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Foreword

“The works of the LORD are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein” (Ps. 111:2). This touches upon our heart: in what do we take pleasure?

Jehovah’s works centre in His salvation of His church in Jesus Christ: glorious works wrought before the foundation of the world, at the cross of Calvary and in the hearts and lives of His people.

This is the calling and delight of the saints: to seek to understand these works. In this wonderful activity, all of God’s faithful children are occupied, for Jehovah’s works are “sought out of all them that have pleasure therein.”

This book is written to help God’s people in their delightful calling to search out and study the wonderful works of the Triune God.

Its authors, Profs. David Engelsma and Herman Hanko, have between them spent almost 100 years in the Christian ministry extolling and magnifying “the God of all grace” (I Peter 5:10) and His “so great salvation” (Heb. 2:3), in preaching and polemics, in catechising and counselling, in lecturing and writing. Between them, they have authored or edited some 20 books, including the previous publication of the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF), *Keeping God’s Covenant*.¹

The six chapters of *The Five Points of Calvinism* were originally the six main speeches at the ninth biennial British Reformed Fellowship Family Conference at Cloverley Hall, Shropshire, England, in 2006.² This little book proclaims the doctrines of grace, both warmly and antithetically, and with deep scriptural penetration. It draws upon a wealth of historical and creedal

material, especially the *Canons of Dordt* (1618-1619), the original Five Points of Calvinism.³ Here is robust, unashamed and uncompromising Calvinism which is also deeply personal and moving, calling the saints to love, confess and promote “the true grace of God” in Christ Jesus (I Peter 5:12).

Reader, the biblical truth of God’s sovereign grace is near you, even in a book in your hand; you do not need to descend into the depths of the sea, encompassed with seaweed, and be swallowed by a great fish, like Jonah, to learn that “Salvation is of the Lord”—all of it (Jonah 2:10)!

This book is sent forth “to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved” (Eph. 1:6), that we might grow in gratitude and worship Him for His great work of saving us in Jesus Christ.

Rev. Angus Stewart
BRF Chairman

¹For these books and others, see www.cprf.co.uk/bookstore.htm (UK and Europe) and www.rfpa.org (N. America).

²These speeches, and other BRF Conference lectures, may be listened to free on-line (www.britishreformedfellowship.org.uk/audio.htm).

³The *Canons* are available on-line (www.prc.org/cd_index.html).

Chapter 1

The History of Calvinism



Prof. Herman Hanko

Introduction

I recall that many years ago, perhaps more than thirty years ago, Prof. Homer Hoeksema, my colleague in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, and I were sitting together on a Friday afternoon. Frequently on a Friday afternoon, after a very busy week of teaching and with some weariness, we would take our shoes off, put our feet up on the table and relax to discuss informally things that belong to the work and life of the seminary. On this particular Friday, we were talking about the present state of the church of Jesus Christ, especially in our own country. In the course of that discussion, Prof. Hoeksema made this remark that has remained with me. “You know,” he said, “if you view the history of the church from the time of Pentecost until today, it is very striking that the doctrines of sovereign and particular grace have only very infrequently and over very short periods of time been consistently maintained by the church.” The history of the New Testament church, taken as a whole, is a history of repeated apostasy. Just as in the time of Israel’s judges, reformation lasts for only a short time and once again the church turns to apostasy.

The Origin of the Five Points of Calvinism

The Synod of Dordt (1618-1619), a milestone in the history of the church for more reasons than one, adopted what we now call

the Five Points of Calvinism, which are to be the subject of the following chapters. The Five Points of Calvinism are easy to remember; I am sure all of you who are adults are aware of what they are. For the sake of the children, I remind you that they are easily remembered by use of the acronym TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints. These Five Points were adopted by the Synod of Dordt (or Dordrecht), each point the subject of a chapter or head of the *Canons of Dordt*. There were five points because, in 1610 in the city of Gouda in what is now the Netherlands, the Arminians drew up five points which were intended to express what in their judgment was the heart and pith of their position. These became known as the Five Points of the Remonstrants. Each chapter in the *Canons* is an answer, a biblical answer, to one of the points of the Arminians. Those points became known as the Five Points of Calvinism because it was the conviction of the fathers at Dordrecht, and properly so, that these Five Points, which were developed over against the Five Points of the Remonstrants, concerned the very heart of the teaching of John Calvin (1509-1564), the great Genevan Reformer. The Five Points set forth clearly the biblical teaching on the sovereignty and particularity of the grace of God in salvation.

