it. When someone does not, the person is called the failure.”

Jehovah placed an answer key in a sealed envelope. **TO BE OPENED AFTER DEATH**, it read.

Clarus examined the seal. “The consequences begin before the correction is available.”

“Late feedback encourages seriousness.”

“It prevents learning,” said Contrarius. “A test can separate knowledge from guessing only if students know the subject, the evidence, and what would count as a mistake.”

Jehovah moved the envelope beyond reach. “If people could identify me in public, they could believe in line with the evidence. They would not need faith.”

Clarus returned the rival claims to the desk. “Then faith—confidence beyond the evidence—does not identify your message. It names the extra confidence each religion keeps after public proof has failed.”

For once Jehovah did not stamp the sentence. He filed it under **UNHELPFUL FAIRNESS TO ALL SIDES**.

The cabinet was the curriculum

By the time the fifth conference ended, the label **UNFILED** no longer looked accidental. These were not random exceptions. They were small examples of the whole method.

“Why call them unfiled?” asked Clarus.

“Because each becomes inconvenient at the moment someone asks what to do,” Jehovah replied.

Contrarius counted the cases: a child awaiting a rite, a former believer whose past could be rewritten, a rich disciple seeking a number, a couple needing a moral rule, and a seeker trying to recognize the hidden author.

“You could answer every case plainly after choosing a policy.”

“And every plain answer would close off possible readings.”

“That is what an answer does,” said Clarus.

The angels left the office with the five dossiers. They no longer saw them as exceptions. Each file showed the whole theory in a small case. When an answer had a cost, vagueness became a virtue. When a reader asked for a reason, the request became a failure of faith—a refusal to believe beyond the evidence.

Before leaving, Contrarius drew four questions on the cabinet door:

THE UNFILED-CASE TEST

What practical question must the human being answer?
Which opposing actions can the archive still defend?
What public method corrects an honest mistake?
Who bears the cost while the dispute remains unsettled?

Jehovah read the questions. “Hostile formatting.”

“They are normal questions,” said Clarus. “They seem hostile only because the answer must touch a life.”

They applied the test to the five files. Obedience could mean baptizing the infant or refusing baptism. The former believer could be called never saved or truly fallen. The rich disciple could give up everything or keep nearly everything as a steward. The couple could be blessed or excluded. The seeker could be blamed for missing a hidden author whose signs also appeared in rival files.

“And the way to correct errors?” asked Contrarius.

Jehovah gestured toward tradition, conscience, scholarship, prayer, experience, and pastoral authority.

“Those produced the rival answers,” said Clarus.

“They also produce correction.”

“In opposite directions.”

“Correction is always directional.”

Contrarius wrote a fifth question beneath the others: **What result would show that the message failed?**

Jehovah removed the cabinet door. “The cases were more orderly before the rubric.”

“No,” said Clarus. “They were only easier to file than to answer.”

PART V — THE CLEAN DRAFT

The rejected option returns: choose a rule, state it, define it, correct likely errors,
and let readers judge how well you communicated.

Chapter 35 — The Clean Draft

At the end of the term, Clarus and Contrarius recovered the clear manuscripts Jehovah had rejected.

On the first page of their final report, the angels stated what the recovered drafts did not claim. Neither draft was divine. Clarity would not settle every human dispute, remove metaphor, erase the distance of history, or force virtue. Their claim was smaller. A perfect teacher giving high-stakes guidance could define the key terms and name the intended authority. The teacher could correct likely mistakes and allow some results to count against the claim of clarity.

Contrarius turned the final page.

“Will we publish them?” he asked.

Clarus looked toward Jehovah’s office. The light beneath the door was still red.

“No,” he said. “We will let readers compare the drafts.”

“And then?”

“Then they may decide whether confusion is a sign of depth, or merely what remains after someone has edited the answers out.”

The next page contained not a doctrine but a test.

A clear revelation claim should state:

What teachings are high-stakes.

Who is meant to understand them.

What normal ways of reading them are approved.

How honest readers can correct a disagreement.

What public result would count against the claim of clarity.

Contrarius read the list. “None of this tells Jehovah what doctrine to choose.”

“No,” said Clarus. “There is no divine logic that forces baptism, authority, marriage, judgment, or grace to take one shape rather than another. He may choose as he wishes.”

“Then why does the list matter?”

“Because choice creates responsibility. Once he says that one possible doctrine is his will, he must name it clearly. Otherwise, he must admit that disagreement is not a reliable test of loyalty.”

