

## The Five Points of Calvinism

The subjects of “Calvinism,” “Puritanism,” “predestination,” and “election” do not have happy associations in the popular mind. Hear these terms and the mind imagines colorless landscapes, black suits and black hats, faces frowning under the weight of a hopeless fatalism, a joyless, harsh, critical, and legalistic religion. That this is an image created largely by an unsympathetic academic community seems not to be known by most. That it may be inaccurate and false seems not to have occurred to but a few.

We raise the issue because the sympathetic presentation of Calvinism seems to some to be an exercise in futility. There is so much prejudice to overcome, why bother? It cannot but alienate. It cannot but prove divisive. Since it is not central to the gospel and is, to some degree, sectarian, is it not better left in the denominational attic?

Our answer is that we must “bother” because the issues with which Calvinism deals are crucial to the gospel itself. Far from being fringe matters or of secondary importance, they are critical to one’s concept of God, of man, sin, the work of Christ, the Christian life, and the mission of the church. They cannot be relegated to the back burners without endangering the gospel itself. Indeed the great weaknesses of the church today, its pride, its self-sufficiency, prayerlessness, its superficial worship, its widespread carnality, its social and political irrelevance are all direct results of a faulty theology, chief error of which is a scaled-down view of the nature of God. “Your God is too small,” the popular book title reads. The God of the Apostle Paul, of Augustine, and of Calvin is majestic, omnipotent, and absolutely sovereign. The conviction of God’s sovereignty produced a hardy, God-fearing people. Today’s church largely does not share this belief. As a consequence its “lower” view of God cannot and does not generate deep repentance, humility, dependence, awe, and fear in our hearts. J.I. Packer, in his “Introduction Essay to John Owen’s *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*,” contrasts the “old” (i.e. biblical, Calvinistic) gospel with the “new.” The “new,” he says, has a new focus. It is too exclusively concerned to be “helpful” to man, whereas the “old” had as its first concern the glory of God.

It (the “old”) was always and essentially a proclamation of Divine sovereignty in mercy and judgment, a summons to bow down and worship the almighty Lord on whom man depends for all good, both in nature and in grace. Its center of reference was unambiguously God. But in the new gospel the center of reference is man. This is just to say that the old gospel was religious in a way that the new gospel is not. Whereas the chief aim of the old was to teach men to worship God, the concern of the new seems limited to making them feel better. The subject of the old gospel was God and His ways with men; the subject of the new is man and the help God gives him. There is a world of difference. The whole perspective and emphasis of gospel preaching has changed . . . to recover the old, authentic, biblical gospel, and to bring our preaching and practice back into line with it, is perhaps our most present need.<sup>1</sup>

This is our conviction as well.

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<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, *Introductory Essay to John Owen’s The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (privately published, no date), 2.

For us then, this is not a secondary issue. But neither can it be called a sectarian issue. Calvinism is also called Augustinianism because Augustine (354–430) argued many of the same points way back in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. Pelagius and his followers said that the effect of the fall was only that of a bad example, and that man could without divine assistance choose to believe and obey God. Augustine countered with the doctrines of predestination, of man’s total depravity, the bondage of the will, and the necessity of Divine intervention in salvation. The church responded as a whole by condemning Pelagianism and its derivative, semi-Pelagianism (man can take the first step, God then assists) at the council of Ephesus in 431.

If the greatest of the church fathers was “Calvinistic,” the same can be said of the greatest of the Medieval theologians. Aquinas (1225–1274), like Augustine, was a predestinarian.

Among the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers, there was nearly complete uniformity at this point. Luther, Zwingli, Knox, Tyndale, Cranmer, Bucer, and Bullinger, were all Augustinian in their convictions. In fact, Luther’s book, *Bondage of the Will*, is, if possible, more “Calvinistic” than anything Calvin ever wrote.<sup>2</sup>

The great Protestant denominations and their confessions are likewise Augustinian. The Swiss, German, Dutch, and Scottish Reformed Churches (the latter known as Presbyterian) are all, of course, Calvinistic. But so also are the Anglicans/Episcopalians (see article XVII of the Thirty-Nine Articles), the Congregationalists, and Baptists, the latter two of whose early confessions were near duplicates of the Presbyterian’s *Westminster Confession of Faith* (see Baptists’ Confession of 1689, and their Philadelphia Confession). While later Lutheranism hedged, at least in its founder it too was consistent with the rest of Protestantism. The only exceptions to this consensus on God’s sovereignty were the Anabaptist (forefathers of today’s Mennonites and other “peace” groups), and 200 years later, the Methodists. Southern Baptists are often surprised to learn that their founding fathers were all Calvinists.<sup>3</sup> Even if many modern denominations may have departed from their roots, historic Protestantism is consistently Calvinistic.

Well then, if these are not secondary or sectarian issues, let us move on and discuss why there should be “Five Points” to Calvinism. Actually, there are not five points to Calvinism, and the reason for speaking of “five” is entirely apologetic and in many ways a regrettable “accident” of history.

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century a Dutch theologian named Jacobus Arminius began to express reservations about the doctrines of predestination and election as taught by the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism. A party began to grow up around his teaching, culminating in 1610 in a *Remonstrance* (protest) being presented by them to the Dutch Church. They argued the following five points:

1. *Man’s free will or ability.* Man is never so controlled by sin that he cannot savingly respond to the gospel. He is never so controlled by God that he cannot reject it.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, trans. O. R. Johnson & J. I. Packer (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Nettles, *A Foundation for the Future: The Southern Baptist Message and Mission* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 1997).

2. *Conditional election.* God's choosing is conditioned upon His foreseeing how individuals will respond to the gospel.
3. *Universal redemption.* Christ made possible the salvation of all, effective upon human choice.
4. *The Holy Spirit can be resisted.* The Spirit's work is limited to that which the individual's will permits.
5. *One can lose one's salvation.* The believer must keep himself in the faith, and failing to do so, may "fall from grace."