Calvinism: the Heart of Biblical Truth

Although other doctrines were involved in the whole Arminian controversy with the Reformed churches in the Lowlands in the late 1500s and early 1600s, the Five Points of the Remonstrants, in which the Arminians took issue with the Reformed faith, were understood by the Arminians to be the heart of the matter. If they could convince the Reformed churches of their position with regard to these Arminian Five Points, they would have had their way in all the other doctrines which they defended. The fathers of Dordt understood this assertion of the Arminians and understood that in the defence of what was the heart of the gospel the Five Points of Calvinism had to be established on firm biblical

grounds and made the confession of the church. In other words, these Five Points were what Calvinism is all about, and the fathers at Dordt very consciously and very deliberately said, “These Five Points are the points that lie at the heart of the genius of the theology of the Reformer of Geneva.” Many other doctrines were at stake, and Calvin himself in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* talked of all these other doctrines, but if one wants to come to the heart of the matter, the heart is found in these Five Points. They are Calvinism, Calvinism in its most fundamental sense. And Calvinism is the teaching of Scripture concerning the doctrines of grace.

What Dordt said was true Calvinism is disputed today. As you know, there are those today, also in the United Kingdom, who contest, for example, that Calvin taught what we call limited atonement or particular redemption, but that Calvin was consistently, as far as the extent of the redemption of Christ is concerned, a universalist: Christ died for all men. I refer to R. T. Kendall and Alan Clifford as two defenders of this position.

Over the years, countless appeals have been made to Calvin in support of doctrines that were foreign to Calvin’s thought. One example of such an appeal to Calvin is that of a great theologian of the twentieth century, Dr. Abraham Kuyper, who, though in the early years of his life was soundly Calvinistic in his thinking, nevertheless later in life appealed to Calvin in support of his erroneous, destructive and insidious heresy of common grace, which is, by the way, almost the only part of Kuyper’s theology that anybody pays attention to today. The heretical part of Kuyper is remembered, while the orthodoxy of Dr. Kuyper has been long forgotten.

We are speaking, therefore, in these lectures of what is the heart of Calvin’s theology. If we would sum up what those Five Points are all about in just a few words, we would have to say that the heart of the Five Points is the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty

of God in the work of salvation by grace alone. God's sovereignty has always been the point at issue. We cannot in the rather brief space of this chapter enter into a detailed history of Calvinism in all of its aspects. I limit myself to this one fundamental thought, because here we have what is *the* single most important point of Calvinism: The Triune God, Jehovah God, the eternal God, is absolutely sovereign in all the work of salvation which He performs. *That* has been the issue throughout the entire history of the new dispensational church.

Other battles have had to be fought, battles on this front, battles on that front, and the church has been called often to contend against errors on many different fronts in her spiritual warfare. But those are minor skirmishes; the real heat of the battle is right at the point of the sovereignty of God in the work of salvation. It always has been so and it will continue to be so until the end of time. Is God sovereign in the work of salvation? The great theme of Calvin's theology was glory to God alone. Glory to God alone because salvation is God's work alone. At this specific point, the enemy has repeatedly, by many different devices, attacked the truth of Scripture. It is at *this* front that we do battle today. If we are going to be consumed with the desire to fight against what are peripheral evils in the church, we are going to be unfaithful in the battle. We will be like those of whom Psalm 78 speaks: "soldiers who faltered when battle was near, who kept not God's covenant nor walked in His fear." The battle lines to which you and I are summoned to fight lie here. The enemy will have nothing of the sovereignty of God in the work of salvation. The enemy invents innumerable clever devices to undermine this great truth.

Calvin's Reliance on Augustine

When Calvin developed the truth of the sovereign grace of God in the work of salvation, he reached back deliberately and consciously to the work of the great church father, Augustine. Augustine died in AD 430, over a millennium prior to the Reformation. Augustine

taught, especially toward the end of his life in his battles with the Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians prevalent especially in France, all the doctrines that Calvin taught. If you read Augustine's writings, including his magisterial *City of God*, you will find all these doctrines, all the Five Points of Calvinism. We could call these five doctrines the Five Points of Augustinianism. It would be just as correct to give them that name as the name of Calvinism. Augustine even taught sovereign reprobation. Many who do not want the doctrines of sovereign grace will challenge that statement and deny that Augustine taught not only sovereign and eternal election but reprobation as well. But he did. He taught that doctrine as clearly, although not as extensively and broadly, as Calvin. He saw that reprobation was a necessary part of the truth of election. This is important, for frequently the first doctrine of sovereign grace to be attacked is the truth of reprobation.

