

# What Is The Gospel?

By Dr. Loraine Boettner

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## What Is The Gospel?

The Gospel is the good news about the great salvation purchased by Jesus Christ, by which He reconciled sinful men to a holy God. The purpose of this booklet is to set forth, in plain language and in terms easily understood, the basic differences between the Calvinistic (Reformed) and Arminian understanding of the Gospel, and to show what the Bible teaches concerning these subjects. An accurate understanding is crucial; the harmony that exists between the various doctrines of the Christian faith is such that error in regard to any one of them produces more or less distortion in all the others.

There are in reality only two types of religious thought: the religion of faith, and the religion of works. The author is convinced that what has been known in church history as Calvinism is the purest and most consistent embodiment of the religion of faith, while that which has been known as Arminianism has been diluted to a dangerous degree by the religion of works and is therefore an inconsistent and unstable form of Christianity. In other words, Christianity comes to its fullest and purest expression in the Reformed faith.

In the early part of the fifth century these two types of religious thought came into direct conflict in a remarkably clear contrast in the teaching of two theologians, Augustine and Pelagius. Augustine pointed men to God as the source of all true spiritual wisdom and strength, while Pelagius threw men back on themselves and said that they were able in their own strength to do all that God commanded (otherwise God would not command it). Arminianism is a compromise between these two systems; while in its more evangelical form (as in early Wesleyanism) it approaches the religion of faith, it nevertheless does contain serious elements of error.

At present, practically all the historic churches are being attacked from within by unbelief. Many of them have already succumbed, and almost invariably the line of descent has been from Calvinism to Arminianism, from Arminianism to liberalism, and then to Unitarianism. The history of liberalism and Unitarianism shows that they deteriorate into a social gospel that is too weak to sustain itself. The author is convinced that the future of Christianity is bound up with that system of theology historically called Calvinism. Where the God-centered principles of Calvinism have been abandoned, there has been a strong tendency downward into the depths of man-centered naturalism or secularism. Some have argued convincingly that there is no consistent stopping place between Calvinism and atheism.

### 1. The Sovereignty Of God

The basic principle of Calvinism is the sovereignty of God. This represents the purpose of the triune God as absolute and unconditional, independent of the whole finite creation, and originating solely in the eternal counsel of His will. He appoints the course of nature and directs the course of history down to the minutest details. His decrees, therefore, are eternal, unchangeable, holy, wise and sovereign. They are represented in the Bible as being the basis of the divine foreknowledge of all future events, and not conditioned by that foreknowledge or by anything originating in the events themselves.

Every thinking person readily sees that some sovereignty rules his life. He was not asked whether or not he would have existence, when or what or where he would be born, whether in the twentieth century or before the flood, whether male or female, white or black, whether in the United States, or China, or Africa. All those things were sovereignly decided for him before he had any existence. It has been recognized by Christians in

all ages that God is the Creator and Ruler of the world, and that as such He is the ultimate source of all power. Hence, nothing can come to pass apart from His sovereign will; otherwise, He would not be truly God. When the thoughtful person dwells on this truth, he finds that it involves considerations which establish the Calvinistic and disprove the Arminian position.

By virtue of the fact that God has created everything that exists, He is the absolute Owner and final Disposer of all that He has made. He exerts not merely a general influence but actually rules in the affairs of men (Ac. 4:24-28). Even the nations are as the small dust of the balance when compared with His greatness (Isa. 40:12-17). Amid all the apparent defeats and inconsistencies found in human society, God is actually controlling all things in undisturbed majesty. Even the sinful actions of men can occur only by His permission and with the strength that He gives the creature. Since His permission is not unwilling but willing, all that comes to pass (including even the sinful actions and ultimate destiny of men) must be, in some sense, in accordance with what He has eternally purposed and decreed. To the proportion that this is denied, God is excluded from the government of the world, and man is left with only a finite God. Naturally some problems arise, which in man's present state of knowledge are not able fully to be explained. But that is not a sufficient reason for rejecting what the Scriptures and the plain dictates of reason affirm to be true.

Is God not able to convert a sinner when He pleases? Cannot the Almighty, the omnipotent Ruler of heaven and earth, change the character of the creatures He has made? He changed the water into wine at Cana and converted Saul on the road to Damascus. The leper said, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean" (Mt. 8:2)--and at a word his leprosy was cleansed! Do not believe that God cannot control the human will or regenerate a soul when He pleases. He is as able to cleanse the soul as the body. If He chose, He could raise up such a flood of Christian ministers, missionaries and workers of various kinds, and could so work through His Holy Spirit, that the entire world would be converted in a very short time. If He had purposed to save all men, He could have sent hosts of angels to instruct them and to do supernatural works on the earth. He could have worked marvelously in the heart of every person, so that no one would have been lost.