The Dutch Church responded to the *Remonstrance* by calling a National Synod in 1618 to meet at Dort for the purpose of examining the teaching of the Arminians. The deliberations included 27 foreigners, and were conducted over a period of seven months, in 154 sessions. The five points of Arminianism were rejected and countered with the five points which reaffirmed a Calvinistic understanding of the teaching of Scripture. In English the sometimes helpful (and sometimes misleading) acrostic TULIP summarizes their conclusions:

- T – Total Depravity
- U – Unconditional Election
- L – Limited Atonement
- I – Irresistible Grace
- P – Perseverance of the Saints

Thus we have the "Five Points of Calvinism." But one can see that this is not necessarily Calvinism's best foot forward. It is merely a response, a negatively framed response, to the Arminian doctrine, over a limited though crucial front. This is not everything that Calvinists believe, not by far. It deals specifically with soteriology (salvation) and only touches on other important doctrines. Calvinism is much broader than the "Five Points," indeed encompassing a comprehensive worldview. A full-orbed Calvinism would address the issues of church government, worship and sacraments, sanctification, the place of the law of God, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless as the "Five Points" do *touch* on the nature of God, the nature of man, the work of Christ, and salvation, they are important, and can serve as a summary of the directions in which Calvinistic doctrine tends. As such, we will now move on and explain their meaning.

### **Total Depravity**

Sometimes referred to as "total inability," or "pervasive depravity," the first point is concerned with how the entrance of sin into the world has affected human nature. What has sin done to us? One's answer is critical to what follows, but more important will directly determine what one understands of what Jesus came to do. Did He come to help the sick? Or did He come to raise the dead? Answer this question correctly, and the other four points follow almost irresistibly.

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<sup>4</sup> See Terry L. Johnson, *When Grace Comes Home* (2000, Ross-Shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2003) for a treatment of a number of these issues.

The biblical picture of human nature after the fall is that of the *radical corruption*. Adam has not left us merely a bad example. We have inherited from him a nature that is thoroughly sinful. No part of human nature, mind, will or emotion, has escaped the poisoning, corrupting, distorting power of sin.

“Total depravity” does not mean that people are as bad as they could be. It is not “absolute depravity.” Man is not at all points sinning as much as he could. Neither does it mean that there is in every person a complete absence of relative good. Even pagans can “do good” in a relative sense. Jesus said,

*“And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.”* (Luke 6:33)

It would be wrong to imply that good works of people such as Ghandi were not good. We can speak of these works as good in the sense that they are good compared to what others might have done, or good compared to other options that might have been chosen. They are good in their exterior shape or externally considered and relative to other choices. They are good, not absolutely, but in a relative sense, and can be appreciated and applauded as such.

What “total depravity” does mean is that Adam’s “original sin” has left humanity both *unable* and *unwilling* to do the good that God requires. Let us elaborate.

1. *Humanity is unable to do good as God counts goodness.* When the noble-minded young man helps the frail older lady across the road, what he does is good as to its outward form, but it is not necessarily good as God sees it. Why?

Because God looks at the heart and intention. Because “Whatever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). Because all we do is to be done “to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Because “good” is not just that which is “good” in its external shape, but also good in its motive. The selfish, twisted human heart is incapable of any act that is not corrupted by ill motive. When our words and acts do not proceed from faith, and when they do not aim at the glory of God and the good of my neighbor, they are not good as God sees good. These high motives are precisely what fallen humanity is incapable of achieving.

One of the major teaching themes of the early chapters of Genesis is that of the effect of sin on human nature. One observes the acceleration of evil from Adam to Cain to Lamech in the generation of Noah (Genesis 3–6). As yet there was no human government to restrain sinful human propensities. The whole era serves as a lesson in what happens when human sin goes unchecked. It is of more than passing interest when God says of Noah’s generation,

*Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.* (Genesis 6:5)

This verse sums up what is true of the human race. Following the flood, God promised never to judge the world in this way again. He then instituted restraints to prevent evil from ever getting

so out of hand again. Still He said, “the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Genesis 8:21).

This assessment of human nature is the consistent teaching of all of Scripture. The Psalmist says of the nature of fallen humanity:

*they are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; there is no one who does good. God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men, to see if there is anyone who understands, who seeks after God. Every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.* (Psalm 53:1-3)

Among the wisdom writings we read,

*This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives.* (Ecclesiastes 9:3)

Among the prophets Jeremiah adds,

*“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9)

The biblical picture of the human heart is not a pretty one: “only evil continually,” “no one who does good, not even one,” “full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts,” “deceitful above all else and desperately wicked.” But it gets worse. The true picture is not just *corruption by* evil, but *enslavement to* evil. People tend to make much of the freeness of their choices. We imagine that we can do whatever we want whenever we want. But the Bible says we are captives of a power that is greater than we are. Jesus said to a group of Pharisees, who were making much of their freedom, claiming “we . . . have never yet been enslaved to anyone,”

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.”* (John 8:33,34)

In Romans 6, the Apostle Paul reminds his readers of their experience prior to conversion: “You were slaves of sin . . . slaves of impurity . . . slaves of sin.” But now you have been “freed from sin” (verses 17-22). This is a matter of fact. This is what you were, he says.

He says in Titus 3:3:

*For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.*

Sometimes we are described as slaves of sin. Other times are called slaves of the devil. Jesus told the Pharisees,

*“You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies.” (John 8:44)*

The Apostle Paul speaks of God granting repentance to the rebellious, who may thereby come to their senses and escape.

*and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:26)*

The normal human condition is bondage in the “snare of the devil,” being held by him as a “captive.” Again he speaks of the gospel being “veiled to those who are perishing,”

*in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:4)*

John says,

*We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. (1 John 5:19)*

Through his own internal corruption, and through the blinding power of the devil, humanity has lost its ability to savingly respond to the gospel. It “lies in the power of the evil one.” The Apostle Paul contrasts the mind set on the Spirit with the mind set on the flesh (i.e. the unconverted mind) saying of the latter,

*because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:7-8)*

Do you see what he says? Unregenerate, fallen humanity “is not even able to do so.” They “cannot please God.” This is the language of inability. Again he says,

*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. (1 Corinthians 2:14)*

They “cannot understand.” Their understanding is “darkened” (Ephesians 4:18). Though the light shines in the darkness, “the darkness did not comprehend it” (John 1:5).

The starkest picture of all is the Apostle Paul’s in Ephesians 2:1-3. “You were *dead* in your trespass and sins,” he says. His argument in Ephesians 1 and 2 is that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead *physically* is at work raising us from the dead *spiritually*. The spiritual “death” of which he speaks is like that of the entombed corpse. It cannot hear. It cannot see. It cannot understand. It cannot decide. It cannot respond. It is, simply, dead. This is what it was

like spiritually for each one of us. The preacher's task is like that of Ezekiel as he cries out to a field of dry, dead bones, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord" (Ezekiel 37:4). It is an utterly hopeless situation. The Apostle Paul goes on and describes the nature of that death in the very terms that we have been using: slavery to sin (the world and the flesh), and slavery to the devil ("the prince of the power of the air"):

*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. (Ephesians 2:1-3)*

It is our "nature," says the Apostle, given our death in sin, given our bondage to the devil, given our slavery to our lusts to be "children of wrath." We are this "by nature."

