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"What is reformed theology?"



Peine Ridge Church

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What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism

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Preface

We love God. He is our great Treasure, and nothing can compare with him. One of the great old catechisms says, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” That is the One we love. We love the whole panorama of his perfections. To know him and to be loved by him is the end of our soul’s quest for eternal satisfaction. He is infinite; and that answers to our longing for completeness. He is eternal; and that answers to our longing for permanence. He is unchangeable; and that answers to our longing for stability and security. There is none like God. Nothing can compare with him. Money, sex, power, popularity, conquest - nothing can compare with God.

The more you know him, the more you want to know him. The more you feast on his fellowship, the hungrier you are for deeper, richer communion. Satisfaction at the deepest levels breeds a holy longing for the time when we will have the very power of God to love God. That’s the way Jesus prays for us to his Father, “. . . that the love with which You loved Me may be in them.” That is what we long for: the very love the Father has for the Son filling us, enabling us to love the Son with the very love of the Father. Then the frustrations of inadequate love will be over.

Yes, the more you know him and love him and trust him, the more you long to know him. That is why we have written this booklet. We long to know God and enjoy God. Another great old catechism says, “What is the chief end of man?” And answers: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever.” We believe that enjoying God is the way to glorify God, because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. But to enjoy him we must know him. Seeing is savoring. If he remains a blurry, vague fog, we may be intrigued for a season. But we will not be stunned with joy, as when the fog clears and you find yourself on the brink of some vast precipice.

Our experience is that clear knowledge of God from the Bible is the kindling that sustains the fires of affection for God. And probably the most crucial kind of knowledge is the knowledge of what God is like in salvation. That is what the five points of Calvinism are about. We do not begin as Calvinists and defend a system. We begin as Bible-believing Christians who want to put the Bible above all systems of thought. But over the years – many years of struggle – we have deepened in our conviction that Calvinistic teachings on the five points are Biblical and therefore true.

Our own struggle makes us patient with others who are on the way. We believe that all the wrestling to understand what the Bible teaches about God is worth it. God is a rock of strength in a world of quicksand. To know him in his sovereignty is to become like an oak tree in the wind of adversity and confusion. And along with strength is sweetness and tenderness beyond imagination. The sovereign Lion of Judah is the sweet Lamb of God.

We hope you will be helped. Please don’t feel that you have to read the booklet in any particular order. Many of you will want to skip the Historical Introduction because it is not as immediately relevant to the Biblical questions. There is an intentional order to the booklet. But feel free to start wherever it looks most urgent for you. If you get help, then you will be drawn back to the rest of it. If you don’t, well, then just return to the Bible and read it with all your might. That is where we want you to end up anyway: reading and understanding and loving and enjoying and obeying God’s Word, not our word.

For the supremacy of God in all things, for the joy of all peoples,

John Piper, Pastor
On behalf of the Pastoral Staff
Minneapolis
April 1997

2. Historical Information

John Calvin, the famous theologian and pastor of Geneva, died in 1564. Along with Martin Luther in Germany, he was the most influential force of the Protestant Reformation. His Commentaries and Institutes of the Christian Religion are still exerting tremendous influence on the Christian Church worldwide.

The churches which have inherited the teachings of Calvin are usually called Reformed as opposed to the Lutheran or Episcopalian branches of the Reformation. While not all Baptist churches hold to a reformed theology, there is a significant Baptist tradition which grew out of and still cherishes the central doctrines inherited from the reformed branch of the Reformation.

The controversy between Arminianism and Calvinism arose in Holland in the early 1600's. The founder of the Arminian party was Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). He studied under the strict Calvinist Theodore Beza at Geneva and became a professor of theology at the University of Leyden in 1603.

Gradually Arminius came to reject certain Calvinist teachings. The controversy spread all over Holland, where the Reformed Church was the overwhelming majority. The Arminians drew up their creed in Five Articles (written by Uytenbogaert), and laid them before the state authorities of Holland in 1610 under the name Remonstrance, signed by forty-six ministers. (These Five Articles can be read in Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, pp. 545-547.)

The Calvinists responded with a Counter-Remonstrance. But the official Calvinistic response came from the Synod of Dort which was held to consider the Five Articles from November 13, 1618 to May 9, 1619. There were eighty-four members and eighteen secular commissioners. The Synod wrote what has come to be known as the Canons of Dort. These are still part of the church confession of the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church. They state the Five Points of Calvinism in response to the Five Articles of the Arminian Remonstrants. (See Schaff, vol. 3, pp. 581-596).

So the so-called Five Points were not chosen by the Calvinists as a summary of their teaching. They emerged as a response to the Arminians who chose these five points to oppose.

It is more important to give a positive Biblical position on the five points than to know the exact form of the original controversy. These five points are still at the heart of Biblical theology. They are not unimportant. Where we stand on these things deeply affects our view of God, man, salvation, the atonement, regeneration, assurance, worship, and missions.

Somewhere along the way the five points came to be summarized under the acronym TULIP.

T-Total depravity.
U-Unconditional election
L-Limited atonement
I-Irresistible grace
P-Perseverance of the saint

NOTE: We are not going to follow this order in our presentation. There is a good rationale for this traditional order: it starts with man in need of salvation and then gives, in the order of their occurrence, the steps God takes to save his people. He elects, then he sends Christ to atone for the sins of the elect, then he irresistibly draws his people to faith, and finally works to cause them to persevere to the end.

We have found, however, that people grasp these points more easily if we follow a presentation based on the order in which we experience them.

1. We experience first our depravity and need of salvation.
2. Then we experience the irresistible grace of God leading us toward faith.
3. Then we trust the sufficiency of the atoning death of Christ for our sins.
4. Then we discover that behind the work of God to atone for our sins and bring us to faith was the unconditional election of God.
5. And finally we rest in his electing grace to give us the strength and will to persevere to the end in faith.

This is the order we will follow in our presentation.

