

CALVINISM and CHOICE

Answers that Build Faith 2019

Northwest Baptist Church

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/northwest>

Presented by Hutson Smelley

SCHEDULE: Saturday (sessions 1 thru 4)

Note that we plan to provide a short time for questions at the end of each of the first three sessions and a longer period for questions after the last session.

Sunday (sessions 5-7)

Note that the Sunday sessions will be recorded and posted on the Northwest sermonaudio page. Those sessions will cover the decrees of God, perseverance of the saints, and the practical issue of talking with those with whom we disagree.

SESSION 1: Introduction and Limited Atonement

- I. REAL QUESTIONS DESERVING REAL ANSWERS
 - a. Who does God love?
 - b. For whom did God's Son die?
 - c. Who can believe?
 - d. Who are the elect?
 - e. Is belief (faith) a work?
 - f. For whom is the gospel good news?
 - g. What conduct proves a person is not a Christian?
- II. SIMPLE APPROACH TO PUTTING CALVINISM ON TRIAL
 - a. Need clarity on exactly what Calvinism claims (what is it?)
 - b. Address the evidence one verse at a time (does the Bible teach it?)
 - c. What matters most: "The question of supreme importance is not how [Calvinism] came to be formulated in five points, or why it was named Calvinism, but rather *whether it is supported by Scripture*. The final court of appeal for determining the validity of any theological system is the inspired, authoritative Word of God. If Calvinism can be verified by clear and explicit declarations of Scripture, then it must be received by Christians; if not, it must be rejected."¹
 - d. But truth propositions become "true" for 3 reasons:

¹ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, p. 17, P&R Publishing Company (2d ed. 2004).

- i. The proposition is actually, objectively true.
 - ii. We want the proposition to be true.
 - iii. The proposition becomes true through much repetition, i.e., it preaches well (and often).
- III. PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS
 - a. The meanings of words matter (e.g., sovereignty, foreknowledge, repent, faith, baptize, elect, wrath, filled, justified, save, salvation, soul)
 - i. What is the term's lexical meaning or meanings? Just as in the English language (e.g., green, date, foil), a Greek term may have several possible definitions.
 - ii. Words may have literal and figurative meanings, and the figurative *is not* merely the literal meaning with a spiritual application. For example, the Greek word *hupsoō* is used literally in 1 Timothy 2:8 of "lifting up holy hands," but figuratively to mean "exalt" in verses like 2 Corinthians 10:5, 11:20 and 1 Peter 5:6 ("that [God] may exalt you in due time"). Other common examples are draw, filled, sober, and dead.
 - iii. Context determines which meaning applies.
 - iv. WE CANNOT INJECT OUR THEOLOGY INTO KEY WORDS TO ENSURE THE MEANING OF A PASSAGE.
 - b. The personalities do not matter. We don't need a worldly hero culture within evangelicalism.
 - c. How we talk to one another matters.
 - i. James 1:19 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.
 - ii. "There are disagreements about some interpretations—sometimes passionate disagreements—but that is no cause to be unfair or mean-spirited. We are often too quick to label those with whom we disagree as "false teachers" or "heretics." The New Testament authors reserve the terms "false prophets" or "false teachers" for those who are maliciously undermining God's truth with blatant heresies. The New Testament only uses the term "false teachers" (psuedodidaskaloi) once where they are equated with the obviously unsaved "false prophets" who teach "heresies" (2 Pet. 2:1). I do not think the terms "false teacher" or "heretic" in the biblical sense are deserved by any sincere Christian who holds a well-intentioned but erroneous interpretation of a Bible passage. Otherwise, I think we would all be false teachers teaching heresy, because we all differ in our interpretations of passages."²
 - d. How we look at the Bible matters
 - i. Inspiration and inerrancy (without error or contradiction)
 - ii. Clarity: The clarity of Scripture is that quality of the Biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures its meaning is accessible to all who

² Charles C. Bing, *Grace, Salvation, and Discipleship: How to Understand Some Difficult Bible Passages* (pp. 13-14). Grace Theology Press. Kindle Edition.

come to it in faith.³

- iii. Plain sense hermeneutic (no hidden meanings, no forced spiritualizing)
- iv. “If the Bible is God’s Word, and the evidence says it is, then once we line our thinking up with the thinking of the Bible, our positions become Bible positions and not opinions.”⁴
- e. Beware the fallacy of limited choice—it is possible to be neither a Calvinist nor an Arminian. (e.g., democrat / republican, catholic / protestant, hot / cold) For many issues, there are three sides, and we do well to consider the third side.
- f. Hermeneutical circle: “It is very important in our study of “salvation” to use our biblical theology to undergird our systematic theology. If we do not, we will be guilty of imposing our theological views upon the text or letting our systematic theology override our biblical theology. **In good exegesis, the parts must add up to the whole, and then the whole will help us understand the parts (this is called the hermeneutical circle)**. But if one part is out of sync with the whole, then our understanding of the whole is faulty. We must be ever ready to adjust our understanding of the whole to correspond and complement our understanding of the parts, not vice-versa.”⁵

IV. THE FIVE TRADITIONAL “TULIP” PRINCIPLES

- a. Total depravity (T): “Man is *totally depraved* in the sense that everything about his nature is in rebellion against God. Man is loyal to the god of darkness and loves darkness rather than The Light. His will is, therefore, not at all ‘free.’ It is bound by the flesh to the prince of darkness grim. *Total depravity* means that man, of his own “free will,” will never make a decision for Christ.”⁶
- b. Unconditional election (U): “Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.”⁷
- c. Limited atonement (L): “Historical or mainline Calvinism has consistently maintained that Christ’s redeeming work was definite in *design* and *accomplishment*—that it was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners, and that it actually secured salvation for these individuals and no one else. The salvation which Christ earned for His people includes everything involved in bringing them into a right relationship with God, including the gifts of faith and repentance. Christ did not die simply to make it possible for God to pardon sinners. Neither does God leave it up to sinners to decide whether or not Christ’s work will be effective. On the contrary, all for whom Christ sacrificed Himself will be saved infallibly. Redemption, therefore,

³ Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word, The Clarity of Scripture*, pp. 169-170, Inter Varsity Press (2006).

⁴ Lester Hutson, *Basic Bible Truths*, Morris Publishing, p. 13 (1999).

⁵ David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, Xulon Press, p. 17 (2010).

⁶ Duane Edward Spencer, *TULIP*, Baker Books, p. 34 (2d ed. 2007).

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 670, Inter-Varsity Press (1994).

was designed to bring to pass God's purpose of election."⁸

- d. Irresistible grace (I): "Therefore, the *Holy Spirit*, in order to bring God's elect to salvation, extends to them *a special inward call* in addition to the outward call contained in the gospel message. Through this special call, the Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the sinner, which inevitably brings him to faith in Christ. The inward change wrought in the elect sinner enables him to understand and believe spiritual truth; in the spiritual realm, he is given the seeing eye and the hearing ear. The Spirit creates within him a new heart or a new nature. This is accomplished through regeneration or the new birth by which the sinner is made a child of God and is given spiritual life. His will is renewed through this process, so that the sinner spontaneously comes to Christ of his own free choice. Because he is given a new nature so that he loves righteousness, and because his mind is enlightened so that he understands and believes the biblical gospel, the renewed sinner freely and willingly turns to Christ as Lord and Savior. Thus, the once dead sinner is drawn to Christ by the inward, supernatural call of the Spirit, who through regeneration makes him alive and creates faith and repentance within him."⁹
- e. Perseverance of the saints (P): "The Scriptures declare that, in virtue of the original purpose and continuous operation of God, all who are united to Christ by faith will infallibly continue in a state of grace and will finally attain to everlasting life. This voluntary continuance, on the part of the Christian, in faith and well-doing we call perseverance. Perseverance is, therefore, the human side or aspect of that spiritual process which, as viewed from the divine side, we call sanctification. It is not a mere natural consequence of conversion, but involves a constant activity of the human will from the moment of conversion to the end of life."¹⁰

V. LIMITED ATONEMENT

Grudem succinctly states the issue: "...when Christ died on the cross, did he pay for the sins of the entire human race or only for the sins of those who he knew would ultimately be saved?"¹¹ Steele, Thomas and Quinn relate the historical Calvinist answer:

Historical or mainline Calvinism has consistently maintained that Christ's redeeming work was definite in *design* and *accomplishment*—that it was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners, and that it actually secured salvation for these individuals and for no one else.¹²

It is important to note that the historical Calvinist view is not merely that Jesus died for the

⁸ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, pp. 39-40, P & R Publishing Company (2d ed. 2004).

⁹ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, pp. 52-53.

¹⁰ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, Judson Press, p. 881.

¹¹ Grudem, p. 594.

¹² David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, pp. 39-40.

elect, but that his death actually saved them. For this reason, Sproul states the question thus: "Is Christ a real Savior or merely a 'potential' Savior?"¹³ Other Calvinists are in agreement:

God decreed to create the race, to permit the fall, and then, in His infinite compassion, He elected out of the fallen an innumerable multitude, chosen in Christ, to be delivered from this ruin; and for them Christ was sent, to make full penal satisfaction for their unrighteousness, and purchase for them all graces of effectual calling and spiritual life and bodily resurrection, which make up a complete redemption, by His righteousness and intercession founded thereon.¹⁴

It is generally admitted that the satisfaction rendered by Christ was in itself sufficient for the salvation of all men, though they do not attain unto salvation... In distinction from them [non-Reformed] the Reformed churches believe in a limited atonement. They maintain that it was the intention of both the Father and the Son to save only the elect, a purpose that is actually accomplished... The advocates of a limited atonement, on the other hand, maintain that Christ actually saves to the uttermost every one of those for whom He has laid down His life. Not one of those for whom the price is paid finally falls short of salvation.¹⁵

When we speak of the meritorious work of Christ on the cross, do we rightfully say the He died for all men equally and alike (as say the Arminians), or do we more accurately state (with the Calvinists) that Christ died for the elect only?¹⁶

The Calvinists' arguments to support limited atonement are threefold: (1) that limited atonement necessarily follows from total depravity and unconditional election; (2) that several verses indicate that Jesus died for the sins of a discrete group of people; and (3) that certain verses expressly teach that Jesus died only for the elect. We shall address these in this order. First, the philosophical argument:

You see, if you believe that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign, His plan immutable, and His election unconditional, you *must* conclude that the atonement is limited to those whom He freely willed to make the objects of grace. (Actually *grace* means unmerited favor. It is an act that is wholly undeserved, so that the term, by its very nature of definition, denies *conditional* election.) The Arminian view insists that it is man's act of faith that merits his being elected according to the foreknowledge of God. If such be the case man is saved by works and not by the grace of God, because he has done at least one

¹³ R.C. Sproul, *What Is Reformed Theology?*, p. 164, Baker Books (1997).