Calvin reached back to Augustine and took up these teachings of Augustine for a very good reason: because the Roman Catholic Church, though with incredible irony, appealed to Augustine as an outstanding saint and father of Roman Catholic theology. Yet, Rome corrupted Augustine at the fundamental point of the truth. Rome adopted a modified Pelagianism. I would almost say that from a certain point of view it was inevitable that Rome would do this. By the time Augustine raised his voice in the defence of sovereign grace, the Roman Catholic Church had already committed itself to monkery and nunnery with its doctrine of the meritorious value of good works. Those who gave themselves over to the life of a monk merited God's special graces. It is that insidious, dreadful word *merit* to which the Roman Catholic Church committed itself early in its history which prevented the church from adopting Augustine's position. Augustine was called by Rome "Doctor of Grace" but that church denied the truth concerning grace. Semi-Pelagianism won in the Roman Catholic Church when the Roman Catholic Church officially approved of

some of the more peripheral teachings of Augustine and refused to approve his emphatic and sharp teachings on sovereign grace. Semi-Pelagianism was approved by the Roman Catholic Church when it allowed outright Semi-Pelagians to remain in the church and in the teaching positions of the church without discipline. Semi-Pelagianism became more and more the doctrine of Rome until it was officially approved by the Synod of Orange in 529.

Throughout the entire millennium of Roman Catholic domination, the loudest voice that was raised in defence of the doctrines of grace was the voice of Gottschalk, the ninth century monk who had studied Augustine. He wrote several confessions, and defended vigorously the teachings of Augustine also with regard to election and reprobation. As a result of his insistence on the truth of Augustine's teachings, Gottschalk suffered a horrible martyr's death at the hand of Rome. At that point, Rome became the false church. Our *Belgic Confession*, Article 29, speaks of the false church as the church that persecutes those who hold to the truth. All hope of Rome ever teaching anything different ended with the martyrdom of Gottschalk.

In order to show that the Reformation was not a novelty, not an introduction into the thinking of the church of new ideas which had never before been heard in the church, and which would have cast a long shadow over the entire Reformation, Calvin consciously reached back to Augustine and said, "What I say is the doctrine of the one you call the 'doctor of grace'—nothing different." If you consult Calvin's *Institutes*, you will see that he refers to Augustine more than any other church father, in fact, nearly more than all the other church fathers put together.

Attacks on Calvinism: Opposition to Predestination

The doctrines of grace as set forth in the Five Points of Calvinism have been frequently attacked—even by those professing to be Calvinists. The doctrines have been attacked on different points and in different ways. The faithful have been called to fight in

defence of the truths of Calvinism on different fronts in the battle. In Calvin's day already the doctrines of grace were subject to bitter and fierce attacks, especially against the doctrine of sovereign predestination.

There were many enemies of this doctrine. I could mention, for example, Pighius. But the great enemy within Geneva itself was a man by the name of Jerome Bolsec, a member of the church of Geneva, who claimed to be a Protestant. As one of the ministers was preaching at a weekday worship service on the doctrine of sovereign predestination, Jerome Bolsec arose and, interrupting the sermon, began to defend his own views with a sharp and bitter attack on sovereign predestination, particularly the doctrine of reprobation. What he didn't know was that Calvin had entered the building during the service and was leaning against the portal at the door of the auditorium listening to Bolsec's attack. When Bolsec finished, Calvin came forward, mounted the pulpit, and, in an impromptu fashion, gave a sterling and magnificent defence, founded on the Scriptures, of the truth of sovereign predestination, including election and reprobation. However, that did not silence Bolsec; he continued to rail against the doctrine and continued to bring objections against it—the same objections one hears today. He not only denied reprobation, but he publicly promoted his heresies throughout the city of Geneva until the consistory and company of pastors were forced to take action.

Before the consistory and company of pastors in Geneva were ready to take final action against Bolsec, they drew up a document called the *Consensus Genevensis* in which they expressed their views on sovereign predestination, including election and reprobation. It was drawn up by Calvin himself and approved by the authorities in the church of Geneva. But before it was officially adopted and considered binding doctrine in the church of Geneva, it was sent to the surrounding Protestant cantons and all the other Swiss Reformers for their approval and approbation. Imagine the chagrin in Geneva when all of the cantons with only

one exception criticized the position of Geneva as being too harsh; the criticism was levelled particularly against the doctrine of reprobation. Even such an outstanding theologian as Henry Bullinger considered the position of Geneva with regard to this doctrine as being unduly harsh. The only one that approved was William Farel in the Protestant canton of Neuchatel.

