1. Doesn’t Hebrews 6 say it’s possible for Christians to “fall away” and lose their salvation?
2. In 1 Corinthians 7:19, Paul says, "keeping God's commands is what counts." Doesn’t this mean we need to keep the law?
3. Is believing that Christians are free from the law called “antinomianism”?
4. In Hebrews 10:16, the author quotes God saying, “I will put my laws on their heart.” How can we be sure it is not the Old Testament law that’s written on our hearts?
5. Isn’t water baptism necessary for salvation because spiritual baptism into Christ only occurs with water baptism?
6. Is the forgiveness described in Ephesians and Colossians really different from that described in Matthew 6:14–15?
7. Does once-for-all forgiveness mean that the whole world is forgiven and saved (Universalism) or does each person still need to turn and believe in order to receive?
8. In Matthew 5, Jesus talks about getting right with other people before going to the altar. Isn’t this applicable to getting right before we can take communion?
9. What about Hebrews 10:26–27, which talks about judgment if we keep on sinning?
10. How can we believe God doesn’t punish Christians for our sins when we read the story of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts?
11. Doesn’t the Holy Spirit convict us of our sin?
12. How important is it for the church today to teach Christians about their spiritual union with Jesus Christ?
QUESTION ONE

Doesn’t Hebrews 6 say it’s possible for Christians to “fall away” and lose their salvation?

In Hebrews, the writer chastises his readers because of their inability to grasp the basics. Apparently, they need to be taught the gospel all over again. He says, “In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!” (Heb. 5:12).

The problem is that people are simply not getting it. The apostles have presented the gospel time and time again, but for many it is just not sticking. And from all appearances, it seems to be the Jewish customs and religious acts performed in the temple that are tripping them up. That’s right, the law. How do we know? In chapter 6, the author of Hebrews gets specific:

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. (Heb. 6:1–2 TNIV)

The dead religious works in the temple, reliance on cleansing rituals, the futile idea of transferring their sins onto an animal through the priest’s laying on of hands, and the Pharisee-Sadducee debate over resurrection and judgment—these were the obstacles that were tripping up the early church. These
issues were keeping them from moving on to grasp the cleansing received through Christ, the transfer of their sins onto the Lamb of God, and the freedom from any fear of judgment. Failure to accept Christ’s sacrifice and believe in what he accomplished was preventing them from becoming saved. Instead, they were trying to hedge their bets by returning to carry out temple sacrifices.

The author then draws a line in the sand:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (Heb. 6:4–6 TNIV)

This is addressed to readers who have been enlightened but haven’t chosen. They have tasted but not swallowed. The truth has been revealed to them, but they have not accepted it. In downtown Jerusalem, people of the day had shared in the power of the Holy Spirit as the apostles performed miracles all around them. They had been taught the Word of God again and again. Still, they had not come to a place of repentance, of relying on Christ’s sacrifice rather than the temple sacrifices.

Similarly, many of us today will encounter the gospel message in all its glory. We have been clearly taught that Jesus Christ died for our sins. We understand that he also rose from the dead to give us new life. And yet we continue on down the
road, ignoring the spectacle before us. We essentially step over Jesus’s offer as we say, “No, thank you. Jesus, you are not enough. I need more.”

In the days of the early church, where were those people headed as they stepped over Jesus and continued to travel on? Right back to the Jewish temple. Where are we headed today? Any number of places, from stricter, more self-effacing religion to complete hedonism. But what Hebrews is telling us is that regardless of where we’re headed, once we’ve stepped over Jesus’s offer, there is no hope for repentance and salvation anywhere else. Rather, we are crucifying Jesus all over again and putting him to public disgrace. Why public? Well, in those days, as people who had participated in early church activities publicly returned to the temple, they were visibly announcing that Jesus’s sacrifice was insufficient—an insult to our Savior.

How do we know the people described in Hebrews 6 were not already Christians? The author of Hebrews uses this analogy from nature to explain how there can be people who have tasted the gospel but have not “drunk it in”:

Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. (Heb. 6:7–8)

Jesus gives us a similar analogy in the parable of the sower: some seed fell on “good soil,” while other seed fell on bad ground (Matt. 13:1–23). In Hebrews 6 and in Matthew 13, it
appears that some will drink in the rain, while others will not. Those who receive the gospel will yield fruit in their lives. Those who are resistant will produce “thorns and thistles.” This is a clear contrast between a saved person who drinks in the rain of the gospel and bears fruit and a lost person who is like rocky ground that resists the rain of the gospel.