¹⁴ R.L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, p. 520 (2002).

¹⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Manua of Christian Doctrine*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 216 (1933).

¹⁶ Duane Edward Spencer, *TULIP*, Baker Books, p. 45 (2d ed. 2007).

thing pleasing to God, and all on his own!¹⁷

What is inherent in this argument is that if Christ died for someone they will be saved, and if faith had anything to do with it, then salvation is by works since faith is a work. Dabney also offers the philosophical argument in favor of unlimited atonement:

The Scriptures tell us that those who are to be saved in Christ are a number definitely elected and given to Him from eternity, to be redeemed by His mediation. How can anything be plainer from this than that there was a purpose in God's atonement, as to them, other than that it had as to the rest of mankind? ...If God ever intended to save any soul in Christ ... that soul will certainly be saved. Hence, all whom God ever intended to save in Christ will be saved. But some souls will never be saved; therefore some souls God never intended to be saved by Christ's atonement. The strength of this argument can scarcely be overrated.¹⁸

Again, the premise underpinning the philosophical argument is that Jesus' death secured (rather than made available) salvation, and since not all are saved (or for the Calvinist, only the elect will be saved), it naturally follows that Jesus only died for some (the elect). Based on this premise, Sproul concludes that unlimited atonement necessarily implies universalism (all will be saved):

The atonement of Christ was clearly limited or unlimited. There is no alternative, no *tertium quid*. If it is unlimited in an absolute sense, then an atonement has been made for every person's sins. Christ has then made propitiation for all persons' sins and expiated them as well.¹⁹

Building on this argument, Sproul concludes that the unlimited atonement view implies that "faith is not only a condition for redemption, but also one of the very grounds for redemption" and thus "faith becomes a work."²⁰ He elaborates further and concludes that if Christ died for all then He died for none at all:

This means that if Christ really, objectively satisfied the demands of God's justice for everyone, then everyone will be saved. It is one thing to agree that faith is a necessary condition for the appropriation of the benefits of Christ's atoning work, for justification and its fruits. It is quite another to say that faith is a necessary condition for the satisfaction of divine justice. If faith is a condition for God's justice to be satisfied, then the atonement, in itself, is not sufficient to satisfy the demands of God's justice. In itself the atonement is not "sufficient" for anyone, let alone for all. Full satisfaction is not rendered until or unless a

¹⁷ Duane Edward Spencer, p. 47.

¹⁸ R.L. Dabney, p. 521 (citations omitted).

¹⁹ R.C. Sproul, pp. 164-65.

²⁰ R.C. Sproul, p. 165.

person adds to the atonement his faith.²¹

For the Calvinists, the only way Jesus could have paid for the sins of the world is if the entire world were saved! This view is neither logical nor scriptural. If Christ's death secured salvation for the elect, then why the gospel at all? Why the emphasis on believing that permeates John's Gospel if salvation were already a completed past event for the elect? The better view is simply that Jesus paid the price for everyone but to obtain the benefits of Christ's payment a person must respond to the gospel. Calvinists will not accept this view because they insist that believing is a work, and since you cannot be saved by works, you cannot be saved by believing! What would you answer in response to the Roman jailor? The jailor "brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." (Acts 16:30-31)

a. Good reason to start with the hermeneutical circle

i. The "world" verses teach unlimited atonement

1. But what about John 12:19: "The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? behold, the world is gone after him."
2. The Pharisees' usage in 12:19 is hyperbole, but no indication of that anywhere else
3. The term nearly always is inclusive of all people in John and 1 John
4. God could have said "elect" if He wanted to
5. No contextual basis to take limit a verse like John 3:16 to the elect or something like "all kinds of people"

John 1:29 The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the **world**.

John 3:16 For God so loved the **world**, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:17 For God sent not his Son into the **world** to condemn the **world**; but that the **world** through him might be saved.

John 4:42 And said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard *him* ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the **world**.

1 Corinthians 5:19 To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the **world** unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

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

²¹ R.C. Sproul, p. 166.

1 John 4:14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son *to be* the Saviour of the **world**.

ii. The “whosoever” verses teach unlimited atonement

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that **whosoever** believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Acts 2:21 And it shall come to pass, *that* **whosoever** shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Acts 10:43 To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name **whosoever** believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.

Romans 10:13 For **whosoever** shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. (NOTE: this is not a justification verse)

Revelation 22:17 And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And **whosoever** will, let him take the water of life freely.

iii. The inclusive verses teach unlimited atonement

Luke 19:10 For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Romans 5:6 For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly....18 Therefore as by the offence of one *judgment came* upon **all men** to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one *the free gift came* upon **all men** unto justification of life.

1 Corinthians 5:14 For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for **all**, then were **all** dead.

2 Corinthians 5:15 And *that* he died for **all**, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.

1 Timothy 2:6 Who gave himself a ransom for **all**, to be testified in due time.

1 Timothy 4:10 For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of **all men**, specially of those that believe.

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to **all men**,

Hebrews 2:9 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of

God should taste death for every man.

1 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that **all** should come to repentance.

- b. Calvinists rely on the less than “all” verses
 - i. But if Jesus died for all, then it can be said without contradiction that he died for a sub-group like Israel
 - ii. Note that “many” is used idiomatically to be inclusive of all (Romans 5:12-19)

Isaiah 53:5 But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

Matthew 1:21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Matthew 20:28 Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Matthew 26:28 For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

John 10:15 As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Galatians 3:13 Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed *is* every one that hangeth on a tree:

Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

Hebrews 9:28 So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

Acts 20:28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

- c. The Pillar proof text: John 10:11, 15
 - i. Key to this passage: The sheep refers to believers and Jesus’ flock is not a static or fixed group, but a growing flock as more come through the door.

John 10:11 I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. * * * 15 As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.

- d. An alternative view – unlimited atonement
 - i. Bible expressly says Jesus died for all
 - ii. The brass serpent illustration in John 3 is absurd if limited atonement is true
 - iii. The gospel is not contingent good news
 - iv. But if total depravity and unconditional election necessitate limited atonement, then showing limited atonement is false proves that total depravity and unconditional election are false

SESSION 2: Total Depravity

The Calvinist concept of total depravity means, among other things, that apart from God’s regeneration, a person lacks the capacity to understand and believe the gospel. It is not that the person hears the gospel, considers it, comprehends it, and rejects it. Rather, he hears the words, but because he is so hopelessly and helplessly lost and unable to move toward God in the slightest, he cannot comprehend it and can only reject the message unless God first makes him spiritually alive by “regeneration,” in which case the person not only comprehends the message but cannot reject it, for it is now compelling to him. Only the “elect” receive this “regeneration” and accept the gospel message (we will address the elect in the next chapter). This doctrine throws a new light on a substantial portion of the Bible. Much of the Bible is reduced to stories about God “going through the motions.” Gospel presentations no longer seem sincere since some in the audience cannot accept it and others cannot reject it.

The issue before us, of course, is whether this is a Biblical view of man. In some sense, the question is how lost is man? Or asked another way, how fallen is man? If you say that man is totally depraved, what does that mean? The Calvinists often say the issue is whether man is depraved, but that is not really the issue since many non-Calvinists would agree that man is depraved. As I have commented before, theology is often about words, and here the issue is what the Bible teaches about (i.e., how God defines) the depravity of man. Now, let’s turn to the Calvinists’ own recitation of this doctrine so that the reader can be assured that the foregoing summary of this doctrine is accurate.

Spencer defines the concept of total depravity in terms of man's natural capacity to please God and expressly states that because of total depravity a person can never "make a decision for Christ":

Total depravity means that man in his natural state is incapable of doing anything or desiring anything pleasing to God. Until he is "born again" of the Holy Spirit and given a living human spirit, man is the slave of Satan ("the Prince of the power of the air") who drives man to fulfill the desires of the flesh that are in enmity with God. In the sight of God the "best hearted man" holds only evil thoughts because they are oriented to doing *human* good for the glory of himself or Satan but never for the glory of the Creator....

Man is *totally depraved* in the sense that everything about his nature is in rebellion against God. *Total depravity* means that man, of his own "free will," will never make a decision for Christ.²²

One might ask whether this means that man is experientially as bad as he can possibly be. Calvinists are careful to distinguish total depravity from absolute depravity, that is, the idea that unsaved man will always sin to the fullest extent possible:

When Calvinists speak of man as being totally depraved, they mean that man's nature is corrupt, perverse, and sinful throughout. The adjective "total" does not mean that each sinner is as totally or completely corrupt in his actions and thoughts as it is possible for him to be. Instead, the word "total" is used to indicate that the *whole* of man's being has been affected by sin. The corruption extends to *every part* of man, his body and soul; sin has affected all (the totality) of man's faculties—his mind, his will, etc.²³

The writers just quoted would further explain depravity by saying that man is spiritually depraved, that is, "the natural man is totally unable to do anything spiritually good" and, as a consequence, "he can do nothing pertaining to his salvation."²⁴ Strong also differentiates the doctrine from absolute depravity, but still defines man as incapable of any good:

...that every sinner is: (a) totally destitute of that love to God which constitutes the fundamental and all-inclusive demand of the law; (b) chargeable with elevating some lower affection or desire above regard for God and his law; (c) supremely determined, in his whole inward and outward life, by a preference of self to God; (d) possessed of an aversion to God which, though sometimes latent, becomes active enmity, as soon as God's will comes into manifest conflict with his own; (e) disordered and corrupted in every faculty, through this substitution of selfishness for supreme affection toward God; (f) credited with no thought,

²² Duane Edward Spencer, pp. 33-34.

²³ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, pp. 18-19.