Since evil exists only by His permission, He could, if He chose, blot it out of existence. His power in this respect was shown, for instance, in the work of the destroying angel who in one night slew all the firstborn of the Egyptians (Ex. 12:29) and in another night slew 185,000 of the Assyrian army (2 Kgs. 19:35). It was shown when the earth opened and swallowed up Korah and his rebellious allies (Num. 16:31-35), and when King Herod was smitten and died a horrible death (Ac. 12:23). The Most High God's dominion is "an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" (Dan. 4:34-35).

All of this brings out the basic principle of the Reformed faith: the sovereignty of God. God created this world in which man dwells. He owns it and is running it according to His own sovereign good pleasure. God has lost none of His power, and it is highly dishonoring to Him to suppose that He is struggling along with the human race, doing the best He can to persuade men to do right, but unable to accomplish His eternal, unchangeable, holy, wise, and sovereign purpose.

Any system which teaches that the serious intentions of God can in some cases be defeated, and that man (who is not only a creature but a sinful creature) can exercise veto power over the plans of Almighty God, is

in striking contrast to the biblical idea of His immeasurable exaltation by which He is removed from all the weaknesses of humanity. That the plans of men are not always executed is due to a lack of power, or lack of wisdom, or both. But since God is unlimited in these and in all other resources, no unforeseen emergencies can arise. To Him, the causes for change have no existence. To assume that His plan fails and that He strives to no effect is to reduce Him to the level of His creatures and make Him no God at all.

## **2. Man's Totally Helpless Condition**

The first and perhaps most serious error of the Arminian writers is that they do not give sufficient importance to the sinful rebellion and spiritual separation of the human race from God, that occurred in the fall of Adam. Some neglect it altogether, while for others it seems to be a faraway event that has little influence in the lives of people today. But unless the Bible-believing Christian insists on the reality of that spiritual separation from God, and the totally disastrous effect that it had on the entire human race, he shall never be able properly to appreciate his real condition or desperate need of a redeemer.

Perhaps it will help to realize more clearly what fallen man's condition really is, if it is compared with that of the fallen angels. Angels were created before man, and each angel was placed on test as an individual, personal, moral being. This apparently was a pure test of obedience, as was that of Adam. Some of the angels stood their test (for reasons fully known only to God) and as a result were then confirmed in a state of perfect angelic holiness; these are now the elect angels in heaven (1 Tim. 5:21). But others fell and are now the demons mentioned in the Scriptures (the devil apparently being the one of highest rank among those who fell). Jude wrote that the "angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, [God] hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day" (v. 6). Furthermore, "God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4). The devil and the demons are totally alienated from God, totally given over to sin, without any hope of redemption. Their fate is described by Christ as that of being cast into "everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt. 25:41).

There is no redemption for fallen angels. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews says, "For verily not to angels doth he give help, but he giveth help to the seed of Abraham" (2:16). Their fate is fixed and certain. For men and for angels, endless punishment is the penalty for endless sinning against God. Some would try to make God appear unjust, as though He inflicts endless punishment for sins committed only in this life. But lost men and lost angels (or demons) are endlessly in rebellion against God, and they endlessly receive punishment for that rebellion.

When God created man a moral creature, He proceeded on a different plan than He did with the angelic order. Instead of creating all men at one time and placing them on test individually, He created one man with a physical body, from whom the entire human race would descend, and who (because of his union with all those who would come after him) could be appointed as the legal or federal head and representative of the entire human race. If he stood the test, he and all his descendants would be confirmed in holiness and established in a state of perpetual creaturely bliss (as were the holy angels). But if he fell (as did the fallen angels), he and all his posterity would be subject to eternal punishment. It was as if God said, "This time, if sin is to enter, let it enter by one man, so that redemption also can be provided by one Man."

Therefore, Adam, in his representative capacity, was placed on a test of pure human obedience. The penalty of disobedience was clearly set before him: “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17).

Hence, the clearly-declared penalty for sin was death: exactly the same penalty that had been inflicted on the angels who fell. As with angels, it was purely a test of whether or not man would be an obedient and appreciative subject in the kingdom of heaven. It was a perfectly fair, simple test, clearly set forth, very much in Adam’s favor, for which he would have no excuse if he disobeyed.