The writer of Hebrews then turns to those who are already Christians (“beloved”). He realizes he has made some scary statements directed at the lost. All this talk of falling away, putting Christ to public disgrace, and being burned is frightening. For that reason, he closes with an encouragement for those who are already in Christ. He assures them that he is convinced of better things for Christians:

But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. (Heb. 6:9 NASB)

The threat was only for those who were teetering on the fence regarding the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice. It was directed at any who were returning to the dead works of the temple to hedge their bets regarding salvation. But we Christians can expect “better things” that “accompany salvation.”
QUESTION TWO

In 1 Corinthians 7:19, Paul says, "keeping God's commands is what counts." Doesn’t this mean we need to keep the law?

The real question here is: which commands does Paul mean? To answer this question, we rely on context. Back in verses 10 and 11 of the same chapter, Paul gives us an example of God’s commands: don’t divorce your wife; or if you do, don’t remarry but rather try to get back together with her if possible. This is one example among many New Testament commands, with the central theme being to love others.

This is very different from having to keep Mosaic commands. Which ones would we keep? Which ones would we ignore? Understanding that New Testament instruction is sometimes referred to as “God’s commands” or a command “from the Lord” is essential in avoiding a mix of Old Testament commands with life under new-covenant grace.

QUESTION THREE

Is believing that Christians are free from the law called “antinomianism”?

No, believing that we’re free from the law, dead to the law, not under the law, and not supervised by the law is scriptural.

But a movement called antinomianism (“against law”) was a well-known concern in the early church. Antinomians were
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

heretics who taught that the law was evil or sinful. Paul even battled this philosophy: “What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not!” (Rom. 7:7). But today, teaching that the law has no place in the life of a Christian is sometimes wrongly labeled “antinomianism.”

The true definition of “antinomian” is a person who disrespects the law or denigrates it. But in saying that we Christians are free from the law, we don’t devalue the law. Instead, we place it on a pedestal and honor it as being perfect in every way. We don’t nullify the law; we hold it up in high regard and esteem it (Rom. 3:31). We admit that it’s so perfect and so demanding that we can’t possibly meet its standard.

For that very reason, God freed us from the law. He offered us a totally different system for relating to him. Only those who abandon the law and put their full trust in God’s new way truly respect the perfect and impossible standards of the law. Until we acknowledge the perfection of the law and our own complete inability to meet it, we’re peddling a toothless, impotent, and religious message of “Jesus plus something.”

QUESTION FOUR

In Hebrews 10:16, the author quotes God saying, “I will put my laws on their heart.” How can we be sure it is not the Old Testament law that’s written on our hearts?

The author of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:33, saying, “I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their
minds” (Heb. 10:16). But when the author of Hebrews quotes from Jeremiah, he actually chooses the *plural* rendition “laws” rather than the singular word “law” found in Jeremiah. Why would he do this? He is distinguishing between the Old Testament law (the Torah, referred to in the singular) and the new-covenant laws of belief in Jesus (1 John 3:23) and loving others as Jesus loves us (John 13:34). It’s these new-covenant laws (plural) of belief in Jesus and transmitting *his* love to others that are written in Christians’ hearts today.

**QUESTION FIVE**

*Isn’t water baptism necessary for salvation because spiritual baptism into Christ only occurs with water baptism?*

There’s no scriptural backing for this idea. Here’s an example of someone who received the Holy Spirit first but wasn’t baptized until later:

> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that *the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out* even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, “*Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.*” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days. (Acts 10:44–48)
Notice the order of events. First, they received the Holy Spirit. Then they were baptized later to publicly demonstrate that they had already received the Holy Spirit. Of course, there are other examples of belief and baptism in Acts. Maybe in some cases the people didn’t truly believe and receive the Holy Spirit until close to the time of their baptism. But it only takes one clear example to show that water baptism is not the cause nor the catalyst for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Demanding water baptism as proof of salvation serves as a form of religion that looks to externals. God looks to the heart, which only he can see, to identify us as his children. It is our baptism into Christ Jesus that saves us, not water baptism.