²⁴ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, p. 19.

emotion, or act of which divine holiness can fully approve; (g) subject to a law of constant progress in depravity, which he has no recuperative energy to enable him successfully to resist.²⁵

When we read that the Calvinists insist that a lost person cannot do anything good, at least not without bad motives, obvious questions arise. Can a lost person sincerely love their spouse or their children? Apparently the answer for many Calvinists is no:

Finally, sin results in inability to love. Since other people stand in our way, representing competition and a threat to us, we cannot really act for the ultimate welfare of others if our aim is self-satisfaction. And so suspicions, conflicts, bitterness, and even hatred issue from the self-absorption or the pursuit of finite values that has supplanted God at the center of the sinner's life.²⁶

Second, because man is totally or pervasively corrupt, he is *incapable of changing his character or of acting in a way that is distinct from his corruption*. He is unable to discern, to love, or to choose the things that are pleasing to God.²⁷

It is helpful at this point to relate this concept of total depravity to the Reform doctrine of the decrees of God (i.e., that prior to creation God predetermined everything without exception) and unconditional election that is the subject of the next session. The reader should note the term reprobation, which is that aspect of God's decrees that certain men would remain totally depraved for their entire lives. Reprobation and election are twin doctrines in the Calvinists' system that fall under the larger umbrella of *predestination*: "While God's decree is His purpose as to all things, His predestination may be defined to be His purpose concerning the everlasting destiny of His rational creatures. His election is His purpose of saving eternally some men and angels. Election and reprobation are both included in predestination."²⁸ Berkhof states that "[p]redestination is simply ... the purposes of God respecting His moral creatures" and that it "includes two parts, namely, election and reprobation."²⁹ He defines election as follows: "It may be defined as God's eternal purpose to save some of the human race in and by Jesus Christ." He then explains reprobation in light of election:

The doctrine of election naturally implies that some of the human race were not elected. If God purposed to save some, He also purposed not to save others... Reprobation may be defined as that decree of God whereby He has determined to pass some men by with the operation of His special grace and to punish them

²⁵ Augustus H. Strong, p. 839.

²⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker Book House, p. 619 (1983).

²⁷ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson, Inc., p. 453 (1998).

²⁸ R.L. Dabney, pp. 223-24.

²⁹ Louis Berkhof, pp. 90-91.

for their sin to the manifestation of His justice. From this definition reprobation appears to be really a twofold purpose namely, (a) to pass by some in the bestowal of regenerating and saving grace; and (b) to assign them to dishonour and to the wrath of God for their sins.³⁰

Thus, the Calvinist system teaches that God, as part of His decree of all things that would come to pass, elected certain people for salvation, whom He will enable (“with the operation of His special grace” He will undo their total depravity) to believe, and passed over the others. Since they were passed over, they remain forever reprobate or totally depraved, destined to make the only choice they are capable of, namely to reject the gospel and spend eternity in the lake of fire.

Grudem provides similar, but more detailed, definitions. “Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.”³¹ “Reprobation is the sovereign decision of God before creation to pass over some persons, in sorrow deciding not to save them, and to punish them for their sins, and thereby to manifest his justice.”³² Although Grudem remarks that God passed over people “in sorrow,” there is no adequate explanation in the Calvinist system for why God passed over anyone if it caused Him sorrow. In other words, if God pre-selected certain individuals for salvation, why did He not do so for everyone? No Calvinist suggests that God could not have elected everyone. The fact is that these concepts reveal philosophical difficulties for the Calvinists, many of which they simply chalk up to a mystery we should be content not to understand. On many occasions, I have been told that the real issue is not why God did not save everyone, but why He saved anyone at all. This is, of course, just punting the difficult question. But if they have no scriptural support for their position, then the mystery is quickly removed.

It should be noted that Calvinists’ writings frequently support total depravity by a string cite of scripture passages rather than any extended Biblical analysis. In reality, the entire TULIP structure, although it boasts much support, actually rests on a small handful of what might be deemed their “pillar” passages. Those who accept the TULIP interpretation of the pillar total depravity passages often find the doctrine all over the pages of the Bible.

- I. PILLAR PROOF TEXT: Romans 3
 - a. Interpreting in context (see outline below)
 - b. Key to this passage: Paul says in Romans 3 what unsaved people do and what they lack but never addresses whether they have the capacity to respond to God’s revelation (like the gospel).
 - The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to those that believe (1:16-17)

³⁰ Louis Berkhof, p. 91.

³¹ Wayne Grudem, p. 670.

³² Wayne Grudem, p. 685.

Amos 5:4 For thus saith the LORD unto the house of Israel, Seek ye me, and ye shall live.

Zephaniah 2:3 Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD'S anger.

Acts 17:26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; 27 That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

- d. God says His pleas to seek Him are not in vain: Isaiah 45:19 I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth: I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain: I the LORD speak righteousness, I declare things that are right.
 - e. We see examples of people seeking God like Cornelius (Acts 10:2, 22) and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8)
- II. PILLAR PROOF TEXT: 1 Corinthians 2:14: But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.
- a. We can summarize Paul's argument in 2:1 through 3:3 as follows: (1) when Paul came to Corinth, he did not speak in words of human wisdom, but simply preached the gospel and demonstrated the power of God (2:1-5); (2) but Paul does teach a type of wisdom to mature believers (2:6-8); (3) this wisdom was received by direct revelation from the Spirit and could not be obtained in any other way (2:9-16); (4) this wisdom of God cannot be understood by a natural person because it involves deep spiritual matters (2:13-15); and (5) because the Corinthians are carnal, Paul cannot yet teach them this wisdom (3:1-3).
 - b. Key to this passage: Paul is comparing the capacity of the immature Corinthian believers for the deeper things of God with the limitations faced by a natural or unsaved man. The gospel is not even in view. It is the meat of the Word that Paul is concerned about so that he can move them on to maturity.
 - c. The identical issue addressed in Hebrews 5:11-14 and 6:1.

- III. PILLAR PROOF TEXT: Ephesians 2:8: For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that

not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God.

- a. Calvinists say the “gift” is the “faith” but the Grammar does not work
- b. Harold Hoehner recognized this in his commentary on Ephesians: “A serious objection to this is that the feminine noun [faith] does not match the neuter gender of the pronoun [that].”³³
- c. “Let’s lay aside the theological problems with such a view and just deal with the text. That interpretation assumes that the word “that” (touto) in verse 8 refers to “faith” as the gift of God (the words “it is” in v. 8 are not in the Greek text but are supplied by translators). However, if “that” refers to “faith,” it would have to be in the feminine gender, as is true of abstract nouns like faith. But it is in the neuter gender. So what does “that” refer to? Obviously, it refers to salvation by grace. A survey of the commentary tradition on this verse will find that many, and maybe most, agree with the view that “that” does not refer to “faith.” This fits the context perfectly from chapter 1 through 2:1-10, which is about how God has saved us by His grace. The neuter pronoun translated “that” is used elsewhere in Ephesians to refer to a phrase or clause that immediately precedes it (cf. 1:15; 3:1). The parallelism of “not of yourselves” in verse 8 and “not of works” in verse 9 seals the argument that salvation by grace is in view as the gift of God.”³⁴
- d. Key question: Is believing (faith) a work? Paul says no (Romans 3:26-28, 4:4-5)

IV. Other proof texts:

- a. Unsaved cannot believe: John 8:43-44, Romans 8:7-8; Ephesians 4:17-19
- b. Must be given faith: Lamentations 3:26; John 1:11-13; 1 Timothy 2:25-26
- c. Made unable to believe: Matthew 11:25-26; Jude 4; 1 Peter 2:8
- d. Total depravity by analogy: Ephesians 2:1-3; Matthew 7:16-18

V. Hermeneutical circle and total depravity

- a. God repeatedly tells people to seek him (e.g., Psalm 105:4: “Seek the LORD, and his strength: seek his face evermore.”)
 - i. Calvinists say God deals with people according to their obligation and not

³³ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2002), 342.

³⁴ Bing, *Grace, Salvation, and Discipleship: How to Understand Some Difficult Bible Passages*, 175-176.

their ability

- ii. "God deals with man according to his *obligation*, not according to the measure of his ability. Before the Fall, man had both the obligation and the ability to obey God. As a result of the Fall, he retained the former but lost the latter. Man's inability to obey, arising from the moral corruption of his nature, does not remove from him his obligation to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and his neighbor as himself. His obligation to obey God remains intact. If God dealt with man today according to his ability to obey, he would have to reduce his moral demands to the vanishing point. Conversely, if we determined the measure of man's ability from the sweeping obligations implicit in the divine commands, then we would need to predicate *total ability* for man, that is to say, we would all have to adopt the Pelagian [Arminian] position, for the commands of God cover the *entire* horizon of moral obligation."³⁵
 - iii. But where does the Bible say that? And why would God go through the motions of calling people to Himself knowing they cannot respond?
 - iv. We have to ask ourselves, are not God's constant appeals to us to seek Him more consistent with an ability to do so than an inability? (Isaiah 45:19-20; Jeremiah 29:12-13; Acts 17:26-27; Romans 10:1-2, 5-8, 16-21)
- b. Jesus said things that are irreconcilable with Calvinism and especially total depravity (e.g., Matthew 11:21-24; Mark 4:13-15; Luke 8:11-12) and so did Paul (e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:12-15, 4:3-4) and others
 - c. People reject the light because they love their sin (John 3:19)
 - d. The lost man in Jesus's story in Luke 16 had understanding and begged Abraham to send someone to his brothers.

SESSION 3: Unconditional Election

The concept of unconditional election has been formalized for centuries. The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 states the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election:

Those of mankind who are *predestinated* unto Life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and *immutable Purpose*, and the secret *counsel* and good pleasure of His will, hath *chosen* in Christ to everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any other thing in the creature as a *condition* or cause moving Him thereunto.