The office door opened behind them. Jehovah stood there with the red pen in his hand.

“You have confused two different things,” he said. “You treat my silence as a failure to communicate.”

“What else is it?” asked Clarus.

“An invitation.”

“To what?”

Jehovah considered the question. “To faith: belief stronger than the evidence.”

Contrarius held up the rival-revelation file. “When another sacred text gives the same invitation, backed by its own tradition, experience, reading, and confidence, how can a seeker know which invitation is yours?”

Jehovah’s red pen touched the page. A line appeared beneath the question, then another, then a careful rectangle around the entire paragraph.

“That,” he said, “is outside the scope of this course.”

Clarus placed the rejected clear drafts beside the marked manuscript. The contrast needed little comment. On one side were freely chosen rules stated in plain words. On the other was a holy archive where disagreement proved depth, requests for correction showed failed humility, and every reader could be told that the answer had been there all along.

He closed neither book.

Contrarius rested a hand on the clear drafts. “We have not shown which doctrine is true.”

“No,” said Clarus. “We have shown the difference between choosing a doctrine and communicating the choice.”

“And if readers reject a perfectly clear doctrine?”

“Then they reject something clear enough to name. Their refusal may be criticized without pretending that their confusion was the problem.”

Jehovah drew one last red line beneath the sentence. “Too much responsibility has survived editing.”

Clarus handed him the pen. “Then correct the sentence publicly. State what it gets wrong, what you intended instead, and what evidence would settle the difference.”

The professor looked at the pen as though it were a tool he no longer knew how to use.

“That is not how red pens work,” he said.

“It is how correction works,” said Contrarius.

For the first time, the red pen remained uncapped because no one could think of a vaguer ending that did not prove the point.

Afterword — What the Red Pen Does Not Prove

The comedy gives Professor Jehovah an ugly motive on purpose. He wants loyalty that outsiders cannot check. So he edits out the clarity readers would need to judge his work. The fictional character is the target. Ordinary believers are not.

The book also uses *faith* in one strict sense: belief held more strongly than the available evidence supports. Faith in that sense is irrational even when the belief happens to be true. Many believers use the same word for trust, loyalty, hope, or an entire religion. This book uses those more precise words instead.

The serious question is narrower than the comedy. A person may believe that God exists, find the Bible profound, learn from a church, or value a private experience. None of that requires a further claim: that the Bible gives clear, reliable answers to every major doctrinal question examined here.

The problem begins when three claims are joined. First, an all-knowing and all-powerful God gave Scripture to guide people on matters of great importance. Second, honest and able readers should be able to find that guidance. Third, centuries of disagreement do not count against the claim that the guidance is clear.

Perfect communication need not produce instant agreement. People have limits and biases. They can ignore even a plain sentence. Still, a perfect teacher can define key words, repeat important rules, give examples, state exceptions, and provide a sure way to correct mistakes. The more important the issue, the more reasonable it is to ask why those tools were not used better.

The angels' rival submissions make the question easy to see. One says baptism is required for salvation; the other says it is not. Both views find support in the same Bible, serious teachers, worshiping communities, and long traditions. Showing that one view *can* be argued from Scripture does not show that Scripture clearly chooses it. What is missing is a public way to tell which reading the author meant.

There are possible answers. A tradition may say that only a few doctrines were meant to be clear. It may say that God guides people through a known Church, not through a text alone. It may argue that vagueness serves some greater good. Or it may appeal to personal evidence that outsiders cannot share. Each answer deserves a fair hearing. Each must also explain how people can recognize the right authority, why so much confusion is needed, and what evidence could show the answer is wrong.

That is why the red pen matters. The book does not attack poetry, metaphor, hard texts, tradition, or spiritual practice. It asks who is responsible when a teacher controls both the lesson and the stakes. A teacher need not make every lesson easy. But the teacher should not call every possible result proof that the lesson worked.

Source Notes and Representative Doctrinal Standards

These sources document the real traditions shortened for the fictional submissions and conferences. Each dossier now identifies the specific paragraphs or numbered sections most closely related to its two clear rules. The official web sources were checked on August 26, 2026. They are examples, not a complete history of Christian doctrine, and listing them is not an endorsement. The satire's paired rules are purposely shorter and firmer than the traditions themselves.

