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“Faith Alone In Christ Alone”

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**Statement of Faith:** “Jesus Christ, God incarnate, paid the full penalty for man’s sin when He died on the Cross of Calvary. Any person who, in simple faith, trusts in the risen Christ as his or her only hope of heaven, refusing to trust in anything else, receives the gift of eternal life which, once granted, can never be lost.”

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# JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE GOSPEL

**BOB WILKIN**

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society  
Irving, Texas

## I. "I HOPE I SHARED ENOUGH"

A while back I was visiting with a pastor friend about a short-term mission trip he had taken. Something he said grabbed my attention. This friend is a solid Free Grace proponent. He believes and would surely die for justification by faith alone.

"Steve" was given the chance to speak at a secular orphanage. He was told he shouldn't say anything about Jesus or Christianity. Well, Steve felt burdened to preach the gospel. So he told the boys and girls that God became a baby, that baby grew up and the man, Jesus, lived a sinless life and then He died on the cross for our sins. Three days later He rose bodily from the grave. Jesus died for your sins and for my sins. And now He is alive. With that, Steve ended his message and sat down.

Steve told me that everyone was deeply moved by his message. The power of the cross really came through. But then he told me something remarkable. Steve looked at me and with a wistful look on his face said: "I hope I shared enough so that maybe some of the children were born again that day."

Steve forgot something in his preaching that day. He never mentioned *the promise of the gospel*. He never told the audience what they needed to do and what they would have if they did it.

Steve knew deep down that telling people that Jesus died for our sins and that He rose from the grave on the third day is not enough. He knew people needed more information than that. Steve forgot to tell his audience anything about believing in Jesus or about everlasting life.

I believed Jesus died on the cross for my sins and rose bodily from the dead 14 or more years before I believed in Jesus for eternal life. There are millions of people around the world who do not believe in justification by faith alone, yet who do believe many orthodox truths

about Jesus and the Bible, including the fact that Jesus died for our sins and rose bodily from the dead.

The thesis of this article is this: Justification by faith alone is an essential part of the gospel. Stated another way, if you have not communicated the truth of justification by faith alone, you have not given enough information for a person to be born again.

## II. MANY NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARS SEE MANY WAYS TO COME TO JESUS

Back in 1998 I had a discussion in front of about 150 students with a renowned seminary professor who teaches New Testament. Our topic was “What Is the Gospel?” In the course of the debate the scholar separated the good news that Jesus died and rose again from the condition of eternal life.

“Daniel” said that there are different types of gospel appeals in the New Testament and that people can come to Christ by believing in Jesus, or by repenting of their sins, or by totally committing themselves to Jesus. There is one gospel, which he understood as Jesus’ death and resurrection; but there are many ways to come to Jesus.

I asked him how he decided which appeal to give when speaking to a given group of people. His answer was that the Holy Spirit guides him and tells him which appeal to present to a given person.

What Daniel was saying is held by many today. He said that the gospel is the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is the one and only gospel. But notice that by doing this he is then free to say that there are many ways to come to the One who died and rose again. Justification by faith alone in this view is not an essential doctrine any longer. Some may come to Christ that way, but others may come by turning from their sins or by committing their life.

## III. MANY FEEL FAITH-ALONE IS TOO PICKY

A friend of mine used to work as a security guard at a Bible church with well over one thousand people in attendance each Sunday. He told me about a controversy that came up at his church.

The pastor, we’ll call him *Norm*, said from the pulpit that Mother Theresa is now in heaven. A member of the church, I believe she may have been a former Catholic herself, questioned the truth of that statement and the wisdom of saying that in front of a large audience that

surely included people who did not yet believe in justification by faith alone.

Pastor Norm did not clarify his statement from the pulpit the next week or any week soon thereafter. Rather, Norm replied privately to his staff. He emailed the entire staff, including my friend, a report of what the woman had said and then a long explanation of why she was wrong.

In the email Norm said that not only Mother Theresa, but untold numbers of Catholics and Anglicans and others who do not believe in justification by faith alone are born again because they “believe in Jesus” and love Him. The precise content of what they believe about Jesus is not the point.

He went on to say *that God is not so picky that a person has to get his doctrine just right*. As long as a person loves Jesus and believes in Him, that’s enough. Confusion over justification by faith alone is unfortunate, but won’t keep anyone from heaven, because that isn’t what it means to believe in Jesus.

Norm, by the way, is a conservative. He believes in justification by faith alone. He just doesn’t believe that is an essential doctrine that must be believed in order to have eternal life. Of course, this comes out in his preaching. Thus, a person in his congregation who believes in justification by faith plus works will likely understand Norm to be saying that he is born again, for that is what Norm believes.

There are many pastors and many churches like this one today. Many conservative Bible churches teach that it really does not matter whether you add works to faith as the condition of justification. The key is that you at least see faith in Jesus as necessary and that you love Jesus and are committed to serving Him. The precise content of your faith in Jesus is not a life and death matter with most pastors today.

#### IV. MOST IN CHRISTENDOM BELIEVE IN THE CROSS YET DON’T BELIEVE IN JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

As mentioned above, when many evangelize, they focus on whether the person they are witnessing to believes Jesus died on the cross in their place. They see the cross, rather than justification by faith alone, as the essential truth that separates believers from unbelievers. Yet many who believe in the cross don’t believe in justification by faith alone.

Now I should say that a full understanding of substitutionary atonement almost demands that a person believes in justification by faith

alone. However, few have a full understanding of substitutionary atonement until long after they came to faith in Jesus for eternal life.

The point remains that millions do not understand or do not fully understand substitutionary atonement, yet they genuinely believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and that He bodily rose from the dead.

Believing that Jesus died and rose again is great, but believing that does not mean that a person is regenerate. In other words, a person may believe that Jesus died for his sins and rose again and yet not believe the gospel! I urge that we make the issue of justification by faith alone clear.

Many today, indeed the vast majority, of those who believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose again are not born again. The reason is simple. They have not yet believed that the one who simply believes in Jesus has everlasting life.

Earlier I told you about my Pastor friend, Steve. I spoke at his church a while ago. Steve asked me to speak in the Sunday morning worship service on how to share the gospel clearly. In the course of my message I indicated that object of saving faith was not the cross *per se*, but the promise of Jesus that the one who simply believes in Him has everlasting life. I said that the cross explains how Jesus can fulfill the promise and who it is that makes the promise, but that a person could believe in the cross and not be born again. We must believe Jesus' promise to be regenerate.

Well, my comments set off some fireworks. After I finished Pastor Steve stood up and said something like this:

Thanks, Bob. While I appreciate much of what Bob just said, I feel it is necessary for me to correct something he said. He said that the cross is not the object of saving faith. He was wrong. The cross is the object of the saving faith. First Corinthians 15:3-11 shows that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the gospel. So if we tell people that Jesus died on the cross in our place and rose from the dead, then we have shared the gospel clearly.

That wasn't the end of it. I was there for a multi-day Bible conference. The next day at lunch Steve said that based on his understanding of Gal 1:8-9 that I was proclaiming a false gospel. This led to an interesting discussion over lunch!

The third day, when we were talking, the associate pastor, who had been reflecting on the pastor's charge that I was a heretic based on Galatians, said that the issue in the letter to the Galatians was not the cross,



but justification by faith alone. The associate pastor pointed out that the Judaizers surely preached the death and resurrection of Jesus. What they denied is that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law of Moses. What the associate pastor said is the key to this discussion.

Is the gospel what Paul says in Galatians? If so, we cannot proclaim the gospel clearly without proclaiming justification by faith alone. We don't need to use the word *justification*, but we must preach *the concept* or its equivalent if we wish to preach the gospel of Paul and Jesus. "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47) is justification by faith alone in different words.

As Steve himself illustrated with his comments about his evangelistic preaching at the overseas orphanage, a person can boldly preach that Jesus died and rose again and yet not evangelize clearly enough if he fails to preach justification by faith alone. Isn't that what the Mormons do? The Jehovah's Witnesses? Roman Catholics? Arminian Protestants? Lordship Salvationists?

If the gospel is a car, then justification by faith alone is standard equipment. It is not optional. If you find someone preaching the gospel without mentioning that the sole condition of justification/eternal life is faith in Jesus, then the gospel they are preaching is not the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

## V. MANY FIVE-POINT CALVINISTS DO NOT CONSIDER JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE ESSENTIAL

Many five-point Calvinists feel that Arminians, people who do not believe in eternal security or justification by faith alone, are brothers and sisters in Christ as long as their lives back up their profession of faith in Christ. This is a major concern to other five-point Calvinists, some of whom are in the Free Grace camp and others of whom are not.

Calvinist John G. Reisinger wrote: "There is a man in Tennessee who is convinced I am not saved because I speak of 'our Arminian brethren.' He writes long letters warning me of my lost estate. He cannot see that he has placed his particular understanding of truth on the same level as inspiration. The poor man's entire theology is, in his eyes, just as verbally inspired as the Bible itself."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.soundofgrace.com/jgr/index023.htm>.

Taking the opposite stand, that is, taking the position of the man from Tennessee who confronted Reisinger, Calvinist Pastor Bill Parker says,

“Many so-called Calvinists, who give mental assent to the doctrines of grace, believe that they themselves and others were saved while in Arminianism or some other false gospel. This shows both an ignorance of the true Gospel and a lack of repentance. They judge themselves and others as saved not based on what they believe (doctrine and a life consistent with it) but based on appearance, morality, and reputation. This is Satan’s lie. It always results in speaking peace where there is no peace, and it promotes lost sinners in false refuges of self-righteous religion.

Many [Calvinists] speak of ‘Arminian brethren,’ implying that even though we differ in doctrine, we believe the same gospel. But what is the Gospel?” (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

Parker went on to say that Arminians promote works salvation since they see faith, repentance, and perseverance as conditions of eternal salvation. Parker sees those things as required, but since regeneration precedes these things, all these things are gifts of God.

Sadly, Pastor Parker didn’t see their problem as their denial of justification by faith alone. Rather, their problem lies in failing to see faith, repentance, and perseverance as gifts of God and works of God.

At a website called “Grace Gems”<sup>3</sup> a Calvinist Pastor, Darryl Erkel tells the reader to “recognize that Salvation is Broader than the Calvinist Camp.” His first reason why Calvinists should consider Arminians to be born again is as follows:

All of us, at one time or another, were Arminian in our thinking. A professing Arminian may be just as unregenerate as a professing Calvinist, but one’s adherence to Arminian theology does not necessarily exclude them from the kingdom of God. It is disturbing to hear some Calvinists assign all Arminians to the lowest abyss while conveniently forgetting that they too, at one time, were Arminians. Although the great 18<sup>th</sup> century evangelist, George Whitefield, had his differences

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.rofgrace.com/art20.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.gracegems.org](http://www.gracegems.org) and click on the sermon by Darryl Erkel entitled, “Practical Wisdom for Calvinists.”

with the staunch Arminian John Wesley, he was able to see the hand of God in Wesley's ministry and count him as a brother in Christ. Thus, we must be patient with our brethren and recognize that both ethical and theological maturity takes time. In fact, there are some truths that, for whatever reason, we may not yet be ready to receive – as Jesus told His own disciples, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (John 16:12)...

"Far be it from me to imagine that Zion contains none but Calvinistic Christians within her walls, or that there are none saved who do not hold our views" (cited in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966] p.65)... (emphasis his)

This Reformed Pastor does not consider the five points of Calvinism as the gospel. Most JOTGES readers would say a hearty amen to that. However, Erkel implicitly does not consider justification by faith alone to be an essential truth. Arminians believe in justification by faith plus works. They also believe that everlasting life is lost whenever a believer commits a big enough sin.

Later, he gave another reason why we should not consider Arminians as unregenerate:

Most Arminians reject the Doctrines of Grace out of gross ignorance, misunderstanding, or misrepresentation on the part of sincere, but misinformed Calvinist's. Thus, often they are not rejecting genuine Calvinism, but distortions of it. One's *heart* may be right, while one's *head* may be wrong. (emphasis his)

As one can easily see, for Calvinists like this pastor, as long as one's *heart* is right, he is born again, even if he doesn't understand or believe the saving message! Works-salvation thinking is saving as long as one's heart is right.

His final reason is that:

Calvinism is *not* the Gospel. One is not saved by a proper understanding of election, Divine sovereignty, or the extent of the atonement. These issues, no doubt, are important, but they are not the *core* of the Gospel; they *indirectly* relate to the Gospel (as do many other Biblical teachings), but are not the *essence* of it. The puritan, John Bradford, stated: "Let a man go to the grammar school of faith and repentance, before he goes to the university of election and predestination." In the

same way that it is wrong to *detract* from the Gospel message, so it is wrong to *add* to the Gospel message one's particular theology. (emphasis his)

Doctrine, according to many Calvinists, is not part of "the *core* of the gospel." The core is "faith and repentance." Of course, we are not talking here of "head faith," as the preceding point shows, but "heart faith." And notice it is not merely faith, but faith and repentance. Erkel never explains precisely what one must be convinced is true (i.e., believe), since for him, regeneration is a matter of the heart, not head or mind.

A few years ago I met with a leading 5-Point Calvinist who is the head of one of the largest Christian radio ministries in the world. I asked him about Calvinists who speak of Arminians as fellow believers. His response concerned me. Instead of saying that was wrong, he said that was correct. This following is not a quote. This is my recollection of what he said:

Well, Arminians believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead. They are trusting in His death on their behalf. Now while they are in error when they say that one is justified by faith plus works, that doesn't mean that they are not born again. After all, they do believe in Jesus. And if they are persevering in good works, then they are giving evidence that they are regenerate.

Even in Reformed thought, justification by faith alone is not normally considered an essential part of the gospel.

## VI. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE IS UNDER ATTACK

The U.S. is involved in a war on terrorism. It is a costly war. The stakes are high. It is not easy to know who the enemies are, for they work covertly.

The Grace movement is involved in a war as well. It too is costly and the stakes are high. And you can't tell who the enemies are simply by looking at them. Those who deny justification by faith alone are loving people, godly people, good parents, and good neighbors. They go to church and sing with gusto and praise God.

The only way to tell who the spiritual terrorists are is to find out what they believe one must do to have eternal life. Spiritual terrorists deny that one must believe in justification by faith alone before he can be born again.

These spiritual terrorists do not deny the cross or the resurrection. In fact, they proclaim these truths. What they deny is that one must believe in faith as the one and only condition of eternal life to be born again.

Justification by faith alone is under attack today. Now by this I mean more than that many who proclaim it define faith in such a way to deny the truth of justification by faith alone. The Trinity Foundation has documented this in *The Current Justification Controversy*<sup>4</sup> and *A Companion to The Current Justification Controversy*.<sup>5</sup> I will not repeat that discussion here.

What I am discussing here is more subtle. Justification by faith alone is under attack since many say you don't need to believe it in order to have eternal life! As we've seen above, even some 5-Point Calvinists are saying this.

I know of no Free Grace people who have said this publicly. I know of some who have told me privately that belief in justification by faith alone is not essential. In their view some who believe in justification by faith plus works, and who never believed in justification by faith alone, are born again. I am alarmed by such thinking, especially from within our camp.

If we as the Grace movement fall prey to this way of thinking, the grace movement will die. Of course, God will not allow His gospel to depart completely. But He may well allow fewer and fewer churches and people to proclaim it clearly.

## VII. FAITH ALONE IS AN ESSENTIAL IN EVANGELISM (GALATIANS 1:8-9)

As mentioned above, Paul in Galatians was defending his evangelistic gospel, his evangelistic good news. And that good news was justification by faith alone. Galatians 2:15-16, the thesis of the book, make this clear. A person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. That is the good news Paul preached and the legalistic Judaizers opposed.

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<sup>4</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> John Robbins, *A Guide to The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2003).

So what is the absolutely essential message that must be proclaimed and believed in order for a person to gain eternal life? A person is 1) justified (declared righteous) 2) by faith in 3) Jesus Christ.

The *sine qua non* in evangelism is a propositional statement found in Gal 2:15-16. It has three essential parts. Jesus gave the same three points: "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47). Note the three essentials:

1. Believing
2. in Jesus
3. for everlasting life.

If you don't mention believing, or the equivalent (like being persuaded), then you haven't been clear. If you don't mention the name of Jesus, you have not given enough information. If you don't speak of the promise of *everlasting* life, or the equivalent (like justification that can never be lost under any circumstances no matter what we do or don't do in the future), then you have not articulated the saving message.

I've found that Free Grace people never fail to mention Jesus' name. But sometimes Free Grace people fail to mention believing. They will speak of accepting Christ or receiving Christ. Unfortunately, the person to whom they are witnessing normally doesn't know that accepting or receiving Christ means believing in Him. And even if they do, they often don't know what they are believing Him for.

I've also found that Free Grace people often fail to mention everlasting life. They instead speak of going to heaven when you die. The problem with this is that unless you specifically say that there is nothing you can do to avoid going to hell, that you are secure forever the moment you believe, most listeners think what you are saying is this: "If you believe in Jesus you will go to heaven when you die *as long as you stay faithful to Jesus until that point.*"

If the gospel is a car, then the doctrine of justification by faith alone is not optional equipment. Never fail to tell people that Jesus guarantees eternal life only to those who simply believe in Him. Those who think they must add works do not believe the gospel. They think that if we are right that they are okay, since they just have some extras. We need to show them that if we are right then they are bound for hell since they don't believe the gospel.

## VIII. FIRST CORINTHIANS 15:3-11 DOES NOT TEACH THAT FAITH ALONE IS OPTIONAL

The word *gospel* means *good news*. We sometimes use it, and I am guilty of this myself, to refer to the good news of eternal life for all who simply believe in Jesus. However, the word doesn't have that narrow of a meaning. Any good news is gospel.

Jesus and John the Baptist and the apostles preached the good news of the kingdom. What was that? It was the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand. Jesus the King was here and He was offering the kingdom to that generation of Jews.

The gospel of the kingdom was not the message of what an individual must do to have eternal life. It may or may not have been the two-fold message, repent and believe, of what Israel as a nation had to do for the kingdom to come. But clearly it was the good news that the kingdom was at hand.

The good news in First Corinthians is the good news that Paul preached to the *believers*, not unbelievers, in the church in Corinth. The good news message he preached was Christ crucified. This was a sanctification message that a divided church needed to hear badly.

The apostle John wrote about the cross of Christ similarly in 1 John 3:16-18. Since Jesus laid down His life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. Paul said the same thing in 2 Cor 5:14.

Indeed, is not Gal 2:20 one of the key *sanctification verses* in the New Testament? When Paul speaks of being crucified with Christ, he is talking about how Calvary impacts his life each and every day as a born-again person. When we speak of the death and resurrection of Jesus at communion services, we are not evangelizing anyone. We are using the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection for sanctification.

The example view of the atonement is wrong. The example view of sanctification is correct. The reason we don't find justification by faith alone anywhere in 1 Cor 15:3-11 is because this was *sanctification* good news.

In Galatians the situation is the opposite. There Paul repeatedly speaks of justification by faith apart from works. Only rarely does he even mention the cross, and then it is in sanctification contexts. That is because in Galatians, Paul is defending his evangelism message. Only if a believer remains true to justification by faith alone can he or she walk in the Spirit.

When I hear people point to 1 Cor 15:3-11 and boldly proclaim that is the precise evangelistic message Paul preached, I shutter. How could we get it so wrong? Yes, Paul did tell unbelievers about Jesus' death and resurrection. But *that was not the sum total of his evangelistic message*. Nor is Paul's evangelistic message the point of 1 Cor 15:3-11.

If 1 Cor 15:3-11 is the evangelistic message that we should preach, then Mormons are clear on the gospel. So are Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Arminians, Lordship Salvationists, and just about anyone in Christianity who says that Jesus died for our sins and rose again.

## IX. CONCLUSION: CALL PEOPLE TO BELIEVE IN JESUS FOR EVERLASTING LIFE

May we never fail to tell people the saving proposition: Jesus, the One who died and rose again, *guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him*.

There aren't many evangelistic appeals. There is one. There aren't many ways to come to Jesus. There is but one way. Jesus guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him. That is information we must never fail to communicate.

When you tell people about Jesus' death and resurrection, don't stop there. Go on to tell them that all who simply believe in Him have everlasting life. He is able to fulfill that promise because of His death and resurrection. But call people to believe the promise. When we believe in Jesus, we believe in His promise of everlasting life to the believer. The true object of saving faith is the faith-alone-in-Christ-alone message

Let's not merely "hope we've shared enough." Jesus, the One who died on the cross in our place and rose bodily from the dead, guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him. Share that message and you have shared enough.



# **TULIP: A FREE GRACE PERSPECTIVE**

## **PART 5: PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Can a person who hears the gospel of Christ, understands it, and believes in Him for eternal life be eternally secure? Can he do so regardless of the degree of spiritual success or failure throughout the rest of his life on earth? Is it possible for someone who believes in the Person and finished work of Christ alone for eternal life to subsequently fail to meet a minimum degree of required holiness or obedience with the result that such failure nullifies the effects of his faith? Will such a person go to heaven? In other words, what if a believer doesn't persevere in faith or in faithfulness until the end of his life? Will he ultimately be allowed into the kingdom?

An integral part of Calvinism and of Reformed Theology, in general, is the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. It is represented by the **P** in the **T U L I P** acrostic which represents the five-point Calvinistic position.<sup>1</sup> The Arminian side of the controversy confronts Calvinism on this point and asks, "What happens to believers who fail in their Christian life experience?" The Calvinist says that a person who fails to stay or be kept in grace by God's almighty power demonstrates that he never *truly* believed. God is not obligated to keep in grace those who are not His. So, such a person goes to hell because he is only a *professor* of the

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<sup>1</sup> See the first four aspects of the **T U L I P** acrostic by Anthony B. Badger, "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 1: Total Depravity," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2003):35-61; "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 2: Unconditional Election," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Fall 2003):17-42; "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 3: Limited Atonement," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2004):33-56; "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 4: Irresistible Grace," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2004):19-40.

faith, but was never a *possessor* thereof. Some who lean toward the Arminian persuasion do not think that a believer can lose his eternal salvation, but the standard Arminian position is that it is possible to fall away from the faith and *lose possession of one's eternal life*. In both Calvinism and Arminianism, the bottom line is that the disobedient or pseudo believer is not allowed into heaven and is destined to incur God's eternal wrath in hell.<sup>2</sup> The believer must, therefore, either 1) prove his faith is genuine and that his relation to Christ is real to the end of his life (per the Calvinist) or 2) he must keep the relation to Christ intact by his obedience so as not to break or relinquish that eternally saving association with Him (per the Arminian).

How can two admittedly conflicting major theological views agree on, and even insist upon, the necessity of the perseverance of the saints in holiness and obedience to the end as a qualifying factor in one's eternal destiny? R. E. O. White suggests the dynamic of the doctrine's development, saying the Bible indicates, "Final perseverance in a state of grace by no means depended entirely on the virtue of persevering" and adds that it was "Pastoral necessities [which] dictated a dual approach. Converts needed assurance, and it was given: 'He who believes has eternal life.'" He then adds, conversely, "But pastoral experience demanded also warning: 'Let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.'"<sup>3</sup> Both the *need for assurance* and the *desire for obedience* were formative factors in the development of the doctrine of perseverance as motivating forces in the development of the doctrine.

Our challenge here, in seeking the scriptural intent, is to allow that there may be other ways to understand the Bible with regard to the doctrine of perseverance (or preservation) of the saints and the resulting assurance of salvation (or lack thereof).

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<sup>2</sup> C. Gordon Olson observes certain parallels between the Arminian and Calvinistic positions in this regard in that: 1) neither have complete assurance of ultimate salvation, 2) both assume there is no such thing as fruitless or carnal believers, 3) both make fear of ultimately going to hell a motivating factor for moral behavior, and 4) neither clearly understand the distinction between salvation and rewards, and both arrive at the same erroneous misinterpretations of key passages of Scripture such as 1 Tim 4:16 and Matt 24:13. (C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* [Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002], 296-98).

<sup>3</sup> R. E. O. White, "Perseverance," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 844.