But--tragedy of tragedies--Adam fell, and the entire human race fell representatively in him. The consequences of his sin are all comprehended under the term “death” in its widest sense. It was primarily spiritual death (or separation from God) that had been threatened (Adam did not die physically until 930 years after he fell). But he was spiritually estranged from God and died spiritually the very instant he sinned; from that instant his life became an unceasing march to the grave. Man in this life has not gone as far in the ways of sin as have the devil and the demons, for he still receives many blessings through common grace--health, wealth, family and friends, the beauties of nature--and he still is surrounded with many restraining influences. But he is on his way. If not checked, man would eventually become as totally evil as the demons. In his fallen state he fears God, tries to flee from Him, and literally hates Him (as do the demons). If left to himself he would remain forever in that condition because, “There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God” (Rom. 3:10-11). Nothing, absolutely nothing but a mighty supernatural act on the part of God, can rescue him from that condition. Hence, if man is to be rescued, God must take the initiative; He must pay the penalty for him, must cleanse him from his guilt, and so reinstate him in holiness and righteousness.

That is precisely what God does! He sovereignly picks up a man out of the kingdom of Satan and places him in the kingdom of heaven. These are the elect that are referred to some 25 times in Scripture: “But for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened” (Mt. 24:22); “Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God” (1 Thess. 1:4); “The election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Rom. 11:7); “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect?” (Rom. 8:33). There are many more such references.

The Bible teaches that God has rescued a multitude of the human race from the penalty of their sins. In order to perform that work, Christ, the second Person of the trinity, took upon Himself human nature (through the miracle of the virgin birth) and was born into the human race as any normal child is born. God thus became incarnate, became one of us. Jesus lived a perfectly sinless life among men as the representative of His people, placed Himself under His own law, and suffered in His own Person the penalty that God had prescribed for sin. In His sinless life He perfectly kept the law of God that Adam had broken and so earned perfect righteousness for His people and the right for them to enter heaven. What He suffered as a Person of infinite value and dignity was a just equivalent of what His people would have suffered in an eternity in hell. In this manner He freed His people from the law of sin and death. As the fruits of that redemptive work are applied to those who have been given to the Son by the Father, they are said to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit, that is, made alive spiritually, or born again.

Paul expresses this broad truth in the epistle to the Romans when he says, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.... But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many.... Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous” (Rom. 5:12-19).

Unless one sees that contrast between the first and the second Adam, he will never understand the Christian system. Writing to the saints that were at Ephesus, Paul said, “And you hath he quickened [made alive], who were dead in trespasses and sins.” The Ephesian Christians “...were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:1-10).

In Christian theology there are three separate and distinct acts of imputation. In the first place, Adam’s sin is imputed to all his descendants (that is, judicially set to their account, so that they are held responsible for it and suffer the consequences of it). This is commonly known as the doctrine of original sin. In the second place (and in precisely the same manner) the believer’s sin is imputed to Christ, so that the innocent Savior suffers the consequences of it. And in the third place, Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the believer and secures for him entrance into heaven. Adam’s descendants, of course, are no more personally guilty of Adam’s sin than Christ is personally guilty of His people’s sin, or that His people are personally meritorious because of His righteousness. In each case it is a judicial transaction. The sinner receives salvation from Christ in precisely the same way that he receives condemnation and ruin from Adam. In each case the result follows because of the close official union which exists between the persons involved. To reject any one of these three steps is to reject an essential part of the Christian system.

Thus there is a strict parallel between Adam and Christ in the matter of salvation. In the above passages Paul piles one phrase upon another, stressing the fact that mankind is not merely sick or spiritually disinclined but spiritually dead. Christ emphatically taught, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). Again He said, “Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word” (Jn. 8:43). The unregenerate man cannot see the kingdom of God nor hear in any spiritually discerning way the words spoken concerning it; much less can he get into it. Had the righteous been left to themselves, they, like the fallen angels, would never have turned to God.

A spiritually dead person can no more give himself spiritual life than a physically dead person can give himself physical life; that requires a supernatural act on the part of God. The sinner gets into the family of God in precisely the same way that he gets into his human family: by being born into it. By that supernatural act, God Himself (through His Holy Spirit) sovereignly takes him out of the kingdom of Satan and places him in His spiritual kingdom by a spiritual rebirth.