Along the same lines, Steele states the doctrine as follows:

The doctrine of election declares that God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals from among the fallen members of Adam's race to be the objects of His undeserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to

³⁵ A.A. Hodge, pp. 454-55.

save.³⁶

Other leading Calvinists define the concept of election in relative uniformity:

Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.³⁷

Election is that eternal act of God, by which in his sovereign pleasure, and on account of no foreseen merit in them, he chooses certain out of the number of sinful men to be the recipients of the special grace of his Spirit, and so to be made voluntary partakers of Christ's salvation.³⁸

It may be defined as *God's* eternal purpose to save some of the human race in and by Jesus Christ.³⁹

By election we mean that sovereign act of God in grace whereby He chose in Christ Jesus for salvation all those whom He foreknew would accept Him.⁴⁰

In addition to the election of people, part of the TULIP includes the election of angels. For this reason, Dabney includes angels in his definition of the doctrine of unconditional election: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His own glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death."⁴¹ Dabney's definition recognizes the necessary and logical result of unconditional election, namely that "others [are] foreordained to everlasting death." Whether God foreordained people for the lake of fire as Dabney holds is a point of contention among Calvinists, with many preferring to simply say that God chose to pass over the rest by rather than choosing them for hell. I would submit that whatever distinction can be made here, it does not matter one iota to the people not picked for heaven. This twin concept to unconditional election is called reprobation:

The doctrine of election naturally implies that some of the human race were not elected. If God purposed to save some, He also purposed not to save others...
Reprobation may be defined as *that decree of God whereby He has determined to pass some men by with the operation of His special grace and to punish them for their sin to the manifestation of His justice....*⁴²

The Calvinist concepts of *unconditional election* and *reprobation*, taken together, are referred

³⁶ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, p. 27.

³⁷ Wayne Grudem, p. 670.

³⁸ Augustus H. Strong, p. 779.

³⁹ Louis Berkhof, p. 91.

⁴⁰ Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology*, Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., p. 344 (2006).

⁴¹ R.L. Dabney, p. 224.

⁴² Louis Berkhof, p. 91.

to as the doctrine of *predestination*, a part of the eternal decrees of God (i.e., that God prior to creation predetermined everything without exception).⁴³

I. ANALYSIS OF KEY TERMS

a. Considering an example: Matthew 22:1-14

b. Key words: elect, election, choose, and chosen

i. In the New Testament, we find the adjective ἐκλεκτός (*eklektos*)⁴⁴ used twenty-two times and generally translated as chosen or elect. The adjective *eklektos* is used several times in reference to tribulation saints (not all saints) and is also used to describe angels, churches, and Jesus and most often the word is used as an adjective without any further theological explanation (e.g., “for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened,” “I endure all things for the elect’s sake”).

ii. We find the related verb ἐκλέγομαι (*eklegomai*)⁴⁵ used twenty-two times and generally translated as choose. Of the twenty-one uses of the verb *eklegomai*, most refer to men’s choices, the selection of the apostle or of Israel or the Gentiles, the end-time saints, or Jesus. Indeed, only in Ephesians 1:4 is there a reference to the *eklegomai* of all Christians, a verse we will address in detail. According to BDAG, the verb *eklegomai* can have the meaning “to pick out someone or something, choose” but has a secondary meaning of “to make choice in accordance with significant preference.” As Gordon Olson observes, “[t]he secular and Septuagint Greek predominantly shows a derived meaning of the best or the choice, such as ‘the most beautiful of what is to be praised’ or ‘something good from literary treasures,’ ‘that which is choice or excellent,’ ‘what is desired, or costly,’ ‘what is costly in the concept of the pure,’ ‘emphasizes the choice or excellent element...’”⁴⁶

⁴³ Although beyond the scope of this book to provide a detailed discussion, I would point out that some Calvinists debate the question of “whether in the plan of God the decrees of election and reprobation precede or follow the decrees to create the world and to permit the fall.” Berkhof, p. 92. Some Calvinists hold to the *supralapsarian* view. Under this view, God made a decision to save some and damn others, known only in His mind as possibilities at the time, and then subsequently decreed to create both groups of people, then decreed “to permit man to fall” and then decreed a way of salvation for the elect. *Id.*, p. 93. Some Calvinists hold to the *infralapsarian* view, namely that God first decreed to create man, then decreed to permit the fall, then decreed to elect some and pass over others, and finally decreed a way of salvation for the elect. *Id.*

⁴⁴ Matthew 20:16, 22:14, 24:22, 24:24, 24:31; Mark 13:20, 13:22, 13:27; Luke 18:7, 23:35; Romans 8:33, 16:13; Colossians 3:12; 1 Timothy 5:21; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:2, 2:4, 2:6, 2:9; 2 John 1, 13; and Revelation 17:14.

⁴⁵ Mark 13:20; Luke 6:13, 10:42, 14:7; John 6:70, 13:18, 15:16, 19; Acts 1:2, 24, 6:5, 13:17, 15:7, 22, 25; 1 Corinthians 1:27-28; Ephesians 1:4; James 2:5. The Strong number is 1586.

⁴⁶ C. Gordon Olson, *Getting the Gospel Right* (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publishers, 2005), p.

- iii. We also find the noun ἐκλογή (*ekloge*)⁴⁷ used seven times. Of the seven uses of the noun *ekloge*, four refer to Israel, one to Paul himself, and two to the believer's "election" without further theological explanation. The noun *ekloge* is defined by BDAG as "a special choice, selection, choice, election." Olson observes that the "meaning of the noun *ekloge* in secular Greek is predominantly 'selection', also having a qualitative meaning, and in Jewish writings, human free choice."⁴⁸
- c. A closer look at *eklektos*
 - i. BDAG defines it as "pertaining to being selected," but with secondary meanings "pertaining to being especially distinguished" (referencing as an example the "elect angels" or "distinguished angels" of 1 Timothy 5:21) and "pertaining to being considered best in the course of a selection, choice, excellent."
 - ii. Liddell and Scott's lexicon provides a secondary definition of "choice, pure."
 - iii. Since *eklektos* has more than one lexical definition, context must drive our determination of which usage applies in a particular verse.
 - iv. LXX and apocryphal usages: "choice" sepulchres (Genesis 23:6), "well favoured" animals (Genesis 41:2, 4, 18, 20), "rank" corn (Genesis 41:5, 7), "chosen [i.e., the best] chariots" (Exodus 14:7), "pure myrrh" (Exodus 30:23), "young men" (Numbers 11:28; 2 Kings 8:12; Isaiah 40:30; Lamentations 1:15, 5:13-14), "choice vows" (Deuteronomy 12:11), "chosen [i.e., the best] men" (Judges 20:15, 34; 1 Samuel 24:2, 26:2; Judith 2:15; 1 Maccabees 9:5, 15:26; Psalm 78:31), "pure" (2 Samuel 22:27; Psalm 18:26), "fat oxen" and "fatted fowl" (1 Kings 4:23), "choice fir trees" (2 Kings 19:23), "choice...men" (1 Chronicles 7:40), "great stones" (Ezra 5:8), "choice sheep" (Nehemiah 5:18), "best horseman" (1 Maccabees 4:1), the finest foods (Psalm 141:4), "choice silver" (Proverbs 8:19), choice hearts (Proverbs 17:3), "excellent... cedars" (Song of Solomon 5:15), "choice" child (Song of Solomon 6:9), "best myrrh" (Sirach 46:1), "plenteous" meat (Habakkuk 1:16), the "pleasant land" (Zechariah 7:14; Jeremiah 3:10), "choicest valleys" (Isaiah 22:7), "precious cornerstone" (Isaiah 28:16), "polished shaft" (Isaiah 49:2), "pleasant stones" (Isaiah 54:12), "valiant men" (Jeremiah 46:15), "pleasant vessel" (Jeremiah 25:34), "precious clothes" (Ezekiel 27:20), "costly stones" (Enoch 8:1), and "choice portions" (Testament of Levi 14:5).
 - v. Philo (20 BC to 50 AD) referred to Abraham as the "great father of sounds" in Cherubim 7 (with "great" translating *eklektos*), and the "elect father of sounds" in several places. Philo explained his description of

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⁴⁷ Acts 9:15; Romans 9:11, 11:5, 7, 28; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Peter 1:10. The Strong number is 1589.

⁴⁸ C. Gordon Olson, *Getting the Gospel Right*, Global Gospel Publishers, p. 276 (2005).

Abraham: "The word 'elect' belongs to the mind of the wise man, **for whatever is most excellent** is found in him." (Names 69) And in another place: "And by the addition of the word **elect** his goodness is intimated. For the evil disposition is a random and confused one, but that which is **elect** is good, having been selected from all others by reason of its excellence." (Abraham 83)

- vi. It should come as no surprise that the predominant meaning of these terms in the LXX and other Greek literature carries over to the New Testament.
- vii. Acts 15:22, 26: "Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send **chosen men** of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; *namely*, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:... 26 Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."
- viii. When we look at the proof texts, we need to look for theological content about the "when" and "how" and not just the use of a term like chosen. Consider Romans 16:13: "Salute Rufus **chosen** in the Lord, and his mother and mine." When? How?

II. PILLAR PROOF TEXT: Romans 9 (especially 9:11, 13, 15, 21)

- a. Many Calvinists recognize Romans 9 doesn't teach unconditional election
- b. Romans 9-11 functions as a parenthesis between the main doctrinal material in Romans 1-8 and the applications in Romans 12-16
- c. What is the context of Romans 9? And what did Paul say concerning the Jewish people in Romans 1-8? What is the overall argument of Romans 9-11? And how would unconditional election further that argument?
- d. Key to this passage: Paul says nothing about selecting individuals for salvation, but instead argues that God's Word has been effective through God's prerogative to extend or withhold mercy.

III. PILLAR PROOF TEXT: Ephesians 1:4

- a. Key to this passage: The "choosing" in view is positional truth ("in him") and is not choosing for salvation but choosing "that we should be holy and without blame before him in love" just as Jesus is "at his own right hand in the heavenly places" (1:20) and God "hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew the

exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness through Christ Jesus" (2:6-7). This position blessing is ours at the moment we trust Christ and are placed "in him" and not before.