So, in keeping with an inductive study methodology, we must continually ask, what if? What if there is a third, better way to understand the teachings of the Bible that provides both a thoroughly scriptural perspective on the subject and that also sets forth an internally consistent and logical system? And what if this consistently biblical and logical system of thought allows us not only to appropriate God's promise of eternal life on the basis of faith in Christ alone, but also provides us with a solidly biblical, non-contradictory interpretation of those passages which warn Christians against disobedience. It would seem that if such a system should exist and be presented with a clear explanation, it would provide the best of both worlds by 1) providing an *absolute guarantee of eternal salvation* based on God's unequivocal promise of eternal life to those who believe in Christ alone and by 2) setting forth a series of warnings from the heavenly Father that would *aid our Christian living through His grace*.<sup>4</sup> Such a system will be proposed after evaluating the Reformed and the Arminian positions.

## II. THE REFORMED VIEW OF THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is crucial to Reformed theology and Calvinism, which teaches that election is unconditional and that faith is God's irreversible gift to the elect. Boettner, speaking of perseverance, says:

This doctrine does not stand alone but is a necessary part of the Calvinistic system of theology. The doctrines of Election and Efficacious Grace logically imply the certain salvation of those who receive these blessings. If God has chosen men absolutely and unconditionally to eternal life, and if His Spirit effectively applies to them the benefits of redemption, the inescapable conclusion is that these persons shall be saved. And, historically, this doctrine has been held by all Calvinists, and denied by practically all Arminians.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> That grace can be an instructor in holiness and in righteous living is seen in Titus 2:11-12, "For the grace of God appeared—bringing salvation to all men—teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires..."

<sup>5</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), 182.

Palmer adds the doctrine of limited atonement as another basis for the doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Perseverance as a necessity is, then, the result of Calvinistic logic which uses the hypotheses of election, limited atonement, and efficacious (or irresistible) grace as a basis of its conclusions.

Steele and Thomas, under a section entitled *Perseverance of the Saints*, further state the Reformed view that “All who were chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of Almighty God and thus persevere to the end.”<sup>7</sup> The key terms here might be: “given faith” and “kept in faith.” The implication is that if one were *given* faith by God and then *not kept* in that faith, this would separate the believer from the Lord positionally. Steele and Thomas continue:

The elect are not only redeemed by Christ and renewed by the Spirit; they are also *kept* in faith by the almighty power of God. All those who are spiritually united to Christ through regeneration are eternally secure in Him. Nothing can separate them from the eternal and unchangeable love of God. They have been predestined unto eternal glory and are therefore assured of heaven.

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints does not maintain that all who *profess* the Christian faith are certain of heaven. It is *saints*—those who are set apart by the Spirit—who *persevere* to the end. It is *believers*—those who are given true, living faith in Christ—who are *secure* and safe in Him. Many who profess to believe fall away, but they do not fall from grace for they were never in grace. True believers do fall into temptations, and they do commit grievous sins, but these sins do not cause them to lose their salvation or separate them from Christ.<sup>8</sup>

R. E. O. White, commenting on the approach of Steele and Thomas, observes that it indeed “restates the Calvinist position with vigor, ignoring the NT warnings and examples [of believers’ failure to persevere in the faith] but conceding that perseverance does not apply to all who profess faith, only to those given true faith.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the teaching is that true

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<sup>6</sup> Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 71.

<sup>7</sup> David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *Romans: An Interpretive Outline* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 146.

<sup>8</sup> Steele and Thomas, 184.

<sup>9</sup> White, “Perseverance,” 845.

faith so affects the life of the true believer that perseverance to the end of life is guaranteed.

The Westminster Confession itself stands in ongoing support:

- 1) 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.
- 2) This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace: from which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.<sup>10</sup>

Grudem, in a chapter entitled “The Perseverance of the Saint (Remaining a Christian)” follows this line of thinking, saying, “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.”<sup>11</sup> After giving this definition he says there are two parts to it.

It indicates first that there is assurance to be given to those who are truly born again, for it reminds them that God’s power will keep them as Christians until they die, and they will surely live with Christ in heaven forever. 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.<sup>12</sup>

This double-sided definition seems contradictory on its face because it fails to take into account the reality of sin and carnal thoughts or actions of those who believe in Christ. It gives assurance of salvation on

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<sup>10</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 17:1-2. Section 3 of Chapter 17 of this *Confession* allows for the actuality of the presence of sin in the believers life with the outcome of disgrace and temporal judgments.

<sup>11</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 788.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

one hand and takes it away with the other, for who among us knows how we will fare in the Christian life tomorrow? By using the phrase, “truly born again” Grudem implies that one can be born again without being *truly* born again. How *truly* born again can a person be (or not be) who has believed in Christ alone for his eternal destiny?

However, in a seeming inconsistency, they go on to speak about present assurance. When one looks at the criteria offered as a test for one’s election, it becomes clear that one could not have absolutely kept all of them until he died.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, the attempt to guarantee that believers will necessarily persevere to the end inserts a form of legalism and works into the formula for receiving actual eternal life.

So, essentially the Calvinistic view is that those who are 1) selected by God (to the exclusion of others) 2) effectually called by the Spirit (to the exclusion of others) 3) particularly redeemed by Christ (to the exclusion of others) and 4) given faith and made regenerate (to the exclusion of others) will *necessarily* be kept in grace and faith by the power of God both in this world and for eternity (to the exclusion of others). Because of this, if *true* believers stray into sin they will assuredly be restored to fellowship. Failure to be so restored would indicate that they were never *true* believers because they would not persevere to the end. Thus, such persons ought not to be so sure they possess eternal life. The Calvinist seems unaware of the difference between the doctrine of *perseverance* of the saints<sup>14</sup> in holiness to the end of their lives (which arises from the *cooperation* of the believer with the Spirit of God who indwells him) and the doctrine of the *preservation* of the saints for eternity which rests on both the veracity of God’s promise and His power to perform His will regardless of the believer’s works or lack of them.

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<sup>13</sup> Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 102.

<sup>14</sup> Mullins defines *perseverance* as “the continuance of divine life even unto the immortal and glorified forms into which it will finally open at death” (*Christian Religion*, 387). Perhaps his definition is alright if by “the continuance in divine life” is meant the willful obedient walk of the believer. *Preservation*, on the other hand, might be defined as the act of God whereby He assuredly guards and keeps us for Himself for all eternity.

### III. THE ARMINIAN VIEW OF THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Steele and Thomas reflect what might be called the traditional Arminian view under a section entitled “Falling from Grace”:

Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their faith, etc. All Arminians have not been agreed on this point; some have held that believers are eternally secure in Christ – that once a sinner is regenerated, he can never be lost.<sup>15</sup>

Enns summarizes Arminian theology showing that the view disallows assurance.

Arminians have adhered to the doctrine that believers can lose their salvation. Although Arminius himself did not clearly state that believers could be lost, his conclusions pointed in that direction...Arminius emphasized that the free will had to concur in perseverance, otherwise the believer could be lost.<sup>16</sup>

Enns goes on to explain the import and gravity of the Arminian position,

Arminianism stresses human participation and responsibility in salvation: recognition of sin, turning from sin, repentance, confession, and faith...Although the stress on human responsibilities is significant, it involves multiple conditions for salvation, this stress becomes a serious matter because the purity of salvation-by-grace-alone is then at stake.<sup>17</sup>

While Enns recognizes the problem with a multiplicity of conditions for salvation, Arminians seem to be in close proximity with Calvinists here, not recognizing the problem at all. Calvinists say these conditions (or *necessary* results) must follow regeneration to be valid (except for faith, which, to the Calvinist, is given by God as a prerequisite to regeneration). Arminians say they must accompany or precede belief in Christ. Note that both Calvinism and Arminianism require conditions for eternal life other than faith in Christ alone. Enns continues,

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<sup>15</sup> Steele and Thomas, 146.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 499.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 500.

Arminianism teaches that believers may lose their salvation because the human will remains free and so may rescind its earlier faith in Christ by choosing sin. Frequently this view is based on controversial passages like Hebrews 6:4-6 and 2 Peter 2:20-22.<sup>18</sup>

If we recognize that one's regeneration is not due to the free use of his will (i.e., by the "will of man" which, according to John 1:13, is disallowed), the claim that the human free will can rescind earlier faith is manifestly false. Eternal life isn't obtained through *decisionism*, but by acceptance of the gospel as true. We are not justified by the use of our free will, we are justified by faith in God's promise of eternal life by believing in His Son. The question, then, is not whether we can, by our free will, rescind our faith, but whether we have the *ability* to rescind the fulfillment of God's promise.

While loss of salvation is not held by all Arminians, Charles Finney, a theologian of Arminian leanings, seems absolutely confused on this matter. He says saints need not fear the loss of salvation, and then, in the same paragraph, says just the opposite. Note his contradiction:

I find no instance in the Bible in which the saints are enjoined or exhorted to fear that they shall actually be lost; but, on the contrary, this kind of fear is everywhere, in the word of God, discountenanced and rebuked, and the saints are exhorted to the utmost assurance that Christ will keep and preserve them to the end, and finally bestow on them eternal life.<sup>19</sup> They are warned against sin and apostasy, and are informed that if they do apostatize they shall be lost. They are expressly informed that their salvation is conditioned [sic] upon their perseverance in holiness to the end. They are also called upon to watch against sin and apostasy; to fear both, lest they should be lost.<sup>20</sup>

Finney tried to have it both ways. He seems to have believed that sin will not cause loss of salvation but that apostasy will. But, isn't apostasy

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Note here that the *final bestowment* of eternal life upon the saints is quite different than the biblical teaching of presently *possessing* ("having") eternal life when one believes in Christ. See John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47, et. al.).

<sup>20</sup> Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology: New Expanded Edition* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers), 546.



sin? He makes another somewhat confusing statement. The Bible, he says, “nowhere encourages, or calls upon saints to fear, that they shall not be saved, or that they shall be lost. It calls on them to fear something else, to fear to sin or apostatize, lest they be lost. But not that they shall sin and not be lost.”<sup>21</sup> Finney certainly wrestles with the concepts, but seems completely unable to reconcile them. (But the problem here, Dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves). It seems that his problem of clarifying the issues employs a momentary tendency to dismiss God, in practicality, from the scene and to maintain that what God has promised is inconsequential if a believer should lapse from faith or from faithful living. Mullins observes the problematic nature of such as eternal life based on human works or endurance as held by the Arminian position.

The Christian is free to continue in grace or fall away from it. He may have God’s help if he will, but ultimately his destiny is in his own hands. If he is finally lost he, and he only, is responsible. Now this statement of the case is only partial, and fails to take account of vital teachings of Scripture and vital elements of experience. It does not recognize the fulness [sic] of divine grace. It tends to a bare moralism in which human effort is everything, and to a deism which puts God above men and apart from their struggles.<sup>22</sup>

And such, indeed, seems to be the case within the Arminian line of thought.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 544 (while slightly confusing, the punctuation and sentence structure are true to the original source).

<sup>22</sup> Mullins, *Christian Religion*, 433-34. Mullins, here, critical of both Calvinism and Arminianism, unfortunately fails in his solution of the matter by 1) asserting that the power of God keeps the believer secure on one hand and, then, 2) concluding that the other passages expressing real danger (referring to 1 Cor 9:27; Heb 6:4-6; Acts 2:40; Phil 2:12-13) are there as a means whereby God deals with “free moral beings, as persons, [who] can only be reached and influenced and held to the Christian ideal in this way” (pp. 435-36). Regrettably, Mullins thinks God uses the threat of hell or of becoming lost as an incentive for obedience, holiness, and perseverance. This is so even though he argues that the power of God keeps the believer. He apparently sees no contradiction, saying that, “The true doctrine of perseverance, then, is to be found by combining into a unity the groups of teachings which have been employed to support contradictory views” (434). He thinks that by combining the views a unity develops. Rather, it seems that by doing this the contradiction becomes more obvious!

#### IV. A SUMMARY OF THE REFORMED AND ARMINIAN VIEWS

The problems with both the Calvinist and the Arminian positions are evident.

##### A. PROBLEMS WITH THE REFORMED CALVINIST VIEW

*1. The Reformed view questions the eternal security of the believer by imposing the requirement for a successful follow-through.*

The Reformed view raises doubt in regard to God's promise of eternal life by simply believing in His Son. This problem enters through the back door, so to speak, by suggesting that a follow-through in the Christian life, *after* we have believed, *validates* our positional salvation (i.e., justification). Apart from such tenuous, subsequent validation, one cannot really be sure that he is elect, that Christ really died for him, that his faith is real, that God loves him, or that he will ultimately go to heaven. Spirituality and obedience are made requirements and, thus, necessities; but the quantity and quality of such spirituality and dedicated lifestyle is never specified. Certainly believers *should* have a sincere love for Christ and endeavor to walk with Him in good conscience, but such ought not to be made into a requisite for the assurance of salvation.<sup>23</sup>

*2. The Reformed view questions the eternal security of the believer by imposing a dependence on internal evidences.*

The insistence of the presence of additional internal evidences seems to provide a liquid, subjective arena in which to evaluate one's eternal destiny. One might also ask whether it is even possible to have an internal evidence of salvation apart from the revealed promise of God. If our assurance of salvation derives from God's promise, upon what grounds may we legitimately add internal, subjective evidences? But the *Westminster Confession* includes the concept of "internal evidences" to God's

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says that those who "truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope never shall make them ashamed." *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18:1 (quoted from John H. Leith, ed., *The Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in the Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, Revised edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 212.

promise as a co-basis for assurance. Notice that certainty is founded on more than God's promise. It reads:

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, founded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, *the inward evidences of those graces* unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.<sup>24</sup>

If we were to restrict our thoughts to the validity of God's promises and His faithfulness, assurance may be the expected (and also, certain) result, but the inclusion of "internal evidences" would seem to weaken, rather than strengthen, one's assurance. Isn't God's promise enough? It is true that the Spirit of God witnesses that believers are children of God in His Word (cf. Gal 4:6; Rom 5:5; 8:15-16). Wilkin explains clearly that this witness is evident to us when we pray to God, "reminding God that we are His children" and having that scripturally revealed truth confirmed back to us by the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup> But it is also true that believers still sin. And because sin certainly disrupts the subjective "internal evidences of those graces," it follows that with such disruption there must of necessity be a diminished *degree* of assurance. If one is "relatively sure" that he has eternal life, does he have assurance at all? This results in a "hope so" kind of faith comparable to the testimony of Asahel Nettleton, a Calvinistic, 19th century evangelical preacher who said, "The most that I have ventured to say respecting myself is, that I think it possible I may get to heaven."<sup>26</sup> Is this anything close to assurance of possessing eternal life?

Now, since we do not audibly hear the Spirit speaking to us, and since any subjective internal "feeling" that the Holy Spirit is telling us this or that must be evaluated in light of God's Word, it would seem that

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<sup>24</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18:2 from *Creeds of the Churches*, 212-13, italics added.

<sup>25</sup> Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 70-71.

<sup>26</sup> Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism*, 296, quoting from B. Tyler and A. A. Bennett, *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, reprint 1975), 30.

no further reliance need be placed upon “internal evidences.” Unbelievers are able to think kindly toward their neighbors, be gentle, use self control, etc, just like believers can. Yet we would not want to give them assurance of eternal life with God simply because they are demonstrating something that mimics the fruit of the Spirit.

*3. The Reformed view questions the reality of one’s regeneration by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone by denying that assurance is of the essence of faith.*

The above stated dubious attempt to obtain assurance by “internal witness” presents another problem. It calls into question the essence and content of faith. The *Westminster Confession* says,

This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that the true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be a partaker of it [i.e., of assurance of salvation]: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance: so far is from inclining men to looseness.<sup>27</sup>

The *Confession* seems to swerve toward the truth in the last few phrases above by indicating that obedience is the *fruit* of assurance, not *vice versa*. But if assurance is not “of the essence of faith” how does one understand his actual position before God when he believes His promise that, “Whoever believes in Him [Christ] should not perish, but have eternal life”? Is eternal life that which is promised, or is it not? If one believes the promise, does he then believe he has eternal life? If he believes he has eternal life, does he not have assurance of possessing eternal life? That “assurance is not of the essence of faith” seems internally inconsistent and logically contradictory on its face.

Interestingly, MacArthur deals with this issue. After stating that faith provides assurance for believers, he then claims that such is not complete

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<sup>27</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18:3 from *Creeds of the Churches*, 213.

or total assurance. Rather one can have “some” assurance or a “measure of” assurance. He explains:

Calvin’s definition of faith is often quoted: “It is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise of Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit.” Calvin emphasized faith as *knowledge*, in contrast to the Catholic Scholastics’ idea that faith is a naïve trust antithetical to knowledge. He thus built assurance into his definition of faith.

In other words, Calvin taught that *assurance is of the essence of faith*. This means the moment someone trusts Christ for salvation, that person will have *some* sense of assurance... Hebrews 11:1 says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Thus it seems clear from Scripture that a measure of assurance *is* inherent in believing.<sup>28</sup>

One must wonder what it is that motivates MacArthur (or anyone) to teach that believers can merely have “*some* sense of assurance” or only a “*measure* of assurance.” Who would suggest that he had *some assurance* of being married, unless he doubts the legality of the ceremony? No one doubts something when he knows it’s true. Why would anyone doubt God’s authoritative promise of eternal life? Isn’t God’s truth personified? Isn’t the lack of assurance an affront to His promise? Why is it that MacArthur doesn’t simply retain Calvin’s definition of faith and include assurance within faith’s essence? But MacArthur disagrees with Calvin and concurs with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* of 1646 and it’s teaching that “assurance is something distinct from faith.”<sup>29</sup> He says,

Later Reformed theologians, recognizing that genuine Christians often lack assurance, denied that *any* assurance is implicit in believing...The later Reformers, battling antinomian tendencies in their movement, wanted to emphasize the importance of practical evidences in the lives of believers.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> John F. MacArthur, Jr. *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 159, quoting John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 3:27 (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 1:475, italics in original.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Maybe MacArthur is attempting to continue the battle of the Reformers in the opposition to what he perceives as “antinomian tendencies.”<sup>31</sup>

So, once again, it would seem that the doctrine that “assurance is *not* of the essence of faith” has developed pragmatically from a desire to keep the straying sheep in line, so to speak. But are we to manufacture doctrines in an attempt to do behavior modification within those who are in the body of Christ? The real question seems to be whether *Perseverance* as a doctrine was then, or is now, derived from a correct, normal interpretation of the Bible. It seems that the later Reformers simply departed from the teachings of Calvin in regard to the relation of faith to assurance and that they did so for practical, not exegetical, reasons. As such, the dubious doctrine that “assurance is not of the essence of faith” is to be rejected because 1) logic demands it and 2) the pragmatic development in Reformation history and theology (rather than biblical exegesis) explains its existence.

There is a progressive logical connection to what the *Confession* says next.

True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it; by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience, and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation; by God’s withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ

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<sup>31</sup> The perception that the Free Grace position is *antinomian* is widespread. It’s a designation that may be accepted if by *antinomianism* it is meant that there is no necessity to keep any law or include into the formula for obtaining eternal salvation any human effort or work of obedience which would merit God’s favor (cf. Gal 3:1-2, 10-14; Rom 3:19-26; 4:1-15, 20-21; 5:1, etc). The concept is to be rejected if *antinomianism* is understood to be loose, irreverent, or sinful. But it is grace that teaches believers to deny such things (Titus 2:11-15). The idea that the doctrine of “once saved, always saved” encourages license to sin is traditionally considered by Arminians to be a “dangerous doctrine” leading to the disregard for holy living. In the same way, Calvinists use the term and essentially say that “nomianism” (living according to God’s law) is necessary to validate possession of eternal life. They also suggest that the Free Grace position leads to a license to sin.

and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair.<sup>32</sup>

Since assurance of salvation is not considered to be “of the essence of faith,” it can be “shaken, diminished, and intermitted” by negligence or by committing sin. This again causes a loss of assurance. But if this is so, one might legitimately ask, “How can a person ever be *assured* that he is ‘never utterly destitute’”? How can a person be certain that a life of faith, love, sincerity, and duty will indeed be “revived” so as to be “supported from utter despair”? Is it *possible* to be assured while one is in the midst of having his assurance shaken, diminished or intermitted?<sup>33</sup> Is such an assertion to be “taken by faith”? And if this secondary claim is to be taken by faith, why not take by faith God’s primary promise in the Scripture (which guarantees eternal life upon personal belief in the Savior)?

We may conclude that the Reformed position has severe biblical and logical weaknesses in presenting the doctrine of perseverance in a consistent, non-contradictory way.

## B. THE PROBLEMS WITH THE ARMINIAN VIEW

### *1. The Arminian View fails to understand the concept of eternal life and the irrevocable nature of God’s promise.*

In light of clear biblical passages (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:39-40; 10:27-28; 17:12; Rom 8:16, 29-30, 37-39; 11:29; Eph 1:13-14; 2 Tim 1:12; 2:13; 4:18; Heb 10:14; 1 Pet 1:5; 1 Jn 5:13; Jude 24-25 and others),<sup>34</sup> it

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<sup>32</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18:4 from *Creeds of the Churches*, 213.

<sup>33</sup> Robert F. Boyd affirms that, “The doctrine of assurance is predicated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter XVIII), which teaches that although believers may have assurance of their redemption sorely tried and shaken, yet they are never sorely deprived of saving faith and hence have their assurance of salvation revived and re-established by the work of the Holy Spirit...The Arminian position would predicate certainty of salvation for the present day.” (Robert F. Boyd, “Assurance” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960], 70). Clearly both positions “predicate” the doctrine of assurance.

<sup>34</sup> Geisler considers most of these passages briefly in *Chosen But Free*, (121-25).

would seem that there is abundantly sufficient and convincing evidence that eternal life is the possession of every believer in Christ. Arminians consider these verses in their theological system, but essentially misunderstand them believing that salvation is offered conditionally, as being “conditioned upon the believer continuing in faith”<sup>35</sup> Geisler refers to Robert Shank<sup>36</sup> who lists some 85 passages from the New Testament which, he thinks, establish the doctrine of a conditional eternal security. He points out that Shank, “stresses texts which speak of ‘continuing,’ ‘abiding,’ ‘holding fast,’ etc.” and cites the example of 1 Corinthians 15:2 which says, “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.”<sup>37</sup>

## 2. *The Arminian view fails to understand the warning passages.*

Arminians, like Calvinists, seem so entrenched in defending their position that they fail to recognize scriptural distinctions. Largely, by assuming that certain passages put one’s eternal life in jeopardy, they tend to see only that point of view. Their point of view, and that of the Calvinist, for that matter, could be corrected by simply refusing to read meaning into the passage that is not there expressly, as determined by a normal reading of the broader context. Another asset that leads to a correct interpretation is the ability to distinguish between passages which require obedience (works, deeds, actions, or compliance with God’s commands) from those passages which set forth the reception of eternal life as a gift of God’s grace with no strings (obedience, works, etc.) attached. Doing this leads to a proper distinction of passages which speak of discipleship (which offer rewards for work or obedience) from those passages which contain God’s promise of eternal life as a gift of grace

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<sup>35</sup> Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 125. Geisler also explains that “Some believers, such as Lutherans, believe salvation cannot be “lost” but it can be “rejected” (by apostasy). The net result is the same, though – once they had it; now they don’t.” (123).

<sup>36</sup> Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 334-37. Additionally, it is of interest to note that on page 333 of Shank’s work he mentions the fact that Lewis Sperry Chafer’s *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, pp. 290-312 gives 51 passages to which Chafer felt Arminians might appeal as a result of their incomplete apprehension. He includes a separate list of passages from Chafer alongside his own list of 85, some of which match or parallel Chafer’s list.

<sup>37</sup> Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 125.



received through faith alone. For an exhaustive review of such passages consult the works of Hodges, Wilkin, Dillow, Radmacher, Vance, and Olson, among others.<sup>38</sup> Space does not permit such exhaustive work here, but some “problem passages” are mentioned below.

## V. AN ALTERNATIVE FREE GRACE SOLUTION

Before proposing a Free Grace solution, several terms need clarified. After which, an internally consistent solution regarding the doctrine of perseverance of the saints will be set forth.