**QUESTION SIX**

*Is the forgiveness described in Ephesians and Colossians really different from that described in Matthew 6:14–15?*

There is a clear contradiction here in terms of which action comes first. In Ephesians and Colossians, Paul speaks of a finished work on the cross that *precedes* our forgiveness of others and motivates us to pass on that same type of unconditional forgiveness to those around us:

> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Eph. 4:32)
Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Col. 3:13)

Here, we forgive others because God already forgave us. In contrast, Jesus speaks of a need for us to forgive others first. Only after we have done that will our Father forgive us:

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matt. 6:14–15)

I recognize that some commentaries have interpreted Jesus’s teaching in such a way that removes the condition. However, reading this passage independent of any preconceived theological biases, the grammar clearly expresses a condition that must be met in order for God to forgive us. Jesus’s statements convey an uncertainty about God forgiving us if the condition of us forgiving others is not met first. Any other interpretation requires rewriting Jesus’s words.

Why is Jesus placing conditions on forgiveness when the New Testament epistles do not? Again, it goes back to identifying the cross as the dividing line of human history. Jesus is addressing a Jewish audience that is still “under law” (Gal. 4:4), and the new covenant is not in effect yet since Jesus has not died yet (Heb. 9:16–17). Jesus is intentionally showing them the futility in saying “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). We certainly need better forgiveness than the kind we’ve been doling out to others!
We see Jesus burying his Jewish contemporaries under impossible demands as he tells them to pluck out their eyes, cut off their hands, sell everything they own, and be perfect like God. This is no different! Much of Jesus’s ministry was designed to show people how hopeless they were apart from the new covenant. Then and only then would they see their need for the Counselor (John 16:7) and the intimate relationship with himself that he so often spoke of:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

QUESTION SEVEN

Does once-for-all forgiveness mean that the whole world is forgiven and saved (Universalism) or does each person still need to turn and believe in order to receive?

What I call “Universal Studios Religion” claims that all dogs go to heaven. You know, that everyone is saved. But is the whole world already forgiven and/or destined for heaven with no need to receive anything?

Here’s an excerpt of Jesus’s conversation with Paul in Acts 26. From this passage, it appears that the unbeliever needs to “turn” and believe in order to receive both forgiveness and an inheritance. And it is faith in Jesus that sanctifies us:
“...from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.” (Acts 26:17-18)

Similarly, as we’ve already discussed in this book, the apostle John cites a condition for receiving forgiveness and cleansing from God:

“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.” (1 John 1:8-10)

John presents the condition, “If we confess our sins…” This verse has to apply to someone! As we’ve seen, it’s directed at the unbeliever influenced by the Gnostic denial of sin. The passage highlights the importance of agreeing with God that we are sinners. If any one of us humans goes around claiming that “we have no sin” and that “we have not sinned,” then we deceive ourselves and we make God a liar. The truth is not in us, and God’s word is not in us. We are lost. The solution to this denial of sin is to agree with God and receive His once-for-all forgiveness and cleansing. This happens “if we confess our sins” to God instead of denying they even exist!

So is the whole world saved? Is the whole world forgiven? These are just a couple of passages that communicate that there is a condition of turning and confessing that we are sinners in order
to actually receive forgiveness and an inheritance (Acts 26:17-18).

Of course, there are numerous passages about the need for repenting, believing, not hardening our hearts, calling on the name of Jesus, and confessing Him as Lord in order to be saved. The two passages in Acts 26 and 1 John 1 are just the tip of the iceberg. But even in themselves they present a significant challenge to Universal Studios Religion.

The Scriptures speak again and again about a need for a decision to turn, believe, and confess in order to receive forgiveness and a place in God’s kingdom. Contrary to the Hollywood theology, not all dogs go to heaven.

QUESTION EIGHT

In Matthew 5, Jesus talks about getting right with other people before going to the altar. Isn’t this applicable to getting right before we can take communion?

Jesus said, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23–24 TNIV). So isn’t this instruction for what we should be doing before communion? There’s no question that confession and reconciliation are key to our relationships with others. Confessing our sins to trusted friends is healthy and helpful. How else can they know how to pray for us? Or be prompted
to forgive us for how we may have harmed them? No, the error lies in developing ritualistic confession as a condition for our forgiveness from God or our celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 5 occurs before the cross. It was given to Jewish listeners who were under the old covenant, going to the Jewish temple to offer a blood sacrifice on the altar. Today, we have no altar. Just as the blood of Christ replaced the blood of bulls and goats, the cross has replaced the temple altar. Despite what we may call a table at the front of our church, it is not an altar.