- b. Other common proof texts: Matthew 24:22, 24:24, 24:31; John 12:37-41, 15:16; **Acts 13:48**; Romans 8:28-29, 11:5, 11:7; Philippians 1:29, 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Timothy 5:21; 2 Timothy 2:10; Peter 1:1-2, 2:7-9; Revelation 13:8, 17:8, 20:15 and 21:27

IV. An alternative view of election

- a. There are inconsistent verses like Matthew 22:1-14, Acts 15:25, 2 Peter 1:10 (this verse is illustrated in the lives of the two men referenced in Acts 15:25) that must be accounted for in the hermeneutical circle
- b. Here are four common sense arguments against unconditional election and in favor of unconditional grace: (1) presentations of the gospel in the Bible are presented for the purpose of convincing people who Jesus is, and by this means some are convinced and others are not; (2) Paul acknowledges that wicked men prevented people from being saved; (3) over and over again, the Bible emphasizes that salvation is to "whosoever" believes and that people are saved by believing, without any reference to election or regeneration; and (4) if the Bible teaches election as the Calvinists understand the term, that election is certainly not unconditional.
 - i. A convincing gospel: What utility is there in the gospel being presented to different people in different ways? Why try to be convincing in the presentation of the gospel? Why preach the gospel at the end of a sermon? Why not present only the historical facts of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15) without more? After all, in the Calvinist system, no one is ever convinced on his own of who Jesus is, but is simply regenerated so that he will certainly believe at a moment in time decreed by God as He gives the regenerated person his faith. But see how Paul sought to persuade people: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Acts 18:4 (cf. 17:4), 28:23-25. And Jesus tailored his message to his audience. (cf. John 3 and 4)
 - ii. People blocking others from believing: If salvation is based on unconditional election, then no one can prevent people from getting saved. But Paul disputes that. (1 Thessalonians 2:16) And so did Jesus.

- (Luke 8:12)
- iii. Whosoever: The Bible repeatedly says “whosoever” believes will be saved. (e.g., John 3:14-16; Revelation 22:17)
 - iv. Conditional election: If the Bible teaches unconditional election, it is difficult to reconcile that with statements such as Jesus saying that it is harder for the rich to be saved (Mark 10:25), statements that entire houses get saved (John 4:53; Acts 16:15, 34; Acts 18:8), or that entire cities reject the gospel (Matthew 10:14-15).
- c. The Biblical doctrine of election (what I would call unconditional grace) is that anyone (not just some select group) that hears the gospel can believe, and upon trusting Christ they become positionally elect, that is, distinguished, excellent, and pure in Christ.
 - d. Note that without total depravity and unconditional election, there is no need for limited atonement or irresistible grace.

SESSION 4: Irresistible Grace, Jesus and Calvinism

Let’s look at irresistible grace in the words of Calvinist writers. Steele, Thomas and Quinn explain the difference between the two calls. Of the outward or general call that is made to anyone, they write:

*The gospel invitation extends a call to salvation to every one who hears its message. It invites all men without distinction to drink freely of the water of life and live. It promises salvation to all who repent and believe. But this outward general call, extended to the elect and nonelect alike, will not bring sinners to Christ. Why? Because men are by nature dead in sin and under its power. They are of themselves unable and unwilling to forsake their evil ways and to turn to Christ for mercy.*⁴⁹

The Calvinists’ view of depravity combined with the obvious fact that the gospel is offered universally in the New Testament creates a problem for them. If people could be saved by simply accepting the general call, then the universal call of the gospel could save anyone, even the non-elect. Thus, they conclude that instead people are saved by an inner or efficacious or effective call:

Although the general outward call of the gospel can be, and often is, rejected, the special inward call of the Spirit never fails to result in the conversion of those to whom it is made. This special call is not made to all sinners, but is issued to the elect only. The Spirit is in no way dependent upon their help or cooperation for success in His work of bringing them to Christ. It is for this reason that Calvinists speak of the Spirit’s call and of God’s grace in saving sinners as being “efficacious,” “invincible,” or “irresistible.” The grace which the Holy Spirit

⁴⁹ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, pp. 52-53.

extends to the elect cannot be thwarted or refused; it never fails to bring them to true faith in Christ.⁵⁰

Along the same lines, Berkhof distinguishes the Calvinist view of the “internal” versus the “external” call:

When we speak of calling in general, we have reference to *that gracious act of God whereby He invites sinners to accept the salvation that is offered in Christ Jesus*. It is a work of the triune God... This calling may be either external or internal. God is the author of both; the Holy Spirit operates in both; and in both the Word of God is employed as an instrument. Yet there are important differences: the external calling comes to all those who hear the Word, while the internal calling comes only to the elect; the external calling as such, that is, without the special operation of the Holy Spirit, affects only the natural life, while the internal calling affects the internal or spiritual life. It is the external calling made effective unto salvation.⁵¹

Similarly, Grudem succinctly defines the effective call as that which saves sinners: “Effective calling is an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which he summons people to himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith.”⁵² The effective call that is accomplished by the Holy Spirit is what the Calvinists term regeneration: “Regeneration is a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us.”⁵³ “In this sense of the word regeneration may be defined as *that act of God by which the principle of the new life is implanted in man, and the governing disposition of the soul is made holy.*”⁵⁴ In other words, God regenerates a person so that they will believe, and this is the effective call made only to the elect. From this brief summary, we can see an immediate issue of concern in the timing of the two calls. It seems that a person is regenerated prior to exercising faith, indeed prior to hearing the gospel at all. Grudem states, “On this definition [of regeneration], it is natural to understand that regeneration comes before saving faith.”⁵⁵ Indeed, most Calvinists would say that regeneration precedes faith (the effective call precedes the general call) or occurs at the same time. Berkhof explains:

The order in which calling and regeneration stand to each other may best be indicated as follows: The external call in the preaching of the Word, except in the case of children, precedes or coincides with the operation of the Holy Spirit in the production of the new life. Then by a creative act God generates the new life, changing the inner disposition of the soul. This is regeneration in the restricted sense of the word. In it the spiritual ear is implanted which enables

⁵⁰ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, p. 53-54.

⁵¹ Louis Berkhof, p. 231.

⁵² Wayne Grudem, p. 693.

⁵³ Wayne Grudem, p. 699.

⁵⁴ Louis Berkhof, p. 236.

⁵⁵ Wayne Grudem, p. 702.

man to hear the call of God to the salvation of his soul. Having received the spiritual ear, the call of God is now brought home effectively to the heart, so that man hears and obeys. This effectual calling, finally, secures the first holy exercises of the new disposition that is born in the soul. The new life begins to manifest itself and issues in the new birth. This is regeneration in the broader sense and marks the point at which regeneration passes into conversion.⁵⁶

You might be wondering whether they are saying that a person is saved prior to hearing the gospel. Calvinists readily agree that being regenerated is being “born again,”⁵⁷ but generally refrain from saying the person is “saved” before hearing the gospel.

In view of the foregoing explanation of irresistible grace, one last consideration is why the doctrine is termed irresistible grace. The Calvinists generally do not favor the term because, in their mind, it suggests that God is forcing salvation on the elect. That, of course, is exactly what they teach, but they attempt to soften the blow. Hodge states, “It is to be lamented that the term irresistible grace has ever been used, since it suggests the idea of a mechanical and coercive influence upon an unwilling subject, while, in truth, it is the transcendent act of the infinite Creator, making the creature spontaneously willing.”⁵⁸ Sproul explains:

Irresistible grace is not irresistible in the sense that sinners are incapable of resisting it. Though the sinner is spiritually dead, he remains biologically alive and kicking. As Scripture suggests, the sinner always resists the Holy Spirit. We are so opposed to the grace of God that we do everything in our power to resist it. *Irresistible grace* means that the sinner’s resistance to the grace of regeneration cannot thwart the Spirit’s purpose. The grace of regeneration is irresistible in the sense that it is invincible.⁵⁹

Spencer similarly elaborates on the use of the term irresistible:

What is meant when the Calvinist speaks of irresistible grace? We answer first in the negative. It does *not* mean that God does violence to man’s spirit by forcing him to do something he does not want to do... Judas, without coercion, fulfilled the will of God (cf. Acts 2:22-23). *Irresistible*, when used of the grace of God toward His elect, means that God, of his own free will, gives life to whom He chooses. Since the *living* human spirit, which is “born of God,” finds the living God wholly *irresistible*, just as the *dead* human spirit finds the gods of the dead (Satan) wholly irresistible, the Lord “quickens” (“makes alive”) all whom He chose in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world. It is the gift of the new nature that makes us find Jesus Christ absolutely irresistible. The new nature, which is a living human spirit, a new creation in Christ, finds God as irresistible as

⁵⁶ Louis Berkhof, p. 237.

⁵⁷ Wayne Grudem, p. 699.

⁵⁸ A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, p. 452 (1999).

⁵⁹ R.C. Sproul, p. 189.

his formerly “dead” human spirit once found the devil irresistible.⁶⁰

In summary, the Calvinists’ doctrine of irresistible grace is that the Bible teaches two types of calls, the outward universal invitation of the gospel to the elect and non-elect, and the inward or effective call to the elect only. This latter call results in the regeneration of the elect person so that when they hear the gospel they find it irresistible and they accept it on the spot. Prior to hearing the gospel, the regenerated elect person is spiritually alive, born again, in union with Christ, and able to understand and respond favorably to God, but not yet saved. With this background information, we can examine whether or not any of this is actually in the Bible.