2. *Humanity is unwilling to do good.* What we have said so far raises an issue. If we are unable to do what God asks of us, why are we still held accountable? Can we be responsible to do that which we have no ability to do? Our answer is this: do not let what has been said thus far give the impression that humanity is somehow a helpless victim in all this. Though corrupt, we are willingly corrupt. Though enslaved, we are willingly enslaved. The Apostle Paul just told us we were "by nature" children of wrath. Our unbelief and resistance to God comes naturally. The problem, again, is our nature. We are not unwillingly dragged into rebellion against God. Jesus said, men "*loved* the darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). We don't much like God, to put it mildly. Hatred (Romans 1:30), hostility, and rebellion against God (Romans 8:7; cf. Colossians 1:21) all come naturally to those whom the Bible describes as "enemies" of God (Romans 5:10). Why do people not trust and obey God? Because they refuse. Jesus said, "You were unwilling to come to Me, that you might have life" (John 5:10; cf. Matthew 23:37).

Is there a contradiction in affirming both inability *and* unwillingness to please God? It may seem so, but any contradiction probably is more apparent than real. The confusion largely comes from the way in which we speak of the will. Is the will "free," it is asked? The answer is, what do you mean by the "will?" Often people will talk of the will as though it were an organ in the body. Of course there is no such organ, in that sense we do not have a will. The will is not a thing. The will is not an autonomous appendage which makes decisions in a way which is unrelated to who we are. The "will," as we ought to speak of it, is merely the person choosing. The will is "free" in that our choices are uncoerced. We have a "free will" in that we make our choices freely. We do what we want to do. No one disagrees with the notion of "free will" in that sense.

But are we free to *want* whatever we want? Answer: No. What we want is determined by who we are. Our nature determines our wants, and our wants determine our choices. Jonathan Edwards in his treatise on the "Freedom of the Will," argued that,

A man never in any instance, wills anything contrary to his desires, or desires any thing contrary to his will.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Freedom of the Will," *Works*, Vol. I (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 5.

In this sense the will is not free, because to be free would be to be random. We choose what we desire. Our desires are a function of who and what we are. They arise out of our nature. Our will, then, follows our desires, which follow our nature. What did we choose in a given situation? We chose what we wanted. And what did we want? We wanted what we desired, or liked. What does the evil heart desire or like? The evil heart wants evil, or it wants good for evil reasons (which is itself evil), and therefore chooses evil, freely. Because we do not want or like or desire God and His ways, we only ever choose evil. Thus, while the will is free, it is enslaved. It freely chooses darkness, because it loves the darkness. “There is none who does good,” says the Apostle Paul, “not even one” (Romans 3:12). “There is none who seeks for God,” because there is none who *wants* to seek for God (Romans 3:11). What the will is not free to do, is to want, like, or desire that which it does not want, like, or desire. Freely it chooses that to which it is enslaved.

This is the human condition. Naturally we are contrary to God. Naturally we are unable to savingly respond to Him. Naturally we are slaves of the flesh and the devil. Our situation is one with “no hope” (Ephesians 2:12). The Apostle Paul says, “while we were still helpless,” Christ died for us (Romans 5:6). “T” is our problem. “ULIP” is God’s solution to the problem, or what God does to save the helpless.

### **Unconditional Election**

What is God going to do about this defiant and rebellious and helpless and hopeless mass of fallen humanity? Nothing? Something? What? We raise this question because the point needs to be made that for God, all options are open. God owes nothing to any of us. He may save some. He may save none. He may save all. These are His prerogatives. He is not obligated one way or another.

In saying this we are making two critical points.

1. *Humanity deserves hell.* As a race we have rebelled against God and fallen under His just condemnation. We are born sinners, live the lives of sinners, and fall under His sentence, “the soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:24), “the wage of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

2. *God is not obligated to rescue us.* God could, with perfect justice, decide to do nothing. He could just let us go our way, remain in willful bondage to sin, earn the wage of sin which is death, and thereby damn ourselves and the entire human race. Our own uninhibited momentum is enough to send us to hell. God is not required to do anything to stop us. Why? Because hell is what we deserve according to the strict requirements of justice. Anything less is a matter of mercy, and mercy by definition cannot be obligated. God did not provide a Redeemer for the fallen angels, and he need not provide one for us.

There are other options for God. On the one hand, He could decide to save some (and not all). Or on the other hand, He could decide to save every single individual. Either way, God is free to do as He will. He does not have to save anyone. He may choose to, but He doesn’t have to. He owes salvation to no one. God does “whatever pleases Him” (Psalm 115:3; 135:6). He “does His own will among the hosts of heaven and the inhabitants of earth” (Daniel 4:35). If He decides to save anyone at all, it is, again, purely a matter of mercy.

What if He decides to save some and not all? John Gerstner, late Professor of Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, put it this way: God may decide to save all, He may decide to save some, but even if He decides to save only one, it would still be “amazing grace!” This is the starting point in discussing election. We focus too much on the rights and freedom of man, when we should be starting with the freedom of God to respond as He pleases to a rebellious, God-hating race. When God chooses, it is a sovereign choice, and a gracious choice. It is a choice to save some from an eternity of torment which they deserve and from which they cannot save themselves. That He does so is a matter of His own free will and mercy. That He does not do so for all is not to be held against Him. The rest get what they deserve. They get justice. That God chooses to save some and not all is His prerogative as God.

The Bible teaches that God determined to save some. He didn't decide to save *all*. He didn't decide to save *none*. He decided to save *some*. Then He chose those whom He would save. That decision is called “election” (to “elect” means to “choose”). Election itself saves no one. Instead, it is the decision by God as to whom He will save. He marks certain individuals for salvation.

Leaving aside the question as to why He would choose some and not all, let us first answer the question as to *how* He chooses. In other words, on what basis does God choose? How does He determine whom He shall save, and whom He shall pass by? We find the answer in the second part of our title. It is an “unconditional” election. God's choice was not conditioned on the seen or foreseen qualities in the ones chosen. There were no conditions which they fulfilled. Those who are chosen do not by their works or efforts earn or merit their election. They do not complete any set of requirements. God's choice is completely without conditions, and from our perspective, even appears arbitrary. There is nothing in the chosen one which prompts or attracts God's choice – nothing! It is purely a matter of mercy.