### A. THE CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

#### 1. *Perseverance of the Saints vs. the Preservation of the saints*

The difference between the *Perseverance* of the saints and the *Preservation* of believers is astronomical. These terms are often used synonymously, but doing so compounds the problem. If one wants to talk about God’s power to preserve a person who has believed in Christ for eternal life, then the term *preservation* should be used. If reference is made to the continuation of holiness, fellowship, and good works of obedience in the Christian’s life (i.e., an outworking of spirituality), then *perseverance* is the proper term. The difference is that *perseverance* focuses on the believer (his endurance, performance, relative holiness, or the measure of just thoughts or actions as opposed to unjust thoughts or actions). It looks upon the saintly or holy actions of those who are Christ’s (thus, the use of the term *saints*). The doctrine of *preservation*, on the other hand, looks to the promises of God, not the compliance of

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<sup>38</sup> See Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: Faith and Works in Tension*, revised (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1992); *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989); Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000); Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999); *The Road to Reward: Living Today in Light of Tomorrow* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2003); Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Hayesville, NC: Schottle Publishing Co., 1992); C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002), 235; Laurence Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, Revised Edition (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 2002).

man, as a basis for eternal security. It takes God at His word and rests upon His promise. It also allows for the fact that believers are often weak in their faith and sinful in their actions. It doesn't insist that a person's eternal destiny be ascertained by an examination of his thought-life or his actions. The Reformed position contradicts this, however, and maintains that:

It is utterly wrong to say that a believer is secure quite irrespective of his subsequent life of sin and unfaithfulness. The truth is that the faith of Jesus Christ is *always respective* of holiness and fidelity.<sup>39</sup>

But one must ask if this assertion is true or biblical. The same idea is asserted by Buswell,

If God has unconditionally elected to save a people, and if He has provided atonement which makes their salvation certain, it follows by inevitable logic that those whom God has elected to eternal salvation will go on to eternal salvation. In other words, a denial of the doctrine of perseverance of the saints is a denial of the sovereign grace of God in unconditional election.<sup>40</sup>

Buswell here equates *eternal salvation* with the *success of the saints* in the area of perseverance. For him, it seems, there is an inseparable attachment of one with the other. Horne compounds the problem suggesting that both perseverance and preservation should be understood as a *synthesis* of what Scriptures teach. He suggests, for instance, that 1 Pet 1:5 supports this idea but seems to miss the point that the "salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" depends on a continuation of faith and has to do with the judgment of Christians with regard to future rewards for obedience.<sup>41</sup> The passage in no way deals with the determination of the place of a believer's ultimate eternal destiny. When the Calvinist or the Arminian fails to distinguish *perseverance* from *preservation* or when either equates *possession of eternal life* with a *successful*

<sup>39</sup> John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 154.

<sup>40</sup> Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:146, italics added.

<sup>41</sup> Charles M. Horne, *The Doctrine of Salvation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 82. Cf. Herman Kuiper, *By Grace Alone: A Study in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 138.

*follow-through*, the reader (or hearer) is led to conclude that each one is dependant on the other, and therefore, that a *successful completion* throughout one's life is a necessary requirement in a continuing process of determining a believer's eternal salvation. Thus, if we don't persevere now, God won't preserve us eternally. And if God doesn't preserve us eternally, we won't persevere now. This is simply an inclusion of human effort into the biblically supported saved-by-grace-alone-through-faith-alone-in-Christ-alone formula.

Ryrie comments on the term perseverance including the definition of the Westminster Confession. He says,

It means that believers "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved" (Westminster Confession, XVII, I). It seems to focus on the believer—it is the believer who perseveres (albeit through the decree and power of God).<sup>42</sup>

Being in the "state of grace" seems to be synonymous with a positional relationship with God from all eternity and, thus, would speak of security based on God's power. However, it also seems that saying, "shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved" would indicate that security is dependent on human actions to ratify this supposed eternally secure relationship. If it is not thus ratified and validated, the relationship and possession of eternal life is shown not to exist. On this basis no one could honestly claim certain and sure knowledge of possessing eternal life (but see John 20:30-31 which refers to his whole gospel and 1 John 5:5-13 which is designed to give such knowledge and assurance).<sup>43</sup> While those who hold to the doctrine of perseverance may allow God's decree and power to shape the continuation of one's faith and Christian growth, the center of attention is still on the believer. Because of this, it is concluded that since God will cause a person to persevere, only those who are *presently* doing so can be assured of having

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 379. The quote is actually from the *Westminster Confession*, 17, 2.

<sup>43</sup> See Hodges (*Gospel Under Siege*, 53-55, 163), where he demonstrates that the entire purpose of the First Epistle of John is to encourage an abiding fellowship with God, not to furnish a list of tests to determine whether one possesses eternal life.

eternal life at that moment. This would be the conclusion of both Calvinists and Arminians.

## 2. *Conditional Security Based on Works vs. Eternal Security*

Ryrie calls *eternal security* “the work of God that guarantees that the gift of salvation, once received, is forever and cannot be lost.”<sup>44</sup> This he asserts in contrast to the doctrine of perseverance, which focuses on the believer.

## 3. *Security Focuses on God*

Perhaps *eternal security* should be defined as the *fact* of a safe, eternal, unending relationship with God as Father. All who have believed in Christ alone are eternally secure. Security is real for the believer regardless of his success or failure. *Assurance* is what follows as a result of realizing this fact. *Eternal security* is different from the *assurance* of eternal salvation, because eternal security is *not* subject to vacillation or change whereas a believer may (but *need not*) develop a lack of *assurance* and doubt his security. One need not *feel* eternally secure in Christ to actually *be* secure. A believer *has* eternal life and *is*, therefore, secure in that eternal life forever. Assurance is the internal confidence in that knowledge.

## 4. *Assurance of Salvation*

We may be sure that *everything* God says or promises is true. *Assurance of salvation* arises from God’s veracity. It is defined by Boyd thus: “The doctrine that those who are truly saved may know without a doubt that they are saved.”<sup>45</sup> Demarest suggests, “Assurance of faith or assurance of salvation denotes the confidence of the believer in Christ that notwithstanding his mortal sinful condition he is irrevocably a child of God and an heir of heaven.”<sup>46</sup> Berkhof, however, sees assurance in both

<sup>44</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 379.

<sup>45</sup> Boyd, “Assurance,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, 69. Again, though, how can one be “saved” and not be “truly saved”?

<sup>46</sup> B. A. Demarest, “Assurance,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 91. This article is fairly concise and to the point. In it he mentions the Roman Catholic position, as delineated at the Council of Trent, which “rejected the teaching that that a Christian may be certain he is saved” and defines the general Arminian position that “the most one can enjoy is assurance at any given moment, since a believer may apostatize and forfeit his salvation.”

objective and subjective modes saying of the *objective* mode that assurance is “the certain and undoubting conviction that Christ is all He professes to be and will do all His promises. It is generally agreed that this assurance is of the essence of faith.”<sup>47</sup> In his view the *subjective* mode of assurance is an “assured conviction that the individual believer has had his sins pardoned and his soul saved.”<sup>48</sup> “Berkhof, in alignment with this tradition [the Reformed Presbyterian position that assurance is not within essence of faith itself], seems to be saying that true assurance is of the essence of faith but that there is an additional assurance which can come on the basis of reflection.”<sup>49</sup> It seems that this *re-assurance*, so to speak, requires reflection, however, and, to use terms from Berkhof, a “certain and undoubting conviction” seems synonymous with “assured conviction.” In the *objective* realm, the focus is on Christ and His promises. In the *subjective* realm it is on forgiveness and eternal life. But are not these two ideas combined in the gospel? Is assurance ever possible without 1) Christ as the only object of faith and 2) the promise of eternal life being the sure result of faith in Him (as the guaranteed and irrevocable outcome)? In fact, one might ask if assurance is not, in reality, faith itself.

That “faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen” (Heb 11:1, italics added) may have provided the outline for Berkhof’s two-fold definition since, it seems, assurance and conviction are indeed the essential ideas of faith.<sup>50</sup> *Objectively believing* in Christ and His promises logically proceeds, upon *subjective reflection*, to the internal, joyful result of believing in Christ, and thus, the assurance of one’s salvation. Assurance of salvation and eternal life is possible for the believer. It will wane only when one focuses away from God, His promise of eternal life, and the finished work of Christ toward himself or others.

Up to this point we have 1) suggested that there is a logical and biblical problem with the doctrine of perseverance of saints (but not for the *preservation* of believers), 2) defined eternal security as a settled fact for every believer in Christ, and 3) presented the doctrine of assurance of

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<sup>47</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 507..

<sup>48</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 507.

<sup>49</sup> Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*, 286.

<sup>50</sup> Perhaps Hebrews 11:1 is simply a form of Hebrew parallelism meant to convey one idea of faith by using two synonymous concepts.

salvation as a state of mind which naturally and logically proceeds from one's faith in Christ alone and His promise (guarantee) of eternal life. Now we might ask, "What is this 'salvation' that we are assured of?"

### 5. *Temporal vs. Eternal Salvation*

The terms *salvation* or *to save* must be understood by their use in a particular context. The verb *sōzō* is defined as to "save, rescue, deliver, keep safe, preserve, cure, make well."<sup>51</sup> The noun form *sōtēria* means "salvation, deliverance, preservation, release."<sup>52</sup> These terms may have 1) a temporal, physical sense, 2) a temporal, spiritual sense, or 3) an eternal, spiritual sense.

Radmacher notes that often *temporal, physical deliverance* is in view. In the Old Testament, he says,

Often the words *save* and *salvation* refer to physical not spiritual deliverance. This is especially true in the Old Testament. People were "saved" (rescued or delivered) from enemies on the battlefield (Deut. 20:4), from the lion's mouth (Dan. 6:20), and from the wicked (Pss. 7:11; 59:2).

When the New Testament uses *save* and *salvation* to refer to physical deliverance those instances are more individual than national...A graphic example of rescue from imminent death is God sparing Paul's life in the shipwreck on his way to Rome (Acts 27:20, 31, 34). This case is of special interest in that God promised deliverance in advance (27:23-24)...In a physical sense salvation refers to being taken from danger to safety (Phil. 1:19), from disease to health (James 5:15), and from death to life (5:20).<sup>53</sup>

An example of *temporal, spiritual deliverance* (related to the Christian life or discipleship) is found in Philippians 2:12 where, in context, Paul is speaking of their obedience and telling the believers in Philippi to "work out your own salvation (deliverance)." Hodges answers that, "It is clear that if the 'salvation' which Paul speaks of here refers to escape from hell, then obedient works are a *condition* for that."<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Barclay M. Newman, Jr. *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 177.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 96.

More examples could be given, but it is obvious that the uses of the terms *to save* and *salvation* depend on the context. Every time the terms are used we need not think that a heaven-or-hell issue is involved. The text may be speaking of something completely different. We ought not be so evangelically minded that we can't see straight when it comes to interpreting the meaning of a passage. When human work is involved, it would behoove us to understand the passage in the context of attaining a successful spiritual life and ultimate rewards, not the reception of eternal life as a gift resulting from faith alone in Christ alone.

Of course, there is an *eternal, spiritual deliverance* involved at the heart of God's program to deliver the world from sin and which deliverance He facilitates in his continuing work of creating the best of all possible worlds. This is the kind of salvation evangelicals are prone to think of when hearing the terms *save* and *salvation*. Passages such as John 3:16-17, Eph 2:8, and Acts 16:30-31 are undoubtedly examples of these terms in relation to one's eternal destiny. Another aspect is the deliverance from the presence of sin. Believers in Christ "will be saved from the presence of sin forever in heaven" (Rom 13:11; 1 Pet 1:9). This having been said, the point remains that when we interpret Scriptures, especially in view of terms like "save" or "salvation," we ought to consider the context and not just assume that it's a heaven-or-hell issue.

## VI. THE ALTERNATIVE TO CALVINIST AND ARMINIAN VIEWS OF PERSEVERANCE

David Clotfelter suggests, in a section entitled "Preservation/Perseverance of the Saints," that the reasons we stumble over the doctrine are two: "First, it seems...that if our preservation in faith is guaranteed by God, then there should be no need for Him to warn us against falling away."<sup>55</sup> He goes on to say, "Second, we are troubled by the fact that people who at least appear to be Christians do at times fall away."<sup>56</sup> How are we, then, to reconcile the seeming disagreement between 1) passages which *guarantee* eternal life and the *preservation* for all eternity of those who believe in Christ with 2) passages which give *dire warnings* to the believer for his failure to *persevere* in holiness?

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<sup>55</sup> David Clotfelter, *Sinners in the Hands of a Good God: Reconciling Divine Judgment and Mercy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 176.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

Rather than answer this question by inductively examining *all* the “problem passages” that might be available, it seems best (because of limited space) to present the case in a logical fashion.

**Premise 1 of the Argument:** All passages that teach that eternal life is obtained as a free gift of God’s grace alone—with no other condition than faith in Christ alone – are to be understood as relating to the determination of one’s eternal destiny (heaven or hell). Such passages that support this premise (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47) teach that receiving eternal life is conditioned only on faith in Christ and that such faith—along with God’s powerful promise—prevents one from perishing. “Eternal life” is juxtaposed against “perishing” and we can rightly conclude that the passage does not refer to simple physical destruction. John 5:24 makes eternal life a present possession with no need for validation by works. Escape from judgment and a transfer from death to life is assured to anyone who, as Jesus said, “hears My word, and believes Him who sent me.” Jesus promises in John 6:47, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.” John simply knows no other condition for receiving the gift of eternal life other than an appropriation of it by faith in Christ alone.

Besides these assertions by Christ within John’s Gospel, other passages teach the same. They exclude works and place possession of eternal salvation as solely conditioned upon faith in Jesus. Paul, in Acts 16:30, advised the Philippian jailor only to believe. He teaches that the gospel is the “power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). He defines his gospel as that which he received through a revelation of Jesus Christ from heaven (cf. Gal 1:11-12), the very nature of which brings God’s declaration of righteousness to bear upon the one who believes it (cf. Rom 3:19–5:1). He also states that the gospel excludes any human works or effort as an avenue through which eternal salvation is attained (cf. Rom 4:4-5; 10:4; 11:6; Eph 2:8-9; Gal 3:1-14).

Of course, other passages also teach that people receive eternal life by faith alone, but the above should be sufficient in supporting the premise.

**Premise 2 of the Argument:** All passages that are addressed to believers that teach obedience – compliant actions, works, deeds, thoughts, intentions, motivations, or faithfulness – are to be understood as relating either 1) to their temporal deliverance in one’s present physical or spiritual life, or 2) to their future evaluation/judgment at the Bema Seat of Christ and/or to their future eternal enjoyment of rewards earned in this



life. Some biblical passages do indeed add conditions for “salvation.” But when salvation or deliverance is mentioned, one must ask, “Salvation or deliverance from what?” The term for salvation or deliverance can certainly refer to one’s eternal destiny (and that’s how the evangelicals have traditionally used it), but it can also refer to deliverance from something in this life or to a successful session at Christ’s judgment seat.

These are the “problematic passages” in relation to the perseverance issue. There is no real need that they be problematic. The problem is that traditionally, evangelicals have not properly understood the passages in their context, nor have they distinguished the terms discussed above to obtain their correct meaning. But a successful session before Christ is not foreign to the Scriptures and such successful sessions before Christ ought to certainly be conditioned upon the obedience and faithfulness of His own. After all, believers are said to have been “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). These exhortations or warnings to believers take into account that the believer will not perform/obey automatically in this regard. It places the responsibility for growth, obedience, and discipleship directly on the child of God and doesn’t rely on God’s supernatural intervention to make sure the believer perseveres.

But those who misunderstand the “problem passages” seem 1) unable to cope with the possibility of failure by a believer – as though the Spirit of God somehow confines us to holiness and right actions, 2) to become prideful legalists, and 3) to miss the blessing of obeying the Lord for correct motivations as we anticipate His approval at the Bema Seat judgment.<sup>57</sup>

The Scriptures teach that a successful session before Christ at His judgment seat is conditional in nature. For instance, Rom 14:10-12 shows the certainty of being evaluated, the success of which is

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<sup>57</sup> Second Corinthians 5:17 is often misquoted as a proof text for automatic, certain, or assured obedience of the believer. It is literally translated, “So that, if anyone is in Christ, a new creation; the old things passed away, behold new things have come.” The verse speaks of the positional relationship of being “in Christ” and, in the context, enforces the possibility of *living* no longer for ourselves (5:15), of *viewing things* from God’s perspective (5:16) and of obediently *entering a partnership* with God in reconciling the world to Himself (5:17-18). The term “all” as in “all things become new” (KJV) is simply not supported by early Greek manuscripts.

conditioned upon how we treat a Christian brother. Second Corinthians 5:9-10 (just before 2 Cor 5:17 mentioned above) invites the attitude which pleases the Lord and shows that good deeds, rather than evil ones, are the condition for receiving rewards of compensation at His judgment seat.<sup>58</sup>

Another passage that might be considered a “problem” is Heb 6:4-8. The reader of this passage should *not* assume the following: 1) that the six specific descriptions in vv 4-5 are anything but descriptions of the experiences of the believing Hebrew audience, 2) that repentance is synonymous with what is usually termed “saving faith,” or 3) that reference to fire or being burned (v 8) relates to hell fire and brimstone. In the analogy the believers are compared to the “*land* which drank in the rain” (i.e., were blessed by the truth of the gospel). The result of this is that they have the potential of producing useful vegetation/crops (for which they would receive a blessing from God (v 7)), or of producing worthless thorns and thistles (for which they would be in jeopardy of being cursed by God) and having their worthless crop (works) burned, consumed, destroyed, or taken away. The *land* (i.e., the believer) is not destroyed in this metaphor, however. Compare this to what Paul teaches the carnal Corinthian believers as he uses the analogy of having their worthless works burned by fire (1 Cor 3:1-14). “If any man’s *work* which he has built on it [the foundation, which is Christ Himself] *remains*, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is *burned up*, he will *suffer loss*; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (3:14-15, italics added). In neither of these passages is the issue one of qualifying for eternal heaven or hell. It is an issue of rewards or loss of rewards which is *conditioned* upon perseverance, obedience, and continuation in the body of truth (i.e., “the faith,” cf. 2 Cor 13:5).

This premise just considered is not mere theological conjecture. It is the only consistent way to adequately understand Scripture and to distinguish between eternal salvation, which is by grace alone, and the conditional nature of gaining or losing rewards at Christ’s judgment seat at the initiation of the future Messianic (millennial) kingdom.

**Conclusion of the Argument:** *There is no contradiction in Scriptures on the matter of perseverance. God preserves* irreversibly for all eternity the one who believes in Christ, and the believer can be sure of this, based on His promise. The *believer*, though, has an *option of*

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<sup>58</sup> See also Col 1:21-23 and Gal 6:7-10.

*persevering* in holiness in this present world, and may do so in accordance with the quality of his fellowship with God, his allegiance to Christ, and his willingness to be led by the Spirit of God in his Christian walk.

Perseverance, it is suggested, is a worthy goal for a successful and glorious reception of the believer at the Judgment Seat of Christ. To say that “results may vary” in the lives of Christians seems a tautology. All believers are at different levels of spirituality. To make perseverance in holiness an additional requisite for eternal salvation, or to make an evaluation of one’s works and faithfulness a requisite for assurance of possessing eternal life is to grossly confuse the issue. Interpreting scriptures that promise rewards for faithfulness or obedience at Christ’s Bema Seat judgment as requisites for receiving or being assured of one’s regeneration diminishes those passages that were written for the benefit of believers.

## VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The P in the TULIP acrostic teaches, from the Reformed view, that the saints of God (true believers in Christ) will persevere in faith, holiness, and good works to the end of their lives. Failure to so persevere is an indication that a person was never a believer (the Calvinist view) or that he has lost or voluntarily relinquished his eternal life/salvation (the Arminian view). Calvinists do not recognize or allow an extended failure of real believers without subsequent restoration in their Christian walk. Such failures would question the existence of one’s eternal life. Lack of assurance is the result that such failure obtains. Arminians fail to recognize the veracity of God’s promise to give *eternal* life and to preserve forever the one who believes in Jesus.

Both views misunderstand the free-grace gospel passages as well as the passages which warn Christians against sin and apostasy. Both branches of theology require that the believer continue in faith and good works to the end of their lives in order to enter into heaven. Both fail to distinguish the doctrine for the *need of endurance* in the Christian life (perseverance) from the comforting fact of the believer’s *promised*

*preservation*, which is guaranteed to those who trust God's offer of eternal life and who believe in Christ to obtain it.<sup>59</sup>

The result of this confusion is devastating. The first devastation is that the gospel of grace (the message that eternal life which is obtained freely by faith in Christ alone) is lost and/or confused to the point that it becomes unclear (and thus unusable). The second devastation is that this unclear "gospel" message then gives rise to fear of eternal hell rather than to peace with God, love for Him, and the assurance of eternal life which He offers in His word. The third devastation is that the biblical impetus for true holy living is completely lost because the focus is turned from the loving, gracious Savior and an anticipated joyful meeting with Him at the Bema Seat judgment to a fearful attempt to *do something* to *validate* one's possession of eternal life.

Here, a better, clearer, and more biblical way is suggested. There is no need to restrict our thoughts to only one or the other of these theological systems, neither of which adequately grasp the biblical teaching. The remedy for the Calvinist/Arminian dilemma regarding the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is simply to understand the passages which offer eternal life as a gift to be a reference to the gospel of grace. Secondly, there is a need to understand the passages which warn the believer against sin, living according to the flesh, and apostasy to be related to God's will for us, and to our responsibility as Christians to glorify Him when we stand before His Bema Seat.

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<sup>59</sup> Perseverance in holiness in this life will eventuate into a successful encounter with Christ at His Bema Seat judgment at which time Christ will evaluate the Christian's works/deeds. There He will issue or deny eternal rewards for faithfulness or lack thereof (cf. 2 Cor 5:10; Rom 14:10, 12; 1 Cor 9:27). It does not relate to the Great White Throne judgment where unbelievers are resurrected and cast into hell because of their lack of the Savior.

# REGENERATION: A NEW COVENANT BLESSING

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The New Covenant relates to the doctrine of regeneration, that is, the new birth. But before this relationship can be clearly considered, it is necessary to deal with a problem that has arisen with regard to this Covenant.

## II. DISPENSATIONALISM AND THE NEW COVENANT

For a long time, the New Covenant has been a problem in dispensational theology. The problem seems to be centered in the statement of Jer 31:31, where the Lord is speaking:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...

From this statement the conclusion has been drawn that the New Covenant is *exclusively* an arrangement between God and the nation of Israel. Many Dispensationalists have feared that to say otherwise would threaten the collapse of any meaningful difference between Israel and the Church.

Yet at the same time, the NT appears to treat NT believers as objects of the New Covenant arrangements. A number of pivotal passages show this.

For example, the expression *new covenant* appears in all three Gospel accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper: Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; and Luke 22:20. Luke, for example, reports:

Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."

This statement of Jesus is repeated by the apostle Paul in his discussion of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11:25. Furthermore, Paul describes himself as a minister of the New Covenant in 2 Cor 3:5,6 when he says,

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also has made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant.

Finally there is the book of Hebrews. The author of that book—whoever he was, Barnabas, I think—makes the New Covenant a centerpiece in discussing the high priestly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact he actually quotes the passage from Jer 31:31-34 in Heb 8:8-12. He treats the New Covenant as fully applicable to his Christian readers.

Even if the first readers of Hebrews were Jewish believers, which seem highly likely, they were nevertheless members of the Christian Church. Therefore, their Jewishness cannot be the reason the writer applies the New Covenant promises to them. In the Christian Church the Jew/Gentile distinction vanishes. Paul teaches us that in Gal 3:28, when he writes:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So the writer of Hebrews cannot be talking about blessings that belong *only* to Jewish members of the Christian Church.

The problem of the New Covenant has been felt so strongly by some dispensational teachers that they have even postulated that there are *two new covenants*. One of these is to be made with Israel in the end times, while the other is with the Church. But this is so clearly a counsel of desperation that it must be decisively rejected. The NT offers zero support for the theory of two new covenants.

The solution to this problem is extremely simple. The New Covenant is indeed to be made with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, just as Jeremiah says. And the meaning of this is that the entirety of Israel and Judah will someday receive eternal salvation. This is plainly stated in the prophecy itself, which says:

No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying "Know the Lord," for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord.

This is quite clear. Someday there will be no unconverted Israelite.

Let us also remember in this connection the words of the Apostle Paul in Rom 11:25-27. They are relevant here even if the word *salvation* is not defined as *salvation from hell*. I quote:

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them when I take away their sins."