The purpose of an altar is to offer sacrifices. No more sacrifices will be offered for sins, so no more altars of any kind are needed. We approached the one altar—the cross—for salvation, and our sins were forgiven and forgotten.

QUESTION NINE

What about Hebrews 10:26–27, which talks about judgment if we keep on sinning?

Another passage that has led many Christians to doubt their eternal security before God is also found in Hebrews:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. (Heb. 10:26–27)
At first glance, this passage seems to say that too much sinning can cause us to lose our salvation. But it’s important to note that the only type of sin mentioned in the first ten chapters of Hebrews is the sin of unbelief in the gospel. When the writer says, “if we deliberately keep on sinning,” in context he means, “if we deliberately keep on unbelieving.”

Note that he also says, “after we have received the knowledge of the truth.” What do we do with knowledge of truth? We have a choice. We either believe it or reject it. So the writer’s point, paraphrased, is this: “If you hear the gospel and deliberately choose not to believe it, then you won’t find any adequate sacrifice for sins anywhere else on the planet. Instead, you will only find judgment and fire. You are an unbeliever, an enemy of God, a rejecter of the gospel truth.”

This is very different from saying that we Christians better watch out, because the blood of Christ may “run out” on us and there’ll be “no sacrifice left.” That’s taking the verse out of context. The point is that there is no sacrifice other than Christ. If any of us reject Jesus’s sacrifice in favor of some alternative (the temple sacrifices being the popular Hebrew choice), then we’ll be left with an empty hope and no way to escape the wrath of God.

Remember what happened to people who refused to subject themselves to the Mosaic law? They died: “Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Heb. 10:28). Now the writer
transitions to reason *with Christians* by saying that we should not disrespect the blood of Christ that sanctified us:

How much more severely do you think those *deserve* to be punished who have trampled the Son of God underfoot, who have treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant *that sanctified them*, and who have insulted the Spirit of grace? (Heb. 10:29 TNIV)

The phrase “that sanctified them” shows us the writer is now addressing *believers* who may be feeling pressure to return to the temple. Christians are forgiven, so there’s no need for any further sacrifice. The author of Hebrews reasons in this way: If the Jews respected the law, how much more should we respect the work of Christ? If we do not give it full respect, we are trampling on Christ’s work and treating Jesus’s blood as insufficient. We are insulting the Spirit of grace. The message of grace is that Jesus’s blood is enough, no matter what.

Any of us who disrespect Christ’s blood in this way *deserve* to be punished. We Christians will not be punished, but we certainly deserve it even more than Israel did for disrespecting the law. So the writer is highlighting our disrespect and asking us a rhetorical question: “How much more severely *do you think* those *deserve* to be punished?” He asks us what we think. He reasons with us about what any of us deserve. These are strong words, and the author knows it. So he closes with words of comfort for true Christians:

“But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.” *But we are not* of those who shrink back
and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. (Heb. 10:38–39)

Notice that Christians (righteous ones) are not in danger, as we are not the ones who shrink back and are destroyed. We are the ones who believe and are saved. The initial warning in this passage is for unbelievers, not Christians. Still, we Christians should be careful to realize and respect the full accomplishment of Jesus’s death and live in the absolute confidence of our cleansing.

Although these verses have been used to advocate the idea that Christians can lose their salvation, what we’ve seen here is exactly the opposite. Some people will hear the gospel and deliberately reject it. These are the enemies of God that can expect judgment and raging fire. But true believers are different—we are not of those who shrink back, and we can expect better things that accompany salvation:

*Even though we speak like this,* dear friends, *we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.* (Heb. 6:9)

**QUESTION TEN**

How can we believe God doesn’t punish Christians for our sins when we read the story of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts?
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

First, we’re never actually told that Ananias and Sapphira are believers (see Acts 5). We know that the church at that time was a mixture of lost and saved, heretical and faithful. So this couple may have been associated with the church, wanting to look good and put on a show, but maybe they never actually placed their faith in Jesus for salvation.

Second, the passage doesn’t actually say that God struck and killed them. We often assume this is the case, but a careful reading of the verses reveals that they fell dead. What if they had a heart attack at the shock of being discovered in their lies? It may seem far-fetched, but imagine getting away with little white lies and even bigger ones your whole life. And then suddenly someone catches you in a big one, and they say the God of the universe revealed it to them. Oh, and by the way, the people discovering your lie are the same ones who appear to have the power to heal people and raise the dead. You’ve got to admit that would be intimidating!