Having once been born into the kingdom of God, the redeemed sinner can never become unborn. Since it took a supernatural act to bring him into a state of spiritual life, it would take another such act to take him out of that state. Hence the absolute certainty that those who have been regenerated (and therefore have become truly Christian) will never lose their salvation but will be providentially kept by the power of God through all the trials and difficulties of this life and brought into the heavenly kingdom. “He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (Jn. 5:24). “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand” (Jn. 10:27-29). This is known as the doctrine of eternal security, or the perseverance of the saints.

This gift of eternal life is not conferred upon all men but only upon those whom God chooses. This does not mean that any who want to be saved are excluded, for the invitation is, “whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17). The fact is that a spiritually dead person cannot will to come. “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw [literally, drag] him” (Jn. 6:44). Only those who are quickened (made spiritually alive) by the Holy Spirit ever have that will or desire; these are the elect. But in contrast with these, there is another group that may be called the non-elect. Concerning them, Floyd Hamilton very appropriately wrote: “All that God does is to let them alone and allow them to go their own way without interference. It is their nature to be evil, and God simply has foreordained to leave that nature unchanged. The picture often painted by opponents of Calvinism, of a cruel God refusing to save all who want to be saved, is a gross caricature. God saves all who want to be saved, but no one whose nature has not been changed wants to be saved.”

### **3. Christ’s Atonement**

It is not revealed why God does not save all mankind, when all were equally undeserving, and when the sacrifice on Calvary was that of a Person of infinite value, amply sufficient to save all men, had God so desired it. The Scriptures do show that not all will be saved; however, it must be remembered that the atonement, which was worked out at an enormous cost to God Himself, is God’s own property; He is at liberty to make whatever use of it He chooses. No man has any claim to any part of it. The Bible teaches repeatedly that salvation is by grace. Grace is favor shown to the undeserving--even to the ill-deserving. If any part of man’s salvation were due to his own good works, then indeed there would be a difference in men, and those who had responded to the gracious offer could justly point the finger of scorn at the lost and say, “You had the same chance that I had. I accepted, but you refused; therefore, you have no excuse.” But no! God has so arranged this system that those who are saved can only be eternally grateful that God has saved them. It is not for man to ask why God does as He does, for the Scripture declares: “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called...” (Rom. 9:20-24).

Only the Calvinist seems to take the fall of man seriously. A proper evaluation of the fall and man's present hopeless condition is the missing element in so much of today's thinking, teaching and preaching. Arminianism seriously errs in assuming that man has sufficient ability to turn to God, if only he will. The Calvinist insists that man is not merely sick or indisposed or just needing the right incentive; he is spiritually dead. The atonement of Christ does not merely make salvation an abstract possibility (such that all men can turn to God if they will). The Calvinist holds that the atonement was an objective work, accomplished in history, which removed all legal barriers against those to whom it was to be applied. It is followed by the work of the Holy Spirit subjectively applying the merits of that atonement to the hearts of those for whom it was divinely intended.

Here, again, is one of the most important verses in Scripture concerning the matter of salvation: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (Jn. 6:44). Another like it is, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (Jn. 6:37). The Apostle Paul wrote, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

How does God cause the elect to exercise faith? The answer is that in regeneration the Holy Spirit subdues man's heart to Himself and imparts a new nature which loves righteousness and hates sin. He does not force man against his will but makes him lovingly and spontaneously obedient to God's will. When the Lord appeared to the hardened persecutor Saul as he was on the way to Damascus, he immediately became obedient to God's will. "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power" (Ps. 110:3). God gives His people the will to come! That act on God's part, in the subconscious nature of the person, is known as regeneration, the new birth, or being born again. When a man is given a new nature, he reacts according to that nature. He exercises faith and does good works characteristic of repentance as naturally as the grape vine produces grapes. Whereas sin was previously his natural element, now holiness becomes his natural element (though not all at once, for he still has remnants of the old nature clinging to him; and as long as he remains in this world he still is in a sinful environment). But as his new nature is free to express itself, he grows in righteousness; he enjoys reading God's Word, praying and having fellowship with other Christians.

One must choose between an atonement of high efficiency which is perfectly accomplished, and an atonement of wide extension which is imperfectly accomplished; one cannot have both. If one had both one would have universal salvation. The Arminian extends the atonement so widely that, so far as its actual effect is concerned, it has practically no value other than as an example of unselfish service. Dr. B. B. Warfield used a very simple illustration to present this truth. He said that the atonement is like pie dough: the wider you roll it, the thinner it becomes. The Arminian, in making it apply to all men, reduces its effectiveness to such an extent that it becomes practically no atonement at all.