We would like to spell out what we believe the Scripture teaches on these five points. Our great desire is to honor God by understanding and believing his truth revealed in Scripture. We are open to changing any of our ideas which can be shown to contradict the truth of Scripture. We do not have any vested interest in John Calvin himself, and we find some of what he taught to be wrong. But in general we are willing to let ourselves be called Calvinists on the five points, because we find the Calvinist position to be Biblical.

We share the sentiments of Jonathan Edwards who said in the Preface to his great book on *THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL*, “I should not take it at all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinction’s sake: though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in every thing just as he taught.”

3. Total Depravity

When we speak of man’s depravity we mean man’s natural condition apart from any grace exerted by God to restrain or transform man.

There is no doubt that man could perform more evil acts toward his fellow man than he does. But if he is restrained from performing more evil acts by motives that are not owing to his glad submission to God, then even his “virtue” is evil in the sight of God.

Romans 14:23 says, “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” This is a radical indictment of all natural “virtue” that does not flow from a heart humbly relying on God’s grace.

The terrible condition of man’s heart will never be recognized by people who assess it only in relation to other men. Romans 14:23 makes plain that depravity is our condition in relation to God primarily, and only secondarily in relation to man. Unless we start here we will never grasp the totality of our natural depravity.

Man’s depravity is total in at least four senses.

Our rebellion against God is total.

Apart from the grace of God there is no delight in the holiness of God, and there is no glad submission to the sovereign authority of God.

Of course totally depraved men can be very religious and very philanthropic. They can pray and give alms and fast, as Jesus said (Matthew 6:1-18). But their very religion is rebellion against the rights of their Creator, if it does not come from a childlike heart of trust in the free grace of God. Religion is one of the chief ways that man conceals his unwillingness to forsake self-reliance and bank all his hopes on the unmerited mercy of God (Luke 18:9-14; Colossians 2:20-23).

The totality of our rebellion is seen in Romans 3:9-10 and 18. "I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: None is righteous, no not one; no one seeks for God....There is no fear of God before their eyes."

It is a myth that man in his natural state is genuinely seeking God. Men do seek God. But they do not seek him for who he is. They seek him in a pinch as one who might preserve them from death or enhance their worldly enjoyments. Apart from conversion, no one comes to the light of God.

Some do come to the light. But listen to what John 3:20-21 says about them. "Every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God."

Yes there are those who come to the light—namely those whose deeds are the work of God. "Wrought in God" means worked by God. Apart from this gracious work of God all men hate the light of God and will not come to him lest their evil be exposed—this is total rebellion. "No one seeks for God...There is no fear of God before their eyes!"

In his total rebellion everything man does is sin.

In Romans 14:23 Paul says, "Whatever is not from faith is sin." Therefore, if all men are in total rebellion, everything they do is the product of rebellion and cannot be an honor to God, but only part of their sinful rebellion. If a king teaches his subjects how to fight well and then those subjects rebel against their king and use the very skill he taught them to resist him, then even those skills become evil.

Thus man does many things which he can only do because he is created in the image of God and which in the service of God could be praised. But in the service of man's self-justifying rebellion, these very things are sinful.

In Romans 7:18 Paul says, "I know that no good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh." This is a radical confession of the truth that in our rebellion nothing we think or feel is good. It is all part of our rebellion. The fact that Paul qualifies his depravity with the words, "that is, in my flesh," shows that he is willing to affirm the good of anything that the Spirit of God produces in him (Romans 15:18). "Flesh" refers to man in his natural state apart from the work of God's Spirit. So what Paul is saying in Romans 7:18 is that apart from the work of God's Spirit all we think and feel and do is not good.

NOTE: We recognize that the word "good" has a broad range of meanings. We will have to use it in a restricted sense to refer to many actions of fallen people which in relation are in fact not good.

For example we will have to say that it is good that most unbelievers do not kill and that some unbelievers perform acts of benevolence. What we mean when we call such actions good is that they more or less conform to the external pattern of life that God has commanded in Scripture.

However, such outward conformity to the revealed will of God is not righteousness in relation to God. It is not done out of reliance on him or for his glory. He is not trusted for the resources, though he gives them all. Nor is his honor exalted, even though that's his will in all things (1 Corinthians 10:31). Therefore even these "good" acts are part of our rebellion and are not "good" in the sense that really counts in the end—in relation to God.

Man's inability to submit to God and do good is total.

Picking up on the term "flesh" above (man apart from the grace of God) we find Paul declaring it to be totally enslaved to rebellion. Romans 8:7-8 says, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

The "mind of the flesh" is the mind of man apart from the indwelling Spirit of God ("You are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you," Romans 8:9). So natural man has a mindset that does not and cannot submit to God. Man cannot reform himself.

Ephesians 2:1 says that we Christians were all once "dead in trespasses and sins." The point of deadness is that we were incapable of any life with God. Our hearts were like a stone toward God (Ephesians 4:18; Ezekiel 36:26). Our hearts were blind and incapable of seeing the glory of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4-6). We were totally unable to reform ourselves.

Our rebellion is totally deserving of eternal punishment.

Ephesians 2:3 goes on to say that in our deadness we were "children of wrath." That is, we were under God's wrath because of the corruption of our hearts that made us as good as dead before God.

The reality of hell is God's clear indictment of the infiniteness of our guilt. If our corruption were not deserving of an eternal punishment God would be unjust to threaten us with a punishment so severe as eternal torment. But the Scriptures teach that God is just in condemning unbelievers to eternal hell (2 Thessalonians 1:6-9; Matthew 5:29f; 10:28; 13:49f; 18:8f; 25:46; Revelation 14:9-11; 20:10). Therefore, to the extent that hell is a total sentence of condemnation, to that extent must we think of ourselves as totally blameworthy apart from the saving grace of God.

In summary, total depravity means that our rebellion against God is total, everything we do in this rebellion is sin, our inability to submit to God or reform ourselves is total, and we are therefore totally deserving of eternal punishment.