Regardless of whether or not they were believers, and regardless of whether they were struck dead by God or simply fell dead on their own, we shouldn’t extrapolate any doctrine from events recounted in Acts. Acts is a descriptive history book; it documents what happened in the early church. At that time, extreme miracles were taking place in order to demonstrate in concrete ways the power of this new gospel. In contrast, the epistles are prescriptive, making recommendations regarding what our spiritual lives should look like, both then and today.
Think about it. If we rely on Acts to develop doctrine, we should then teach that flames of fire fall on our heads at salvation. After all, it happened in Acts. And if it is not happening today, then maybe we should assume that no one today is truly saved. We might also erroneously conclude that we’ll be able to present the gospel in various languages of the world just after the flames fall. This too happened in the book of Acts. And while we’re in the business of turning history into doctrine, we could tell people that if they disobey God, they may be swallowed by a whale!

The Ananias and Sapphira account was never intended to communicate that God kills Christians. That would fly in the face of everything we know about Jesus, who took our punishment on the cross. It would negate everything we’re told about total forgiveness. And let’s be candid—our churches today would be littered with corpses if God punished Christians for lying about money. So we have to conclude that—consistent with many other stories of miracles in Acts—the story of Ananias and Sapphira is likely to have been recounted as a demonstration of God’s ability to see the motivations of our hearts.

**QUESTION ELEVEN**

*Doesn’t the Holy Spirit convict us of our sin?*

Of the eight mentions of the term “convict” in the New Testament, not one of them refers to the Holy Spirit’s
interaction with Christians. Instead, the term “convict” is reserved exclusively for the work of the law and the Spirit in bringing unbelievers to Jesus.

That doesn’t mean God doesn’t care about our behavior. Of course he does! According to the Bible, the Holy Spirit counsels us, helps us, comforts us, reminds us of our true identity (Rom. 8:16), and prays on our behalf (Rom. 8:26). But why wouldn’t he convict? It seems the term “convict” is reserved for the guilty, for the unforgiven, and even in our judicial systems, for convicts. The Holy Spirit agrees with the Father that we as children of God have been forgiven, and the Holy Spirit remembers our sins no more (Heb. 8:12).

It makes sense that if Jesus took our sins away, and if the Father honors that sacrifice as being sufficient, the Holy Spirit would be on the same page with the rest of the Trinity. The entire Trinity is pleased to have us and recognizes us as fully forgiven people. Still, in the midst of being forgiven people, the Spirit counsels us toward upright living. He concerns himself with training us for the future, not with dragging up the record of our past. This Counselor is like no other, since a blood sacrifice has made it all possible.

QUESTION TWELVE

How important is it for the church today to teach Christians about their spiritual union with Jesus Christ?
The mystery of “Christ in you” (Col. 1:27), hidden for ages, is now revealed—we are spiritually fused to Jesus Christ. Both Christ and you, together, live out a spiritual mystery that has only recently in human history been unraveled. Through the resurrection, God has thrown open the doors to experiencing a radical, intimate union with his only begotten:

*The word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.* (Col. 1:25–27 TNIV)

If you’ve ever wondered whether you’re hearing a full, complete gospel each time you step into church, Paul tells us that the message of *Christ in us* is “the word of God in its fullness” (v. 25). This is the message that we need to base everything else upon. And there is no greater message to deliver to the church today.

Everything we preach about behavior and attitudes should begin with the premise that it is Christ in us and Christ through us that brings real change. Many pastors might think, “Yeah, yeah, I know that already.” Maybe so, but does your congregation? I have found it necessary to teach the new covenant reality of Christ in us over and over, and then some more after that. To assume everyone’s already got that down and to then “move on” will result in the congregation thinking Christianity is simply a behavior modification program rooted in human effort.

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In fact, the Barna Group’s survey showed that very thing. Their survey indicated that 80 percent of self-identified Christians think that Christianity is all about obeying the rules to be good. If we think that Christians today have already “got it,” we are missing it ourselves. No one ever gets it fully, and we shouldn’t be moving on to “advanced things.” After all, what’s more important than learning to allow the Son of God himself to express his life through your personality? Every ounce of our preaching and teaching should direct people to Christ in them as their only hope of glory: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor. 4:7).