- I. PILLAR PROOF TEXT: John 6:44, 65
 - a. Context matters
 - i. Jesus ends John 5 addressing Jewish people that not only rejected him, but wanted to kill him, and made the point that they did not believe Moses because, if they had, they would have believed him (5:46-47)
 - ii. John 6 opens with Jesus feeding the 5,000 (6:1-15) then he sent his disciples across the lake to Capernaum
 - iii. The next day some people that witnessed the miracle followed Jesus to Capernaum, but not because they believed. They wanted their bellies filled and to see more miracles. (6:22-27)
 - iv. In the balance of John 6, Jesus addresses a large group referred to as disciples but some of them are not believers and it is his intent to give them another opportunity to believe, and failing that, send them away.
 - b. KEY TERM: Calvinists frontload their doctrine into the word “draw” (Greek *helkuō*) by saying it means to drag, so the picture is of God spiritually dragging the lost person to Jesus by an efficacious or irresistible call. While the term can have the meaning “to drag” when the context shows it is physical exertion or compulsion at issue, the lexicon BDAG says it can also mean “to draw a person in the direction of values for inner life.” Liddell and Scott include the definition, “draw to oneself, attract.” The sense of the word is to attract or woo someone to oneself. The term is used exactly that way in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and other Greek literature. For instance, in Jeremiah 31:3, we read: “The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.” This is being drawn by God’s love (Hebrew *chesed*), not dragged. Likewise, in Song of Solomon 1:4, we read: “Draw me, we will run after thee: the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee.” This is Solomon drawing his wife, obviously not dragging her. Moreover, in John 12:32, we read that Jesus “will draw all men unto me” and we know that not all men are dragged to salvation because that would be universalism. The picture in John 12:32 is that the cross will draw all men to Christ, but that does not guarantee

⁶⁰ Duane Edward Spencer, pp. 56-57.

their salvation. When used of physical objects, “draw” means drag, but when where no physical exertion or coercion is involved, that meaning does not work.⁶¹

- c. Key to this passage: There is nothing here about an efficacious spiritual calling (drawing), but instead the passage addresses the issue of “would be” disciples. Jesus said that those who would come to him (as disciples) must do so in response to God’s wooing or enticing them through His Word (like the writings of Moses referenced in the closing verses of John 5). God had thus prepared people to follow Jesus and gave them to Jesus as disciples (6:65).

II. PILLAR PROOF TEXT: Acts 16:14

- a. Everyone assumes Lydia is lost, but does anything in the passage say that?
- b. KEY TERM: Luke uses the Greek term *sebomai* (“worshipped”) elsewhere in the Acts to describe Gentiles as God-fearing. In particular, Luke uses the term to refer to “religious” proselytes in Acts 13:43, “devout” Greeks in Acts 17:4, “devout” persons in Acts 17:17, and of an apparent Gentile believer named Justus in Acts 18:7 that “worshipped” God.
- c. Everyone assumes Lydia “got saved” in this passage, but does anything in the passage say that?
- d. Key to this passage: Lydia is a saved Gentile that had not yet heard that the Christ had come. Paul brought her that news and the Lord opened her heart to this additional revelation, just as he did for the already saved disciples in Luke 24:31 and 24:44-45 (cf. John 20:22).

⁶¹ C. Gordon Olson, *Getting the Gospel Right* (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publishers, 2005), p. 311.

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- III. Proof texts for two calls: Matthew 20:16, 22:14; Romans 1:6-7, 8:28-30; 1 Corinthians 1:22-24; Galatians 1:15-16
- a. Note that the Bible speaks of people being called in many senses. For a few examples, consider that God called Jesus (Matthew 2:15), Simon was called Peter (Matthew 4:21), Paul was called as an apostle (Romans 1:1), believers are called to peace (1 Corinthians 7:15), believers are called to holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7), Aaron was called to be high priest (Hebrews 5:4), Jesus was called as a high priest after the order of Melchisedec (Hebrews 5:10), Abraham was called to leave Ur of the Chaldees (Hebrews 11:8), and people are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).
 - b. The fact that the term “called” is used in the Bible is undisputed, but this alone proves nothing regarding irresistible grace. We must look to these purported proof texts to see if two types of calls related to salvation are taught, and in particular, whether any verse teaches the so-called “effectual call.”
- IV. General proof texts: Ezekiel 37:1-6; Jeremiah 31:3; Psalm 65:4; John 5:21
- V. An alternative view
- a. Paul teaches that people are saved by faith and that faith is not a work so there is no theological need for irresistible grace. (Romans 3:27-31, 4:3-5, 10:17)
 - b. Some believed Jesus’ words and some believed because of his works.
 - c. As a practical matter, this means that how we deliver the gospel message really does matter.
- VI. THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE AND JESUS’ TEACHINGS
- a. The hermeneutical circle reminds us that it is not acceptable for different verses in the New Testament to stand in conflict. If Jesus said things that cannot be reconciled with what we think the rest of the New Testament teaches about the TULIP, then we should accept Jesus’ words and re-examine our system.
 - b. All of these things are inconsistent with Calvinism
 - i. Jesus mission to seek and save the lost (Matthew 18:12-13; Luke 9:56, 19:10) makes no sense if only the elect could be saved.
 - ii. The healings were intended to illustrate and validate Jesus’ power to bring spiritual healing, and Jesus healed everyone that came to him without exception. (Matthew 4:23-24, 8:16-17, 10:1, 7-8, 12:15; Mark 2:5-11) If Jesus only purposed to save a small group of people who would be given their belief in him based on election, then why did he heal everyone who came to him for healing without exception? And on a more fundamental level, why heal anyone? The elect need no convincing.
 - iii. Jesus taught that certain cities that rejected him would be judged more harshly the famous sin cities in the Bible. (Matthew 10:12-15, 11:20-24, 12:39-42) He even said that some cities that were destroyed for their disbelief would have believed had they received the additional revelation some cities in the first century received.

- iv. Jesus said that bad people kept others from entering the kingdom. (Matthew 23:13; Luke 11:49-52)
 - v. Jesus said it is harder for rich people to get saved. (Matthew 19:23-24; Luke 18:22-25)
 - vi. Jesus said if people did not believe his words they should believe his works. (John 10:37-38)
 - vii. Jesus spoke in parable to conceal and reveal (Matthew 13:11-13) but why would he need to conceal the mysteries of the kingdom from non-elect people who cannot comprehend God's Word?
- VII. THE BIG TAKE AWAY
- a. The gospel is NOT contingent good news.
 - b. God did not create people for hell.
 - c. God created humanity with volition and God paid the ultimate price for it.
 - d. We can present the gospel message with integrity because God really did love the world so much that He gave His Son to provide a way of reconciliation for any that would appropriate by faith the sin payment made by the Son on their behalf.

SESSION 5: The Decrees of God

Louis Berkhof, a leading Reformed theologian of the 20th century, defines the decrees (or decree) in this way: "The decree of God is His eternal plan or purpose, in which He has foreordained all things that come to pass."⁶² He continues by explaining that there is only one decree but because it covers many particulars, it is often spoken of in the plural, that is, as the decrees of God. It should not be surprising that this doctrine does not sit well with many believers. Culver harshly criticizes those that will not accept it: "Nothing in the scheme of Christian doctrine is so offensive to the secular spirit or so preposterous to the unbelieving mind as to propose that God has a plan for the whole universe down to such minute details as the hairs on one's head or the death of a sparrow (Matthew 10:29, 30) and is unfailingly executing the same."⁶³ Whatever one's reaction to the eternal decrees of God, the real issue is whether it is Biblical. And of course, if the decrees of God as Berkhof defined them are Biblical, then Berkhof or Culver or others should be able to point us to the passages that teach the doctrine and make quick work of the matter.

Lest anyone think Berkhof's view is singular among Reformed theologians, the definitions of others are quoted below, all sharing in common the conviction that God predetermines everything without exception:

The decrees of God are His eternal purpose according to the counsel of His will,

⁶² Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 84 (1933).

⁶³ Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology*, Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., p. 122 (2006).

whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.⁶⁴
(Dabney)

By the decrees of God we mean that eternal plan by which God has rendered certain all the events of the universe, past, present, and future.⁶⁵ (Strong; also adopted by Culver⁶⁶)

The decree of God is his eternal, unchangeable, holy, wise, and sovereign purpose, comprehending at once all things that ever were or will be in their causes, conditions, successions, and relations, and determining their certain futuration.⁶⁷ (Hodge)

The decrees of God are *the eternal plans of God whereby, before the creation of the world, he determined to bring about everything that happens.*⁶⁸ (Grudem)

We may define the plan of God as his eternal decision rendering certain all things which shall come to pass.⁶⁹ (Erickson)

Commenting on the expansive scope of the decrees of God, Gordon Clark summarizes: “The material above shows clearly that God plans, decrees, and controls all events.”⁷⁰ Spencer likewise makes clear that God’s decrees go to everything without exception: “...whatever comes to pass in the history of mankind does so by virtue of the fact that it suited the eternal plan or purpose of God... Therefore, whatever comes to pass in any part of creation, at any time in history, does so because the omniscient God knew it as a possibility, willed it as a reality by His omnipotence, and established it in His divine plan or purpose.”⁷¹ And Erickson states: “The plan of God is all-inclusive.”⁷² Hodge provides an excellent summary “under several heads the Calvinistic doctrine on this subject”:

1st. God foreknows all events as certainly future *because* he has decreed them and thus made them certainly future.

2nd. God’s decree relates equally to all future events of every kind, to the free actions of moral agents, as well as to action of necessary agents, to sinful as well as morally right actions.

⁶⁴ R.L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, p. 211 (2002).

⁶⁵ Strong, p. 353.

⁶⁶ Culver, p. 123.

⁶⁷ A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, p. 200 (1999).

⁶⁸ Grudem, p. 332.

⁶⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker Book House, p. 346 (1983).

⁷⁰ Gordon Haddon Clark, *Predestination*, Lois A. Zeller and Elizabeth Clark George, p. 53 (1987).

⁷¹ Spencer, p. 22.

⁷² Erickson, p. 353.

3rd. Some things God has eternally decreed to do himself immediately, e.g., creation; other things to bring to pass through the action of second causes acting under a law of necessity, and again other things he has decreed to prompt or to permit free agents to do in the exercise of their free agency; yet the one class of events is rendered by the decree as certainly future as the other.

4th. God has decreed ends as well as means, causes as well as effects, conditions and instrumentalities as well as the events which depend upon them.

5th. God's decree determines only the certain futurity of events, it directly effects or causes no event. But the decree itself provides in every case that the event shall be effected by causes acting in a manner perfectly consistent with the nature of the event in question.⁷³

We can readily see why consideration of this doctrine is so important. If God foreordained everything without exception, then He necessarily selected those who will be saved and spend eternity with Him and accomplished salvation for them. While many Calvinists would say that God did not select the rest of humanity for the lake of fire (so-called double predestination), the necessary implication from God selecting those He would save is that He made a decision not to select everyone. Whether you view it as God selecting the rest for the lake of fire, or merely passing over them as He selected those He would save, the net result for those that spend eternity in the lake of fire is the same. The Bible says God is love and God loves the world, and so this issue of the decrees of God merits our careful consideration. To support their view on God's decrees, Reformed theologians typically appeal to a philosophical argument⁷⁴ and then several purported proof texts. I will address the philosophical argument first, and then demonstrate that the Reformed theologians do not have a single verse that provides evidence supporting their doctrine of the decrees of God.