Here, Paul's quotation from the OT comes mainly from Isa 59:20-21a, which includes the words *this is My covenant with them*. But the final words of the quotation, *when I take away their sins*, are not found in this passage in Isaiah. They are apparently a reference to the New Covenant prophecy in Jeremiah 31. Thus they are Paul's interpretation of the reference in Isaiah to *My covenant*. The future of Israel (that Paul describes in Romans 11) is predicated on the fulfillment of the New Covenant promise found in Jeremiah.

(Parenthetically, let me add in passing how I understand Rom 11:26. I think Paul is referring to deliverance from God's eschatological wrath by means of "the Deliverer" [Jesus Christ] who turns away "ungodliness from Jacob." When He comes again His people will all be believers in Him. By His coming and personal presence with them He will teach them practical holiness. In other words, His kingship and ministry to them "will turn away ungodliness from Jacob." He will lead them in the paths of righteousness. But this is all based ultimately on the New Covenant.)

Leaving that complication aside, however, the bottom line is extremely simple. The New Covenant will someday be in force with the entire nation of Israel. But this is not the same as saying it will be in force *only* with them. Every person who has ever been eternally saved, regardless of racial origin, has been saved under the promises of the New Covenant. That is, they have been saved on the basis of *the blood of the New Covenant* that Christ shed for them. They have become the beneficiaries of God's New Covenant, just as will *all* Israel in a coming day.

*We celebrate our participation in the New Covenant every time we partake of the Lord's Supper.*

There is no real problem here. To say that every individual finds eternal salvation under the New Covenant is one thing. To say that the destiny of every individual who is saved is exactly the same as every other individual who is saved, is quite another. The New Covenant does *not* say this.

The New Covenant should be viewed as God's universal covenant of salvation. God enters into that Covenant with each individual at the moment He believes in Jesus.

Under its terms, Israelites can be saved and remain Israelites, or as in the present age, they can become members of the Christian Church. The same is true of Gentiles as well, of course. The distinctions between Israel and the Church are simply not addressed in the New Covenant. Much less are these distinctions denied by this Covenant. Everyone is eternally saved in the same way. What happens beyond that depends on God's purpose for them, which is by no means a plain vanilla conformity.

In a future day, as Jeremiah predicts, God will enter into this New Covenant with the entire nation, both Israel and Judah.

### III. NEW BIRTH UNDER THE NEW COVENANT

When we read Jeremiah's prophecy about the New Covenant, our first impression might be that it does not mention new birth. But this would be incorrect. There are two features of the New Covenant as spoken through Jeremiah that show clearly that regeneration is being discussed. I will take the last one first.

#### A. KNOWING GOD

In his New Covenant prophecy, Jeremiah speaks as follows:

No more shall every man teach His neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord.

What does it mean to "know the Lord"? Jesus gives us the answer to this in John 17:1-3. In His prayer to the Father Jesus says:

Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may also glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know



You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

As this statement shows, eternal life is nothing less than the knowledge of God. But eternal life itself is the result of new birth.

It follows, therefore, that when Jeremiah's prophecy predicts that all Israelites will someday "know the Lord," he is predicting that someday every Israelite will be born again. The whole nation will have been regenerated because the whole nation will have believed in Jesus Christ for eternal life.

Yes, new birth is definitely included in the New Covenant.

## B. GOD'S LAW IN THE HEART

The second feature of the New Covenant that anticipates new birth is found in these words from Jeremiah:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Clearly here we have a work of God that He does through new birth. The law of God—His will—becomes part of the regenerate person's innermost being. Paul gives testimony to the truth of this in his own personal experience. As described in Rom 7:19-25, Paul tells us of his struggle with the presence of sin in his physical body. In the process of telling us, he writes:

For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.  
But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members [vv 22-23].

A half verse later he writes:

So then with my mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin [v 24b].

It is completely clear in these verses that the apostle Paul is under the terms of the New Covenant. Just as God had promised in Jeremiah's prophecy, God had written His law on Paul's mind and heart. With his mind he served that law and in his heart he delighted in it. Only a recalcitrant physical body prevented him from doing it consistently.

In fact, this happy inner servitude to God's law is precisely what the apostle John speaks of in 1 John 3:9 saying:

Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His [that is, God's] seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.

This much-discussed text simply means that the regenerate person, as such, cannot sin.

Since God's law is written in his heart, his regenerate self never produces sin. Sin, as Paul teaches us in Romans 7, is the work of the sinful flesh as it operates in and through our yet-to-be transformed physical bodies.

It is the inner man that is transformed at new birth, not the outward man. That outward change can happen gradually as we walk with God, and the process will be completed when we meet the Lord in the air and receive our glorified bodies.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: NEW BIRTH IN THE OT

Even before the New Covenant was established through the death of Christ, its benefits were applied to believers in anticipation of the sacrificial work of Christ. God's righteousness in doing so was vindicated by the cross of Christ as we learn from Rom 3:25.

Thus New Covenant language appears early in the book of 1 Samuel. In 1 Sam 1:12, we are told this:

Now the sons of Eli were corrupt; they *did not know* the Lord.

And in 1 Sam 3:7 we read:

Now Samuel *did not yet know* the Lord, nor was the word of the Lord yet revealed to him.

In the light of the New Covenant, these statements simply mean that Eli's sons were unregenerate and that Samuel was unregenerate until the night that God appeared to him. On that night, however, Samuel was not only born again, he was given the gift of prophecy. Thereafter the word of the Lord was revealed to him.

Perhaps the clearest case of regeneration in the whole OT is the case of King Saul. After his first interview with Samuel, as he departs, Samuel tells him (in 1 Sam 10:5-6):

And it will happen, when you have come there to the city, that you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with a stringed instrument, a tambourine, a flute, and a harp before them; and they will be prophesying. Then the

Spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and *be turned into another man*.

A few verses later we read (1 Sam 10:9):

So it was, when he had turned his back to Samuel, that God gave him *another heart*; and all those signs came to pass that day.

So Saul was born again and this was a benefit of the New Covenant that Jesus would establish by His death on the cross. In the days of Samuel and Saul, people in Israel needed to know the Lord. Indeed they had enough knowledge, apparently, to encourage this experience in their unregenerate brothers and neighbors. According to Jeremiah, Jewish people used to say to their fellow Jews, “Know the Lord.” Thus the terminology of the New Covenant was part of Israel’s earliest history. But when the New Covenant prophecy of Jeremiah is fulfilled, it will be wonderfully true that,

No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord.

That day will probably be here much sooner than we expect.

# ANOTHER TALE OF TWO CITIES

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## I. INTRODUCTION

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. The best of times in Athens, but the worst of times in Jerusalem. Alexander the Great found no more worlds to conquer, but when his four generals split up his kingdom, the Seleucids in Syria and the Ptolemys in Egypt used Palestine as their football field in their effort to control the Mediterranean world. The Golden Age of philosophy had flourished in Athens for over two hundred years when (167 BC) Antiochus Epiphanes stormed into Jerusalem and committed the original abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet (Dan 8:11-14). Even in the Babylonian deportations Nebuchadnezzar had not so desecrated the holy temple of the Jews. Yes, it was the best of times in Athens, but the worst of times in Jerusalem.

The dream of Alexander the Great, who had studied at the foot of Aristotle for three years, was to “hellenize” the known world. He was so convinced of the superiority of Greek philosophical thinking that he carried copies of *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* with him as he swept over the Medo-Persian Empire faster than a hawk dive-bombing a field mouse. He wanted each of his conquered countries to experience the wisdom of Athens. Greek became the *lingua franca* of his realm. East met West, and the resulting union was a marriage that has had more impact on Western Civilization than Newton’s discovery of the laws of motion. What we are talking about is the ripple effect of two thinkers from Athens as their philosophies landed in the sea of Judaeo-Christian thought like two meteors into the Mediterranean. Those thinkers were Plato and Aristotle.

Ralph Stob, a Christian philosopher, has observed: “This element of the Greek spirit had great influence on . . . the Christian movement in the first three centuries. At the same time it was the factor which was

operative at the bottom of some of the heresies which arose.”<sup>1</sup> Or as Marvin Wilson puts it, “Westerners have often found themselves in the confusing situation of trying to understand a Jewish Book through the eyes of Greek culture.”<sup>2</sup> Dom Gregory Dix goes so far as to say that the miscegenation of early Christianity with Greek philosophy has led to a “spiritual schizophrenia in the process.”<sup>3</sup>

What we would like to do in this study is to focus on a few salient points of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle which have impacted Western Christianity. Special emphasis will be placed on the search for “the elect” and the doctrine of Double Predestination.

## II. PLATO (D. 347 BC)

Plato bought into the dualistic philosophy of the Persians (Zoroaster), which recognized the ongoing struggle between the impersonal forces of good and evil. However, Plato’s twist was to relegate everything good to the spiritual world. Everything evil was in the material world. Only in the spiritual world could we find the perfect ideals of which their inferior, material replicas are made. And in this spiritual world we also find immortal souls, which pre-exist their union with material bodies.

When an immortal soul does enter a material body, good mixes with evil, and suffering begins for the immortal soul. The goal of human life becomes the release of this entrapped soul to reenter the world of ideals, the perfect and good spiritual world. So, just as his dualism (good versus evil) is a way to explain the nature and function of the entire universe, so it is for man. Man’s body is a prison for his soul. This immortal soul is incarcerated in a defective, crumbling pot of clay. “Salvation” is not something one attains until death, when the soul is freed and able to float upwards into that celestial realm of goodness and perfection. This dualistic view of man is at the very root of salvific doctrine in Western Christianity.

Werner Jaeger goes so far as to say that “the most important fact in the history of Christian doctrine was that the father of Christian theology,

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Stob, *Christianity and Classical Civilization* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), 49.

<sup>2</sup> Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Dom Gregory Dix, *Jew and Greek* (London: Dacre Press, 1953), 14.

Origen, was a Platonic philosopher at the school of Alexandria. He built into Christian doctrine the whole cosmic drama of the soul, which he took from Plato, and although later Christian fathers decided that he took over too much, that which they kept was still the essence of Plato's philosophy of the soul."<sup>4</sup>

Plato's soteriology was far from that taught in the OT. Most OT readers have to work hard to think of an OT promise of salvation in heaven for man's soul after death (it is in there, but most folks do not know where). The salvation emphasis in the OT was longevity in the land. God's fellowship and blessings were something to be savored and enjoyed in the historical context of this world. As Wilson points out,

Certainly, the godly of the Old Testament could never have brought themselves to sing such patently foreign and heterodox words as the following, which may be heard in certain churches today: "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through," or "Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away," or "When all my labors and trials are o'er, and I am safe on the beautiful shore." To any Hebrew of Bible times this kind of language would be unrealistic and irresponsible, a cop-out—seeking to abandon the present, material world, while focusing on the joys of the "truly" spiritual world to come.<sup>5</sup>

Now despite the claims of Jaeger that Origen of Alexandria was most responsible for inculcating Platonism into Christianity, this author believes the Bishop of Hippo had far more influence than Origen. And Augustine did not get his Platonism from Origen. It came from the influence of Plotinus and Neo-Platonism. Therefore, in order to trace the influence of Athens on Jerusalem, the next link in the chain is Plotinus.

### III. PLOTINUS (D. AD 270)

This man of brilliance and mysticism is considered by some to have been the most influential man since the Apostles on Western

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<sup>4</sup> Werner Jaeger, "The Greek Ideas of Immortality," *Harvard Theological Review* 52 (July 1959): 146.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, 168-69. It must be observed that Wilson is referring to OT believers. Obviously, there is some NT emphasis on the temporary trials of this world as opposed to the glory that shall be revealed in the sons of God when Christ returns.

Christianity. He is known as the Father of Neo-Platonism. After growing up and studying philosophy in Alexandria and Persia, he settled in Rome, where he began a school. He was said to have been a man without enemies, greatly beloved for his divine wisdom. He himself made no attempt to perpetuate his wisdom, but Porphyry, his disciple and biographer, edited and organized his scattered lectures. These became known as *The Enneads*, which were translated by Marius Victorinus and studied diligently by Augustine. Augustine actually credits Plotinus for getting him on the road to truth and, eventually, of his conversion to the Orthodox Church.<sup>6</sup> Says Michael Azkoul:

In the case of Augustine...his attraction to Platonism—specifically Plotinus of Lycopolis (204-270) and his school (Neo-Platonism)—was very serious, perhaps fatal. He did more than accessorize his theology with it. From this Greek philosopher and his *Enneads*, more than any other, Augustine borrowed the principles to develop his Christian version of Greek philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

It has been said that Augustine was Christianity's first writer of introspection, as witnessed by his *Confessions*. Perhaps, but it was the mysticism of Plotinus and his elevation of contemplation to the status of a productive principle which was Augustine's inspiration for his *Confessions*. Augustine even compared the writings of Plotinus with the Holy Scriptures.<sup>8</sup> He both paraphrased and quoted freely from Plotinus. So influential was Plotinus that W. R. Inge claims:

Plotinus gave an impetus to this fusion [the coalescence of Greek philosophy into a theocentric system of religious discipline], for the victory of his philosophy was so rapid and overwhelming that it absorbed the other schools, and when Neoplatonism captured the Platonic academy at Athens, ...it reigned almost without a rival until Justinian closed the Athenian schools in 529.

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<sup>6</sup> In the *Confessions*, VII, Augustine makes clear his dependence on Plotinus and *The Enneads*.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Azkoul, *Texts and Studies in Religion* 56 (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 129.

<sup>8</sup> *Apud Platonicos me interim, quod sacris nostris non repugnet, reperi turnm esse confideo* (*Conta Acad.* III, xx, 43 PL 32, 957).

...Even Augustine recognized that the differences between Platonists and Christians were slight, and the church gradually absorbed Neoplatonism almost entire [sic]...It is no paradox to say with Eucken that the pagan Plotinus has left a deeper mark upon Christian thought than any other single man.<sup>9</sup>

While Inge no doubt overstates his case, we cannot be hasty in dismissing his claims. For many would ascribe such sweeping influence to Augustine, and if Augustine's primary source was Plotinus, then the implication is obvious.

According to Plotinus, the Supreme Being is the source of all life, and is therefore absolute causality. This Supreme Being is moreover, the Good, in so far as all finite things have their purpose in it, and ought to flow back to it. The human souls which have descended into corporeality are those which have allowed themselves to be ensnared by sensuality and overpowered by lust. They must turn back from this; and since they have not lost their freedom, a conversion is still possible.

Here, then, we enter upon the practical aspect of his philosophy. Along the same road by which it descended, the soul must retrace its steps back to the Supreme Good. It must first of all return to itself. This is accomplished by the practice of virtue, which aims at likeness to God, and leads up to God. In the ethics of Plotinus all the older schemes of virtue are taken over and arranged in a graduated series. The lowest stage is that of the civil virtues; then follow the purifying; and last of all the divine virtues. The civil virtues merely adorn the life, without elevating the soul. This is the purpose of the purifying virtues, by which the soul is freed from sensuality and led back to itself, and thence to the Supreme Being. By means of ascetic observances the man becomes once more a spiritual and enduring being, free from all sin.

But there is still a higher attainment; it is not enough to be sinless, one must become "God." This is reached through contemplation of the Supreme Being, the One—in other words, through an ecstatic approach, the soul may become one with God, the fountain of life, the source of being, the origin of all good, the root of the soul. In that moment, it enjoys the highest indescribable bliss; it is as if it were swallowed up by divinity, bathed in the light of eternity. Porphyry tells us that on four

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<sup>9</sup> W. R. Inge, "Plotinus," *Encyclopedia Britannica* 18 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1955), 81.



occasions during the six years of their correspondence Plotinus attained this ecstatic union with God.

As Porphyry set out to popularize the teachings of Plotinus, he emphasized the religious side of Neo-Platonism. The object of philosophy, according to Porphyry, is the “salvation” of the soul. The origin and the cause of evil are not in the body, but in the desires of the soul. Hence, the strictest asceticism (abstinence from meat, wine, and sexual relations) is demanded, as well as the knowledge of God. He became an enemy of Christianity in his writing *Against the Christians*. Here he does not attack Christ, but he does denounce the practice of Christianity current in his day. By 448 his works were condemned.

#### IV. AUGUSTINE (D. 430)

##### A. THE PLATONISTS

When Augustine began reading *The Enneads* in the late fourth century, they opened his eyes to the “invisible things” (*Confessions*, VII, 20). When it comes to the Platonic principles, it must be stated that Augustine held the Christian philosophy to be the highest of the philosophies, since it rested on faith, while the Greek philosophies relied upon reason. But he also saw them as preparatory for the coming of Christianity. Once here, the Christian philosopher could “spoil the Egyptians” just as Moses did when he left bondage in Egypt.

Rational inquiry was to be pursued in order to grasp by reason what was already held by faith. Platonism was “the handmaiden to faith.” Therefore, Augustine did not seek to know in order to believe, but rather he believed in order that he might know (faith seeking reason).<sup>10</sup> There were certain matters in which reason could precede faith (*ipsa ratio antecedit fidem*), such as in physics or mathematics.

For Augustine, God was the Platonic Good. Augustine thought of the material world as a hazy copy of the World of Ideals, the spiritual world. Indeed, all phenomena are but contingent *ektypes* (*ek* meaning “out of” or “from” in Greek) of the eternal Ideals. Again, since there are some created and material things superior to others and some things below

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine anticipated the Anselmian “*fides quaerens intellectum*,” and he quoted Isaiah on behalf of this proposition—“*fides quaerit, intellectus invenit; propter quod aut propheta: Nisi credideritis non intelligentis*” (Isa 7:9).

which more greatly resemble things above, Augustine's universe is a hierarchy or ladder of beings leading to Him who is the Supreme Being. The ascent to God begins with a *turning* to Him, a *turning* which necessarily involves divine illumination. Of course, the limitation of our ascent is not merely the limitation of our created nature, but also the result of our moral and spiritual condition.

At this point, Augustine introduces his version of the Platonic memory. Memory according to him is the soul's ability to recall the past, the bringing forward what has been stored within our being. Memory is the storehouse of knowledge which, with the intellect's *a priori* categories, brings the truth of the world external to it. Memory is the *sine qua non* of all knowledge, whether intellectual or sensory.

The intellect, unlike the sense, is fed by two streams: from the soul and, indirectly, from the world of phenomena. The intellect, stamped or "impressed" with the divine Ideals, beckons us to contemplate the soul and the heavenly realm to which it is akin. When the intellect or reason concerns itself with the physical world, it produces "science" (*scientia*); but when it searches the realm of the spirit, it uncovers "wisdom" (*sapientia*). Inasmuch as both *scientia* and *sapientia* comprehend some aspect of the truth, they both, to some degree, require illumination. The higher we ascend on the scale of being, the greater the "light" given to the soul.

Now where, we must ask ourselves, do these concepts appear in Scripture? Alas, they do not. But the long arms of Plato have reached forward through the centuries and through his resurgent disciples like Plotinus to embrace the Bishop of Hippo. In fact, this new strain of Platonism in the church was so evident in Augustine that Michael Azkoul claims,

[Augustine's] philosophical religion is a perversion of the Christian revelation. He is also responsible, in large measure, for the division between East and West; and, indeed, even for the Occident's loss of the patristic spirit...There is good reason that Orthodoxy has never recognized him as a Father of the church—his latter-day champions notwithstanding; and, certainly not a "super-Father," as he has been known in the West since the Carolignian period. He is surely not the apex of the

patristic tradition; in fact, he was the beginning of something new.<sup>11</sup>

Augustine's life quest was to experience the mystical union resulting from a beatific vision of the Good, just as Plotinus claimed to have done. Plotinus was convinced that during this mystical state we actually have an experience of formless intuition. This mystical ascent seems to those who pass through it to be a progressive stripping off of everything that is alien to the purest nature of the soul, which cannot enter in to the Holy of Holies while any trace of earthliness still clings to it. He describes this holy ascent as "a flight of the alone to the Alone."

Plotinus acknowledged that such an ascent was a rare experience indeed. It is the consummation of a life-long quest of the highest, to be earned only by intense contemplation and unceasing self-discipline. Hence, asceticism was seen as the means by which one could experience this mystical union.

Augustine, as Bishop of Hippo, set up a school for young aspirants, who were willing to mortify their bodies for the prize of the goal of holy ascent. Augustine himself never experienced the mystical union described by Plotinus, though he yearned for it his entire life.

In order to be fair, we must not credit Augustine with imbibing all of Plato's philosophy. E. Portalié enumerates the Platonic theories which the Bishop of Hippo rejected: eternity of the world, emanationism, pantheism, autosoterism, the pre-existence and the transmigration of the soul, and polytheism.<sup>12</sup> But he also lists those doctrines of Plato which Augustine always approved and appropriated: philosophy as *amor sapientiae*, with God and the soul as its object; the idea of the Good, the doctrine of "illumination" and the distinction between "intellection" (knowledge of eternal things) and "science" (knowledge of temporal things), corresponding to Plato's double-tiered reality; and, of course, the theory of eternal ideas or Forms which Augustine placed in the Essence of God.

A. H. Armstrong called Augustine "the first Christian thinker whom we can place among the great philosophers."<sup>13</sup> Augustine the philosopher

<sup>11</sup> Azkoul, ii-iii.

<sup>12</sup> E. Portalié, "Augustine" *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* I (Paris: n.p., 1909): 2268-2472.

<sup>13</sup> A. H. Armstrong, "St. Augustine and the Eastern Tradition," *Eastern Churches Quarterly* V, 7-8 (1963): 161.

believed truth came by rational inquiry, but Augustine the theologian also believed that faith certifies reason's discoveries. Another way of putting this is that faith leads to understanding, or, Christianity supplies the "faith" and Platonism satisfies the reason. The confidence he placed in Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Porphyry, and the like was not shared by the earlier Fathers. They may have taken elements, but never principles from the Greeks. At best certain elements from the philosophers could decorate the temple of truth, but never form its foundation.

Augustine's dependence on reason explains why his writings chase rabbit trails of the mind far from the halls of revelation. It seems strange that one who believed so thoroughly in the depravity of man and the corruption of human reason would, at the same time, depend so completely upon his own reason to ratify truth. It was centuries after his death before Augustine became the theological master of the West.<sup>14</sup> But he has had such an impact on Western Christianity that, as Hermann Reuter observed, "Augustinianism prepared the West for division with the East."<sup>15</sup> B. B. Warfield agreed, saying, "But it was Augustine who imprinted upon the Western section of the Church a character so specific as naturally to bring the separation of the Church in its train."<sup>16</sup> And, as Armstrong remarks, "The *sine qua non* of Augustinianism is Neo-Platonism."<sup>17</sup>

To trace all or even the majority of Augustine's influence on the West would span far beyond the scope of this study, but one of his salient doctrines will be examined: Double Predestination. We will see that behind this difficult doctrine, to put it mildly, lies an elitism implicit within Augustine's theology, an elitism which finds its identity in the elect.

## B. DOUBLE PREDESTINATION

In Augustine's mind, his doctrines of "original sin," "irresistible grace," and "double predestination" were organically linked. We have

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<sup>14</sup> See H. Leibschütz, "Development of Thought in the Carolingian Empire," *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: n.p., 1967), 571-86.

<sup>15</sup> Hermann Reuter states: "*Augustin hat die Trennung des Occidents und des Orients vorbereitet, eine bahnbrechende Wirkung und den ersteren ausgeübt*" in *Augustinische Studien* (Gotha: n.p., 1887), 229.

<sup>16</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1956), 307.

<sup>17</sup> Armstrong, 161, 167.

written on his doctrine of “irresistible grace” in a previous article.<sup>18</sup> The grace referenced in Augustine which is irresistible is not the grace of regeneration, which he believed was bestowed at water baptism, nor the grace of an efficacious call, but rather the grace (gift) of perseverance. It was this grace that God irresistibly foisted on the elect so that, for them, apostasy was impossible. Of course it was impossible, since Augustine *defined* the elect as those who persevere in their loyalty to Christ until the end of their lives (Matt 24:13).

Because the Scriptures were refracted by Augustine through the prism of the Platonists, God’s light was bent toward the elite. And because of their emphasis on the contemplative life (mysticism) and self-denial (asceticism) as twin engines which power the flight of the soul out of its corporeal prison into the presence of the Supreme Good, “heaven” was inaccessible to the masses. After all, how could illiterate people (the masses) ever hope to enjoy a life of study and contemplation (reason plus revelation)? And among the contemplative still fewer could qualify for heaven based on the austere requirements of asceticism (all sex is sin, either venial or mortal).