1. **World English Bible.** *World English Bible*, 2020 stable-text edition. Public-domain modern English Bible used for every verse-file quotation. worldenglish.bible
2. **Roman Catholic.** *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Representative statements on Scripture and tradition, baptism, Eucharist, marriage, saints, ministry, and final judgment. vatican.va
3. **Eastern Orthodox.** Orthodox Church in America, *The Orthodox Faith*, especially the sections on Church, baptism, Eucharist, marriage, and holy orders. oca.org
4. **Lutheran.** Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *The Lutheran Confessions*, identifying the *Book of Concord* as its doctrinal standard. lcms.org
5. **Reformed and Presbyterian.** Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *Westminster Confession of Faith*, including Scripture, election, justification, perseverance, sacraments, Sabbath, marriage, worship, and judgment. opc.org
6. **Methodist and Wesleyan.** The United Methodist Church, *Articles of Religion*, including Scripture, free will, justification, good works, sacraments, and Christian possessions. umc.org
7. **Baptist.** Southern Baptist Convention, *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, including Scripture, salvation, baptism, Lord's Supper, stewardship, war, ministry, and family. bfm.sbc.net
8. **Anabaptist and Mennonite.** Mennonite Church USA, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, especially baptism, discipleship, simplicity, peace, and nonresistance. mennoniteusa.org
9. **Pentecostal.** Assemblies of God (USA), *Our Core Doctrines* and its linked Statement of Fundamental Truths, especially salvation, Spirit baptism, healing, and Christ's return. ag.org
10. **Seventh-day Adventist.** *Fundamental Beliefs*, especially creation, Sabbath, spiritual gifts, and final destiny. adventist.org
11. **Divine hiddenness.** J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell University Press, 1993), especially chapter 2. This is a philosophical source rather than a denominational standard.

The doctrinal exhibits also draw on widely recognized contrasts within and across these families: sacrament and ordinance; infant and believer baptism; monergist and synergist accounts of salvation; perseverance and possible apostasy; real presence and memorialism; Scripture alone and Scripture-with-tradition; pacifism and just-war reasoning; complementarian and egalitarian ministry; continuationism and cessationism; eternal conscious punishment, conditional immortality, and universal restoration.

Appendix — The Clarity Test

What the test asks

The argument can be stated without the heavenly office. If a perfect teacher chose important rules and wanted honest readers to understand them, we should expect broad agreement or a sure way to correct honest mistakes.

The test does not require every verse to read like a manual. Nor does it require every reader to agree about everything. Stories, poems, parables, and letters can communicate well. The question is whether the result is as reliable as the message is important and the author is able.

Clarus puts it simply: “A difficult teacher may assign a difficult question. A responsible teacher does not make the answer key depend on which classroom a student inherited.”

Apply the same standard

Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Baptist, Pentecostal, and other Christian groups all have serious readers, learned defenders, devoted members, and reasons for rejecting rival views. That does not make every view equally likely. It does show that evidence shared by all sides cannot, by itself, prove that one side alone is clear.

The same standard applies between religions. Suppose family teaching, changed lives, study, good conduct, or a willingness to suffer supports one holy book. What happens when another religion offers the same kinds of support? Real differences may remain. Readers should be able to examine those differences. The first tradition to speak should not get a hidden advantage.

What the test does not prove

Lasting disagreement does not prove that no God has spoken. It does not prove that every reading is equally good, or that stories, traditions, rituals, and private experiences are worthless. It makes a smaller point: a strong claim that God spoke clearly must explain confusion that lasts and causes harm.

Jehovah’s comic defense turns every result into success. Agreement proves clarity. Disagreement proves freedom, depth, or human sin. The claim may still be possible, but it no longer explains why any result should count in its favor.

Why the satire aims upward

The book is sharp about systems and gentle about people. Most believers inherit a language, family, and tradition before they can judge them. Nearly all learning begins with that kind of trust.

The joke is not that readers are foolish. It is aimed at an authority that uses normal human trust, then calls the resulting confusion a moral success. The frightened child, excluded believer, divided couple, careful soldier, and unsure seeker are not punch lines. Their losses are why the office is funny and the policy is not.

One fairness test remains. Would the criticism still work if every believer in the scene were smart, honest, informed, serious about right and wrong, and willing to change? If the satire needs foolish or dishonest believers, it has missed its point. The question is what the message allows even when readers do their honest best.

Scripture Index

The entries below point to the verse files, not to every passing mention of a passage. Page numbers refer to the print edition; each number is also a link in the PDF and EPUB.

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