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of admitting our condition to be this bad. If we think of ourselves as basically good or even less than totally at odds with God, our grasp of the work of God in redemption will be defective. But if we humble ourselves under this terrible truth of our total depravity, we will be in a position to see and appreciate the glory and wonder of the work of God discussed in the next four points..

4. Irresistible Grace

The doctrine of irresistible grace does not mean that every influence of the Holy Spirit cannot be resisted. It means that the Holy Spirit can overcome all resistance and make his influence irresistible.

In Acts 7:51 Stephen says to the Jewish leaders, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers did.” And Paul speaks of grieving and quenching the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). God gives many entreaties and promptings which are resisted. In fact the whole history of Israel in the Old Testament is one protracted story of resistance, as the parable of the wicked tenants shows (Matthew 21:33-43; cf. Romans 10:21).

The doctrine of irresistible grace means that God is sovereign and can overcome all resistance when he wills. “He does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand!” (Daniel 4:35). “Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases” (Psalm 115:3). When God undertakes to fulfill his sovereign purpose, no one can successfully resist him.

This is what Paul taught in Romans 9:14-18, which caused his opponent to say, “Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” To which Paul answers: “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me thus?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?” (Romans 9:20f).

More specifically irresistible grace refers to the sovereign work of God to overcome the rebellion of our heart and bring us to faith in Christ so that we can be saved. If our doctrine of total depravity is true, there can be no salvation without the reality of irresistible grace. If we are dead in our sins, totally unable to submit to God, then we will never believe in Christ unless God overcomes our rebellion.

Someone may say, “Yes, the Holy Spirit must draw us to God, but we can use our freedom to resist or accept that drawing.” Our answer is: except for the continual exertion of saving grace, we will always use our freedom to resist God. That is what it means to be “unable to submit to God.” If a person becomes humble enough to submit to God it is because God has given that person a new, humble nature. If a person remains too hard hearted and proud to submit to God, it is because that person has not been given such a willing spirit. But to see this most persuasively we should look at the Scriptures.

In John 6:44 Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” This drawing is the sovereign work of grace without which no one can be saved from their rebellion against God. Again some say, “He draws all men, not just some.” But this simply evades the clear implication of the context that the Father’s “drawing” is why some believe and not others.

Specifically, John 6:64-65 says, “‘But there are some of you that do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that should betray him. And he said, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.’”

Notice two things.

First, notice that coming to Jesus is called a gift. It is not just an opportunity. Coming to Jesus is “given” to some and not to others.

Second, notice that the reason Jesus says this, is to explain why “there are some who do not believe.” We could paraphrase it like this: Jesus knew from the beginning that Judas would not believe on him in spite of all the teaching and invitations he received. And because he knew this, he explains it with the words, No one comes to me unless it is given to him by my Father. Judas was not given to Jesus. There were many influences on his life for good. But the decisive, irresistible gift of grace was not given.

2 Timothy 2:24-25 says, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth.”

Here, as in John 6:65 repentance is called a gift of God. Notice, he is not saying merely that salvation is a gift of God. He is saying that the prerequisites of salvation are also a gift. When a person hears a preacher call for repentance he can resist that call. But if God gives him repentance he cannot resist because the gift is the removal of resistance. Not being willing to repent is the same as resisting the Holy Spirit. So if God gives repentance it is the same as taking away the resistance. This is why we call this work of God “irresistible grace”.

NOTE: It should be obvious from this that irresistible grace never implies that God forces us to believe against our will. That would even be a contradiction in terms. On the contrary, irresistible grace is compatible with preaching and witnessing that tries to persuade people to do what is reasonable and what will accord with their best interests.

1 Corinthians 1:23-24 says, “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jew and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Notice the two kinds of “calls” implied in this text.

First, the preaching of Paul goes out to all, both Jews and Greeks. This is the general call of the gospel. It offers salvation to all who will believe on the crucified Christ. But by and large it falls on unreceptive ears and is called foolishness.

But then, secondly, Paul refers to another kind of call. He says that among those who hear there are some who are “called” in such a way that they no longer regard the cross as foolishness but as the wisdom and power of God. What else can this call be but the irresistible call of God out of darkness into the light of God? If ALL who are called in this sense regard the cross as the power of God, then something in the call must effect the faith. This is irresistible grace.

It is further explained in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, “The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God...It is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Since men are blinded to the worth of Christ, a miracle is needed in order for them to come to see and believe. Paul compares this miracle with the first day of creation when God said, “Let there be light.” It is in fact a new creation, or a new birth. This is what is meant by the effectual call in 1 Corinthians 1:24.

Those who are called have their eyes opened by the sovereign creative power of God so that they no longer see the cross as foolishness but as the power and the wisdom of God. The effectual call is the miracle of having our blindness removed. This is irresistible grace.

Another example of it is in Acts 16:14, where Lydia is listening to the preaching of Paul. Luke says, “The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul.” Unless God opens our hearts, we will not heed the message of the gospel. This heart-opening is what we mean by irresistible grace.

Another way to describe it is “new birth” or being born again. We believe that new birth is a miraculous creation of God that enables a formerly “dead” person to receive Christ and so be saved. We do not think that faith precedes and causes new birth. Faith is the evidence that God has begotten us anew. “Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God” (1 John 5:1).

When John says that God gives the right to become the children of God to all who receive Christ (John 1:12), he goes on to say that those who do receive Christ “were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” In other words, it is necessary to receive Christ in order to become a child of God, but the birth that brings one into the family of God is not possible by the will of man.

Man is dead in trespasses and sins. He cannot make himself new, or create new life in himself. He must be born of God. Then, with the new nature of God, he immediately receives Christ. The two acts (regeneration and faith) are so closely connected that in experience we cannot distinguish them. God begets us anew and the first glimmer of life in the new-born child is faith. Thus new birth is the effect of irresistible grace, because it is an act of sovereign creation—“not of the will of man but of God.”