Augustine did allow for sexual relations between a husband and wife as a necessary evil for the propagation of the race, but his Manichaean background never left him in this area. For the Manichaeans, sex was always evil. So it was also for Augustine. Plotinus himself so abhorred his body that he never bathed so as to not give any honor or attention to the body, while at the same time making it all the more repugnant (not to mention pungent). The point here is that Neo-Platonism fostered an elitism which manifested itself in Augustine through his understanding of the elect.

While all baptized were regenerated by the Holy Spirit, only those who persevere until the end of their lives will prove to be the elect, the few. In other words, Augustine believed that everlasting life could be lost, but only by the non-elect. Perseverance proved whether one was elect, and hence whether he would keep his everlasting life or not. Again we quote from Azkoul, a former student at Calvin College, until he began his study of Augustinianism:

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<sup>18</sup> David R. Anderson, “The Soteriological Impact of Augustine’s Change from Premillennialism to Amillennialism,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 15 (Spring/Autumn 2002).

Also, predestination is inseparable from Augustine's doctrine of irresistible grace. Grace for him is a divine but created force, whereby God compels the will of man from evil to good and negates the consequences of "original sin" in those who are baptized. The grace of the Sacrament of Baptism is given to "many" while on the "few" is imposed irresistibly "the grace of perseverance" which denies apostasy to the elect. Saving grace is compulsory, because, if freely given, the wicked nature of man would reject it. The Reformation will adopt Augustine charitology as its own.<sup>19</sup>

The "elect" become the focal point of Augustinian theology. To understand this it may help to remember the passage of Augustine from the Manicheans to the Academics to the Platonists to Christianity. He spent nine years as a "hearer" (*auditor*) in the Manichaeian philosophy, a combination of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. The Manichaeians distinguish between the "sons of mystery" and "the sons of darkness," with the latter obviously being outside the realm of Manichaeian enlightenment. But within the ranks of their own members, the "sons of mystery" were divided between the "elect" and the "hearers." Mani proclaimed salvation through knowledge (*gnōsis*), which itself was achieved through ascetic practices. The elect were sealed with a threefold preservative: 1) Purity of the mouth—abstinence from meat and alcohol; 2) Purity of life—renouncing physical property and physical labor; and 3) Purity of heart—forsaking sexual activity.

Few of us are able to cast away the baggage of our past. These Manichaeian distinctions are easily transferred to the world of Christianity, especially since the word "elect" is a biblical term. But the distinction between the regenerate (the baptized) and the elect (those who are compelled by the gift of perseverance) is the creation of Augustine. No doubt his ascetic background originated with Manichaeism and was perpetuated by Plotinus and Porphyry. This is a salvation for only the "few," the "elect," the "sons of God," who slowly but surely distance themselves from material things. By grace, the grace/gift of perseverance, the elect escape the bondage of the flesh.

Tied in closely with election and perseverance is predestination. Ferdnan Prat claims that Augustine changed his exegesis of Romans 9 in 397. He began to see Jacob and Esau as types of two different sets of

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<sup>19</sup> Azkoul, 181.

people, the elect and the reprobate. By adopting the hermeneutics of Tyconius,<sup>20</sup> which utilized typology extensively instead of allegory, Augustine began finding types all over the Bible. Regardless of the fact that Romans 9 never mentions hell, Hades, heaven, eternal, judgment, condemnation, or the like, Augustine reads eternal bliss and eternal condemnation right into the passage.

And within Romans 8 Augustine equated God's knowledge with God's will, that is, God's foreknowledge is tantamount to predetermination. Like the propagators of Open Theism today, Augustine failed to see that foreknowledge is but a subset of the all-inclusive omniscience of God, which includes both the actual *and the possible*. Hence, it is predetermined before the foundation of the world that those whom God chose (the elect) would spend eternity with Him and those He passed over (the Reprobate) would spend eternity without Him. Of course, Augustine is left with the same dilemma that the Reformers who copy his system will inherit—how does Augustine's idea of Double Predestination exonerate God from evil? All Augustine's sophistry could not answer this dilemma, nor could that of the Reformers. Alas, the omnibenevolence of God becomes the foil in the double predestinarian shield. As we shall see, Theodore Beza simply punted on the idea of omnibenevolence. He elevated the hatred of God to the same level as the love of God, calling both virtues and evoking equal glory to God from each.

### C. HIS INFLUENCE IN THE WEST

Although Augustine was praised by Pope Celestine as a man of great learning and a doctor of the Faith, Augustine still lived in the shadow of the Fathers. St. Jerome did not mention him in *De viris illustribus*. St. Gennadius of Marseilles shows little knowledge of what Augustine had written. Sulpicius Severus ignored Augustine altogether in his biography of St. Martin of Tours, but in the same work he showed great appreciation for the works of Sts. Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, Paulinus and John Cassian. Nor did Sts. Nicetas of Remesiana, Valerian of Cimiez, Peter Chrysologus of Ravenna reveal any hint of Augustinian influence in their writings.

Those who opposed the teachings of Augustine were formidable, among which were St. John Cassian, Sts. Vincent of Lerins, Hilary of Arles, Honratus and Gennadius of Marseilles, Faustus of Riez, and Ar-

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<sup>20</sup> Anderson, 4.

nobius the Younger. Cassian was his most powerful contemporary, who claimed that Augustine's new and dangerous opinions were unknown to the Fathers and at variance with accepted interpretation of the Scriptures. In reaction to Augustine's doctrines on irresistible grace and double predestination, Cassian accused him of transposing grace and liberty, realities of the spiritual order, to the rational plane, where grace and liberty are transformed into two mutually exclusive concepts. Cassian's voice was drowned out by the din of the Pelagian/Augustinian controversy, but that of St. Faustus of Riez (d. 485) was not.

Faustus opposed both the autosoterism (you can save yourself) of Pelagius and the double predestination of Augustine. He preached the doctrine of *meritum de congruo et condigno*, that is, grace is commonly imparted but not imposed. He also took predestination to be a parody of the pagan notion of fate. Under his leadership the Council of Arles condemned predestinationism. And in 530 the Council of Valence rejected double predestination.

However, during the so-called "Carolingian Renaissance" the star of Augustine began to rise. Among the Frankish intellectuals, Augustine became the greatest of the Fathers (*doctor super omnes*). Charlemagne slept with a copy of *The City of God* under his pillow. At the Benedictine Monastery of Corbie (near Amiens), Ratramnus affirmed double predestination and also concluded that the Eucharist was simply a memorial (based on the metaphysics of Augustine, which separated material and immaterial entities). One of his disciples, Gottschalk of Mainz (d. 869) claimed to be the true heir of Augustine. He defended double predestination, was condemned at the Council of Mainz (848), was vindicated at Valence (855), and finally opposed again in 856 until an "exhausting compromise" was reached at the Council of Douzy.

From this point on, there were disagreements on what Augustine meant, but no disagreement in the West that he was the greatest of the Fathers. Anselm, Aquinas, Bonaventure, and the Reformers would drape themselves in the mantle of Augustine. And, as we have seen, Augustine was heavily influenced by Plato. But before we jump from the double predestination of Augustine to that of the Reformers, we need to stop long enough to take a glimpse at the influence of Aristotle on the historical theology of Western Christianity. Aristotle entered the church through Thomas Aquinas, and it was the principles of logic taught by Aristotle which the Reformers used to justify double predestination.



## V. ARISTOTLE (D. 322 BC)

Aristotle was the son of the court physician to the king of Macedon. At the age of seventeen he went to Plato's Academy in Athens, where he remained for twenty years as a student and then a teacher. After the death of Plato he spent the next twelve years away from Athens, serving for three of these years as the tutor to the son of Philip II of Macedon, Alexander the Great. In 335 he returned to Athens to open a new school called the Lyceum, where he taught for the next twelve years. Upon the death of Alexander, anti-Macedonian feelings threatened the school, forcing Aristotle to flee to Euboea, where soon afterward he died.<sup>21</sup>

Though he was a student of Plato, Aristotle reacted to the concept of the unseen world of ideas being more real than the world of the five senses. Reality for him was what he could observe right in front of him. The unseen world would require revelation for validation. Not so with the empirical world of nature. Reason and logic alone could mine the diamond fields of nature. He is sometimes called the Father of the Scientific Method, and was the first to classify the physical world into specific fields of biology, zoology, and physics. He is also known as the founder of logic, and his syllogistic reasoning and "four causes" were utilized heavily by the Reformers to buttress their approach to predestination.

A syllogism contained a Major Premise, a Minor Premise, and a Conclusion. Knowledge can be *deduced* by syllogistic reasoning as described in *Prior Analytics*. The Reformers relied heavily on this type of reasoning in order to give assurance of election to church members: Major Premise—Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved; Minor Premise—I have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; Conclusion—I am saved.

The "four causes" of Aristotle were used by him to explain change in nature: 1) Material Cause—the matter from which something has evolved; 2) Formal Cause—that which gives shape and structure to that which is changing; 3) Efficient Cause—that which imposed the form on the matter; and 4) Final Cause—the end to which that substance emerges and which requires the efficient cause to act in a determinate way. These will be honed and applied by Theodore Beza to theology in order to undergird his supralapsarianism (God decreed to elect some and reprobate

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<sup>21</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, "Aristotle," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 75-78.

all others before the creation and fall of man) and double predestination to the glory of God. In doing so he used both the inductive and deductive logic of Aristotle.

The writings of Aristotle were lost to western thinkers for centuries after the Fall of Rome. But during the twelfth century, scholars discovered a mother lode in Spain. Here in the libraries of Toledo, Lisbon, Segovia, and Cordoba Arabic translations of books that Europeans had long talked about but never read were found: Ptolemy's *Almagest*, the lost key to astronomy and astrology; Galen's *On the Art of Healing* and *On Anatomical Procedures*, the first scientific medical textbooks; Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*; Archimedes' treatises on mathematical engineering; and, best of all, the vast corpus of Aristotle's works—*Metaphysics*, *Physics*, *On the Heavens*, *History of Animals*, *On Generation and Corruption*, *De Anima* (Aristotle's famous treatment of the soul), *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Politics*.

Two more works attributed to Aristotle were also found, although it was discovered at a later date that these belonged to Neo-Platonists: *Theology of Aristotle* and the *Book of Causes*. Taken together, these books were the greatest discovery in Western intellectual history. It became the joint task of scholars from Europe and Africa (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) to translate these books into Latin. Here is an excerpt of what they read after translation into English:

The evidence of the senses further corroborates [the sphericity of the earth]. How else would eclipses of the moon show segments shaped as we see them? As it is, the shapes which the moon itself each month shows are of every kind...but in eclipses the outline is always curved; and, since it is the interposition of the earth that makes the eclipse, the form of this line will be caused by the form of the earth's surface, which is therefore spherical....Hence one should not be too sure of the incredibility of the view of those who conceive that there is continuity between the parts about the pillar of Hercules [the Straits of Gibraltar] and the parts about India, and that in this way the ocean is one.<sup>22</sup>

No wonder these men were bug-eyed over this treasure trove of knowledge. The church was in shock. Ever since the start of European

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<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *On the Heavens (De Caelo)*, J. L. Stocks, trans., in *Works*, 1 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 2.14, 297b.24-298a.20.

universities, the Queen of the Sciences had been theology. But with Aristotle's *redivivus*, there emerged a new interest in the physical world. Along with this information came the realization that Aristotle accumulated his wealth of knowledge apart from any assistance from the church or the Bible, using human logic, reason, and observation as his guide. Here the church was not an authority. This was no minor matter, for at this time the church enjoyed a position of unchallenged power and authority, dominating European thought and culture.

Some welcomed this new fount of wisdom. Peter Abelard (d. 1142) went so far as to imply that whatever could not be proven true though logic was considered false. Unfortunately, when one leans upon reason solely and independently of revelation, and makes reason the final arbiter of truth, a very strange thing begins to happen: reason reasons out revelation altogether. This is what slowly took place on the European stage between the 1200s and the 1700s.

## VI. THOMAS AQUINAS (D. 1274)

In the 1200s Thomas Aquinas sought to accommodate the work of Aristotle with the church and make room for both to coexist under the blessing of church authority. His work, known as Thomistic Scholasticism, brought resistance from the church initially because of its dependence on Aristotle. In 1277 several of his propositions were condemned in Paris and Oxford, but in 1323 he was canonized. In the sixteenth century Thomism was the leading light of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). He was made a Doctor of the Church in 1567, and in 1879 Pope Leo XIII commended his work for study. It is because of his influence on the Reformers and in particular their adoption of Aristotle's syllogistic reasoning and his "four causes" that Thomas Aquinas is included in our discussion.

Aquinas sought to unite reason-based and revelation-based thinking into a new and acceptable whole. He did this by dividing life into two distinct realms: the realm of Nature and the realm of Grace. In the lower realm of Nature (which included science, logic, and things having to do with the natural, temporal world) man's intellect and independent reason operated quite well on its own. Reason was seen as a reliable guide to truth in this realm. Revelation, on the other hand, was necessary for understanding the upper realm of Grace, which included such things as theology, prayer, worship, God, angels, and things pertaining to the eternal supernatural world.

Aquinas did not think of the realm of Nature and the realm of Grace as oppositional. He believed the realm of Nature should be subjected to the authority of the church. But by simply placing the material world in a category of its own, even though initially connected to the realm of Grace, over time the distinction became so great in people's minds that the connection disappeared altogether.

The "Enlightenment" was a celebration of human reason, and it rose like a beast out of the sea of the "Dark Ages," an age when revelation reigned supreme. The celebration of human reason is the corner stone of modernism, where there is a blatant disregard for revelation and a high regard for reason; where Nature is the sole, impersonal, guiding intelligence of the universe; where the Word of God is considered as relevant as the proclamations of Zeus; where human reason is the sole measurement of ethics, morality, and freedom. Despite the protestations of post-modernism against the omnipotence of human reason, the stronghold of reason over divine revelation remains as powerful as ever.<sup>23</sup>

We are now ready to jump forward to the Reformers in order to see how the influence of Plato and Aristotle converged at the Geneva Academy through their dependence on Augustine and Aristotelian logic.

## VII. THE REFORMERS

### A. JOHN CALVIN (D. 1564)

Although John Calvin is often thought of as Augustine's alter-ego, most of the Reformers were Augustinian in background. Martin Luther, for example, was an Augustinian monk. John Calvin followed Augustine almost exclusively in his typological dependence on Romans 9 to support his double predestination. But as Sanday and Headlam point out, the loving of Jacob and the hating of Esau "has reference simply to the election of one to higher privileges as head of the chosen race, than the other. It has nothing to do with their eternal salvation."<sup>24</sup> And again, "The Apostle says nothing about eternal life or death. He says nothing about the principles upon which God does act...He never says or implies that

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<sup>23</sup> See Christian Overman, *Assumptions That Affect our Lives* (Louisiana, Missouri: Micah Publishing, 1996), 106-107.

<sup>24</sup> William Sanday and Arthur Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968), 245.

God has created man for the purpose of his damnation.”<sup>25</sup> Calvin and his followers never consider that the initial use of “wrath” in Romans occurs in Rom 1:18 and deals with God’s anger against man’s sin in time instead of eternity. This may well be its use throughout Romans, including Rom 9:22 (“vessels of wrath”).

It should be apparent that this hermeneutical approach to Romans came directly from Augustine. Like so many others of his time Calvin had been studying Augustine for quite some time before dedicating his talents to Christian theology. He had only been a believer for four years when he published the first edition of his *Institutes* (1536). He claimed that his theology was thoroughly Augustinian. Of course, he differed from Augustine in his understanding of justification and the sacraments, but with regard to predestination and his preoccupation with the elect and getting one’s soul to heaven, he adopted Augustine almost wholesale. He taught a clear double predestination and supralapsarianism.<sup>26</sup> He said God caused the Fall of Adam and so “arranged” it in His decree of predestination “for His own pleasure.”<sup>27</sup> So did his successor at the Geneva Academy.

#### B. THEODORE BEZA (D. 1605)

Beza succeeded Calvin in Geneva. His supralapsarianism emphasized that Christ died only for the elect. Although Calvin certainly subscribed to the double predestination of Augustine, Beza brought it to the forefront of his theology. He even developed a chart (see appendix) which elevated the hatred to God to the same level as the love of God, making them both equal attributes of God which brought equal glory to God. As we shall see, he utilized the “four causes” of Aristotle to arrive at his conclusion, but the roots of his double predestination went back to Augustine and Neo-Platonism. So through Beza, Plato and his student Aristotle met once again at the Geneva Academy.

By the time of Beza, the preoccupation of the Reformed church was to find out whether or not one was a member of the elite group, the elect. Assurance was separated from faith so that one could no longer find

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>26</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, III, 21, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., III, 23, 7. Notice his appeal to Augustine for support. Compare *Opuscules*, Sp. 2054: “*Cependant je recognoy ceste doctrine pour mienne, qu’Adam est tombé non seulement par la permission de Dieu, mais aussi par le secret conseil d’iceluy.*”

assurance of his salvation by looking to Christ, since Christ only died for the elect, and the person in question might very well be one of the reprobate. This began the great fruit-inspecting industry of the Reformed Church.

From the chart in the Appendix we can see that the just and merciful God decrees to elect some and reprobate others before the creation and fall of man. This is called supralapsarianism. Limited atonement is a corollary of supralapsarianism deduced from the decree of election and reprobation before the creation of man. If, it is reasoned, that God's first decree was election and reprobation, then the death of Christ could only have been for the elect. That is called limited atonement. It does not come from Scripture; it comes from reason and logic. Moses Amyraut, who studied at the Geneva Academie under Beza, spent his career trying to convince Dortian Calvinists that Calvin did not teach Limited Atonement.<sup>28</sup>

Beza, in fact, seems to have gotten lost in the maze of human logic and reasoning. Building from a Platonic *a la* Augustinian base in order to determine who the elect might be, he incorporates the logic of Aristotle to help make this determination. He employs syllogistic and dialectical reasoning, as well as inductive and deductive logic. He takes Aristotle's "four causes" (material, formal, efficient, and final) and creates sub-causes to keep God from being the author of evil.<sup>29</sup>

Beza realizes he not only is in danger of making God the author of evil, but his supralapsarian approach (people are damned before they are created) presents a potentially repugnant concept of the Creator. So he works hard to make man the efficient cause of sin, while God is the deficient cause (permissive will). He works deductively, starting with the attributes of God (He is merciful and just) and extrapolates from there, all leading to the ultimate glory of God. The glory of God means the

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<sup>28</sup> Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1969), 210-14.

<sup>29</sup> See Walter Kickel, *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Theodor Beza*, Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche 25 (Lemgo, Germany: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins GmbH Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1967), for a full discussion of Beza dependency on Aristotelian logic along with his own developments in addition to the "four causes": 61-68, 159-66. There were *causa prima* and *causa secunda*; direct causes and indirect (three types) causes; *causa efficiens* and *causa deficiens* (*permissio volens*, permissive will) and *causa finalis*.

open, public, manifestation of His attributes. If His justice is going to be manifested, God must do something just which can be observed. So He chooses to justly condemn the reprobate.<sup>30</sup>

No question that God's justice demands judgment of sin and condemnation of unbelievers. The rub comes in His decree to condemn the reprobate before He creates them. Beza realizes this decree before creation presents an image-of-God problem, but it is a dilemma from which he could not extricate himself. Nor could his followers, like William Perkins. Arminius would try, but he simply swung the pendulum to the opposite extreme.

### C. WILLIAM PERKINS

Perkins defended his theology in a book called *A Golden Chain*. Since he was trained at the Geneva Academy under Beza, the subtitle of his book should come as no surprise: "*A GOLDEN CHAIN: or, THE DESCRIPTION OF THEOLOGIE: Damnation, according to Gods word. A view whereof is to be seene in the Table annexed Hereunto is adioyned the order which M. Theodore Beza used in comforting afflicted consciences.*" Like the theology of his predecessor, the most obvious feature of *A Golden Chain* is the centrality of the doctrine of double predestination.<sup>31</sup>

Perkins defines predestination as "that by the which he hath ordained all men to a certaine and everlasting estate: that is, either to salvation or condemnation, for his owne glory."<sup>32</sup> Perkins quotes Augustine no less than 588 times with Chrysostom coming in second with 129 references.<sup>33</sup> He completely mistranslates Rom 9:22 when he says, "Moreover, every man (as Paul *avereth*) is unto God, as a lumpe of clauy in the potters hand: and therefore God according to his supreme authoritie 'doth make vessels of wrath....'"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kickel rightly observes, "*dass das ganze System Bezas hinfällig ware, wenn zugegeben werden müsste, dass Gott seine Vorsätze ändern kann,*" 166. He argues that the immutability of God precludes His changing what He has decreed.

<sup>31</sup> R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 55.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> *Works*, 11. 694.

Perkins writes about four degrees of God's love: effectual calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification.<sup>35</sup> Notice how conveniently he slips "sanctification" into the mix, when Rom 8:30 quite obviously omits sanctification in its "golden chain." It is, in fact, conspicuous by its absence. Perhaps God does not guarantee progressive sanctification as the champions of an amillennial interpretation of Matt 24:13 presume. As Kendall observes, "The horror of horrors for a disciple of Perkins is the thought that he could be a reprobate."<sup>36</sup>

The reprobate man is doomed to eternal condemnation before he is even born, no matter what he does in his lifetime. It does him no good to make his calling and election sure; his lot is unalterably fixed and decreed by God, whose right it is to take the lump of clay from which man is to be created and "make him a vessel of dishonor." All such interpretations of Rom 9:22 fail to observe that the verb they keep translating as active (*katērtismena*) is not active at all, but rather a middle/passive participle. God does not act upon these vessels in any way, shape, or form. By contrast God does act upon the vessels of mercy in the very next verse; He prepares these for glory.

#### D. JACOB ARMINIUS (D. 1609)

Although Arminius studied under Theodore Beza and was an admirer of William Perkins, it is surmised that he never agreed with their understanding of the decrees of God or their resulting double predestination. Arminius's contention was that God only predestines believers. Arminius saw four decrees:

- 1) God appointed Jesus Christ to be our Mediator and Redeemer;
- 2) God decreed to receive into favor those who repent and believe and leave in sin all unbelievers;
- 3) God decreed to administer in a sufficient and efficacious manner all means which were necessary for repentance and faith;
- 4) God decreed to save those who He knew from all eternity would believe and persevere and to damn those He likewise knew who would not believe and persevere.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>36</sup> Kendal, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Jacobus Arminius, *Works of Arminius*, I:589f.



Arminius remains consistent in his thesis that “election of grace is only of believers,”<sup>38</sup> for predestination “is the decree of the good pleasure of God in Christ, by which He determined within Himself from all eternity to justify believers.”<sup>39</sup> If a person believed, he was elect; if he did not believe, he was not elect. From the above it can be seen that both the mainline Reformers and Arminius made perseverance a requirement for election. The difference was that the Calvinists said lack of perseverance proved the professing Christian never truly had everlasting life in the first place, even if he did have temporary faith. Arminius said that a lack of perseverance could cause one to lose everlasting life. In either case, the one who did not persevere until the end (Matt 24:13) was not elect.

The position taken by Arminius might be argued to be more biblical in that one cannot find any biblical support for the use of the word “predestination” in connection with unbelievers. However, his understanding of faith differs very little from that of the Calvinists.<sup>40</sup>

#### E. THE SYNOD OF DORT (1618-1619)

The year after Arminius died his followers preserved his teachings in the Remonstrance of 1610. His five points were:

- 1) God has decreed Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of men and decreed to save all who believe on Him;
- 2) Christ died for all but only believers enjoy forgiveness of sins;
- 3) Man must be regenerated by the Spirit;
- 4) Grace is not irresistible;
- 5) Perseverance is granted through the assistance of the grace of the Holy Spirit, but whether one can fall away from life in Christ is left open.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., III:583.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., II:392.

<sup>40</sup> See Kendal, 141-150, for a lengthy discussion of this claim.

<sup>41</sup> The full text of the Five Articles of the Remonstrants (also the Canons of Dort) are given in Peter Y. DeJong (ed.), *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commencement of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-19* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 207ff.