I. ARGUMENTS FOR THE DECREES OF GOD

- a. Note that Reformed Theologians equate foreknowledge with foreordination. In other words, they say God has foreknowledge *because* He decreed everything.
- b. The philosophical argument: (1) God has foreknowledge and created the material universe, (2) therefore, every event in the creation is certain to occur in accordance with God's foreknowledge of the event before creation, (3) therefore, every event that comes to pass is fixed, (4) therefore, a causative

⁷³ Hodge, pp. 202-203.

⁷⁴ Certainly, some writers appeal to other philosophical arguments than the "divine foreknowledge" argument addressed in this text, but the author believes that this is the only one that superficially has some logical appeal. For instance, Hodge makes what he calls arguments from God's divine wisdom, divine immutability and divine benevolence, but in each of these Hodge uses circular reasoning, essentially assuming the existence of the decree of God and then reasoning the nature of the decree from the nature of God. Hodge, pp. 358-59. Consistent with the purpose and goals of this text, this chapter will be limited to the Calvinists' key philosophical argument and primary proof texts.

- agent fixed every event without exception, (5) that causative agent could only be God, and (6) therefore, God decreed (fixed) everything before creation.
- c. The response: If God's foreknowledge is so absolute in its breadth that it includes all of His thoughts, words and actions, then He is also bound by His foreknowledge. Since God is self-existent, there is no point in time when God did not already know every one of His future thoughts, words and actions. This means God is incapable of conceiving a thought he did not previously have at all points in time, speaking a word He did not always know He would speak at that precise moment, or performing a spontaneous action. But the God of the Bible experiences the moment, responds to events as they happen, and even expresses a change of mind.
- i. Our view of God's foreknowledge should start and end where the Bible does.
 - ii. Our view should not resolve God to a philosophical singularity no longer retaining the qualities of being a person.
 - iii. The Bible affirms God's foreknowledge about His creation, His determination that certain discreet future events will come to pass, and His ability to intervene in human events as He pleases.
 - iv. Rather than God's foreknowledge binding Him and us, it maintains our volition and His right to intervene as He pleases in His creation without leaving God in a state of uncertainty about things future.
 - v. In this view of God's sovereignty, nothing comes to pass without God causing or permitting it, but there is no need for a comprehensive decree.
 - vi. If God decreed everything, then He decreed sin. But James 1:13 and Jeremiah 19:5 say God would not do that.
- d. The argument from prophetic texts: Reformed theologians rely heavily on the instances in which God has provided a prophecy of a future.
- i. "God has in the Scriptures foretold the certain occurrence of many events, including the free actions of men, which have afterwards surely come to pass. Now the ground of prophecy is foreknowledge, and the foundation of the foreknowledge of an event as certainly future, is God's decree that made it future. The eternal immutability of the decree is the only foundation of the infallibility either of the foreknowledge or of the prophecy. But if God has decreed certain future events, he must also have included in that decree all of their causes, conditions, coordinates, and consequences. No event is isolated; to make one certainly future implies the determination of the whole concatenation of causes and effects which constitute the universe."⁷⁵
 - ii. The plan of God is all-inclusive. This is implicit in the great variety of items which are mentioned in the Bible as parts of God's plan. Beyond that, however, are explicit statements of the extent of God's plan.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Hodge, p. 206.

⁷⁶ Erickson, p. 353.

- e. The response: Their argument is really no argument at all—they simply state that if God decreed one discreet event He had to decree everything else in order to ensure that one event happens.
 - i. An inductive argument seeks to establish a generalized conclusion from specific occurrences. Such an argument does not establish anything absolutely; the argument is either weak or strong or in between.
 - ii. Such inductive reasoning seeks to draw a conclusion about trillions upon trillions of events from just one or just hundreds.
- f. Pillar proof text: Acts 17:26
 - i. Context: Paul is preaching to the Athenians, who are polytheistic and prideful.
 - ii. Key to the passage: The verse simply teaches that God established national boundaries and the seasons. It does not teach that God foreordained everything, nor does it say anything about the timing of a decree.

- g. The argument from general proof texts: Job 23:13-14; Psalm 115:3; Psalm 135:6; Proverbs 16:33; Isaiah 14:26-27; Isaiah 46:10-11; Daniel 4:35; Daniel 11:36; Matthew 10:29-30; Ephesians 1:11.
- h. The response: Although we should expect such a profound truth claim as the Calvinist’s decrees of God to have a single explicit proof text—somewhere in the Bible that God says he decreed everything before creation—it does not.
 - i. In the KJV, there are 57 occurrences of the word “**decree**” in 55 verses.
 - ii. Of these 57 occurrences, 47 of them refer to the decrees of men. Of the remaining 10 occurrences, we read that God decreed the rain in creation (Job 28:26), the boundaries of the seas (Job 38:10; Jeremiah 5:22), the position of the stars (Psalm 148:6; Proverbs 8:29), the destruction of Israel (Isaiah 10:22; Zephaniah 2:2), to punish Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:17, 24), and in reference to the city boundaries being extended (Micah 7:11).

II. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE DECREES OF GOD

- a. The first evidence submitted for this doctrine was a philosophical argument that equates foreknowledge with foreordination, leading to the conclusion that God authors sin, which of course the Bible expressly rejects.
- b. None of the verses in the Bible that actually use the term “decree” say that God

decreed everything.

- c. And the proof texts do not even mention the word “decree” and, instead, only speak of God bringing to pass certain discrete events, generally without any reference to when God purposed that the events would occur.
- d. Alternative view: The better view is to accept God’s foreknowledge of His creation because the Bible teaches this doctrine and not add to it. We should be content to say, without taking it a step further and insisting on a decree nowhere found in Scripture, that God created with foreknowledge and intervenes in His creation as He pleases and, therefore, everything that comes to pass was either caused or permitted by God.
 - i. The practical implication of refuting the Reformed doctrine of the decrees of God is that our lives are not scripted for us.
 - ii. Our thoughts, words and actions matter a great deal and God is just to hold us responsible for our actions because we were created with genuine volition.

SESSION 6: Perseverance of the Saints

Grudem succinctly defines the perseverance of the saints: “The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.”⁷⁷ This author agrees wholeheartedly in the eternal security of the believer, or as Grudem states, “those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power.” A saint cannot lose their justification, for otherwise it could not be called *eternal* life. But the second part of the definition is where we must part ways. Grudem explains further: “On the other hand, the second half of the definition makes it clear that continuing in the Christian life is one of the evidences that a person is truly born again. It is important to keep this aspect of the doctrine in mind as well, lest false assurance be given to people who were never really believers in the first place.”⁷⁸ Thus, Grudem introduces the Reformed idea that there are multitudes of people who think they are Christians but are not. They are the so-called professors of faith, but not possessors of faith.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, in Article XVII, states the traditional reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints: “They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.” Again, this is not just about being eternally secure, but about having a lifestyle that evidences faith to the end. The Calvinist, Hoekema, explains this point with reference to the writings of fellow Calvinist John Murray:

John Murray makes a strong plea for retaining the express “perseverance” rather

⁷⁷ Grudem, p. 788.

⁷⁸ Grudem, p. 788.

than “preservation.” The term “perseverance,” he says, guards against the notion that believers are spiritually secure regardless of the extent to which they may fall into sin or become careless about their way of life. It is simply not biblical teaching to say that believers are secure regardless of how they live. The doctrine we are considering is the doctrine that believers *persevere*; it is only through the power of God that they are able to persevere, to be sure, but they do persevere. The security of believers is inseparable from their perseverance; did not Jesus say, “He who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22)? Murray, in fact, puts it as strongly as this: “Perseverance means the engagement of our persons in the most intense and concentrated devotion to those means which God has ordained for the achievement of his saving purpose.”⁷⁹

Dabney likewise explains that the doctrine of perseverance of the saints requires an outward showing of works evidencing salvation:

This perseverance does not imply that a man may be living in habitual and purposed sin, and yet be in a justified state, because he who is once justified cannot come into condemnation. We heartily join in everything which can be said against so odious a doctrine. It is impossible, because the living in such a state of sin proves that the man never was, and is not now, in a justified state, whatever may be his names and boasts.⁸⁰

Berkhof remarks that “[t]he name naturally suggests a continuous activity of believers whereby they persevere in the way of salvation” and then offers this definition: “Perseverance is that continuous operating of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion.”⁸¹ Strong also defines perseverance of the saints to include a lifetime of works, and like many Calvinists, views the doctrine as the “human” side of sanctification:

The Scriptures declare that, in virtue of the original purpose and continuous operation of God, all who are united to Christ by faith will infallibly continue in a state of grace and will finally attain to everlasting life. This voluntary continuance, on the part of the Christian, in faith and well-doing we call perseverance. Perseverance is, therefore, the human side or aspect of that spiritual process which, as viewed from the divine side, we call sanctification. It is not a mere natural consequence of conversion, but involves a constant activity of the human will from the moment of conversion to the end of life.⁸²

In his systematic theology, the Calvinist, Culver, is emphatic on the works component of the

⁷⁹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (1994), p. 236.

⁸⁰ Dabney, p. 688-89.

⁸¹ Berkhof, p. 274.

⁸² Strong, p. 881.

doctrine:

The true doctrine (not the caricature often rejected by opponents of the supposed doctrine) means that the believer is kept in faith and obedience, partial and temporary lapses notwithstanding. It means that final apostasy does not take place, that sins committed in moments of neglect of the means of grace will be repented of rather than continued in. Those who live scandalous lives have no basis for assurance and are not to be received as Christians by the churches.⁸³

Thus, it is evident that there is much more to perseverance of the saints than eternal security or “once saved, always saved.” It should also be pointed out again that there are Calvinists that would only hold to eternal security and not the rest of the doctrine. Interestingly, most Calvinists that accept the traditional view explained in all of the quotes above would defend their position as a natural and necessary conclusion from the doctrine of unconditional election, which all Calvinists hold to. Thus, there seem to be some irreconcilable conflicts among Calvinists as to this doctrine, much as there is regarding limited atonement. Our purpose here, though, is limited to addressing the traditional doctrine and its primary proof texts, but before we turn to those, we need to first consider whether the doctrine flows from the very definition of the term “faith.”