Furthermore, for God to have laid the sins of all men on Christ would mean that, as regards the lost, He would be punishing their sins twice: once in Christ, and then again in themselves. Certainly that would be unjust! If Christ paid their debt, they are free, and the Holy Spirit will invariably bring them to faith and repentance. If the atonement were truly unlimited, it would mean that Christ died for multitudes whose fate had already been determined, who were already in hell at the time Christ suffered. If the atonement merely nullified the sentence that was against man (so as to give him a new chance if he would exercise faith and obedience), it would mean that God was placing him on test again, as his ancestor Adam. But that kind of test was



tried and had its outcome long ago, even in a far more favorable environment. Carried to its logical conclusion, the theory of unlimited atonement leads to absurdity.

Christ's suffering in His human nature, as He hung on the cross those six hours, was not primarily physical but mental and spiritual. When He cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46), He was literally suffering the pangs of hell. For that is essentially what hell is: separation from the comfortable presence of God, separation from everything that is good and desirable. Such suffering is beyond man's comprehension. But since Christ suffered as a divine-human Person, His suffering was a just equivalent for all that His people would have suffered in an eternity in hell.

As a matter of fact, the redeemed man gains more through redemption in Christ than he lost through the fall of Adam. For in the incarnation God literally came into the human race and took human nature upon Himself, which nature Christ in His glorified body will retain forever. Evidently He will be the only Person of the Godhead that the redeemed will see in heaven. Peter says that those who have obtained like precious faith now are "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4); Paul says that believers are "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). Think of that: partakers of the divine nature, joint-heirs with Christ! What greater blessing could God possibly confer upon sinful men? As such redeemed men are superior to the angels, for angels are designated in Scripture only as God's messengers, His servants.

Ultimately the Arminian is faced with precisely the same problem as the Calvinist: that broader problem as to why a God of infinite holiness and power permits sin at all. In his present state of knowledge the theologian can give only a partial answer. But the Calvinist faces up to that problem and acknowledges the scriptural doctrine that all men had their fair and favorable chance in Adam. God now graciously saves some of the fallen race while leaving others to go their own chosen sinful way, manifesting His justice in their punishment. But having admitted foreknowledge, the Arminianism has no explanation as to why God purposefully and deliberately creates those He knows will be lost, those who will spend eternity in hell.

As regards the problem of evil, the Calvinist can say that God created this world as a theater in which He would display His glory, His marvelous attributes for all His creatures to see and admire: His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. How does God manifest His justice?

God's justice demands that goodness must be rewarded and sin punished. It is just as necessary that sin be punished as it is that goodness be rewarded; God would be unjust if He failed to do either. He created men and angels not as robots who would automatically produce good works as a machine produces bolts or tin cans (but deserves no rewards) but as free moral agents, in His own image, capable (in Adam before the fall) of choosing between good and evil. He manifests His justice toward those whom He purposed in grace to save, by rewarding them for the good works that are found in Christ their Savior and credited to them, confirming them in holiness, and admitting them into heaven. He manifests His justice toward those whom He purposed to bypass because of their willing continuance in sin.

Likewise, if sin had been excluded, there could have been no adequate revelation of God's most glorious attributes--grace, mercy, love and holiness--displayed in His redemption of sinners. The angels in heaven earned salvation through a covenant of works by keeping God's law. Like Adam, they had been promised certain rewards if they obeyed. They did obey and were confirmed in holiness. They do not experience salva-

tion by grace. There is an old hymn which says, “When I sing redemption’s story, the angels will fold their wings and listen.” So it will be in the ultimate contrast between men and angels.

Hence the explanation of sin is that God permits it but controls and overrules it for His own glory. If sin had been excluded from the creation, those glorious attributes could never have been adequately displayed before His intelligent universe of men and angels, but for the most part would have remained forever hidden in the depths of the divine nature.

#### **4. God’s Foreknowledge**

The evangelical Arminian acknowledges that God has foreknowledge and is able to predict future events. But if God foreknows any future event, that event is as fixed and certain as if foreordained. Foreknowledge implies certainty, and certainty implies foreordination. The evangelical Arminian does not deny that there is such a thing as election to salvation, for he cannot get rid of the words “elect” and “election,” which occur some twenty-five times in the New Testament. But he tries to destroy the force of these words by saying that election is based on foreknowledge: that God looks down the broad avenue of the future and sees those who will respond to His gracious offer, and so elects them.