So the situation is this. Out of a uniformly undeserving race, indeed a uniformly hell-deserving race, God determines to rescue some. This decision was made before any of us were born, in eternity, before any of us had done anything to influence the decision. His choice then is a *sovereign* choice, a decision to do something for some when He might justly have done nothing for anyone. It is an *unconditional* choice, not conditioned on anything seen or foreseen in the chosen one. It is a *gracious* choice, a decision to save sinners who deserve His wrath.

The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 1 traces our salvation back to its beginning in the eternal decision of God to show mercy:

*. . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,*  
(Ephesians 1:4,5)

When did God choose His people? “Before the foundation of the world.” He “predestined” us conditioned upon what factors? Merely “the kind intention of His will.”

Again he says,

*also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, (Ephesians 1:11)*

We have been “predestined,” the Apostle Paul again says, according not to something in the predestined one or foreseen in the predestined one, but merely “according to His purpose” and the “counsel of His will.”

“God has chosen you *from the beginning* for salvation,” Paul tells the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 2:13). He has “saved us,” he tells Timothy,

*and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, (2 Timothy 1:9)*

God’s “own purpose and grace” determined God’s calling us, not our works. The book of Revelation speaks of those,

*. . . whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain. (Revelation 13:8; cf. 17:8)*

When were the names of the saved written in the book of life? “From the foundation of the world.” It was not conditioned on anything seen or foreseen.

The most extensive discussion of election is found in Romans 8, and then in Romans 9–11. In the first of these the Apostle Paul argues the certainty of the Christian’s victory in Christ, by tracing the victory to God’s predestinating love and then moving forward to its eventual goal in our glorification:

*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)*

We will deal with this passage more later. For now we just note that God does have predestinating purposes. In Romans 9 Paul is dealing with the question of Jewish unbelief. How is it that the very ones who were most qualified to recognize the Messiah when He came, in fact rejected Him? Was it a problem with the message? No, he says, “it is not as though the word of God has failed” (Romans 9:6). Well, what is it then? His answer is election. There has always been an Israel within an Israel, the true Israel determined by God’s gracious choice. Thus, He chose Abraham from among the whole family of humanity; then Isaac and not Ishmael; then Jacob and not Esau. The latter case is especially instructive, because they were twins, sharing the same father and mother, even sharing the same womb at the same time. Yet God chose Jacob.

*And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."* (Romans 9:10-13)

Note the emphasis upon unconditionality. God chose Jacob when “the twins were not yet born” and before they had “done anything good or bad.” The determining factor in the election of Jacob was to be “God’s purpose according to His choice.” Several of the typical objections to the doctrine of election are addressed in this passage.

1. *Isn't election based on foreknowledge?* No, it isn't. What other reason could there be for mentioning what we just noted, that God’s choice took place when “the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad?” When dealing with omnipotence and omniscience, there is no real difference between foreknowledge and predestination anyway. What God foreknows and allows He ordains and, at least in some sense, approves. In addition, when the Bible speaks of “foreknowledge,” it is likely to be speaking of “setting one’s love on before hand.” To know means to love (cf. Amos 3:2). To “foreknow” means more than to have an awareness of future facts. It is virtually synonymous with to “choose” or “predestinate.”

2. *Is this fair?* Paul anticipates this objection in the next verse:

*What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!* (Romans 9:14)

The raising and answering of this objection is in itself an implicit proof that Paul is teaching predestination. For the Arminian the question of injustice never arises because the human choice always takes precedence over God’s. This, in fact, would have been an appropriate kind of answer for Paul to give. He might have said at this point, “Don’t misunderstand me. All I have said about election so far is based on foreknowledge. God’s choices were based on what He foresaw Isaac and Jacob would do.” But this is not how he reasons. He instead first asserts God’s absolute freedom in the showing of mercy:

*For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* (Romans 9:15)

Then he asserts the priority of the Divine will:

*So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.* (Romans 9:16)

Election does not “depend” on man, on his willing and running, but on God. Citing the example of Pharaoh, whom God raised up in order to harden and destroy, he again concludes:

*So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.*  
(Romans 9:18)

The Apostle Paul's answer is the first of several non-answers. Is it fair? He answers indirectly: God can do as He pleases; He shows mercy and hardens whom He will.

3. *How then can we be held responsible?* So that none would misunderstand what he is talking about, the Apostle Paul immediately entertains another question that Arminianism never has to ask of itself but that Arminians always ask about Calvinism.

*You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"*  
(Romans 9:19)

The question is, how can we be held responsible if God is saving some and hardening others? We can't "resist His will." How can He "find fault?" How does the Apostle Paul answer? He answers with a second non-answer.

*On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? (Romans 9:20,21)*

What is the Apostle Paul's answer? We are clay and God is the potter. He is saying that we have pushed logic far enough. There is a mystery in this. God is absolutely sovereign. Yet, we are responsible. How is this possible? How can both be true? We do not know. What we are being encouraged to do is believe it. There is a point at which the questions must stop, at which they become impiety. "Who are you" to challenge God? If God is God, there are going to be things about His will and ways which will be beyond our comprehension. We are not to "answer back to God." We are not to challenge. Our response is to bow our heads and confess that He is God and beyond our comprehension.

The Bible seems to teach what Packer calls an *antinomy*.<sup>6</sup> An antimony is an apparent contradiction between two necessary truths. The Bible teaches the unconditional, eternal election of God. It also teaches that God is just, and that humans are held responsible for their spiritual condition and choices. How can these seemingly contradictory truths coexist? At this point the Augustinian or Calvinist says, "I don't know." He refuses to push logic and resolve the antimony, for to do so would result in the denial of either sovereignty or human responsibility. The former is the road to atheism, and the latter is the road to fatalism. Both are true. God is sovereign. We are responsible.

4. *Why would God choose some and not others?* Now we can take up the "why" question. Why not save all? Why save only some? Again, the question is not answered directly, but only hinted at. Paul continues by asking:

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<sup>6</sup> J. I. Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961).

*What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, (Romans 9:22,23)*

The answer being implied is that it suits God's purposes to glorify Himself not only by showing mercy, but also by displaying His justice. God saves some in order to display "the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy; *which He prepared beforehand* for glory." But others, from the "same lump," were made for "common use." They are "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction." Their purpose now, before judgment, is to display His "much patience" as He endures their rebellion. But when judgment day arrives, He shall "demonstrate His wrath and make His power known" through their just punishment. The judgment day is, says Paul elsewhere,

*. . . the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, (Romans 2:5)*

By choosing some and leaving others their sin, God reveals the fullness of His attributes in a way that He would not if all were saved or all were lost. In choosing some for salvation, He demonstrates love and mercy. In passing by others, He demonstrates holiness and justice. We cannot question God beyond this. He is pleased to demonstrate both His wrath and mercy in sinners. We must trust that He knows what He is doing, and that what He is doing is the highest and best.