In November of 1618 the Synod of Dort began the first of 163 sessions, which resulted in what is known as the Five Points of Calvinism. Though not in the order popularly referenced under the acronym TULIP, here is the Synod's response to the Remonstrance:

- 1) God's eternal decree of predestination is the cause of election and reprobation, and that this decree is not based upon foreseen faith;
- 2) Christ died for the elect only;
- 3) Men by nature are unable to seek God apart from the Spirit;
- 4) Grace is irresistible;<sup>42</sup>
- 5) The elect will surely persevere in faith to the end.<sup>43</sup>

Though the discussion between the Arminians and the Calvinists will probably continue unabated until Jesus comes, the point at issue here is double predestination and its perseverance in the annals of church history, especially in Western Christianity. The supralapsarian position of Beza (God decreed double predestination before the creation and fall of man) certainly was maintained by the Synod of Dort.

#### F. THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLIES (1643-49)

The primary focus here was not soteriological but ecclesiastical. Nevertheless, there was quite a discussion over the order of the decrees and universal versus limited atonement. Limited atonement won the day, and the wording regarding the decrees was such that either a supra- or infralapsarian could agree.<sup>44</sup>

Regarding double predestination, their *Confession of Faith* (III. iii, 9) says some are "predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death." Those who are not elected to eternal life

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<sup>42</sup> It is interesting that modern day exponents of these five points explain irresistible grace as an extension of the efficacious call of God: "In addition to the outward general call to salvation which is made to everyone who hears the gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation [David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1975), 18]. This was not at all the meaning Augustine meant for the phrase. It referred to the gift of perseverance.

<sup>43</sup> DeJong, 229-62.

<sup>44</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (1931), 56.

were passed by and ordained to dishonor and wrath to the praise of God's glorious justice. The number of both the elect and the reprobate "is so certain, and definite, that it cannot be either increased, or diminished."

#### G. SUMMARY

From the foregoing we can see that the Reformers capitalized on both revelation and reason. Following the lead of Augustine, they combined the revelation of Scripture with the reason of the Greek philosophers, namely Plato and Aristotle. As Alister McGrath notes, "Theology was understood to be grounded upon Aristotelian philosophy, and particularly Aristotelian insights into the nature of method; later Reformed writers are better described as philosophical, rather than biblical, theologians."<sup>45</sup> In search of Augustine's elect, the Reformers refined the doctrine of double predestination with the syllogistic reasoning and causality of Aristotle. In this quest they have obviated any possibility of assurance of salvation before physical death, since one must persevere in the faith until the end of his life to either find out (Calvinism) or determine (Arminianism) whether he is elect or not. But what are some of the other effects of Athens on Western Christianity?

### VIII. SUMMARY

The purpose of this study has been to demonstrate some of the influence of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle on the landscape of Western Christianity. The influence of Plato came into the church primarily through Augustine. As he was deemed to be the greatest of the church fathers from the Carolignian Renaissance onward, the Reformers and their disciples leaned heavily upon him and his theology of the elect. Augustine's theology of the elect was an amalgam of his background in Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism with Christianity.

Augustine's theology of the elect was traced under the subject of Double Predestination through the teachings of Calvin, Beza, Perkins, and the Westminster divines. Some attention to Aristotle and his principles of logic was given as his philosophy was imbibed by Thomas Aquinas and Theodore Beza. The resulting introspection (contemplation) to determine if one were elect or not helped foster the detachment of prac-

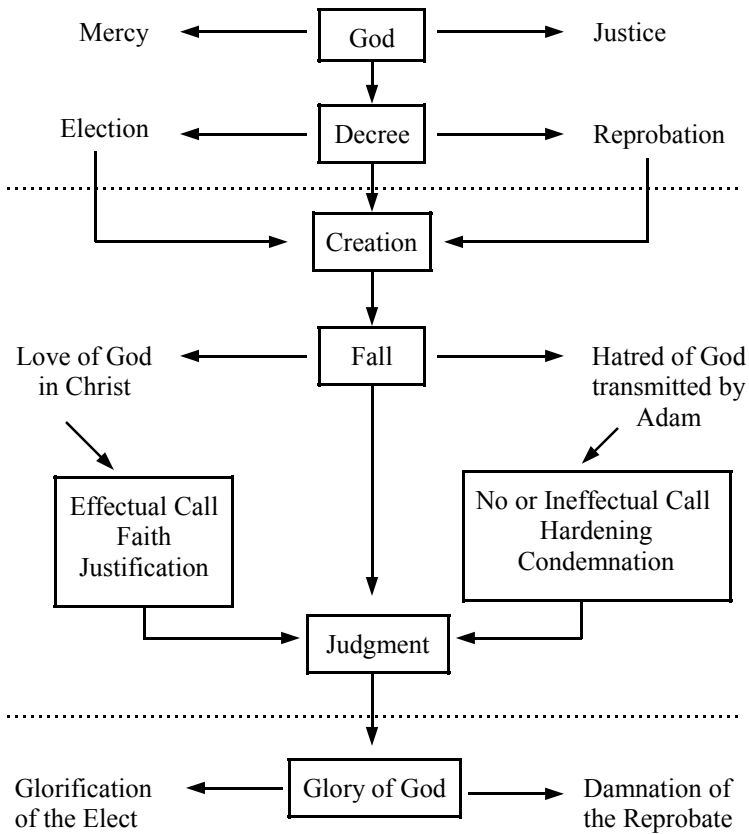
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<sup>45</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1997), 74.

ting Christians from involvement in helping to cure the ills of this world. The unbiblical emphasis in the West on getting souls to heaven as the end-all of life has caused a de-emphasis on discipleship and any concern for the underprivileged of this world.

Of course, the Bible does speak of the “salvation of the soul” (1 Pet 1:9) as the end (goal) of our faith. But this salvation is not the return of the soul to heaven in the sense that Plato, Mani, Plotinus, and Porphyry espoused. That “salvation of the soul” (1 Pet 1:9) would be more properly identified with the salvation set forth by Jesus in Matt 16:24-27, a salvation of one’s *life* (= time on earth—a common use of *psyche* in the NT, the word translated “soul” in 1 Pet 1:9) for both time and eternity (as revealed by the rewards rendered by the Lord when He returns in Matt 16:27). But that is another study.

# **Appendix: Double Predestination by Theodore Beza**



# AN EVALUATION OF THOMAS À KEMPIS' *THE IMITATION OF CHRIST*

LORNE ZELYCK

## I. INTRODUCTION

Originally named Thomas Hemerken, Thomas à Kempis (1379/80–1471) joined the Brethren of Common Life in 1392. The monastic order had been founded eighteen years earlier by Gerard Groote<sup>1</sup>, a lay preacher who adamantly spoke out against the corruption and declining spirituality of the Roman Church.<sup>2</sup> After being ordained in 1413, à Kempis spent his entire monastic life at the monastery of Mount St. Agnes at Zwolle, except for a three-year exile. The Brethren devoted themselves to doing charitable work, nursing the sick, studying and teaching the Scriptures, as well as copying religious and inspirational works. Their undogmatic form of piety became known as the *devotio moderna*.<sup>3</sup>

The works of à Kempis exemplified the ideas of the *devotio moderna*, and stressed the example of Christ in seeking a spiritual lifestyle.

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<sup>1</sup> Groote's teaching was highly influenced by Johannes Eckhart. Eckhart was a German mystic and theologian who taught that the true goal of contemplation was absorption into the Divine Unknown. He wrote a large number of works dealing with man's inner spirituality and the ability of the individual to develop this spirituality. These ideas diminished the importance of the clergy and the sacraments of the Church. In 1327, Pope John XXII summoned Eckhart to defend himself against charges of heresy which he did by recanting many of his propositions.

<sup>2</sup> I believe it is for this reason that Protestants accepted the teachings of à Kempis. While they may not have agreed with everything he wrote, the Reformers were desperate for witnesses who agreed to some extent with their doctrines and provided them with some ammunition against the erroneous teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>3</sup> Modern Devotion. This included a return to the simplicity of the Christian faith which included: clergy living a holy life, valuing the internal life and internal piety, lack of stress on the Church's institutionalized aids to salvation, an insistence that the knowledge of God lay open to scholar and illiterate peasant alike, intense and emotional meditation to the suffering of Christ, and an interpretation of the Eucharist that stressed the sacrament as mediator of an intimate relationship with Christ. See <http://www.ucalgary.ca>.

While writing several literary works, he is best remembered for one devotional: *The Imitation of Christ*. The four sections which comprise the book were written sometime between 1420 and 1427. Immediately, the book experienced success within the Christian community, and printing began in 1472. Prior Pirkhamer enthusiastically commended its publishing in 1494 by claiming: "Nothing more holy, nothing more honorable, nothing more religious, nothing more profitable for the Christian commonwealth can you ever do than to make known these works of Thomas à Kempis."<sup>4</sup> Throughout the years, this book has been translated into over fifty languages. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was so certain that this book was the best summary of a disciplined Christian life that he translated it for his followers.<sup>5</sup> The popularity of *The Imitation of Christ* has remained throughout the centuries. One recent edition even considers it, "the best-loved book of Christianity, after the Bible."<sup>6</sup>

It has widespread popularity in Christendom. However, Protestants have accepted à Kempis' teachings without regard for his mystical and unorthodox doctrine.<sup>7</sup> He has perpetrated and sustained doctrinal errors which deviate from the teachings of Christ on four important issues: 1) the value of a disciple, 2) the call to discipleship, 3) the possibility of perfection, and 4) the assurance of eternal life.

## II. THE VALUE OF A DISCIPLE

### A. JESUS' IMPARTATION OF VALUE THROUGH LOVE

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus bestows value upon humanity through extending His unmerited love in three concrete ways: His teaching, His attitude and His ministry.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous teachings of Jesus spoke about the value of people in the sight of God. Jesus taught that God cares for people so much that even

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14661a.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> J. H. Chadwick, *The Imitation of Christ: Rewritten and Updated by Harold Chadwick* (New Jersey: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1999), xviii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., front cover.

<sup>7</sup> These problems are usually dismissed on grounds that the book is to be read as a devotional classic which addresses relational aspects of the Christian walk, rather than doctrinal issues.

<sup>8</sup> John Stott, "Am I Supposed to Love Myself or Hate Myself?" *Christianity Today* (April 20, 1984): 28.

the hairs of their head are numbered (Luke 12:7). In the Sermon on the Mount, He contends that people are much more valuable than the birds of the air or the grass of field (Matt 6:26, 30). The Father is portrayed as so charitable that He desires to give good gifts to His children who ask in prayer (Matt 7:11) and promises to reward those who obey His precepts (Matt 6:4, 6, 18). The paramount example of the Father's love is that He even extends goodness towards the evil and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45).

Jesus' attitude towards people also gave them value. He went out of His way to honor the dishonored, and to accept those the world rejected. He spoke courteously to outcast women (Mark 5:25; John 4:7-26; 8:11), and He invited simple children to come to Him (Matt 19:13-15). He spoke words of hope to Samaritans. He allowed lepers to approach Him (Mark 1:40-45) and a prostitute to kiss his feet (Luke 7:37-39). He ministered to the poor and hungry (Matt 14:21; 15:38), ate with tax collectors (Mark 2:15-16), and was even accused of being a friend of sinners (Matt 11:19). It was this loving attitude of Jesus which transformed people's lives. When Jesus told Zaccheus that He wanted to stay with him ("a great sinner" Luke 19:7), Zaccheus responded by extending love to Jesus by receiving Him gladly (19:6), and then he showed love to others by repaying all that he had defrauded (19:8).

Lastly, Jesus' ministry is a clear example of the value He placed on humanity. Examples of this are seen in His ministry of healing, exorcism, and His death. Jesus was moved with compassion by the infirmities of people (Matt 9:36, Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13), and He healed them and made them whole. He was the Good Shepherd who cared so much that He came to seek and to save the one lost sheep (Matt 18:14) and to lay down His life for it (John 10:11). At the cross, we see the ultimate value and worth of humanity. The Son of Man showed the greatness of the Father's love by laying down His life for His friends (Mark 10:45; John 15:13).

#### B. À KEMPIS' CONCEPT OF UNWORTHINESS

Within *The Imitation of Christ*, à Kempis portrays the disciple to be without value and worthless in the eyes of God. The inevitable result of this attitude is self-scorn and depreciation.

He considers himself and other believers as, "unworthy of divine solace and deserving of much tribulation," (I 21:4) "unworthy of any benefits," (III 8:3) "poor and unworthy," (III 10:2) and an "unworthy sinner who am [sic] but dust and ashes" (IV 4:1). We should not think that we have made any spiritual progress unless we feel that we, "are inferior to all others," (II 2:2) and the most perfect wisdom is, "To think



of oneself as nothing, and always to think well and highly of others” (I 2:4). The only way to enjoy peace on earth is to, “come to the place of complete contempt for yourself” (III 25:3). It is only those who, “consider themselves the most wicked of all people, and judge themselves to be the most unworthy, who are the most fit to receive the greater blessings” (III 22:2). à Kempis says that a disciple should come before the Lord saying, “I am nothing, I have nothing, and I can do nothing” (III 3:5). The consequence of this attitude is that we should confess our unworthiness and our “extreme unworthiness should always displease us” (III 4:3).

à Kempis believes that humanity is not only worthless, but also states that we are to despise ourselves: “Truly to know and despise self is the best and most perfect counsel” (I 2:4). He concludes by saying that, “I am the poorest and meanest servant, a vile worm, much more poor and contemptible than I know or dare to say” (III 3:5).

While Jesus bestowed unmerited value upon humanity by extending love in His teaching, attitude and ministry, à Kempis seems to bestow shame and dishonor.

### III. THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

#### A. JESUS’ CALL TO FOLLOW HIM

In Mark 8, Jesus clearly tells His disciples what it means to “follow Him.” Within the context, Peter has just made the great confession that, “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29). Jesus then clearly states what will soon happen to Him: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed” (Mark 8:31). In response to this, Peter took Jesus aside and censured Him, yet Jesus rebuked Peter for he was not setting his mind on God’s interests, but man’s (Mark 8:33). Jesus said to them, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Wessell states, “By denial of self, Jesus does not mean to deny oneself something. He means to renounce self—to cease to make self the object of one’s life and actions. This involves a fundamental reorientation of the principle of life. God, not self, must be at the center of life.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Walter W. Wessell, “Mark,” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 697.

Therefore, what disciples need to deny is every “interest of man” which would hinder them from following Jesus. These may include: fear of persecution (Mark 8:38), family commitments (Matt 8:22), job security (Matt 4:19; 9:9) possessions and greed (Luke 14:33; 19:21), jealousy and selfishness (John 21:19, 21). The description of following Jesus is further expounded by the metaphor, “take up his cross.” Criminals condemned to death by crucifixion were forced to carry their cross to the scene of their execution (John 19:17). The picture is of a man, already condemned, required to carry his cross on the way to the place of execution, as Jesus was required to do. Consequently, for a disciple to bear his cross is synonymous with following Jesus.

The reason for a disciple to deny their self is so they can follow Jesus’ self-sacrificial example. Self-denial is not for Jesus, so much as it is with Jesus. The goal of self-denial is not to impress God, but rather to follow Jesus example more closely.

#### B. À KEMPIS’ CALL TO SELF-MORTIFICATION

*The Imitation of Christ* is best known for its uncompromising stance on discipleship. Throughout the book, à Kempis quotes the words of Jesus in Mark 8:34, “If you will be my disciple, deny yourself,” and encourages others to, “take up your [their], therefore, and follow Jesus.”

Sadly, à Kempis, at times, loses sight of the goal of self-denial. Instead of a fundamental reorientation of one’s desires and identity with Christ’s sufferings, the object of self-denial has become “perfect (self) mortification” (III 31:3). This mortification and self-denial results in “true (spiritual) progress,” (III 39:3) and meritorious grace. “A man makes the most progress and merits the most grace precisely in those matters wherein he gains the greatest victories over self and most mortifies his will” (I 25:3). Further, “the desire to die to all things of this world so that He may be despised and unknown in this life, and the ability to be transported from vanity to truth and from flesh to spirit” (III 34:2) is another mark of spiritual progress. In my opinion, this radical mortification seems to be feasible within a monastery only, for it includes keeping oneself, “free from all temporal cares” (II 5:3), “free from any external affection” (II 6:4) and the desire to “seek no solace from any other creature (but) relish God completely” (I 25:9).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Notably, the Second Vatican Council denied this claim and said that spirituality is not for priests and religious alone. “The Lord addressed all His disci-

Furthermore, à Kempis suggests that the motivation behind self-denial is to acquire the love of God. Disciples are to, “subject themselves wholeheartedly for the love of God” (I 9:1). The disciple will gain much more merit if they, “accept another’s opinion for love of God” (I 9:2). The love of God demands that we “part with an intimate and much-needed friend” (II 9:2) because, “the further you withdraw from human consolation, the nearer you come to God” (III 29:3). For the love of God, the disciple is also compelled to undergo all things cheerfully, all labors and sorrows, temptations and trials, anxieties, weaknesses, necessities, injuries, slanders, rebukes, humiliations, confusions, corrections, and contempt.

While Jesus taught that discipleship involves a reorientation of one’s desires to those of God, à Kempis views discipleship as a mortification of all desires, even the desire for human relationships. In addition, Jesus sees following Him as a willingness to endure suffering as He did, while à Kempis views it as a way to obtain the love of God. à Kempis’ teachings will inevitably lead to self-sufficiency, works righteousness, and hypocrisy. The paradox is that this radical aestheticism can only be achieved by a true disciple of Christ, while at the same time it is viewed as a way to obtain a relationship with Him.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. THE POSSIBILITY OF PERFECTION

##### A. JESUS’ CONCEPT OF WHOLENESS

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus exhorts His disciples to be perfect. “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In both instances, the word translated “perfect” is *telios*. The semantic range of *telios* as defined by BDAG means, “having attained the end or purpose,

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ples in Matt 5:48. Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.” “Each must adapt the call to perfection to his or her own situation. What will always be common to all is love of God and of neighbor.” Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1970), 1078.

<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, it also seems possible for unbelievers to obtain this standard of aestheticism through rigid self-denial. Again, I believe the fundamental flaw with this teaching is that it emphasizes self-mortification over an intimate relationship with Jesus where the disciples seek to follow Him and identify themselves with His sufferings.

complete, or perfect.”<sup>12</sup> This word describes a person who is “fully developed in a moral sense.” This is contrasted with “persons who are fully up to standard in a certain respect, perfect, complete, expert.” Therefore, it appears that the perfection which Jesus desires of His disciples is total moral maturity, versus flawless perfection.

Jesus uses the word *telios* in Matthew 19:21. It is translated by the NASB as “complete.” I believe that this passage helps explain the meaning of perfection. The Rich Young man, while keeping the commandments, serves two masters – God and wealth. Wholeness (or perfection) meant for him a willingness to give up his wealth, yet he was unwilling and left Jesus’ presence incomplete. Therefore, it seems that Jesus does not use *telios* to mean “sinless perfection”, rather a complete, undivided devotion to God which expresses itself through acts of love. Also, after the antithesis statements of Matthew 5:21-47, I believe it is impossible for any disciple to perfectly achieve these standards on an ongoing basis. The fact that we are unable to attain this standard does not mean that it will be lowered; rather, it means that we need God’s grace and forgiveness to overcome our remaining sin.

#### B. À KEMPIS’ CONCEPT OF ATTAINING SINLESS PERFECTION

à Kempis suggests the disciple is to press on to perfection through, “persevering in seeking perfection” (I 17:1), being “diligent to desire perfection” (I 19:2) and living perfectly for Jesus (I 19:1). Beyond this, I believe Jesus and à Kempis would disagree.

While Jesus understood wholeness to be devotion to God which expresses itself through acts of love, à Kempis believes perfection can be obtained through a nebulous, subjective, mystical experience. à Kempis encourages the disciple to be like the saints who were able to “attach themselves to God.” The saints were able to obtain perfection because “they tried to mortify entirely in themselves all earthly desires, and thus they were able to attach themselves to God with all their heart and freely to concentrate their innermost thoughts” (I 11:2). We, as disciples, are able to experience something of heavenly contemplation, “if we mortify

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<sup>12</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

our bodies perfectly and allow no distractions to enter our minds" (I 11:3). This can be achieved through abandoning self to God (III 31:1), perfectly mortifying the body and "offering [our] heart completely to God, uniting it with Him; a soul perfectly united with God" (IV 13:3). Therefore, perfection negatively signifies freedom from grievous sin, and positively, a permanent supernatural attachment to God.<sup>13</sup>

à Kempis offers more concrete ways for a disciple to attain perfection, such as "not believing every talebearer," (I 4:1) nor "letting his mind relax in attention to heavenly things," (III 26:1) "selling all" (III 56:2) and submitting to superiors (I 18:5). Partaking of the Eucharist is also seen as the perfect source of freedom from sin: "You must often return to the source of grace and divine mercy, to the fountain of goodness and perfect purity, if you wish to be free from passion and vice, if you desire to be made stronger and more watchful against all the temptations and deceits of the devil" (IV 10:1).

The most troubling aspect of *The Imitation of Christ* is à Kempis' belief that a disciple may obtain sinless perfection. This view is evident when he says, "we become perfect through uprooting one vice each year" (I 11:5) and we are to, "strive earnestly for perfection for in a short time [we] will receive the reward of [our] labor" (I 25:1).<sup>14</sup> à Kempis believes

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<sup>13</sup> This is strikingly similar to the traditional Catholic view of self-denial and the attenuation of divine perfection. "It is a firm conviction of the Fathers that God became man so that man might become God, that is, be deified." This must not be conceived of as pantheism, neither as moral communion with God, but rather a physical communion of man with God. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1960), 256-57. Post-Vatican II dogma would also agree with the mystical nature of perfection. McBrien quotes Thomas Merton from *Life and Holiness*: "Spiritual perfection is available not to those with superhuman powers but to those who, though weak and defective in themselves, trust perfectly in the love of God, who abandon themselves with confident joy to the apparent madness of the cross (119). R. P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 1075.

<sup>14</sup> à Kempis' view of perfection is comparable to that of Wesley who believed that the perfect man was not free from temptation, but rather free from giving in to temptation. Perfectionists maintain that it is possible for a believer to arrive at a state where they no longer sin. Wesley notes that this does not mean "the inability to sin, rather the ability to not sin." He also refutes the idea that there is no longer a need for grace or the Holy Spirit, or the cessation of temptation or struggle with the tendency toward evil, or that there is no room for further spiritual growth. "It is to have 'the mind which was in Christ,' and to

sinless perfection is attainable because of the example of the saints. These are holy persons who were “given to contemplation, able to mortify entirely all earthly desires, and attach themselves to God” (I 11:2). They were also “free from passions and lusts” (I 11:3), “possessed the light of true perfection and religion” (I 18:1), and their lives bore witness that they were “holy and perfect men who conquered the world” (I 18:5).

In response to such a high standard of perfection, à Kempis ironically reassures his readers that the way of the perfect should not make us downcast, but spur us on to “*seek perfection*” (III 32:2). In possibly the darkest passage of the whole book, à Kempis reveals the turmoil of a man who knows of the sinless perfection which he is supposed to obtain, yet he is sadly unable. “I know the way of perfection, but because of corruption, do not rise to more perfect things” (III 55:3). “I have always been prone to sin and slow to amend. That is true. I cannot deny it” (III 52:2).

While Jesus’ view of perfection was moral maturity which evidences itself in God-like acts of love, à Kempis viewed perfection as a mystical attachment to God which was possible through spiritual exercises, such as partaking of the Eucharist. Moreover, while Jesus did not expect His disciples to reach perfection, à Kempis’ teachings contradict this by insinuating that they could achieve sinless perfection like the saints.

## V. THE ASSURANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE

### A. JESUS’ TEACHING ON ASSURANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE

The Apostle John states the evangelistic aim of his gospel in John 20:31, “These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” Therefore, it seems natural that this gospel would describe how someone can have spiritual, eternal life. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus states that the only requirement for obtaining eternal life is to believe in Him: “...whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” (John 3:15), “...whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16), “He who believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:36),

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‘walk as He walked’; to have all the mind that was in Him, and always to walk as He walked: in other words, to be inwardly and outwardly devoted to God; all devoted in heart and life.” See [www.wesley.nnu.edu/Wesleyan\\_theology](http://www.wesley.nnu.edu/Wesleyan_theology) quoting J. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfectionism* (IV, 4, 15:1-6).