5. Limited Atonement

The atonement is the work of God in Christ on the cross whereby he canceled the debt of our sin, appeased his holy wrath against us, and won for us all the benefits of salvation. The death of Christ was necessary because God would not show a just regard for his glory if he swept sins under the rug with no recompense.

Romans 3:25-26 says that God “put Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood...This was to demonstrate God’s righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

In other words the death of Christ was necessary to vindicate the righteousness of God in justifying the ungodly by faith. It would be unrighteous to forgive sinners as though their sin were insignificant, when in fact it is an infinite insult against the value of God’s glory. Therefore Jesus bears the curse, which was due to our sin, so that we can be justified and the righteousness of God can be vindicated.

The term “limited atonement” addresses the question, “For whom did Christ die?” But behind the question of the extent of the atonement lies the equally important question about the nature of the atonement. What did Christ actually achieve on the cross for those for whom he died?

If you say that he died for every human being in the same way, then you have to define the nature of the atonement very differently than you would if you believed that Christ only died for those who actually believe. In the first case you would believe that the death of Christ did not actually save anybody; it only made all men savable. It did not actually remove God’s punitive wrath from anyone, but instead created a place where people could come and find mercy—IF they could accomplish their own new birth and bring themselves to faith without the irresistible grace of God.

For if Christ died for all men in the same way then he did not purchase regenerating grace for those who are saved. They must regenerate themselves and bring themselves to faith. Then and only then do they become part-takers of the benefits of the cross.

In other words if you believe that Christ died for all men in the same way, then the benefits of the cross cannot include the mercy by which we are brought to faith, because then all men would be brought to faith, but they aren't. But if the mercy by which we are brought to faith (irresistible grace) is not part of what Christ purchased on the cross, then we are left to save ourselves from the bondage of sin, the hardness of heart, the blindness of corruption, and the wrath of God.

Therefore it becomes evident that it is not the Calvinist who limits the atonement. It is the Arminian, because he denies that the atoning death of Christ accomplishes what we most desperately need—namely, salvation from the condition of deadness and hardness and blindness under the wrath of God. The Arminian limits the nature and value and effectiveness of the atonement so that he can say that it was accomplished even for those who die in unbelief and are condemned. In order to say that Christ died for all men in the same way, the Arminian must limit the atonement to a powerless opportunity for men to save themselves from their terrible plight of depravity.

On the other hand we do not limit the power and effectiveness of the atonement. We simply say that in the cross God had in view the actual redemption of his children. And we affirm that when Christ died for these, he did not just create the opportunity for them to save themselves, but really purchased for them all that was necessary to get them saved, including the grace of regeneration and the gift of faith.

We do not deny that all men are the intended beneficiaries of the cross in some sense. 1 Timothy 4:10 says that Christ is “the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.” What we deny is that all men are intended as the beneficiaries of the death of Christ in the same way. All of God’s mercy toward unbelievers—from the rising sun (Matthew 5:45) to the worldwide preaching of the gospel (John 3:16)—is made possible because of the cross.

This is the implication of Romans 3:25 where the cross is presented as the basis of God’s righteousness in passing over sins. Every breath that an unbeliever takes is an act of God’s mercy withholding judgment (Romans 2:4). Every time the gospel is preached to unbelievers it is the mercy of God that gives this opportunity for salvation.

Whence does this mercy flow to sinners? How is God just to withhold judgment from sinners who deserve to be immediately cast into hell? The answer is that Christ’s death so clearly demonstrates God’s just abhorrence of sin that he is free to treat the world with mercy without compromising his righteousness. In this sense Christ is the savior of all men.

But he is especially the Savior of those who believe. He did not die for all men in the same sense. The intention of the death of Christ for the children of God was that it purchase far more than the rising sun and the opportunity to be saved. The death of Christ actually saves from ALL evil those for whom Christ died “especially.”

There are many Scriptures which say that the death of Christ was designed for the salvation of God's people, not for every individual. For example:

John 10:15, "I lay down my life for the sheep." The sheep of Christ are those whom the Father draws to the Son. "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." Notice: being a sheep enables you to become a believer, not vice versa. So the sheep for whom Christ dies are the ones chosen by the Father to give to the Son.

In John 17:6,9,19 Jesus prays, "I have manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest me out of the world; Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to me...I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom Thou hast given me, for they are thine...And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth." The consecration in view here is the death of Jesus which he is about to undergo. His death and his intercession are uniquely for his disciples, not for the world in general.

John 11:51-52, "[Caiaphas] being high priest that year prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." There are children of God scattered throughout the world. These are the sheep. These are the ones the Father will draw to the Son. Jesus died to gather these people into one. The point is the same as John 10:15-16, "I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice." Christ died for his sheep, that is, for the children of God.

Revelation 5:9, "Worthy art Thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for Thou wast slain and by Thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." In accordance with John 10:16 John does not say that the death of Christ ransomed all men but that it ransomed men from all the tribes of the world.

This is the way we understand texts like 1 John 2:2 which says, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." This does not mean that Christ died with the intention to appease the wrath of God for every person in the world, but that the "sheep," "the children of God" scattered throughout the whole world, "from every tongue and tribe and people and nation" are intended by the propitiation of Christ. In fact the grammatical parallel between John 11:51-52 and 1 John 2:2 is so close it is difficult to escape the conviction that the same thing is intended by John in both verses.

John 11:51-52, "He prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad."

1 John 2:2, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."

The "whole world" refers to the children of God scattered throughout the whole world.

If "the whole world" referred to every individual in the world, we would be forced to say that John is teaching that all people will be saved, which he does not believe (Revelation 14:9-11). The reason we would be forced to say this is that the term propitiation refers to a real removal of wrath from sinners. When God's wrath against a sinner is propitiated, it is removed from that sinner. And the result is that all God's power now flows in the service of his mercy, with the result that nothing can stop him from saving that sinner.

Propitiated sins cannot be punished. Otherwise propitiation loses its meaning. Therefore if Christ is the propitiation for all the sins of every individual in the world, they cannot be punished, and must be saved. But John does not believe in such universalism (John 5:29). Therefore it is very unlikely that 1 John 2:2 teaches that Jesus is the propitiation of every person in the world.