If the doctrine of election reveals a God who differs from the One we thought we knew, perhaps it is time that our hearts and minds were enlarged to receive the God whose "judgments" are "unsearchable," and whose "ways" are "unfathomable" (Romans 11:33). He is beyond us—infinitely beyond us. This is a God who bursts our limited categories, who transcends our concepts, and before whom we are called not to argue, but to worship:

*For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:36)*

C.H. Spurgeon was once asked how he could reconcile these two truths. His answer: "I wouldn't try. I never reconcile friends." They are friends in the mind of God though unreconciled in ours. For us they are parallel railroad tracks which in time never intersect, but do in eternity. In the meantime, we take comfort in the knowledge that our salvation is as secure as God's eternal decision to save us. As Spurgeon said,

I believe the doctrine of election because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen him; and I am sure He chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and He must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why He should have looked upon me with special love.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography: Vol. 1: The Early Years* (1847-1900, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), 166.

## Limited Atonement

Having determined to save the people of His choice, God then set about to redeem them from sin through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the eternal Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the substance of the third point. We may divide it into two parts.

1. *There must be an atonement.* There is a sense in which we can say that not even God can forgive sin without some satisfaction being made. God doesn't determine to forgive His chosen people without reference to justice. He doesn't "wink" at sin. For God to remain a moral God, there must be a payment for sin. The payment that God requires is death. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin," the Scriptures teach (Hebrews 9:22). That is why there was a sacrificial system in the Old Testament. Yet, the Scriptures also teach that "it is impossible for the blood of goats to put away sin" (Hebrews 10:4). Human blood must atone for human sin and it must be of infinite value to pay an infinite debt. Consequently God Himself graciously provides the God-Man, the Lamb of God, to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Through the cross, Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of God's elect, satisfied or propitiated the justice of God, and secured their salvation.

2. *The atonement is a "limited atonement."* Christ's atonement is "limited" in that it doesn't save everyone. Its efficacy is limited to those whom it actually saves. Of the five points it is this one which gives people the most trouble. We even speak of "four point" Calvinists, and understand that the point that has dropped off is this one. It is the word "limited" that seems to be the most objectionable. So several words of qualification are in order.

i) The *value* of death in Christ is not being limited. Nothing is being said about the worth of the death of Christ. His shed blood is of infinite value, and could atone for the sins of a thousand worlds.

ii) It is the *extent* of the atonement that is limited. Its efficacy does not extend to everyone. This is not an unusual doctrine. No one who takes the Bible seriously doubts for a second that Christ accomplished a limited, as opposed to a universal, atonement. Shall *everyone* who has ever lived be saved by the death of Christ? Yes, say universalists. No, say all who believe the warnings of judgment found nearly on every page of Scripture. Biblical Christian of both the Calvinist and non-Calvinist stripe agree that the saving benefits of the atonement are limited to those who actually believe.

Now we come to the crux of the matter. Given that the atonement is limited, is it limited by design or by chance? This is a critical issue because at question is not just the *extent* of the atonement, but its *nature*. At issue is this: what actually took place on the cross? What, if anything, was accomplished?

"Limited," or "definite," atonement is the doctrine which understands the following.

i) Jesus went to the cross with a *particular people* in mind; i.e., those whom the Father had chosen for salvation. He died for "all that He has given Me" (John 6:37-40). He said, "I lay down My life for *the sheep*" (John 10:11,15; cf. 10:26). The angel announced to Joseph, "He shall save *His people* from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). It is "*the church* of God," which "He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). There is a specific and therefore personal

dimension to His death. He knew those for whom He was dying. He had their names in mind, as it were, when He went to the cross. Paul can speak with this kind of personal particularity when he says,

*... I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.”*  
(Galatians 2:20b)

The claim that Jesus “loved *me*” and “delivered Himself up for *me*” implies that He went to the cross knowing the particular ones for whom His death would atone. Isaac Watts (“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”), Augustus Toplady (“Álas and Did My Savior Bleed”), John Newton (“Amazing Grace”), and other Calvinistic hymn-writers have written with profound wonder and joy at the love of Christ because they have understood this personal, particular nature of His death.

ii) Jesus at the cross accomplished an *actual* atonement. This point is directly related to the preceding one. Jesus died for His people, and on the cross actually accomplished their salvation. In other words, an actual transaction took place, one in which He took our sins and we received His righteousness. So we read,

*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

Paul speaks of a transaction. He was made “to be sin.” We receive the “righteousness of God.”

So also Peter,

*and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. (1 Peter 2:24)*

When did He bear our sins? When we believed? Or did He do so at the cross, and thereby secure and guarantee our salvation? He “bore our sins,” says Peter, “in His body,” and “on the cross.” It happened then and there. “By His wounds, you were healed.”

This is to be contrasted with a view which would say that Christ achieved the potential of salvation for all without actually dying for anyone in particular, without accomplishing anything necessarily. Does the cross ensure salvation or only create the possibility of salvation? Does the cross save, or only potentially save?

The label “limited” is unfortunate because the non-Calvinist view of the atonement is actually far more limiting than the Calvinist. It empties the cross of any inherent significance. It removes the cross from the center of history and the center of the Christian life. What becomes critical, in this understanding, is what happens later—when a decision is made, an aisle is walked, a prayer is prayed. The Arminian cross has the potential to save no one, if no one responds in faith. This is a weak, limiting concept of what happened at Calvary.

But the Calvinistic understanding of the atonement of the cross is it actually saves. Christ actually stood in my place, bore my sin, removed the penalty of my sin, secured my right to eternal life, and guaranteed that I would one day come to personal faith. Spurgeon put it this way:

We are often told that we limit the atonement of Christ, because we say that Christ has not made a satisfaction for all men, or all men would be saved. Now, our reply to this is, that, on the other hand, our opponents limit it; we do not. The Arminians say, Christ died for all men. Ask them what they mean by it. Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of all men? They say, ‘No, certainly not.’ We ask them the next question – did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of any man in particular? They say, ‘No.’ They are obliged to admit this, if they are consistent. They say, ‘No, Christ has died that any man may be saved if’ – and then follow certain conditions of salvation. Now, who is it that limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say we limit Christ’s death; we say, ‘no, my dear sir, it is you that does it.’ We say Christ so died that He infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ’s death not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it.<sup>8</sup>

A “definite” or “particular” understanding of the atonement preserves the *value* of the cross, even if it limits its *extent*.