But in acknowledging foreknowledge, the Arminian makes a fatal concession; figuratively speaking, he cuts his own throat. Why? For the simple reason that as God foresees those who will be saved, He also sees those who will be lost! Why, then, does He create those who will be lost? Certainly He is not under any obligation to create them; there is no power outside Himself forcing Him to do so. If He wants all men to be saved and is earnestly trying to save all men, He could at least refrain from creating those who, if created, certainly will be lost. The Arminian cannot consistently hold to the foreknowledge of God and yet deny the doctrines of election and predestination.

The question persists: Why does God create those He knows will go to hell? It would be mere foolishness for Him to wish to save or try to save those He knows will be lost! That would be for Him to work at cross-purposes with Himself. Even man has better sense than to try to do what he knows he will not do or cannot do. The Arminian has no alternative but to deny the foreknowledge of God, and then he is left with only a limited, ignorant, finite God who in reality is not God at all, in the true sense of that word. If election is based on foreknowledge, it is so meaningless that it is more confusing than enlightening. For even as regards the elect, what sense is there for God to elect those whom He knows are going to elect themselves? That would be just plain nonsense.

#### **5. The Universalistic Passages**

Probably the most plausible defense for Arminianism is found in the universalistic passages in Scripture. Three of the most quoted are: “...not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). “Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). “...Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all...” (1 Tim. 2:5-6). In regard to these verses it must be borne in mind that (as we have said earlier) God is the absolute sovereign Ruler of heaven and earth, and man is never to think of Him as wishing or striving to do what He knows He will not do. For Him to do otherwise would be for Him to act foolishly. Since Scripture teaches that some men are going to be lost (e.g., Mt. 25:46), Peter cannot mean that God is earnestly wishing or striving to save all individual men. For if it were

His will that every individual of mankind should be saved, then not one soul could be lost. As Paul said, “For who hath resisted his will?” (Rom. 9:19).

These verses simply teach that God is benevolent and does not delight in the sufferings of His creatures, any more than a human father delights in the punishment that he sometimes must inflict upon his son. The word will is used in different senses in Scripture (as in everyday conversation). It is sometimes used in the sense of “desire” or “purpose.” A righteous judge does not will (desire) that anyone should be hanged or sentenced to prison, yet he wills (pronounces sentence) that the guilty person shall be punished. In the same sense, for sufficient reason a man may will to have a limb removed (or an eye taken out), even though he certainly does not desire it.

Arminians insist that in 2 Peter 3:9 the words “any” and “all” refer to all mankind without exception. But it is important, first of all, to see to whom those words were addressed. The epistle is addressed not to mankind at large but to Christians: “...to them that have obtained like precious faith with us” (2 Pet. 1:1). At the beginning of this very chapter Peter addressed those to whom he was writing as “beloved” (3:1). An examination of the verse as a whole, and not merely at the last half, reveals that it is not primarily a salvation verse at all but a second-coming verse! It begins by saying, “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise [singular].” What promise? “The promise of his coming” (v. 4). The reference is to Christ’s second coming when He will come for judgment, and the wicked will perish in the lake of fire. The verse has reference to a limited group. It says that the Lord is “longsuffering to us-ward”; that is, to His elect, many of whom had not yet been regenerated and who therefore had not yet come to repentance. Hence verse 9 may quite properly be read as follows: “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise as some count slackness, but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any of us should perish, but that all of us should come to repentance.”

What about 1 Timothy 2:4-6, “Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth... Who gave himself a ransom for all”? It must be noted that “all” is used in various senses. Oftentimes it means not all men without exception but all men without distinction: Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, men and women, rich and poor. In this context it is clearly used in that sense. Through many centuries the Jews had been, with few exceptions, the exclusive recipients of God’s saving grace. They had become the most intensely nationalistic and intolerant people in the world. Instead of recognizing their position as that of God’s representatives to all the people of the world, they had kept those blessings to themselves. Even the early Christians for a time were inclined to appropriate the mission of the Messiah only for themselves. The salvation of the Gentiles was a mystery that had not been known in other ages (Eph. 4:6; Col. 1:27). So rigid was the pharisaic exclusivism that the Gentiles were regarded as “unclean,” “common,” “sinners of the Gentiles”--even “dogs.” It was not lawful for a Jew to keep company with or have any dealings with a Gentile (Jn. 4:9, Ac. 10:28, 11:3). After an orthodox Jew had been out in the marketplace where he had come in contact with Gentiles, he was regarded as unclean (Mk. 7:4). After Peter preached to the Roman centurion Cornelius and the others who were gathered at his house, he was severely taken to task by the church in Jerusalem. One can almost hear the gasp of wonder when, after Peter told them what had happened, they said, “Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Ac. 11:18)--that is, not to every individual in the world but to Jews and Gentiles alike. Used in this sense the word “all” has no reference to individuals but simply to mankind in general.