“he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life” (John 5:24), “he who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47), and “Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:26).<sup>15</sup> These passages testify that the sole condition for eternal life is belief in Jesus.

Throughout the gospel, it is also evident that anyone who believes in Jesus is eternally secure – they are unable to lose eternal life. Jesus assures believers that they have irreversibly passed from death to life: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). Believers currently possess eternal life, they will never be condemned, and they have already passed from the sphere of death into life. Jesus also completely fulfills the will of the Father and doesn’t lose even one believer: “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I myself will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:39-40). Jesus has never lost a believer and He never will. What He will do is raise up every person who believes in Him for eternal life. Lastly, Jesus assures believers that no one is able to snatch them out of God’s hand: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (John 10:27-30). Therefore, eternal security is based on the veracity of Jesus. Since He will prevent believers from being snatched out of the Father’s hand, they will always possess eternal life.<sup>16</sup>

#### B. À KEMPIS’ TEACHING ON ASSURANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE

Thomas à Kempis believes people can obtain eternal life through experiencing an infusion of grace from God. “Have mercy, O Lord, have mercy on those who ask Your mercy, give grace to those who need it, and make us such that we may be worthy to enjoy Your favor and gain

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<sup>15</sup> Within the Gospel of John, other words besides belief are used in correlation with eternal life. Words such as “drink” (John 4:14), “eat” (John 6:54) and “know” (John 17:3) are synonymous with “belief.”

<sup>16</sup> Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 94.

eternal life” (IV 9:6).<sup>17</sup> The way to receive this infusion is through removing obstacles to grace and participating in the Eucharist. “Cast away all obstacles to grace, therefore, if you wish to receive its infusion” (III 53:1). “I truly believe that You are present here in this Sacrament, God and man... In it greater grace is infused, growing virtue is nourished, faith confirmed, hope strengthened, and charity fanned into flame” (IV 4:2).

In this paradigm, there is no assurance of eternal security. First, no one can ever know if they have removed all of the obstacles which would hinder an infusion of grace (unless, of course, they have reached sinless perfection),<sup>18</sup> and second, even if they have received a grace infusion, this grace can be lost through sin.<sup>19</sup> “They who follow their own evil passions stain their consciences and lose the grace of God” (I 1:5). “Cleanse my conscience of every fault, and restore to me Your grace which I lost in sin” (IV 9:2). It is also possible to lose Jesus and His grace, “You may quickly drive Him away and lose His grace, if you turn back to the outside world” (II 8:3) and “He who finds Jesus finds a rare treasure...whereas he who loses Him loses more than the whole world” (II 8:1). There is clearly no assurance to be found in à Kempis’ theology.

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<sup>17</sup> This keeps with traditional Catholic teaching. “In regard to the increase of the state of grace, the Council of Trent declared against the Reformers, who asserted that good works are only a fruit of the achieved justification, that the justice already in the soul is increased by good works. The various good works are rewarded by different grades of grace.” Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic*, 262.

<sup>18</sup> This is in accordance with traditional Catholic beliefs. “Against the teaching of the Reformers, that the justified possess certainty of faith which excludes all doubt about their justification, the Council of Trent declared: ‘If one considers his own weakness and his defective disposition, he may well be fearful and anxious as to his state of grace, as nobody knows with the certainty of faith, which permits of no error, that he has achieved the grace of God.’” Ibid., 261-62.

<sup>19</sup> This is also central to Catholic teaching. “The Council of Trent declared that the state of grace is lost, not by unbelief alone, but also by every mortal sin.” Ibid., 263. “The moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost are, according to the general teaching of theologians, lost when grace and charity are lost.” Ibid., 26.



## VI. CONCLUSION

I do not believe that every component of *The Imitation of Christ* is erroneous; I appreciate his attempt to take discipleship seriously. Yet I do believe that there are enough problematic statements which cause me to question its benefit to the Christian community. While Jesus bestows value upon humanity, à Kempis seems to eradicate it. While Jesus calls us to follow Him, à Kempis calls us to mortify ourselves. While Jesus calls us to complete, undivided devotion to God which expresses itself through acts of love, à Kempis calls us to sinless perfection, and views it as attainable. Moreover, while Jesus assures His followers of eternal life through believing in Him, à Kempis provides no assurance of eternal life, for the infusion of grace can be lost.

In conclusion, I believe *The Imitation of Christ* was simply a product of its times.<sup>20</sup> Honorably, à Kempis sought to understand God the best he could, and apply his knowledge to his context. McBrien notes that the Middle Ages were, "...wrought with mysticism. The lack of intellectual and theological substance produced numerous problems: superstition, ignorance of the Bible, fascination with reports of visions, exaggeration of the value of relics, emotionalism, inordinate fears of the after-life and of God's judgment, and devotional excesses unrelated to the central mysteries of Christian faith."<sup>21</sup> Whether or not the Christian community has made any progress in these areas, I can not say. What does seem apparent is this: the Christian community needs to be diligent in reading its authors carefully, filtering everything through the clear teachings of Jesus as found in the Scriptures, and applying it to our lives with the help of the Holy Spirit. I believe that in doing this, we would truly imitate Christ.

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<sup>20</sup> A possible contemporary of à Kempis, Walter Hinton alludes to the spiritual mindset at this time. He became a hermit before joining the Augustinians at the Priory of Saint Peter in Thurgarton, Nottinghamshire, where he composed a devotional. This book was first printed in 1494. It was written to a "ghostly sister" who is presumed to be a solitary nun, living alone in a cell, seeking to pray, to contemplate God and to live solely for his glory. In it, he wrote that, "Through humility and love, the soul is mounting the spiritual ladder rung by rung until it reaches perfection. It is the highest state attainable in this life, but it can only be reached by the grace of God." Walter Hilton, *The Ladder of Perfection*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1988), xxv.

<sup>21</sup> R. P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 1065.

# BOOK REVIEWS

BY THE MEMBERS OF THE GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

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***The Passion of Jesus Christ.*** By John Piper. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004. 125 pp. Paper. \$7.99.

This is a short book containing 50 chapters (most are 2 pages or less) explaining 50 reasons why Jesus suffered and died. This is good theology and very practical.

There are, of course, places where the author's Lordship theology comes through. For example, the title of Chapter 14 is "To Bring Us to Faith and Keep Us Faithful." In that chapter he says, "The miracle is not only the creation of our faith, but the securing of our faithfulness...He will keep them. They will persevere. The blood of the covenant guarantees it" (p. 47). Similarly in Chapter 30 he writes, "The believer is dead to sin, no longer dominated by her attractions. Sin, the prostitute who killed my friend, has no appeal" (p. 79). While the author doesn't press the point, if what he is saying is true, then our assurance is linked to our works. For if anyone finds sin appealing, he surely would be right to believe he was not regenerate if sin holds no appeal for the believer. Plus if one doubts he is being faithful in his service for Christ, he would reasonably doubt he was born again if the blood of Christ guarantees the faithfulness of all who are justified.

In spite of a few places like those, this is a good book worth having. I recommend it.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Irving, TX

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***Can it Be True? A Personal Pilgrimage through Faith and Doubt.***

By Michael Wakely. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2002. 224 pp. Paper. \$11.99.

The presently popular evangelical (in the most liberal sense of the word) postmodernist, Brian McClaren suggests in his writings that doubt serves as a Christian virtue. While he believes that doubt that is out of control can lead to unbelief, when in the proper balance, it is “our Geiger counter for error.” What essentially occurs is that faith changes from objective to humanistic. No longer does our assurance rest completely in the objective promise of God’s Word but partially in our own subjective emotions and feelings. This thinking is becoming increasingly common.

Michael Wakely shows a similar line of thought in his book, *Can it Be True?* In the introduction, Wakely orients the reader to the book’s subject: “This is a book about faith—to be specific, the Christian faith—not a book of doctrine and dogma, as many such books might be. What I have written is the product of a personal pilgrimage...in my experience, faith has always walked hand in hand with doubt” (p. 8). What Wakely fails to realize is that our faith is grounded in doctrine (*doctrina*, Latin meaning “body of teaching”). Our understanding of Biblical teachings may be wrong or right, but it nevertheless is grounded in doctrine. Just one page later he explains, “In my understanding, doubt is not a sin, nor is it a failing. It is a mark of an intelligent and authentic faith” (p. 9).

Admittedly, there are key figures in the NT that had doubts: Peter and Thomas. Yet, was that moment of doubt their finest hour or something that they had to overcome in order to become an unmovable follower of Christ? We see that the disciples’ doubts before the resurrection were turned into such persuasion the world has scarcely seen since.

Wakely qualifies his belief that doubt is a “mark of an intelligent and authentic faith” by explaining in chapter 2, “God has given us a mind and expects us to submit it to him and then use it” (p. 18). Thankfully, in this same chapter he dispels the notion that feel-good faith is authentic. Wakely isn’t comfortable with ongoing doubts: “...doubt, left unanswered and feeding on the cynical encouragement of the world, can easily lead to unbelief—active rebellion and moral disintegration” (p. 25). Yet, he goes on to say that “Biblical doubt is better seen as perplexity or uncertainty” (p. 25). It doesn’t seem that his thesis is very well thought out.

The author spends the next six chapters (3-8) answering several questions: Is religion relevant?; Has God really spoken?; What's so special about the Bible?; How can it [the Bible] possibly be true?; Why [believe in] Jesus?; and Don't all roads lead to Heaven?. These chapters are more apologetical in nature than the first two. He makes many good points in these chapters, but I especially like his comment on tolerance: "Today, tolerance has come to mean acceptance of every creed as of equal value—anything less is regarded as bigotry and prejudice" (p. 93). It is amazing that modern society looks pejoratively at those who hold firm convictions. Society looks to the weak-kneed for their source of strength and encouragement.

After six chapters of apologetics, Wakely takes a turn into the great unknown. The final ten chapters seem out of place. Chapter 9 urges the church to not equate Christianity with middle class America, which is a good message, but it does not seem to fit with the rest of the book. Chapters 10 and 11 combat the "name it and claim it" gospel. In chapter 12, Wakely turns his attention to the question "Is God biased?" He cites statistics that show how unfair life is and cause many to question the righteousness of God. Yet, he answers these questions well by saying: "...but the Christian God has himself plunged into the maelstrom of human suffering and failure, wading through the sewage to experience the horror and involve himself in the rescue operation" (p. 142). It is our God alone who, though His home was in Heaven, came to earth to suffer and die on our behalf. This is definitely an answer that should erase any doubts. The remaining chapters answer objections about whether God cares, why there is so much pain in the world, and why we see so many unanswered prayers. These chapters are adequate at best. The chapter on signs and wonders (chapter 14) is far from convincing, being filled with anecdotal illustrations.

Overall, the first eight chapters are worth reading. The second half of the book unfortunately wanders from an already poorly-thought-out-thesis. To top it off, the gospel is not clearly presented (pp. 14, 49, 75, 100, 103). Buyer beware.

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***The Dark Side of Calvinism.*** George Bryson. Santa Ana, CA: Calvary Chapel Publishing, 2004. 398 pp. Paperback. \$14.95.

*The Dark Side of Calvinism* by George Bryson is another light in the spectrum of books dispelling the gloom of Calvinism. Up until a few years ago, there were very few books challenging the labyrinth of Calvinistic logic, but recently, several books have been written, each with their own strengths. Laurence Vance's *The Other Side of Calvinism* is an excellent source for seeing in their own words what Calvinists teach and believe. C. Gordon Olson's *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive, Mediate Theology of Salvation* contains some of the strongest exegetical arguments against Calvinism that exist. Dave Hunt added his weight with the striking book *What Love Is This?*

Bryson's book is a mixture of these others. Like Vance, he has numerous quotes from Calvinistic authors. Like Olson, he includes exegetical arguments. Like Hunt, he employs logic to show the illogic of Calvinism. Bryson's real strength, however, is in the tone of the book. His book is full of grace. Of all the books written against the so-called "Doctrines of Grace" his is the most gracious. This is an amazing feat considering that his primary purpose was to show the Scriptural abuses, logical sinkholes, and foreboding theological implications inherent in the Calvinistic system.

One way he was able to accomplish his gracious tone was through numerous and memorable illustrations which cleverly shed light on the illogic of the Calvinistic logic (e.g. pp. 80, 83, 89, 97, 353). Of course, I don't think Calvinists are amused, no matter how gracious Bryson is, for he says "it is the 'distinctives' of the Reformed faith that are of concern to me and are the focus of this book" (p. 16). He wants to make sure his readers understand that only Calvinism is under attack—not Calvinists. While he considers Calvinists to be believers (p. 17), he says that Calvinism is a false Gospel (pp. 19, 23, 147). How can this be? Most Calvinists, he says, only became Calvinists after they had believed in Jesus for eternal life (pp. 38-39). They have become victims of their own theology (pp. 16-17).

The Calvinistic crimes Bryson is most concerned with revolve around three central distinctives: the doctrine of reprobation (chaps 2-3; p. 31), the idea that God causes sin (p. 17, 68-69), and the Calvinist's lack of assurance (pp. 245, 268, 270-71, 284, 286). Though most

Calvinists deny all three of these teachings, Bryson shows that consistent Calvinists must either believe these things, or reject their entire system. The logic of Calvinism—the good, the bad and the ugly - stands or falls together (pp. 49-53, 275).

Since this is the nature of Calvinism (p. 51), Bryson does not feel compelled to deal with the five points of Calvinism as traditionally presented, namely, TULIP. Nor does he begin with what is considered the “weakest link”: Limited Atonement. Instead, Bryson takes the bull by the horns and begins at the central and strongest point—Unconditional Election (chaps 2-3). From there he goes on to deal with Limited Atonement (chaps 4-5), Irresistible Grace (chaps 6-7), Total Depravity (chaps 8-9), and Perseverance of the Saints (chaps 10-11). Each of the five points is dealt with in two chapters. The first explains the point using numerous Calvinistic quotes. If you want to know what Calvinists teach, you don’t have to trust Bryson to tell you; he lets them tell you in their own words. The second chapter of each point is devoted to the Scriptural and logical refutation of the point just explained. Bryson closes out the book with what is often called the “Sixth Point of Calvinism”—the Sovereignty of God (chap 12) and a summary chapter (chap 13).

While the layout of the book is well formatted and easy to follow, I sometimes found myself confused by the outline of the individual chapters and the transition between sections. This was especially true when Bryson was explaining some of the texts of Scripture. I was never quite sure which passage he was attempting to exegete, since his primary tool of exegesis seemed to be comparing Scripture with Scripture. For example, when he begins to explain John 3:1-8 (p. 239), he does so by going to John 1:12-13 and Ephesians 2:1-10 in rapid succession (p. 243). After another return to John 1:12-13 (p. 245) he concludes his explanation of John 3:1-8 (p. 246) without explaining much of the text at all. While I agree with his conclusion, I found it difficult to follow his page-turning approach. It would have been clearer to deal with each passage individually, and then draw conclusions based on primary exegesis.

Of utmost concern to *JOTGES* readers is his discussion of matters like faith and works, the Gospel, assurance, and perseverance. I am happy to say that Bryson fits very nicely in the Free Grace camp. I found many references where the Gospel was presented as faith alone in Christ alone (pp. 30, 121, 130, 154, 171, 176, 177, 189, 190, 191, 192, 196, 199, 202-203, 205, 206, 207, 225, 231, 244, 246-49, 348, 349, 350, 352, 356, 366, to name a few). In one place, he very clearly states that “While

it must be emphasized that we bring *nothing but* faith, it must also be emphasized that we *must bring* faith. ...Requiring the lost to bring faith is not to ask the lost to make a contribution to their salvation, but it is a consistent reminder that salvation is *all of God and not at all of man*" (p. 244, italics his).

However, having said this, I found several instances where the Gospel was stated in ways some *JOTGES* readers might be uncomfortable with. In two places, he refers to salvation as receiving Christ as Lord and Savior (pp. 39-40), and in three places, he says that the condition of the Gospel is faith and repentance (pp. 174, 336, 362). I thought maybe these references to repentance were just hiccups in the editing process since most of the time Bryson refers to justification by faith alone. But on p. 362, he writes, "I would agree with those Calvinists who believe that when a man believes in Christ, he also necessarily repents. Conversely, I also believe that when a man repents, he also necessarily believes. You cannot do one without the other." I disagree with this statement, but then, many in the Free Grace camp would shout a hearty "Amen!"

As far as eternal security is concerned, Bryson believes it is Scripturally irrefutable (pp. 190, 201, 284). In the same vein, he takes Calvinists to task for their weak stance on assurance. Because of their doctrine of perseverance of the saints, he forcefully points out that no one who believes in the Calvinist doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints can have assurance of salvation (pp. 245, 268, 270-71, 284, 286). I love his statement on p. 286 which says, "The Calvinist doctrine of salvation provides no more assurance of salvation than Arminianism does, and perhaps less."

As side issues, I really like the way he laid out his endnotes, numbered not by each chapter, but for the book as a whole (618 of them). On the other hand, I would have liked to see some Scriptural and topical indexes of which there were none.

Just as few people will see the dark side of the moon unless they are shown pictures of it, Bryson has provided a vivid picture of the dark side of Calvinism. Don't be lured to the dark side of the faith. Keep within the light of Scripture: read Bryson's book.

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***Grace, Faith, Free Will; Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism & Arminianism.*** By Robert E. Picirilli. Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 2002. iv + 245 pp. Paperback. \$19.99

The title of this book is one that could be found on a book written by a Calvinist or an Arminian. However, this is certainly not true of the publisher, Randall House Publications, or the author, Robert Picirilli. Randall House Publications is owned and operated by the National Association of Free Will Baptists. Picirilli is the former academic dean and professor of Greek and New Testament studies at Free Will Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee. Besides serving on the North American Overview Committee that produced the *New King James Version* and writing numerous booklets and articles in denominational publications and theological journals, Picirilli has also authored commentaries on Romans and Galatians. He currently serves as the general editor of *The Randall House Bible Commentary*, to which he is also a contributor.

This is a needed book, not because there is a shortage of recent works critical of Calvinism, but because it is written from a conservative Arminian perspective. I emphasize this because, as anyone who has studied Calvinism knows, Calvinists define an “Arminian” as anyone who is not a Calvinist. And once this designation is made, all manner of evils are ascribed to Arminianism. Nevertheless, just as there are different types of Calvinists (who sometimes vehemently disagree with each other), so there are different types of Arminians. Picirilli rightly says that “the trouble with ‘Arminianism’ is that it means different things to different people” (p. 1). He calls his viewpoint “Reformation Arminianism,” by which he means “the views of Arminius himself and his original defenders” (p. 1). Indeed, he quotes Arminius quite often, and more so than he quotes anyone else. Unfortunately however, as Picirilli also recognizes, “Many automatically think of Arminians as liberal, differing little from Universalists, at least holding to salvation by works and possibly holding Arian views on the Trinity or Pelagian views of the goodness of man” (p. 1). The author definitely does not fit that description, but whether or not the “very specific form of Arminianism” (p. i) he urges is sufficient “as the best resolution of the tensions” (p. i) between Calvinism and Arminianism remains to be seen.



*Grace, Faith, Free Will* contains five parts, as do many books on the subject of Calvinism because of its well-known five points. Part 1 serves as an introduction to the “issues that divide Calvinists and Arminians” (p. 3). It is mainly an account of the life of Arminius, the theology of the Remonstrants, and the Synod of Dort. However, because very little is said about Calvin and Calvinism, it is much too brief to properly serve as an introduction to the Calvinist/Arminian conflict. The next four parts deal with the familiar five points of Calvinism. Noticeably absent, however, is a separate part on the first point of Calvinism: Total Depravity. Although he does mention the concept a few times (pp. i, 22, 42, 57), it is not until Part 4, “The Application of Salvation” (Irresistible Grace to a Calvinist), that he introduces us to the TULIP acrostic and “the implications of the first and fourth of these points” (p. 141). It is true that the Canons of Dort (from which the Five Points of Calvinism are derived) treat Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace under one heading (“Of the Corruption of Man, His Conversion to God, and the Manner Thereof”), but the five articles of the Arminian Remonstrance (which Picirilli quotes in full in the first chapter) do not.

The result of this omission is an incomplete treatment of the first point of Calvinism. This is a big mistake, for Total Depravity is not only one of the three essential points of the Five Points of Calvinism, it is the foundation of the whole system, and necessitates the two other essential points of the TULIP. At the beginning of Part 3, Picirilli says that “when dealing with the basic assumptions of Calvinism and Arminianism, there is probably no more crucial issue than the extent of the atonement” (p. 85). But this can’t possibly be since even Calvinists are divided on this issue (e.g., four-point Calvinists). The first point of Calvinism is so important because if all men are unable to repent and believe the Gospel, then it logically follows that if any of them are to be saved, God must first determine who they are (Unconditional Election) and then “irresistibly” overcome their “inability” (Irresistible Grace) so they can repent and believe the Gospel. But to the contrary, if Total Depravity is a fraudulent doctrine, then the rest of the TULIP withers.

Each section of the book regarding a point of Calvinism is divided into three chapters: “The first sets forth the Calvinistic view, the next the Arminian view, and the last some Biblical theology studies in support of the Arminian view” (p. ii). The method of presentation in the chapters is quite different. The chapters on Calvinism and Arminianism in Parts 2 and 4 are organized by topic. In Part 3 of the chapter on the Calvinist

view of Limited Atonement, a brief introduction is followed by a series (nine in all) of Calvinist arguments, each with an Arminian response. In the next chapter, which sets forth the Arminian view contrary to Limited Atonement, an introduction and summary precede and follow a pattern (nine in all) of Arminian arguments, Calvinist responses, and Arminian rejoinders. Part 4 of the chapter on the Calvinist view of Perseverance, part of the chapter is topical and part is a series (ten in all) of Calvinist arguments, each with an Arminian response. The next chapter on the Arminian view is purely topical.

Unlike many books of this nature, *Grace, Faith, Freewill* has real footnotes—quite a few of them. However, the vast majority of them are merely for reference rather than being of a supplementary or explanatory nature. There are four indexes: Scripture, Selected Subjects, Citations from Arminius, and Citations from Other Authors. There is a generous use of section headings throughout the chapters. There is unfortunately no bibliography. Instead, each chapter is followed by recommendations “For Further Reading.”

The chapters of *Grace, Faith, Free Will* that set forth the Calvinistic view are buttressed with quotes from the leading Calvinistic authorities: Herman Hoeksema, Paul Jewett, Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof, William Shedd, John Piper, Loraine Boettner, Roger Nicole, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. Are his characterizations of Calvinism accurate? Very much so. Picirilli even mentions in the Foreword that “Bob Reymond, a well-known Reformed thinker,” read the text “for the Calvinist side” (p. iii). For those conversant with Calvinist doctrine, these chapters go over familiar ground. However, because they do contain some of the author’s criticisms of Calvinism (especially the aforementioned chapters with Arminian responses to Calvinist arguments), they should not be passed over.

The crucial chapters in the book are, of course, those in which Picirilli offers his critique of Calvinism while setting forth the Arminian view, and especially the “Biblical theology studies” chapters in which his “Reformation Arminianism” is presented more fully. Although Picirilli relies heavily on Arminius, the “largely misunderstood theologian” (p. 1), he doesn’t hesitate to criticize modern Arminians like Robert Shank (p. 50), Donald Lake (pp. 56, 152, 161), Jack Cottrell (p. 151), and Carl Bangs, the biographer of Arminius (p. 157). He is especially critical of what he calls the “deformed Arminianism” of Clark Pinnock and Richard Rice (pp. 40, 60)—the “open view” of God that limits his omniscience.

Because he perceptibly recognizes that Calvinists often disagree among themselves, Picirilli on several occasions lets "Calvinists answer Calvinists" (pp. 66, 75, 93, 132, 134).

In his chapter on "The Classical Arminian Doctrine of Predestination," Picirilli has an extended discussion of God's foreknowledge. He correctly maintains that "the Calvinist errs, on this subject, in suggesting that God knows the future certainly only because He first unconditionally foreordained (predestined) it" (pp. 39-40). He makes the case in this chapter for what he believes is "the Arminian's main point of departure from Calvinism" (p. 53)—conditional election, but, in my opinion, relies too much on Arminius. His follow-up chapter, "Predestination in the New Testament," has an extensive treatment of three key passages—Ephesians 1:3-14, Romans 9-11, and Romans 8:28-30—and brief comments on other texts that relate to election or predestination. His discussion of Ephesians 1 is the most detailed, but his continual mention that a verb is in the aorist tense adds nothing to his arguments (pp. 66, 67, 69).