One more point may be made, that of harmony. If the Father does elect certain individuals, does it not make sense that the Son’s death would be particularly related to them in a way that it is not for the world? As we move on to the next point, that of “irresistible grace,” who is it that the Holy Spirit shall infallibly draw to Christ for salvation? Is it not the elect? Are not the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together for the same people, as opposed to the Son dying for those whom the Father refuses to choose, and the Holy Spirit refuses to draw? It is this harmony that is reflected in Jesus’ high priestly prayer when He refuses to intercede for the world, saying,

*“I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom Thou hast given Me; for they are Thine;”* (John 17:9)

Does He refuse to pray for those for whom He died? By His high priestly intercession the benefits of His death are applied to those who are saved. We would expect harmony between His atoning blood and intercessory work. Does He not intercede for the same people for whom He died, “those whom Thou hast given Me?” We think so, and believe that His is the most biblical view of the work of Christ, who by His death “didst purchase” (as opposed to potentially purchase) a people for God, and by His intercession infallibly applies grace to them.

*. . . for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.* (Revelation 5:9)

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<sup>8</sup>Packer, *Introductory Essay*, 14, note 1.

## **Irresistible Grace**

The salvation that has been *accomplished*, secured, and guaranteed by the death of Christ upon the cross now must be *applied* to the individual. For all we have said so far about election and the atonement, the benefits of the work of Christ have yet to be received. Stop here, and God's people perish. Why? Because they must come to repent and believe the gospel. Those who are saved are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and in no other way. Fail to come to faith, and they fail to receive salvation and its benefits. The fourth point is concerned with how the atonement *accomplished* and *guaranteed* by Christ comes to be savingly *applied* and *experienced*.

Given the doctrine of total depravity, how do the spiritually dead come to respond positively to the Lord Jesus Christ? The answer of Calvinism is that of "irresistible grace." Here, too, the meaning of this phrase is not immediately obvious. The language of "irresistibility" may suggest images of one being dragged kicking and screaming into heaven, forced by an insistent God against one's resistant will. Obviously this is not what is meant. What then is meant?

The simplest way of speaking of "irresistible grace" might be to say this: *God through His Holy Spirit makes Himself irresistible*. He does this by taking the initiative to change our hearts so that we are able to perceive how desirable He is. Because we are spiritually dead and blind and enslaved, God must take the initiative in drawing us to Himself. We are unable and unwilling to move toward Him. If we are to be saved, God must take the first step. This is what Jesus told His adversaries in saying,

*"No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."* (John 6:44)

The translation "draws" is a rather weak rendering of the Greek word *elko*, which means "to compel," and even "to drag," as in James 2:6. Either way, Jesus plainly teaches human inability and the necessity of the divine initiative. "No one can come to Me unless . . ."

Again Jesus said,

*". . . no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father."* (John 6:65)

Here, coming to Christ is a matter of a divine grant or gift. Apart from that, "no one can come" and receive the benefits of redemption.

Nearly everyone is familiar with the famous words of Jesus when He invited all to come to Him:

*"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls."* (Matthew 11:28,29)

What is not often appreciated is the words immediately preceding these. All are invited to come. But it is also true that Jesus praises the Father for hiding “these things” from the wise and intelligent and “revealing them to babes.” Further,

*“All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” (Matthew 11:27)*

Who may know the Son? Only those “to whom the Son wills to reveal” Himself. Knowing the Son of God requires a special revelation from God. We do not get that knowledge on our own. God must take the initiative.

When Peter made his great confession of Christ, “Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God,” Jesus said,

*“Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17)*

Of what then does this initiative consist? These last two passages speak of a *revelation*. The knowledge of Christ must be brought by the Father to lost sinners. But this revelation is more than bare information. If God only communicated the message of the gospel to sinners externally, none would respond because we lack the ability or inclination to respond. The “revelation” includes the opening of the heart to see and receive the Father’s revelation. God’s initiative requires the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

If we are to live God must make us alive. If we are to see, God must give us sight. How is a lover of darkness ever to become a lover of light? We must be transformed. The dead cannot raise themselves; the blind cannot make themselves see. We must be changed. Our hearts must be recreated, the enmity removed, the rebellion subdued. This is exactly what happens when the grace of God reaches us.

Repeatedly the Bible portrays our salvation as involving a radical rebirth or recreation.

Jesus said to Nicodemus,

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3)*

Notice the spiritual birth must take place before one can “see” the kingdom of God. One is “born again” then one “sees.” As in physical birth, the initiative is with God. We are passive in the process. We do not decide or choose to be born. Our choices begin after we are born.

*“The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)*

Here He makes the point even stronger. How can one be “born again?” What can one do to bring the new birth about? Nicodemus is confused. Jesus’ answer: “the wind blows where it wishes . . . so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” This is really not the answer we would expect. After all, we know of people who write books telling people exactly “How to be Born Again.” Jesus doesn’t do that. He says, “The wind blows where it wishes.” In other words, it is a mystery. God is in control of this, even as He controls the winds, though they may seem to blow at random. But the agent in this rebirth is clear: the Holy Spirit. To be “born again” is to be “born of the Spirit.”

Stronger still is the statement in John’s prologue:

*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)*

To be “born again,” or “born of the Spirit,” or “born of God,” does not involve the “will of the flesh,” or the “will of man.” One does not decide to be born again any more than one decides to be born the first time. Can one decide to be born? Of course not. Neither can one decide to be born again. It is rather the opposite. One decides for Christ *because* one is born again. Being “born again” makes a decision for Christ possible. Regeneration or the “effectual call,” as it is sometimes called, is a sovereign work of the Spirit of God, whereby,

“Convicting us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel” (Shorter Catechism, #31).

Our minds must be enlightened. Our wills must be renewed. These things must occur before we will be persuaded and able to embrace Jesus Christ. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Other biblical texts are equally compelling. Paul says, “You were dead in your trespasses and sins,” and then describes the extent of that spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1-3). So how did we get out of this hopeless situation?

*But God . . . even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), (Ephesians 2:4,5)*

How did we come to life? “God . . . made us alive.” God did it. He took the initiative. This is what we mean by grace. God saves those who are able to do nothing to save themselves (cf. Colossians 2:13).

James says,

*In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures. (James 1:18)*

Do you see it again? It was God's will that was decisive. *He "brought us forth" through "the exercise of His will."*

Let's take one more example.

*Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)*

Notice the strength of the image used to describe our change. I am a "new creature," or "new creation" (NIV). Creation was a sovereign work of God. So is the "new creation." It is God who changes us and makes us something other than we were.