Mark 10:45, in accord with Revelation 5:9, does not say that Jesus came to ransom all men. It says, "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Similarly in Matthew 26:28 Jesus says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Hebrews 9:28, "So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." (See also 13:20; Isaiah 53:11-12.)

One of the clearest passages on the intention of the death of Christ is Ephesians 5:25-27. Here Paul not only says that the intended beneficiary of the death of Christ is the Church, but also that the intended effect of the death of Christ is the sanctification and glorification of the church. This is the truth we want very much to preserve: that the cross was not intended to give all men the opportunity to save themselves, but was intended to actually save the church.

Paul says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor."

Similarly in Titus 2:14 Paul describes the purpose of Christ's death like this: "He gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds." If Paul were an Arminian would he not have said, "He gave himself to redeem all men from iniquity and purify all men for himself"? But Paul says that the design of the atonement is to purify for Christ a people out from the world. This is just what John said in John 10:15; 11:51f; and Revelation 5:9.

One of the most crucial texts on this issue is Romans 8:32. It is one of the most precious promises for God's people in all the Bible. Paul says, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"

The crucial thing to see here is how Paul bases the certainty of our inheritance on the death of Christ. He says, "God will most certainly give you all things because he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for you." What becomes of this precious argument if Christ is given for those who do not in fact receive all things but instead are lost? The argument vanishes.

If God gave his own Son for unbelievers who in the end are lost, then he cannot say that the giving of the Son guarantees "all things" for the those for whom he died. But this is what he does say! If God gave his Son for you, then he most certainly will give you all things. The structure of Paul's thought here is simply destroyed by introducing the idea that Christ died for all men in the same way.

We can conclude this section with the following summary argument. Which of these statements is true?

1. Christ died for some of the sins of all men.
2. Christ died for all the sins of some men.
3. Christ died for all the sins of all men.

No one says that the first is true, for then all would be lost because of the sins that Christ did not die for. The only way to be saved from sin is for Christ to cover it with his blood.

The third statement is what the Arminians would say. Christ died for all the sins of all men. But then why are not all saved? They answer, Because some do not believe. But is this unbelief not one of the sins for which Christ died? If they say yes, then why is it not covered by the blood of Jesus and all unbelievers saved? If they say no (unbelief is not a sin that Christ has died for) then they must say that men can be saved without having all their sins atoned for by Jesus, or they must join us in affirming statement number two: Christ died for all the sins of some men. That is, he died for the unbelief of the elect so that God's punitive wrath is appeased toward them and his grace is free to draw them irresistibly out of darkness into his marvelous light.

6. Unconditional Election

If all of us are so depraved that we cannot come to God without being born again by the irresistible grace of God, and if this particular grace is purchased by Christ on the cross, then it is clear that the salvation of any of us is owing to God's election.

Election refers to God's choosing whom to save. It is unconditional in that there is no condition man must meet before God chooses to save him. Man is dead in trespasses and sins. So there is no condition he can meet before God chooses to save him from his deadness.

We are not saying that final salvation is unconditional. It is not. We must meet the condition of faith in Christ in order to inherit eternal life. But faith is not a condition for election. Just the reverse. Election is a condition for faith. It is because God chose us before the foundation of the world that he purchases our redemption at the cross and quickens us with irresistible grace and brings us to faith.

Acts 13:48 reports how the Gentiles responded to the preaching of the gospel in Antioch of Pisidia. "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Notice, it does not say that as many believed were chosen to be ordained to eternal life. The prior election of God is the reason some believed while others did not.

Similarly Jesus says to the Jews in John 10:26, "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." He does not say, "You are not my sheep because you do not believe." Being a sheep is something God decides for us before we believe. It is the basis and enablement of our belief. We believe because we are God's chosen sheep, not vice versa. (See John 8:47; 18:37.)

In Romans 9 Paul stresses the unconditionality of election. For example, in verses 11-12 he describes the principle God used in the choice of Jacob over Esau: "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, [Rebecca] was told, 'The elder will serve the younger.'" God's election is preserved in its unconditionality because it is transacted before we are born or have done any good or evil.

NOTE: Some interpreters say that Romans 9 has nothing to do with the election of individuals to their eternal destinies. They say that the chapter only relates to the historical roles that are played by the peoples descended from Jacob and Esau.

We recommend *The Justification of God* by John Piper (Baker Book House, 1983) which was written to investigate this very issue. It concludes that Romans 9 not only relates to the historical roles of whole peoples, but also to the eternal destinies of individuals, because among other reasons (*Justification*, pp. 38-54), verses 1-5 pose a problem about the lostness of individual Israelites which would be totally unaddressed if the chapter had nothing to say about individuals.

The unconditionality of God's electing grace is stressed again in Romans 9:15-16, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy."

We really do not understand mercy if we think that we can initiate it by our own will or effort. We are hopelessly bound in the darkness of sin. If we are going to be saved, God will have to unconditionally take the initiative in our heart and irresistibly make us willing to submit to him. (See Romans 11:7.)

Ephesians 1:3-6 is another powerful statement of the unconditionality of our election and predestination to sonship.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He predestined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace.

Some interpreters argue that this election before the foundation of the world was only an election of Christ, but not an election of which individuals would actually be in Christ. This simply amounts to saying that there is no unconditional election of individuals to salvation. Christ is put forward as the chosen one of God and the salvation of individuals is dependent on their own initiative to overcome their depravity and be united to Christ by faith. God does not choose them and therefore God cannot effectually convert them. He can only wait to see who will quicken themselves from the dead and choose him.

This interpretation does not square well with verse 11 where it says that "we were predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will."

Nor does the literal wording of verse 4 fit this interpretation. The ordinary meaning of the word for “choose” in verse 4 is to select or pick out of a group (cf. Luke 6:13; 14:7; John 13:18; 15:16,19). So the natural meaning of the verse is that God chooses his people from all humanity, before the foundation of the world by viewing them in relationship to Christ their redeemer.