When it was said of John the Baptist that “there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins” (Mk. 1:5), it is obvious that not every individual did so respond. After Peter and John had healed the lame man at the door of the temple it is said that “all men glorified God for that which was done” (Ac. 4:21). Jesus told his disciples that they would be “hated of all men” for His name’s sake (Lk. 21:17). Thus, when Jesus said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (Jn. 12:32), He certainly did not mean that every individual of mankind would be so drawn. What He did mean was that Jews and Gentiles, men of all nations and races, would be drawn to Him--and it is evident that this is what is actually happening.

In 1 Corinthians 15:22 it says, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” This verse is often quoted by Arminians to prove unlimited or universal atonement. This verse is from Paul’s famous resurrection chapter, and the context makes it clear that he is not talking about life in this age (whether physical or spiritual) but about the resurrection life. Christ is the first to enter the resurrection life; then, when He comes, His people also enter into their resurrection life. What Paul says is that at that time a glorious resurrection life will become a reality, not for all mankind, but for all those who are in Christ. This point is illustrated by the well-known fact that the race fell in Adam, who acted as its federal head and representative. What Paul says, in effect, is this: “For as all born in Adam die, so also all born again in Christ shall be made alive.” This verse, therefore, refers not to something past, nor to something present, but to something future; it has no special bearing at all on the Calvinist-Arminian controversy.

Two other verses that also are often quoted in defense of Arminianism are: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20); and “...whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17). This general invitation is extended to all men. It may be (and often is) the means the Holy Spirit uses to arouse in certain individuals the desire for salvation, as He puts forth His supernatural power to regenerate them. But these verses, taken by themselves, are silent about the truth that fallen man is spiritually dead and totally unable to respond to the invitation, as are the fallen angels or demons. Fallen man is as dead spiritually as Lazarus was dead physically until Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!” He is as dead spiritually as the Pharisee Nicodemus, to whom Jesus said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). Christ said to the Pharisees, “Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word” (Jn. 8:43). Apart from divine assistance, no one can hear the invitation or put forth the will to come to Christ.

The declaration that Christ died for all is made clearer by the song that the redeemed sing before the throne of the Lamb: “Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Rev. 5:9). Oftentimes the word all must be understood to mean all the elect, all His Church, all those whom the Father has given to the Son (as when Christ says, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me” [Jn. 6:37]), but not all men universally and every man individually. The redeemed host will be made up of men from all classes and conditions of life: princes and peasants, rich and poor, bond and free, male and female, Jews and Gentiles, men of all nations and races. That is the true universalism of Scripture.

## 6. The Two Systems Contrasted

It is the author's conviction that Christianity comes to its fullest expression in the Reformed faith. The great advantage of the Reformed faith is that in the framework of the five points of Calvinism it sets forth clearly what the Bible teaches concerning the way of salvation. Only when these truths are seen as a unit and in relation to each other can one really understand or appreciate the Christian system in all its strength and beauty. The reason that so many Christians have only a weak faith, and that so many churches present only a rather superficial form of Christianity, is that they never really see the system in its logical consistency. It is not enough for the professing Christian to know that God loves him and that his sins have been forgiven; he should know how and why his redemption has been accomplished and how it has been made effective. This is set forth systematically in the five points of Calvinism.

Historically the five points of Calvinism have been held by the Presbyterian and Reformed churches and by many Baptists, while the substance of the five points of Arminianism has been held by the Methodist and Lutheran churches and also by many Baptists. The five points of Calvinism may be more easily remembered if they are associated with the word T-U-L-I-P:

T - Total inability

U - Unconditional election

L - Limited atonement

I - Irresistible (efficacious) grace

P - Perseverance of the saints

The following material (taken from *Romans: An Interpretive Outline*, by David N. Steele and Curtis Thomas) contrasts the five points of Calvinism with the five points of Arminianism in a particularly clear and concise form. It is also included as an appendix in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, by the present writer. (Each of these books is published by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, N.J.)