In each of these descriptions of the inaugural event of the Christian life, God is the initiator in a process to which we can make no contribution. We cannot cause ourselves to be raised from the dead (cf. Colossians 2:13; John 5:21), born or reborn (cf. 1 Peter 1:23; Timothy 3:5), created or recreated (cf. Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:10). All of these are processes in which we are passive. All of these are sovereign acts of God working through the Holy Spirit. Why am I a Christian? I am a Christian because God changed my whole nature and orientation and desires so that I came to life and came to Christ "most freely, being made willing by His grace" (*Westminster Confession of Faith, X.1.*).

If this is what we mean by grace, what do we mean by "irresistible?" By this we mean that God's will to save us cannot be frustrated. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives me *shall* come to me" (John 6:37). There can be no question in this, He seems to be saying. The Father elects the people, gives that people to the Son, and without exception they "all . . . shall come to me."

Grace is irresistible in that it so changes us that our will to resist crumbles. We are made to no longer *want* to resist. Gladly we come to Christ. No longer do we love the darkness, which by nature we once did. Now, as new creatures, we love the light and come willingly into the light. God becomes irresistibly desirable to us.

Why does one choose Jesus? Can anyone claim that it was just a matter of his or her wisdom or insight? Can anyone say that it was just a matter of his will, of his decision? Jesus said, "You did not choose Me but I chose you" (John 15:16). His choice preceded our choice and made our choice possible. He took the initiative.

Why do you love God? Can anyone claim to have generated warmth and affection for God from within themselves and apart from His initiative? John tells us: "We love, because *He first loved us*" (1 John 4:19). Our love is a response to His love. His creative love touched and changed us and made it possible for us to love Him in return.

Why do we believe God? Paul says,

*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. (Ephesians 2:8,9)*

What is "not of yourselves?" Salvation is "not of yourselves." This means all salvation, including faith. Even your faith is "not of yourselves" but is a "gift of God." Salvation is wholly a matter

of Divine initiative. Our part is to respond. But even our response is guaranteed by the transforming character of His private work. We are saved by sovereign “grace,” and God’s saving purposes are “irresistible,” they conquer, they cannot be frustrated.

### **Perseverance of the Saints**

The loving, saving, gracious purposes of God cannot be thwarted. Is the statement, “once saved always saved,” true? Does the Bible teach “eternal security?” Or can one “fall from grace,” and lost one’s salvation? Our conviction is that the genuine believer is as secure as God’s eternal decision to save him This fifth point is really saying two things.

1. *The saints will persevere* in obedience and faith to the end, and so be saved (Matthew 24:13). They will “keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus” (Revelation 14:12). The one “who believes that Jesus is the son of God” inevitably “overcomes the world” (1 John 5:4).

2. *God will preserve the saints* in obedience and faith. The reason why the saints persevere is that God enables them. He keeps us from “falling” (Jude 24). We are “protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5). As we have seen already, Jesus said of all that the Father has given Him, “I lose nothing” (John 6:39).

Even more assuring are His words in John 10:

*“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”* (John 10:27-29)

It is hard to imagine what Jesus could have said that would have given us a greater sense of security. We are in Jesus’ hand. No one can snatch us out. But we are also in the Father’s hand. We have two sets of omnipotent hands wrapped around us; there is no one who can take us from Him.

The Apostle Paul asks of us a series of questions in Romans 8. “If God is for us, who is against us? . . . who will bring a charge against God’s elect? . . . who is the one who condemns? . . . who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” The answers are obvious. We know the answers as soon as we ask them. No one can effectively oppose us, charge us, condemn us, or separate us from Christ. This is what the apostle says:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 8:35,37-39)

Can it be, as it has been suggested, that a person's own will is the one exception to the rule that nothing can "separate us from the love of Christ?" Nothing *outside* of us can separate us from the love of Christ, some say. Can we, however, decide to separate ourselves from His love?

If this were so, the passage would offer little consolation to us. After all, this is precisely what we would be prone to worry about. What troubles us is that under the pressure or persecution or temptation we might renounce Christ, and separate ourselves from His love. Happily, as J. G. Machen pointed out years ago, Paul does refer to "any other created thing," and unless one is prepared to say that the will is not a created thing, it too must be included.<sup>9</sup> We will not separate ourselves from the love of Christ because He will not let us get to that point. This is what the Bible assures us of repeatedly. God "will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able . . ." (1 Corinthians 10:13). "He who began a good work in your will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). "Faithful is He who calls you," we read, "and He will also bring it (i.e. your salvation) to pass" (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

*. . . I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.* (2 Timothy 1:12)

*. . . He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,"* (Hebrews 13:5)

In Ephesians 1 Paul uses two words which reinforce this teaching. First he says, "you were *sealed* in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). In antiquity a seal was a means by which the authenticity or ownership of an item was established, or protection provided. A seal was both a stamp of identification, and a protective enclosure, a sealing. Which sense does Paul mean here? It is hard to say. But either way it speaks of the security of the believer. We have His seal, the Holy Spirit, the presence of whom identifies us as His own, and by whom we are protected.

He then says, "you were sealed with Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a *pledge* of our inheritance . . ." (Ephesians 1:13,14). This is the language of business. The pledge is the first installment, guaranteeing the full payment in time. God will pay His bills. He has obligated Himself to save us. The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our salvation, guaranteeing we shall get the whole of it one day.

Further, the Apostle Paul speaks of us as receiving the "adoption as sons" (Ephesians 1:5). Packer powerfully argues that the implication of the concept of the Fatherhood of God precludes any chance of our falling away.<sup>10</sup> Good fathers discipline their children when they are disobedient. But they do not throw them out of the family. We are His eternally. We are His children not if we do thus and so, but now and forever because of His gracious love.

What do we say about the observable phenomena of professing Christians who do fall away? What do we make of them? John says,

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<sup>9</sup> J. G. Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (1937; London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 181-208.

*They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:19)*

His answer is that they were never authentic Christians. “They were not really of us.” If they had been, “they would have remained with us.” Why? Because God’s people persevere in the faith, and God preserves them. If they fall away, it just proves that their profession of Christ was never genuine.