All election is in relation to Christ. There would be no election of sinners unto salvation if Christ were not appointed to die for their sins. So in that sense they are elect in Christ. But it is they, and not just Christ who are chosen out of the world.

Also the wording of verse 5 suggests the election of people to be in Christ, and not just the election of Christ. Literally it says, “Having predestined us unto sonship through Jesus Christ.” We are the ones predestined, not Christ. He is the one that makes the election of sinners possible, and so our election is “through him,” but there is no talk here about God having a view only to Christ in election.

Perhaps the most important text of all in relation to the teaching of unconditional election is Romans 8:28-33.

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose, For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.

Often this text is used to argue against unconditional election on the basis of verse 29 which says, “Those whom he foreknew he also predestined...” So some say that people are not chosen unconditionally. They are chosen on the basis of their faith which they produce without the help of irresistible grace and which God sees beforehand.

But this will not square with the context. Notice that Romans 8:30 says, “And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Focus for a moment on the fact that all whom God calls he also justifies.

This calling in verse 30 is not given to all people. The reason we know it’s not is that all those who are called are also justified—but all men are not justified. So this calling in verse 30 is not the general call to repentance that preachers give or that God gives through the glory of nature. Everybody receives that call. The call of verse 30 is given only to those whom God predestined to be conformed to the image of his son (v.29). And it is a call that leads necessarily to justification: “Those whom he called he also justified.”

But we know that justification is by faith (Romans 5:1). What then is this call that is given to all those who are predestined and which leads to justification? It must be the call of irresistible grace. It is the call of 1 Corinthians 1:24 which we discussed above on page 6.

Between the act of predestination and justification there is the act of calling. Since justification is only by faith the calling in view must be the act of God whereby he calls faith into being. And since it necessarily results in justification it must be irresistible. There are none called (in this sense! not the sense of Matthew 22:14) who are not justified. All the called are justified. So the calling of verse 30 is the sovereign work of God which brings a person to faith by which he is justified.

Now notice the implication this has for the meaning of foreknowledge in verse 29. When Paul says in verse 29, “Those whom he foreknew he also predestined,” he can’t mean (as so many try to make him mean) that God knows in advance who will use their free will to come to faith, so that he can predestine them to sonship because they made that free choice on their own. It can’t mean that because we have seen from verse 30 that people do not come to faith on their own. They are called irresistibly.

God does not foreknow the free decisions of people to believe in him because there aren’t any such free decisions to know. If anyone comes to faith in Jesus, it is because they were quickened from the dead (Ephesians 2:5) by the creative Spirit of God. That is, they are effectually called from darkness into light.

So the foreknowledge of Romans 8:29 is not the mere awareness of something that will happen in the future apart from God’s predetermination. Rather it is the kind of knowledge referred to in Old Testament texts like Genesis 18:19 (“I have chosen [literally:known] Abraham so that he may charge his children...to keep the way of the Lord”), and Jeremiah 1:5 (“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations”) and Amos 3:2 (“You only [Israel] have I known from all the families of the earth”).

As C.E.B. Cranfield says, the foreknowledge of Romans 8:29 is “that special taking knowledge of a person which is God’s electing grace.” Such foreknowledge is virtually the same as election: “Those whom he foreknew (i.e. chose) he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

Therefore what this magnificent text (Romans 8:28-33) teaches is that God really accomplishes the complete redemption of his people from start to finish. He foreknows, i.e. elects a people for himself before the foundation of the world, he predestines this people to be conformed to the image of his Son, he calls them to himself in faith, he justifies them through that faith, and he finally glorifies them—and nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ for ever and ever (Romans 8:39). To him be all praise and glory! Amen.

7. Perseverance of the Saints

It follows from what was just said that the people of God WILL persevere to the end and not be lost. The fore-known are predestined, the predestined are called, the called are justified, and the justified are glorified. No one is lost from this group. To belong to this people is to be eternally secure.

But we mean more than this by the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We mean that the saints will and must persevere in the obedience which comes from faith. Election is unconditional, but glorification is not. There are many warnings in Scripture that those who do not hold fast to Christ can be lost in the end.

The following seven theses summarize our understanding of this crucial doctrine.

Our faith must endure to the end if we are to be saved.

This means that the ministry of the word is God’s instrument in the preservation of faith as well as the begetting of faith. We do not breathe easy after a person has prayed to receive Christ, as though we can be assured from our perspective that they are now beyond the reach of the evil one. There is a fight of faith to be fought. We must endure to the end in faith if we are to be saved.

1 Corinthians 15:1,2, “Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast--unless you believed in vain.”

Colossians 1:21-23, “And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel...”

2 Timothy 2:11,12, “The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him...”

Mark 13:13, “But he who endures to the end will be saved.”

See also Revelation 2:7,10,11,17,25,26; 3:5,11,12,21.

Obedience, evidencing inner renewal from God, is necessary for final salvation.

This is not to say that God demands perfection. It is clear from Philippians 3:12,13 and 1 John 1:8-10 and Matthew 6:12 that the New Testament does not hold out the demand that we be sinlessly perfect in order to be saved. But the New Testament does demand that we be morally changed and walk in newness of life.

Hebrews 12:14, “Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

Romans 8:13, “If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

Galatians 5:19-21, “Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not enter the kingdom of God.” (See also Ephesians 5:5 and 1 Corinthians 6:10.)

1 John 2:3-6, “And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says, ‘I know him’ but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” (See also 1 John 3:4-10, 14; 4:20.)

John 8:31, “Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.’” (See also Luke 10:28; Matthew 6:14,15; 18:35; Genesis 18:19; 22:16-17; 26:4-5; 2 Timothy 2:19.)

God’s elect cannot be lost.

This is why we believe in eternal security--namely, the eternal security of the elect. the implication is that God will so work that those whom he has chosen for eternal salvation will be enabled by him to persevere in faith to the end and fulfill, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the requirements for obedience.