### The Five Points of Arminianism

**1. Free-will or human ability.** Although human nature was seriously affected by the fall, man has not been left in a state of total spiritual helplessness. God graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe but does not interfere with man's freedom. Each sinner possesses a free will, and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it. Man's freedom consists in his ability to choose good over evil in spiritual matters; his will is not enslaved to his sinful nature. The sinner has the power to either cooperate with God's Spirit and be regenerated or resist God's grace and perish. The lost sinner needs the Spirit's assistance but he does not have to be regenerated by the Spirit before he can believe, for faith is man's act and precedes the new birth. Faith is the sinner's gift to God; it is man's contribution to salvation.

**2. Conditional election.** God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world was based upon His foreseeing that they would respond to His call. He selected only those whom He knew would of themselves freely believe the Gospel. Election therefore was determined by or conditioned upon what man would do. The faith which God foresaw, and upon which He based His choice, was not given to the sinner by God (it was not created by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit) but resulted solely

from man's will. It was left entirely up to man as to who would believe and therefore as to who would be elected unto salvation. God chose those whom He knew would, of their own free will, choose Christ. Thus the sinner's choice of Christ--not God's choice of the sinner--is the ultimate cause of salvation.

**3. Universal redemption or general atonement.** Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved but did not actually secure the salvation of anyone. Although Christ died for all men and for every man, only those who believe on Him are saved. His death enabled God to pardon sinners on the condition that they believe, but it did not actually put away anyone's sins. Christ's redemption becomes effective only if man chooses to accept it.

**4. The Holy Spirit can be effectually resisted.** The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly by the gospel invitation. He does all that He can to bring every sinner to salvation. But inasmuch as man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call. The Spirit cannot regenerate the sinner until he believes; faith (which is man's contribution) precedes and makes possible the new birth. Thus, man's free will limits the Spirit in the application of Christ's saving work. The Holy Spirit can only draw to Christ those who allow Him to have His way with them. Until the sinner responds, the Spirit cannot give life. God's grace, therefore, is not invincible; it can be-- and often is--resisted and thwarted by man.

**5. 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.

According to Arminianism, salvation is accomplished through the combined efforts of God (who takes the initiative) and man (who must respond); man's response being the determining factor. God has provided salvation for everyone, but His provision becomes effective only for those who, of their own free will, choose to cooperate with Him and accept His offer of grace. At the crucial point, man's will plays a decisive role; thus man, not God, determines who will be recipients of the gift of salvation.

## The Five Points of Calvinism

**1. Total inability or total depravity.** Because of the fall, man is unable of himself to savingly believe the Gospel. The sinner is dead, blind and deaf to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt. His will is not free; it is in bondage to his evil nature; therefore, he will not--indeed he cannot--choose good over evil in the spiritual realm. Consequently it takes much more than the Spirit's assistance to bring a sinner to Christ--it takes regeneration, by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. Faith is not something man contributes to salvation but is itself a part of God's gift of salvation; it is God's gift to the sinner, not the sinner's gift to God.

**2. Unconditional election.** God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will. His choice of particular sinners was not based on any foreseen response of obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary, God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result, not the cause, of God's choice. Election therefore was not determined by or conditioned upon any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. Those whom God sovereignly elected He brings through the power of the Spirit to a willing acceptance of Christ. Thus God's choice of the sinner--not the sinner's choice of Christ--is the ultimate cause of salvation.

**3. Particular redemption or limited atonement.** Christ's redeeming work was intended to save the elect only, and actually secured salvation for them. His death was the substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of certain specified sinners. In addition to putting away the sins of His people, Christ's redemption secured everything necessary for their salvation; including faith which unites them to Him. The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, therefore guaranteeing their salvation.

**4. The efficacious call of the Spirit or irresistible grace.** 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. The external call (which is made to all without distinction) can be-- and often is--rejected; whereas the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. By means of this special call, the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man's will, nor is He dependent upon man's cooperation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. God's grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.

**5. Perseverance of the saints.** All who are 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.

According to Calvinism, salvation is accomplished by the almighty power of the triune God: the Father chose a people, the Son died for them, the Holy Spirit makes Christ's death effective by bringing the elect to faith and repentance, thereby causing them to willingly obey the Gospel. The entire process (election, redemption, regeneration) is the work of God and is by grace alone. Thus God, not man, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation. This is the biblical Gospel.

If you have never bowed the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ, then call upon Him today to save you. Scripture offers this hope: "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger forever, because he delighteth in mercy" (Mic. 7:18). Cast yourself upon God's mercy, seeking Him with all your heart, putting your full confidence and trust in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. "Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed" (Rom. 10:11).

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