I. WHAT IS FAITH?

- a. In plain everyday English the noun “faith” is defined to mean “confidence or trust in a person or thing; belief in the truth of a statement or doctrine.”⁸⁴
- b. In our New Testaments, the Greek word typically translated “**faith**” is the noun *pistis*. According to the Greek lexicon BDAG, the noun *pistis* has the primary meaning of “that which evokes trust and faith” and a secondary meaning of a “state of believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted, trust, confidence, faith.”
- c. The word typically translated as “**believe**” is the related verb *pisteuo*. According to the Greek lexicon BDAG, the verb *pisteuo* has the primary meaning “to consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one’s trust, believe.”
- d. The very essence of the gospel depends on how you define faith, and not everyone defines faith the same way. Calvinists add in a commitment of obedience to Christ.
 - i. Since Calvinists insist that God must give us our faith, by defining faith to include a commitment of obedience, God’s gift of faith to us ensures our obedience in the faith to the end of our lives.
 - ii. Wayne Grudem says that repentance is also necessary for salvation and that “*repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a*

⁸³ Culver, p. 767.

⁸⁴ H.G. Emery and K.G. Brewster, *The New Century Dictionary of the English Language Volume One* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company 1948).

sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."⁸⁵

- iii. Hodge likewise says that faith necessarily leads to good works and also speaks of saving repentance as entailing "[g]rief and hatred of sin, a resolute turning from it unto God, and a persistent endeavor after a new life of holy obedience."⁸⁶
 - iv. Strong affirms that faith includes a "voluntary element" (so-called *fiducia*), which means: "Surrender of the soul, as guilty and defiled, to Christ's governance."⁸⁷
 - e. By giving the term "faith" this special definition, which finds no support whatsoever in the lexical meaning of the term, Reformed theologians insist that salvation is by faith alone while also maintaining that no one can enter heaven without sufficient works (i.e., with faith alone).
 - f. Reformed theologians speak of "spurious faith" or head faith or mental assent as the type of faith that is not saving faith because it lacks the commitment to obedience to Christ.
 - g. In contrast, Charles Ryrie explains: "Faith means confidence, trust, to hold something as true. Of course, faith must have content; there must be confidence or trust about something. To have faith in Christ unto salvation means to have confidence that He can remove the guilt of sin and grant eternal life."⁸⁸
 - h. As Charlie Bing explains, believing is simply believing: "Let's be clear about what it means to believe. To believe something means that we are convinced or persuaded that it is true. We cannot almost believe something. We either believe it or we don't."⁸⁹
- II. Pillar verse for spurious faith: James 2:14 ff.
- a. R.C. Sproul on James 2: "James is asking what kind of faith is saving faith. He makes it clear that no one is justified by a mere profession of faith. Anyone can say he has faith. But saying it and having it are not the same thing. True faith always manifests itself in works. If no works follow from faith, then the alleged faith is "dead" and useless. Abraham demonstrated his faith by his works. He "showed" he had true faith, thus "justifying" his claim to faith. Abraham's profession of faith is vindicated in his demonstration of his faith in Genesis 22.... At issue here is the question of genuine faith. The Reformers taught that "justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone." True faith is never alone."⁹⁰
 - b. John MacArthur on James 2: "The question **can that faith save him?** is not offered to dispute the importance of faith, but to oppose the idea that just any kind of faith can save. (cf. Matt. 7:16-18) The grammatical form of the question

⁸⁵ Grudem, p. 713.

⁸⁶ Hodge, pp. 479, 487.

⁸⁷ Strong, p. 838.

⁸⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 377.

⁸⁹ Charlie C. Bing, *Simply by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009), 40.

⁹⁰ Sproul, pp. 69-70.

calls for a negative answer—“No, it cannot save.” A profession of **faith** that is devoid of righteous **works** cannot **save** a person, no matter how strongly it may be proclaimed. As already noted, it is not that some amount of good **works** added to true **faith** can **save** a person, but rather that **faith** that is genuine and saving will inevitably *produce* good **works**.⁹¹

- c. Key to the passage: James repeatedly affirms he speaks to believers. The “faith” at issue is not faith in the gospel, but the Word generally, and especially the command to love one another. The salvation at issue is the bema judgment where our works are judged with a view to rewards and our share as co-heirs with Christ of the inheritance. Faith without works will not be rewarded.
- III. Other proof texts for spurious faith: Acts 8:9-25; John 2:23-25
 - IV. Other proof texts for perseverance: Romans 8:29-39; Romans 11:20; 1 Corinthians 1:8-9, 13:7-13; Philippians 1:3-6; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Peter 1:5; 2 Timothy 2:12; Galatians 5:21; Matthew 24:13
 - V. An Alternative View
 - a. Consider the hypothetical man at the judgment seat of Christ in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. Did his life reflect spurious faith?
 - i. This man’s works burn up and he receives no reward.
 - ii. What did his life look like so that he received no rewards?
 - iii. Yet he was saved, yet so as by fire.
 - iv. The parable of the ten pounds in Luke 19:12-24 provides a similar teaching about rewards and people that do not get rewards.
 - b. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints steals away our assurance of salvation. Since the mark of the true Christian is that they never fall away permanently from a life of good Christian works, how could anyone possibly have assurance in this lifetime? As long as they are living, there is the possibility of turning from the faith and never turning back.
 - c. We tend to have PhD’s in picking out the faults in others and a pre-school education in looking in the mirror. There is a temptation to make our perception of ourselves be the standard we apply, but the Bible does not teach us to make this judgment. Rightly understanding that Christians can choose to live outside of God’s will and yet be saved reinforces to us our responsibility to encourage, admonish, mentor, bear one another’s burden, and love as we seek to grow and help those around us grow as well.

SESSION 7: Learning, Listening and Talking

As this study comes to a close, it behooves us to briefly consider the matter of speaking to people with whom we disagree. As I have interacted with people about the issues covered in the preceding chapters, many of them had in mind someone they wanted to be better equipped to discuss these issues with. That is a good thing, and we ought always to be willing to

⁹¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James* (Chicago: Moody Press 1998), 124.

share the truth. Paul said, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” (2 Timothy 4:2) But the Bible also says a great deal about how Christians ought to speak to others. Candidly, how some Christians speak publicly about political and Bible issues is an embarrassment and a reproach. If I had to sum up everything the Bible says about our speech in a single word, that word would be humility. It is the key to learning, listening, and talking in a manner that honors Christ and edifies the hearer.

- I. LEARN THE WORD WITH HUMILITY
 - a. Jesus was humble (or meek). (Matthew 11:29; Philippians 2:3-8)
 - b. Part of the fruit of the Spirit is humility. (Galatians 5:22-23)
 - c. Paul admonished Timothy and Titus to humility. (1 Timothy 6:11; Titus 3:2)
 - d. God exalts the humble, as He did Jesus. (Philippians 2:9; Matthew 23:12; 1 Peter 5:5-6)
 - e. Humility and learning the Word
 - i. Proud people do not learn. (Proverbs 26:12)
 - ii. We need humility to learn. (1 Corinthians 3:18)
 - iii. Like the Ethiopian who admitted he needed help to learn the Word. (Acts 8:30)
 - iv. Wise people are teachable. (Proverbs 9:9)
- II. LISTENING AND TALKING
 - a. We are not called to debating for the sake of debating. (Philippians 2:14)
 - b. Our speech can betray our lack of maturity. (James 1:19, 26)
 - i. Someone might protest, “it is just when someone makes me mad that I mouth off.”
 - ii. But the Bible says that circumstances do not create our spirit, they just reveal it.
 - c. Called to be peacemakers and edify others. (Romans 14:19; Ephesians 4:29)
 - d. Recommendations for interacting with others about disputed issues
 - i. Do so with humility.
 1. We can only learn with humility.
 2. We can only teach with humility. (2 Timothy 2:24-25)
 3. Our conversation with someone with whom we disagree should not be a fight or heated argument (“must no strive”), but our approach should be “gentle,” for the purpose of teaching, with patience and humility.
 - ii. Be a good listener. (James 1:19)
 1. We can have a reasoned and profitable discourse without monopolizing the conversation and without interrupting.
 2. If we are humble, they might teach us something.
 3. All of our responses should not be about telling the other person they are wrong. Try asking them questions; it shows you are listening and value their opinion.
 4. First goal is to understand what they believe and why so we can pinpoint where the point of disagreement is.

- iii. Set out some ground rules to cabin the conversation.
 - 1. Select a single passage to discuss and limit the conversation to that passage and the book where it is found before moving on.
 - 2. Avoid the “moving the goalposts” problem.
 - 3. May state that you have no interest in debating but are willing to discuss what you believe and why.
 - 4. Listen and no interrupting.
 - 5. Only edifying, respectful speech.
- iv. Beware Facebook folly and other blogs and social media melee. Remember that Matthew 12:36 applies!
- v. Be a good steward of your time—budget and spend wisely. (Ephesians 5:16) You cannot afford “pinball machine” discussions.
- vi. Remember that while everything is debated, not everything is reasonably debatable.
 - 1. Beware theological “flat earthers” with their private interpretations (1 Peter 1:20) that require just about everyone to be wrong so they can be right.
 - 2. Paul says don’t waste your time. (1 Timothy 1:4)
 - 3. They love debating, speak with great confidence (as fools do), and have an air of intellectualism about them, but their views are so far “off the deep end” that there is not even a sensible starting place from which to engage in a profitable conversation. And they have zero interest in the evidence.

III. SOAPBOXES

- a. Everyone has a soapbox, but we need to be mindful not to let one issue so consume us so that we cannot effectively minister to other people outside the scope of our soapbox issue.
- b. Let the Great Commission be your soapbox issue.

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Living Hope, A Mission 119 Guide to First Peter (2019)

Chasing Jonah, A Mission 119 Guide to Jonah (2018)

Love, Romance & Intimacy, A Mission 119 Guide to the Song of Solomon (2016)

Better With Jesus, A Mission 119 Guide to Hebrews (2015)

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