Jesus taught the same thing in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-23). Three out of four seeds fail to survive Why? Because only one ever takes firm root. The others never do. They may even appear healthy for a while. But time proves the superficiality of their condition, and eventually the devil, or persecution, or the cares and lusts of the world snatch away or choke out the possibility of salvation. Did they lose their salvation? No, they never had it. Jesus will one day say to “many” who for all appearances were Christians, prophesying in His name, casting out demons, and performing miracles,

*“I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” (Matthew 7:23)*

There is a wonderful balance in all this. The doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints” leaves no room for “cheap grace” or presumption. We must persevere in faith and obedience. After all, there is no eternal security for the hypocrite or self-deceived, and often the only difference between them and a true believer is perseverance. Some of the warnings of Scripture are quite strong, and quite frightening, regarding “falling away” from the faith (e.g. Hebrews 6:4-6). This is why we are urged to make our “calling and election” sure (2 Peter 1:10; incidentally, one wonders what the Arminian makes of such a passage). We are to “test” and “examine” ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Yet it does not leave plenty of room for a true assurance. Those whose election is proven by a life of obedience and faith, by bearing the fruit of the Spirit, and loving as Christ loved, may be sure that God is at work in their lives, and will continue to be at work, until He brings them home. There is a “Golden Chain,” as the Puritans called it, described by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8, which begins the eternal purposes of God in election and terminates in glory:

*For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30)*

The *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) is an unbroken chain, beginning with predestination (which guarantees its continuation and completion), moves infallibly to (effectual) call, to faith, to justification, to adoption, to sanctification, and finally to glorification. All of it is a work of God. All of it is unto His glory. Our security is as sure as the eternal purposes of an omnipotent God.

## **Sovereignty of God**

This is not really a sixth point (TULIPS), but a summary of the previous five. The central point of these five points is that God is the author of salvation. In the fullest sense, “salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9). It is “by His doing” that we are in Christ Jesus, so “let Him who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:30,31).

In a situation of total human helplessness (T), the Father decided to save some (U), sent Jesus Christ to bear their sins on the cross (L), caused them to be “born again” by His Spirit, thereby enabling them to come to Christ in faith (I), and preserving them through life until they reach glory (P).

Let us now field one final question, the obvious question to ask: Do these high doctrines of God’s sovereignty take the evangelistic initiative away from the church? In other words, if these doctrines are true, why bother to preach the gospel? As Milton put it,

You can but you can’t, you will but you won’t, you’re damned if you do, and you’re damned if you don’t.

If the church really teaches and believes these doctrines, won’t it throw up its collective hands and say, “What’s the use? It has already been determined anyway – why bother?” Let me see if we can answer this in several ways.

First of all, this is not a problem peculiar to Calvinism. Even the rankest forms of Arminianism assert that God has foreknowledge. If God foresees who will believe, it is certain to happen. If it is certain to happen, then we are right back to the problem of predestination. If it is certain, why do we need to bother to concern ourselves with it? There is nothing we can do to affect the outcome one way or another. Everyone who believes in the God of the Bible, the God who distinguishes Himself from the idols of the nations in that He knows “the end from the beginning,” has to wrestle with this problem. It is not resolved by renouncing predestination. It can only ultimately be renounced by atheism.

Second, Calvinism is not fatalism. What goes by the name of “hyper-Calvinism” is not Calvinism at all. “Hypers” deny the need to evangelize, saying as John Ryland Sr. was reputed to say to William Carey as he founded the first modern missionary society:

Sit down, young man! When God is pleased to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!

This is fatalism. It is a denial of the necessity of means. God ordains the end. But He also ordains the means to the end. The means to the end of converted sinners is prayer and the preaching of the gospel. There is mystery in this. But our responsibility is not to limit our obedience by our understanding. Our responsibility is to submit our hearts to the command of God to go to all the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ and pray for its conversion. We do so trusting that He will use our witness and that we shall find, as did the early church, that “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). Through our witness and intercessions, God will gather His elect from the four corners of the earth.

Thirdly, contrary to the propaganda which asserts otherwise, church history demonstrates the opposite effect. Over the centuries many, if not most, of the greatest Protestant evangelists and missionaries have been Calvinists. The great Puritan preachers were all Calvinists. John Bunyan was a Calvinist. The greatest evangelist who ever lived, George Whitefield, was a Calvinist. The other men of the “Great Awakening” era, excepting the Wesleys (whom Packer nevertheless calls “confused Calvinists”), were Calvinists. We think of the Welshman Howell Harris, the American Presbyterians William and Gilbert Tennant, the great Jonathan Edwards, Daniel Rowlands, and many others. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the English Baptist, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, was a Calvinist. The saintly Scotsman, Robert Murray McCheyne, was a Calvinist. Even in our own century, admittedly not the most successful era for biblical Calvinism, Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade, and D. James Kennedy, the author of *Evangelism Explosion*, were both Calvinists.

As for missionaries, virtually to a man, all the founders of the modern missionary movement were Calvinists. One can begin with the father of modern missions, William Carey, and his fellow laborers among the Baptists, and they were all Calvinists. The English nonconformists Robert Morrison, missionary to China, and Robert Moffat, missionary to Africa, were Calvinists. In the church of England, the leaders were Henry Venn, John Newton, Richard Cecil, and Thomas Scott, all Calvinists. In the Church of Scotland, John Wilson, John Anderson, Alexander Duff, David Livingston, John G. Patton, and the other pioneer missionaries were Calvinists. Amongst the Americans, the first overseas missionaries, Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice were, you guessed it, Calvinists. It is a remarkable thing, yet true. Rather than undermining evangelism and missions, it seems to promote it. Whitefield’s biographer, Dallimore, suggests that this is true for Whitefield because he preached with the confidence that God could convert a person. God can change a human heart. The Calvinist preaches not with the image of the passive Christ knocking meekly at the door of the human heart, but rather with the image of the conquering Christ who kicks down the door to the heart, and comes in.

William Carey’s response to the conversion of Krishna Pal, his first convert after five years of mission work in India, is typical in this kind of confidence, which we strive to make our own:

He was only one, but a continent was coming behind him. The divine grace which changed one Indian’s heart could obviously change a hundred thousand.<sup>11</sup>

So we teach Calvinism not of a party spirit, but because we find it in the Bible, indeed, on virtually every page of the Bible. We teach it because we believe it is the gospel in its purest, clearest, most dynamic form. We teach it because we believe that this is the gospel that we need to hear again today; that in it is the health and life of the church. Again, and in closing, we leave you with the words of Spurgeon:

I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what nowadays is called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel, if we do not preach justification by faith, without works; nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt

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<sup>11</sup> Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 141.

the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel, unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called, and suffers the children of God to be burned in the fires of damnation after having once believed in Jesus . . . If God has a mastermind; He arranged everything in gigantic intellect long before He did it, and once having settled it, He never alters it. “This shall be done,” saith He, and the iron hand of destiny marks it down, and it is brought to pass.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Packer, *Introductory Essay*, 10-11, note 2.