Romans 8:28-30, “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.” What is evident from this passage is that those who are effectually called into the hope of salvation will indeed persevere to the end and be glorified.

John 10:26-30, “You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, 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 my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (See also Ephesians 1:4-5.)

There is a falling away of some believers, but if it persists, it shows that their faith was not genuine and they were not born of God.

1 John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be made plain that they all are not of us.” Similarly, the parable of the four soils as interpreted in Luke 8:9-14 pictures people who “hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root, they believe for a while and in a time of temptation fall away.”

The fact that such a thing is possible is precisely why the ministry of the Word in every local church must contain many admonitions to the church members to persevere in faith and not be entangled in those things which could possibly strangle them and result in their condemnation.

God justifies us on the first genuine act of saving faith, but in doing so he has a view to all subsequent acts of faith contained, as it were, like a seed in that first act.

What we are trying to do here is own up to the teaching of Romans 5:1, for example, that teaches that we are already justified before God. God does not wait to the end of our lives in order to declare us righteous. In fact, we would not be able to have the assurance and freedom in order to live out the radical demands of Christ unless we could be confident that because of our faith we already stand righteous before him.

Nevertheless, we must also own up to the fact that our final salvation is made contingent upon the subsequent obedience which comes from faith. The way these two truths fit together is that those who do not lead a life of faith with its inevitable fruit of obedience simply bear witness to the fact that their first act of faith was not genuine.

The textual support for this is that Romans 4:3 cites Genesis 15:6 as the point where Abraham was justified by God. This is a reference to an act of faith early in Abraham’s career. Romans 4:19-22, however, refers to an experience of Abraham many years later (when he was 100 years old, see Genesis 21:5, 12) and says that because of the faith of this experience Abraham was reckoned righteous. In other words, it seems that the faith which justified Abraham is not merely his first act of faith but the faith which gave rise to acts of obedience later in his life. (The same thing could be shown from James 2:21-24 in its reference to a still later act in Abraham’s life, namely, the offering of his son, Isaac, in Genesis 22.) The way we put together these crucial threads of biblical truth is by saying that we are indeed justified through our first act of faith but not without reference to all the subsequent acts of faith which give rise to the obedience that God demands. Faith alone is the instrument (not ground or basis) of our justification because God makes it his sole means of uniting us to Christ in whom we “become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

God works to cause his elect to persevere.

We are not left to ourselves and our assurance is very largely rooted in the sovereign love of God to perform that which he has called us to do. 1 Peter 1:5, “By God’s power we are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Jude 24,25, “Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."

Philippians 1:6, "And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

1 Corinthians 1:8-9, "Jesus Christ will sustain you to the end; guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Therefore we should be zealous to make our calling and election sure.

2 Peter 1:10, "Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

8. Concluding Testimonies

It is possible to believe all these things in your head and go to hell. So easily deceived and hypocritical are we by nature! Therefore our concern in writing these things is not merely to convince the mind but also to win the heart.

We want for others the sweet experience of resting in the massive comfort of these truths. We want others to feel the tremendous incentive for righteousness and for missions flowing from these truths. We want for others the experience of knowing and trusting the sovereign grace of God in such a way that He and He alone gets the glory.

To this end we have gathered here some testimonies of what these truths have meant to some great Christians of the past. For those who have known them truly, they have never been mere speculation for the head, but have always been power for the heart and life.

Augustine

Augustine was resoundingly converted by the irresistible grace of God after leading a dissolute life. He wrote in his *CONFESSIONS* (X, 40):

I have no hope at all but in thy great mercy. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt. Thou dost enjoin on us continence...Truly by continence are we bound together and brought back into that unity from which we were dissipated into a plurality. For he loves thee too little who loves anything together with thee, which he loves not for thy sake. O love that ever burnest and art never quenched! O Charity, my God, enkindle me! Thou commandest continence. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt.

These are the words of a man who loves the truth of irresistible grace, because he knows he is utterly undone without it. But also in his doctrinal letters he drives this beloved truth home (Epistle ccxvii, to Vitalis):

If, as I prefer to think in your case, you agree with us in supposing that we are doing our duty in praying to God, as our custom is, for them that refuse to believe, that they may be willing to believe and for those who resist and oppose his law and doctrine, that they may believe and follow it. If you agree with us in thinking that we are doing our duty in giving thanks to God, as is our custom, for such people when they have been converted...then you are surely bound to admit that the wills of men are preveniently moved by the grace of God, and that it is God who makes them to will the good which they refused; for it is God whom we ask so to do, and we know that it is meet and right to give thanks to him for so doing...

For Augustine the truth of irresistible grace was the foundation of his prayers for the conversion of the lost and of his thanks to God when they were converted.

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards, the great New England preacher and theologian of the eighteenth century, had an equally deep love for these truths. He wrote when he was 26 about the day he fell in love with the sovereignty of God:

There has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, in respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, from that day to this...God's absolute sovereignty...is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes...The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God...God's sovereignty has ever appeared to me, a great part of his glory. It has often been my delight to approach God, and adore him as a sovereign God. (Personal Narrative).

George Whitefield

Edwards wept openly when George Whitefield preached in his church, because of how much he loved the message he preached. Whitefield was a great evangelist in the 18th century. He said, "I embrace the Calvinistic scheme, not because Calvin, but Jesus Christ has taught it to me" (Arnold Dalimore, GEORGE WHITEFIELD 1, p. 406).

He pleaded with John Wesley not to oppose the doctrines of Calvinism:

I cannot bear the thoughts of opposing you: but how can I avoid it, if you go about (as your brother Charles once said) to drive John Calvin out of Bristol. Alas, I never read anything that Calvin wrote; my doctrines I had from Christ and His apostles; I was taught them of God (Dalimore, p. 574).

It was these beliefs that filled him with holy zeal for evangelism:

The doctrines of our election, and free justification in Christ Jesus are daily more and more pressed upon my heart. They fill my soul with a holy fire and afford me great confidence in God my Saviour.