Picirilli's view of election is confusing. On the difference between election and predestination, he states: "'Election' sees the saved as people God has chosen; 'predestination' refers to what He has chosen them for" (p. 68). On foreknowledge in Romans 8:29, he states that "a meaning similar to foreordination" would be "tautological" (p. 77). But in his conclusion, his first point seems to say otherwise: "God, in eternity, elected some to be saved. Ephesians 1:4 uses the word 'elected.' Romans 8:29 uses 'foreknew' in a sense very close to meaning 'elected': 'in love acknowledged them as His'" (p. 83).

In the next section on the atonement, the arguments in Picirilli's chapter on "Arminian Arguments for a Universal Atonement" are the standard ones used to combat the third point of Calvinism (Limited Atonement), but with a new twist. One of his proofs for a universal atonement is that "the truly saved may apostatize and eternally perish" (p. 115). If the apostasy of believers were in fact a possibility, then this would be a devastating argument against Limited Atonement. However, those who refuse to be labeled as a Calvinist or an Arminian would generally take issue with such a possibility. The follow-up chapter on the atonement, "New Testament Evidence for Universal Atonement," contains very exhaustive studies on 1 John 2:2 and 1 Timothy 2:1-6 that break much new ground.

Picirilli considers the subject of Part 4, "The Application of Salvation" as an "area where the Calvinist least understands the Arminian, at

least the Reformation Arminian” (p. 140). After showing in “Calvinism and the Administration of Salvation” that Calvinists stand the Gospel on its head by putting regeneration before faith, he posits the solution to the depravity and inability of the sinner as “prevenient grace” (p. 153), which he also terms “enabling grace” or “pre-regenerating grace” (p. 154), and defines as “that work of the Holy Spirit that ‘opens the heart’ of the unregenerate (to use the words of Acts 16:14) to the truth of the gospel and enables them to respond positively in faith” (p. 154). Thus, there can be no regeneration without the hearing of the Gospel, and “no possibility that one may receive regeneration and not be converted until later (or never) as in Calvinism” (p. 160). The follow-up chapter is basically a study of salvation by faith in the New Testament. Here Picirilli shows how so much related to salvation is “by faith.” Unlike Calvinism, the author considers faith and works to be “mutually exclusive” but faith and grace to be “complementary” (p. 178).

Because he is a genuine Arminian, Picirilli’s treatment of “Perseverance in Salvation” in Part 5 is just as was expected because historically, as he says, “Arminians have taught that those who are truly saved need to be warned against apostasy as a real and possible danger” (p. 198). (It should be noted that Picirilli defines apostasy as “a willful retraction of faith” [p. 205] and believes it to be final [p. 207]). But for someone who was so dependent on Arminius throughout the preceding chapters, it is strange that his views on apostasy are introduced and so quickly disregarded. Picirilli quotes Arminius as saying: “That true and saving faith may be, totally and finally, lost, I should not at once dare to say” (p. 198), and then proceeds at once to say exactly the opposite. According to Picirilli: “One’s possession of salvation is, at any time, conditioned on faith” (p. 203). He maintains that “the believer can leave his belief, become an unbeliever, and come into condemnation—thus escaping from the promise made to believers who continue in faith” (p. 201). The righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer as long as he remains “in Christ” (p. 206). But once again the author is confusing. He makes faith the sole condition of salvation (p. 204) and unbelief the sole condition of apostasy (p. 205). He is careful to stress that “we must not make sinful acts, in themselves, the cause of falling from grace” (p. 205). As long as “one continues to exercise saving faith, he has not committed apostasy” (p. 207). But then he says that works “are evidences of faith” (p. 205), and that “the Bible offers us no encouragement to provide assurance of salvation to those whose lives are characterized by sinful practice”

(p. 207). He maintains the right to continue “to regard any person whose life is characterized by sinful practice (regardless what he claims about ‘salvation’) as having no grounds for assurance of salvation” (p. 206). Picirilli ends up sounding like a Calvinist arguing for his fifth point when he says that believers should be exhorted to “persevere in faith and good works” (p. 207). He even declares his agreement with Calvinists: “Careful Calvinists agree wholeheartedly with those of us who emphasize that one whose life consistently indicates that he is under the dominion of sin has no grounds—not even in the doctrine of perseverance—for assurance of salvation” (p. 206). These statements are why I point out in my book, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, that perseverance in the Calvinistic system is not the same as eternal security—it is pure Arminianism.

There is an alternative to both Calvinism and Arminianism, and Picirilli even mentions it. In the opening remarks to Part 5, he brings up the subject of eternal security. He calls its adherents “sub-Calvinists” (p. 184), as if we needed another term in the already burgeoning lexicon of the Calvinist/Arminian debate. He refers to these “sub-Calvinists” throughout the first two chapters of this section on perseverance (pp. 185, 186, 193, 194, 195, 200, 203). According to Picirilli, sub-Calvinists “think of themselves as Calvinists but really are not—as both Arminians and consistent Calvinists realize” (p. 193). The first part of this statement is an inaccurate deduction. Many adherents of eternal security repudiate any connection with Calvinism. But this is not the only inaccuracy in Picirilli’s depiction of those he terms “sub-Calvinists.” Commenting on the sub-Calvinist view of the nature of salvation, he claims that adherents of eternal security believe that “once a person is saved, he by nature will not ever desire to turn away from God” (p. 194). This is a gross misconception. Picirilli believes that the position of sub-Calvinists is “internally contradictory” because “they seem to believe that salvation is conditional, but they do not follow through with insistence that it remains conditional after the initial experience of regeneration” (p. 203). His view dismisses sub-Calvinist arguments as too logical (pp. 194, 195, 202, 203).

In spite of its various deficiencies that have been pointed out, *Grace, Faith, Free Will* is a welcome book because of the void it fills for a work critical of Calvinism from a genuine Arminian perspective. But it can never be emphasized enough that dividing men off into groups of either Calvinists or Arminians is one of the strengths of the Calvinistic system. And because of his view of apostasy, Picirilli’s “Reformation

Arminianism” is sure to be rejected as “the best resolution of the tensions” between Calvinism and Arminianism.

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***Romans Unlocked - Power to Deliver.*** By Rene A. Lopez. Springfield: 21st Century Press, 2005. 319 pp. Paper. \$15.99.

The commentary literature on the book of Romans is absolutely voluminous, so why the need for yet another commentary on this book? Simply put, this one is both *brief* enough to attract a wide range of readers and *in-depth* enough that it will not be overlooked by scholars. In addition, Lopez allows the book of Romans to interpret itself, rather than forcing a theological system on it. The *gospel*, as Lopez sees it, “encapsulates the message found in the entire book of Romans (ie., justification, sanctification, glorification and a future for Israel)” (p. 27).

He makes an interesting observation (overlooked by many) that the words believe/faith occur twenty-seven times in chapters 3-4, while the words live/life occur twenty-five times in chapters 5-8, indicating that the gospel (deliverance from sin) is not merely limited to justification but includes the “resurrection-life” known as sanctification (p. 42). Understood another way, one might say that to be delivered from the destructive power of sin, the justified sinner needs to realize and experience his capacity to become the sanctified saint. Being declared right before God provides the potential for having victory over sin but does not guarantee it. Obviously, it is the goal of God in justification (as well as every Bible teacher’s goal) to see everyone who trusts Christ as their Savior experience the resurrection life of Christ; however not all believers take full advantage of the power God makes available to them through the Holy Spirit.

Many students of the book of Romans have discovered that certain passages and words, properly understood in their context, hold the keys that unlock the flow of this epistle. Lopez highlights those passages as 1:16-18; 5:9-10 and 10:9-10; the key words are wrath, believe and salvation/save. He explains each in a clear and understandable way. He summarizes the main focus of Romans as being, “Only Those Justified by Faith Can be Delivered to Experience Life” (p. 28). His rendering of

Habakkuk 2:4 as quoted in 1:17, “The one who is righteous by faith shall live” (p. 42) clearly supports this thesis.

The style of this work is straightforward and simple for those with a working knowledge of Romans. Lopez comments on almost every phrase and sometimes on individual words. While there are no official footnotes in the book, the writer exhibits a thorough knowledge of recent commentary material, making reference to it throughout the work. Where there are options as to the meaning of certain phrases, Lopez lists them. For example, for 5:12 “all sinned,” he presents four views and prefers the seminal headship view. In 6:3-4 and the discussion of baptism, three views conclude with Spirit baptism being best. Commenting on 8:10-11 and the phrase “the body is dead because of sin,” three suggestions are made. The discussion of 10:9-10 follows the tradition set by Zane Hodges, Joseph Dillow, John Hart and others. Finally, when discussing the phrase “all Israel will be saved” in 11:25-27, he gives five suggestions, concluding that the whole nation of justified Israelites who remain alive during the tribulation will enter the millennium.

Other aspects that reveal Lopez’s overall interpretation of the book include his comments regarding *justification*: “Justification is a forensic term that means to ‘declare righteous,’ (not make righteous)...This distinction is extremely important. When a sinner is justified, his position changes before God, not the condition of his character or practice” (P. 77). He says Romans 4:4-5 are “essential to defining the exclusion of works in relation to justification by faith;” and “No other verse argues more strongly against considering faith a meritorious work than these.” When commenting on the terms *old man* and *new man*, Lopez follows the suggestion of Renald Showers. The old man connotes the unredeemed life in Adam while the new man represents the redeemed life in Christ (p. 89). Finally, the author suggests that the experience of Paul described in chapter 7 concerns his struggles during “Christian infancy.” This will be the commentary I recommend to lay church leaders and Bible school students for a long time to come. It goes a long way toward unlocking the book of Romans by showing that it is not only about God

declaring us righteous through belief in His son, but also about triumph over sin in the life of the redeemed.

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***The Soul's Quest for God: Satisfying the Hunger for Spiritual Communion with God.*** By R. C. Sproul. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992. Reissued in 2003. Paper. \$11.99.

This book is a reissue of a work originally published a decade ago. It has an engaging title and subtitle and an attractive cover. As with the other works I've read by Sproul, he is light on biblical exegesis and heavy on citations from Reformed theologians like Edwards and Calvin. While his intended audience probably doesn't mind, this will be bothersome for those who want careful defense of his views from Scripture.

The book appears to be based on messages he has delivered, for the Table of Contents does not evidence a logical connection between the chapters. Here are the eleven chapter titles. 1) Restless Hearts; 2) Sweetness and Honey: Loving the Word of God; 3) Divine Illumination: The Secret of Christian Progress; 4) The Witness of the Holy Spirit (which is also a subsection in Chapter 10, see pp. 225-26); 5) Loving the Law of God; 6) The Obedient Soul; 7) The Model of Joseph; 8) The Soul and Its Value; 9) The Feeding of the Soul; 10) Barriers to Progress; and 11) The Soul's Final Destination.

The most interesting chapter for *JOTGES* readers would be Chapter 10. While it speaks of barriers, plural, to progress, the headings in the chapter all deal with one issue: assurance of salvation. Sproul sees the barrier to progress to be despondency (pp. 205-208). To get us past Bunyon's Slough of Despond, he says, "requires the full assurance of our salvation to get us safely through" (p. 208). *JOTGES* readers will agree with this assessment: "When we are uncertain about our status in the kingdom, we are vulnerable to the fiery darts of Satan. We are reeds shaken in the wind. We become like corks in the sea, bobbing this way and that with each change of tide" (p. 208).

So how does one gain "full assurance"? Here we are faced with the normal and confusing three pillars of assurance in Reformed thought: the



word of God, the works the Holy Spirit does in and through us, and the inner witness of the Spirit.

Of particular interest is Sproul's suggestion that is it possible "to be unsaved and yet fully assured...to be sure that we are saved" (p. 213). This causes him to ask, "How can we know in which category we truly are?" Frankly, if one follows his advice in this chapter, he will not escape the Slough of Despond, not knowing prior to death whether he is regenerate or not.

Sproul's understanding of Matt 7:21-23 is confusing. On the one hand he says, "They will appeal to their works as evidence of the authenticity of their personal relationship with Christ...Yet despite these protests [concerning their works], they will be turned away" (p. 224). Thus for these people they were wrong to look to their works for evidence of the authenticity of their personal relationship with Christ. Yet on the other hand he says, "Works that are the evidence of true faith are not merely activities of the church or ministry; they are works of obedience" (p. 225). So looking to one's works is important, but we must distinguish between mere activities and actual works of obedience. But is this helpful? Won't the many that say "Lord, Lord" and point to their works sincerely believe that their works are not merely activities, but are works of obedience? Isn't that the point of Matt 7:22?

Another point of interest is the author's insistence that the moral law of God cannot change since it reflects the character of God (pp. 104-105ff.). (He fails to even try to prove that God's commands are intricately linked to His character. This, of course, leads him to a faulty conclusion.) Leaving aside the fact that the Law of Moses was a unit and we cannot separate out moral parts from civil or ceremonial, we find no discussion of obvious contradictions to his view. There is no discussion of texts like Rom 10:4 and the Book of Galatians which teach that the believer is not under the Law. In addition, obvious changes occurred in God's laws and yet these changes are not discussed.

Prior to the Law of Moses, marrying one's brother or sister was lawful. That changed. During the Law one was required to do no customary work from Friday sundown until Saturday sundown. That has changed

today. The Law prescribed levirate marriage in cases where one's brother died childless. That has changed as well. I recommend this book for the discerning reader.

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***I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist.*** By Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004. 447 pp. Paper. \$15.99.

In his first epistle, Peter commands believers to “sanctify Christ as Lord in [their] hearts, always being ready to a defense to everyone who asks [them] to give an account for the hope that is in [them], yet with gentleness and reverence” (3:15, NASB). Apologetics are a very important element in the overall picture of Christian evangelism. *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*, written by apologists Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, is a valuable resource for preparing Christians to defend their faith.

The book's main premise (as suggested by the title) is that all world-views require at least some faith, but Christianity, as the only one that accurately portrays reality, requires the least, because its claims can be shown to be objective fact. The content presented in the book has a stacked structure: Geisler and Turek lay a foundation upon which they build their case for Christianity, beginning with the broad topics and working down to the narrow.

The first two chapters are devoted to establishing the foundation of any belief—namely, the reality of truth. Now, to the average person this may seem pointless. After all, don't we all know through common sense that there is such a thing as truth? The fact of the matter is truth has come under attack in our postmodern culture. It is viewed by many as relative. “What is true for you may not be true for me,” they say. Geisler and Turek show through sound reasoning that not only is truth absolute, but it is knowable as well.

Chapters three through eight present a case for the existence of God. Three arguments are utilized: 1) The Kalam Cosmological Argument

(there must be a first cause of the universe); 2) The Teleological Argument (there must be an intelligent designer); and 3) The Moral Argument (because there are moral values and laws, there must be a Lawgiver). Geisler and Turek present their reasoning in a clear and scholarly fashion, responding to various objections that might be raised and ultimately showing that a supernatural Being is the only adequate explanation of what we observe around us. The question of evolution is dealt with in chapters five and six.

The last section of the book addresses God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ and in the Bible—which is ultimately the clincher. Many religions claim ultimate truth and claim to worship God, but if it can be shown that Jesus is what He declared Himself to be, then Christianity is the only religion that can claim to be of God. Chapters nine through eleven present a case for the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' miraculous life. Chapter twelve lays out the evidence for the resurrection. Chapters thirteen and fourteen conclude that because of his fulfillment of prophecy, his sinless life, and his defeat of death in the resurrection, Jesus is God. Because He is God, whatever He teaches must be true. He taught that Scripture is God's Word; therefore, the Bible, as God's Word, can be completely trusted as an inspired, infallible book.

The only concern I have with this work is the authors' presentation of the gospel. Although they use words like *trust* and *believe*, they equate them to a commitment to Christ. They write, "Jesus went through all of [the pain that He did] so you and I could be reconciled to him, so you and I could be saved from our sins by affirming, *Father, into your hands I commit my life*" (p. 383). Yet, because this book is not specifically a defense of soteriology, I strongly recommend it as a source to better understand the foundations of Christianity. *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* presents the clearest and most accessible defense of our faith that I have seen. It is a welcome addition to the world of Christian apologetics. All believers would do well to take the time to read and study this book. I think many would be surprised at just how reasonable their faith really is.

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# PERIODICAL REVIEWS

BY THE MEMBERS OF THE GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

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**“Earthly Empires: How Evangelical Churches Are Borrowing from the Business Playbook,”** William C. Symonds, *Business Week* (May 23, 2005): 78-88.

The United States has gone through a major cultural shift in the last decade. Stressed out and tired, the average American seeks to fill his life with that which is stress free and self-serving. They yearn for low prices, big clean buildings, and hassle free shopping. This has given rise to the superstore mindset, the Wal-Mart mentality. Americans demand one stop shopping and out of this demand has grown a vast supply of mega churches, which offer everything under one roof.

Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas is just one example of the way in which American evangelicalism has reinvented itself. These mega churches attract new members with everything from coffee shops that rival Starbucks, to professional worship teams that offer “innertainment,” and Sunday school wings that look like Disney World.

Symonds writes, “To make newcomers feel at home, some do away with standard religious symbolism—even basics like crosses and pews—and design churches to look more like modern entertainment halls than traditional places of worship” (p. 84). The way these churches look is not the problem, it is the mentality. Symonds explains, “Hybel’s consumer-driven approach is evident at Willow Creek, where he shunned stained glass, Bibles, or even a cross for the 7,200 seat, \$72 million sanctuary he recently built. The reason? Market research suggested that such traditional symbols would scare away non-churchgoers” (p. 87). Replacing crosses with globes so that newcomers won’t be offended is symbolic of evangelicalism’s shift from being Christ-centered to man-centered. How can anyone follow Jesus in discipleship when He said “take up your cross” and the cross is nowhere to be found in church?

When we stop talking about Christ and sin, we become nothing more than a self-help group. Unfortunately, that is exactly what many of these churches have become. Symonds quotes a Willow Creek member as saying, “When I walk out of a service, I feel completely relieved of any

stress I walked in with” (p. 88). These churches lack accountability, responsibility, and truth. True growth never occurs apart from these things.

Many of these churches have become nothing more than pacifying entertainment for the masses and padding for the pocket books of their leaders. Symonds writes, “[Creflo] Dollar, too, defends materialistic success. Dubbed ‘Pass-the-Dollar’ by critics, he owns two Rolls Royces and travels in a Gulfstream 3 jet. ‘I practice what I preach, and the Bible says...that God takes pleasure in the prosperity of his servants’” (p. 87).

The Father’s will was for Jesus, His Son, to leave behind the riches of heaven to live the life of a poor carpenter, giving up His heavenly abode to walk the dust of the earth. Paul knew very well what it was like to have an empty stomach and simultaneously be in the will of God. The “health and wealth gospel” is something, but I dare not say it is Christian.

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**“The Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James, Part 1,”** Virgil V. Porter Jr., *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September 2005): 344-60.

In my undergraduate studies at Moody Bible Institute, Dr. John Hart taught me that there are many parallels between the book of James and the Sermon on the Mount. That tidbit intrigued me, and I resolved to develop a list of these parallels as soon I got the chance. If the Book of James is a further development and explanation of the Sermon on the Mount, it would be invaluable to the expositor in understanding and applying the Sermon to the church. I never got around to making my list, so I was delighted to see that Virgil Porter has done the work for me.

His article, based on his 2003 Ph.D. dissertation from Dallas Theological Seminary, identifies forty-five statements in James that parallel statements by Christ in the Sermon (pp. 347-52). The rest of the article is a topical rearrangement of this list. I was hoping for more theological interaction and development, but found out at the end of the article that the theological connections will be discussed in Part 2.

I look forward to this second installment with great anticipation because what was revealed in this article was so promising. Free Grace proponents know that the two primary passages used by Lordship advo-

cates are Matt 7:15-16 and Jas 2:14-26. Regarding Matt 7:15-16, Porter points out that parallels between Matthew and James reveal that the fruit of the false prophets is not their works, but their words. "False prophets were false because their message, their speech, was false" (p. 365). This is what Free Grace has been teaching for years.

There was not much interaction on James 2:14-26 except to point out that Abraham received imputed righteousness by faith (p. 359) and yet was counted righteous because of his obedience (pp. 356, 359), so Porter does seem to distinguish between the two. However, he also says that "James's challenge about authentic Christianity being measured by appropriate works and behavior (1:27; 2:1-7, 14-17) parallels Jesus' challenge about the authenticity of a person's faith (Matt 7:21)" (p. 354). This seems to contradict what he says elsewhere.

He also writes that good works, which are emphasized in both the Sermon and James, do not reveal whether a person is a believer or not, but are rather signs of maturity (p. 357). Several times, he mentioned eschatological rewards (pp. 355, 358, 359) as being a key theme and motivator in both the Sermon and James. Both of these are key Free Grace subjects.

Overall, I highly recommend the article to anyone teaching though the Sermon on the Mount or the Epistle of James. The chart of forty-five parallels makes the article worth having, even if the rest of the article is sketchy on theological conclusions. But then, Part 2 should have more of that.

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**"Dead in Trespasses and Sins,"** Mal Couch, *The Conservative Theological Journal* (August 2005): 225-40.

Couch's main thesis is that "total inability and total deadness involves the loss of the power of self-determination. Man's will is now made a slave to sin and is dead in its ability to respond to God" (p. 240).

There has been much discussion on the exact meaning of "dead in trespasses and sins." Every student of the word should agree that all peo-

ple are, or were, dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). The issue comes to defining deadness and what must result to counteract the implications of that deadness.

Are the unsaved so dead that they can't even respond to the Holy Spirit drawing them through the Word of God, thus requiring regeneration before they can even believe?

In this article, Mal Couch has taken his turn at adding to the vast amount written on this very subject. In being consistent with Tyndale Theological Seminary's doctrinal statement, where he serves as President, Couch defends the Puritans' understanding of total depravity. Tyndale's doctrinal statement proclaims,

"no one can enter the kingdom of God unless born again; and that no degree of reformation however great, no attainment in morality however high, no culture however attractive, no baptism or other ordinance however administered, can help the sinner to take even one step toward heaven; *but a new nature imparted from above, a new life implanted by the Holy Spirit through the Word*, is absolutely essential to salvation, and only those thus saved are sons of God (emphasis mine)."

Couch states that "to come alive is not caused by the human will but by the sovereign work of God in salvation" (p. 235). Further, he states, "only by God's omnipotent and sovereign power could He bring alive one who is dead spiritually, and who is unable to respond to any external appeal" (p. 235). This seems to contrast what is stated above in Tyndale's doctrinal statement, that "a new life implanted by the Holy Spirit *through the Word*," is needed for salvation. Does a person who is spiritually dead, as Couch describes, have the ability to come to the Word for this regeneration? After all, "man is incapable of changing his character or acting in a way that is distinct from his corruption" (p.238).

Couch claims that many people who once held to Total Depravity are now "replacing this doctrine of Depravity with warmed over old line Pelagianism and Arminianism that says, man can to some degree cooperate and help God out in the salvation process." Pejoratively, Couch states that people who do not believe in man's total inability in the same way that he does "have not read clearly their Bible," (p.228) and refers to such as "Evangelical so-called scholars" (p.232).

Finally, Couch gives credit to his position by stating, "no Reformed group of the past worth its salt held any other position" (p. 237). He also asserts that "through the generations almost all dispensationalists have

been Calvinists, and they have held tightly to the issues of Depravity, the Sovereignty of God, the inability of man to believe unless the Holy Spirit works, and the doctrines of the absolute Sovereignty and Providence of God! ‘Deadness’ has always been a cardinal belief of those in the Reformed and dispensational camps” (p. 237).

Man is dead in trespasses and sins, and apart from the drawing of God, no man would come to the Father. However, Couch takes the extreme Calvinist position which implies that man is so far gone that God must regenerate him before he can even believe. This extreme is not necessary and goes against clear biblical teaching (e.g., Cornelius in Acts 10).

Finally, this article will be helpful to one who is not already familiar with the extreme Calvinist understanding of total depravity. But for the one who has a grasp on such teachings, this article fails to add much new information.

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