I hope we shall catch fire from each other, and that there will be a holy emulation amongst us, who shall most debase man and exalt the Lord Jesus. Nothing but the doctrines of the Reformation can do this. All others leave freewill in man and make him, in part at least, a saviour to himself. My soul, come not thou near the secret of those who teach such things...I know Christ is all in all. Man Is nothing: he hath a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and to do his good pleasure.

Oh, the excellency of the doctrine of election and of the saints' final perseverance! I am persuaded, til a man comes to believe and feel these important truths, he cannot come out of himself, but when convinced of these and assured of their application to his own heart, he then walks by faith indeed! (Dalimore, p. 407).

George Mueller

George Mueller is famous for the orphanages he founded and the amazing faith he had to pray for God's provision. Not many people know the theology that undergirded that great ministry. In his mid-twenties (1829) he had an experience which he records later as follows:

Before this period [when I came to prize the Bible alone as my standard of judgment] I had been much opposed to the doctrines of election, particular redemption (i.e. limited atonement), and final persevering grace. But now I was brought to examine these precious truths by the Word of God. Being made willing to have no glory of my own in the conversion of sinners, but to consider myself merely an instrument; and being made willing to receive what the Scriptures said, I went to the Word, reading the New Testament from the beginning, with a particular reference to these truths.

To my great astonishment I found that the passages which speak decidedly for election and persevering grace, were about four times as many as those which speak apparently against these truths; and even those few, shortly after, when I had examined and understood them, served to confirm me in the above doctrines.

As to the effect which my belief in these doctrines had on me, I am constrained to state for God's glory, that though I am still exceedingly weak, and by no means so dead to the lusts of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, as I might be, and as I ought to be, yet, by the grace of God, I have walked more closely with Him since that period. My life has not been so variable, and I may say that I have lived much more for God than before (Autobiography, pp. 33-34).

Charles Spurgeon

C.H. Spurgeon was a contemporary of George Mueller. He was the pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for thirty years, the most famous pastor of his day—and a Baptist at that. His preaching was powerful to the winning of souls to Christ. But what was his gospel that held thousands spellbound each week and brought many to the Saviour?

I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what is nowadays 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...unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt 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 (AUTOBIOGRAPHY 1, p. 168).

He had not always believed these things. Spurgeon recounts his discovery of these truths at the age of 16:

Born, as all of us are by nature, an Arminian, I still believed the old things I had heard continually from the pulpit, and did not see the grace of God. When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me...I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths in my own soul—when they were, as John Bunyan says, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron...

One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, "How did you come to be a Christian?" I sought the Lord. "But how did you come to seek the Lord?" The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, How came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures? I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, "I ascribe my change wholly to God" (AUTOBIOGRAPHY, pp. 164-5).

Spurgeon started a college for pastors and was intent that the key to being a worthy teacher in the church was to grasp these doctrines of grace.

Arminianism is thus guilty of confusing doctrines and of acting as an obstruction to a clear and lucid grasp of the Scripture; because it mis-states or ignores the eternal purpose of God, it dislocates the meaning of the whole plan of redemption. Indeed confusion is inevitable apart from this foundational truth [of election].

Without it there is a lack of unity of thought, and generally speaking they have no idea whatever of a system of divinity. It is almost impossible to make a man a theologian unless you begin with this [doctrine of election]. You may if you please put a young believer to college for years, but unless you shew him this ground-plan of the everlasting covenant, he will make little progress, because his studies do not cohere, he does not see how one truth fits with another, and how all truths must harmonize together...

Take any county throughout England, you will find poor men hedging and ditching that have a better knowledge of divinity than one half of those who come from our academies and colleges, for the reason simply and entirely that these men have first learned in their youth the system of which election is a centre, and have afterwards found their own experience exactly square with it.

9. A Final Appeal

It is fitting that we close this account of our belief in the doctrines of grace by appealing to you, the reader, to receive the magnificent Christ who is the eternal Author of these doctrines. Give heed to the beautiful entreaty extended by J.I. Packer, a great contemporary advocate of these truths:

To the question: what must I do to be saved? the old gospel [Calvinism] replies: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. To the further question: what does it mean to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? its reply is: it means knowing oneself to be a sinner, and Christ to have died for sinners; abandoning all self-righteousness and self-confidence, and casting oneself wholly upon Him for pardon and peace; and exchanging one's natural enmity and rebellion against God for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of one's heart by the Holy Ghost.

And to the further question still: how am I to go about believing on Christ and repenting, if I have no natural ability to do these things? it answers: look to Christ, speak to Christ, cry to Christ, just as you are; confess your sin, your impenitence, your unbelief, and cast yourself on His mercy; ask Him to give you a new heart, working in you true repentance and firm faith; ask Him to take away your evil heart of unbelief and to write His law within you, that you may never henceforth stray from Him. Turn to Him and trust Him as best you can, and pray for grace to turn and trust more thoroughly; use the means of grace expectantly, looking to Christ to draw near to you as you seek to draw near to Him; watch pray read and hear God's Word, worship and commune with God's people, and so continue till you know in yourself beyond doubt that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, and the new heart which you desired has been put within you ("Introductory Essay to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*," p. 21).

Let Charles Spurgeon lead you in prayer:

Join with me in prayer at this moment, I entreat you. Join with me while I put words into your mouths, and speak them on your behalf— "Lord, I am guilty, I deserve thy wrath. Lord, I cannot save myself. Lord, I would have a new heart and a right spirit, but what can I do? Lord, I can do nothing, come and work in me to will and to do thy good pleasure.

Thou alone hast power, I know,
To save a wretch like me;
To whom, or whither should I go
If I should run from thee?

But I now do from my very soul call upon thy name. Trembling, yet believing, I cast myself wholly upon thee, O Lord. I trust the blood and righteousness of thy dear Son...Lord, save me tonight, for Jesus' sake." (From Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973], pp. 101f.)





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