Geneva, nevertheless, was not deterred by this failure of the other Swiss cantons to agree with the doctrine, but adopted it anyway and it has become, therefore, in spite of the attacks of many enemies of the truth, one of the points of Calvinism. It has become, in fact, the most important point. You may judge whether a man is genuinely a Calvinist or not by putting the question to him: Do you believe in sovereign reprobation? You will find hardly anyone among today's Calvinists who will answer that question in the affirmative. Yet it is in Head I of the *Canons of Dordt*.

Attacks on Calvinism: Opposition to Total Depravity

When the Arminian controversy broke out in the Netherlands, less than 50 years after Calvin died, the Arminians, although they also wanted nothing of predestination, attacked the truths of Calvinism at another point: total depravity. Central to Arminianism was the doctrine of the free will of man. The Arminians insisted, as heretics often insist, "We are Reformed. We believe in the doctrines of grace; we maintain them; we are willing to fight for them; we hold them precious and dear." Nevertheless, they taught as their central, pivotal point the free will of man. Man has to have some role in this matter of salvation. In some respect, man has to be also a figure of importance in God's work of saving His church. In defence of that underlying position of Arminianism, they launched an attack on the truth of total depravity.

Proceeding from the viewpoint of man's free will, the Arminians disagreed with all the other points of Calvinism as well. They drew up the Articles of the Remonstrants in Gouda in 1610. They

understood that to be committed to the doctrine of free will was to be committed to a position which was at *every* point at odds with the doctrines of grace which Calvin had emphasized. But their attack was a different approach, a more subtle approach, an attack on a different front. And that became the occasion for the great Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) concerning which I am not going to speak, except to make one remark: God in His gracious care of the church so ordered things in the Netherlands, that not only were the Arminian forces defeated by what we may call an international synod of Europe's greatest theologians, but also the truths of sovereign grace were incorporated into a creed of the church that stands as a wall against all assaults on the sovereign grace of God. The *Canons* are a flag under which Calvinists may march into battle. The best of Europe spoke and set down in creedal form the doctrines of grace. All Reformed Europe agreed: this is Calvinism. To be in disagreement with any point of the *Canons* is to turn one's back on Calvinism. And so, thank God, we have these precious doctrines of grace, which we confess and for which we fight, incorporated into a creed binding on the church of Jesus Christ.

Attacks on Calvinism: Opposition to Particular Grace and Limited Atonement

Errors, however, persisted. It was only a few years after Dordt that the error of Amyraldianism arose in France in the school of Saumur. Amyraldianism is called Hypothetical Universalism because the Amyraldians followed the same two-track theology which is so common in today's church: On the one hand ... but on the other hand ... On the one hand, God chose only the elect to salvation; but on the other hand, God chose all men. Christ died only for His people; but Christ also died for all men. Salvation is the sovereign work of grace, but only hypothetically; for it is also dependent on man's free will. It was a two-track theology, and those elements in it which we would call soundly Calvinistic were window dressing to deceive the unwary, to give heresy (as

heretics are always wont to do) a colouring of Scripture and the Reformed faith. It was a tipping of one's hat to the Synod of Dordt, while at the same time an insidious attack on the very things for which Dordt stood. It claimed to be what Calvin really taught, but it corrupted almost every one of Calvin's teachings.

To make things worse, Amyraldianism, especially in the British Isles, became an acceptable view of the doctrines of grace. What strikes me as amazing is this: Amyraldianism, which had such a small beginning in the British Isles, has become a dominant theology. Amyraldians claim to be Calvinists, in large measure, I suspect, because of the Marrow controversy in the first part of the eighteenth century in Scotland.

Attacks on Calvinism: Opposition to Irresistible Grace

The Marrow controversy arose out of a book by Edward Fisher, a seventeenth-century English Calvinist, entitled, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which book had in it the seeds of Amyraldianism. Those Amyraldian seeds grew to fruition in the Marrow controversy. Not even the Westminster Assembly, in the 1640s, could stop the inroads of Amyraldianism. It is interesting to pause to take note of the fact that there were Amyraldians (in all but name) at the Westminster Assembly. They made their voice heard; they defended publicly on the floor of the assembly Amyraldian views. They were repeatedly rebuffed; their views were rejected. The *Westminster Confession* took firm decisions on all the doctrines of grace, including election and reprobation. But the creed could not stop the spread of Amyraldianism any more than the Synod of Dordt could stop the spread of Arminianism in the Lowlands and eventually in America.

The Marrow men claimed that they were Calvinists, solid Calvinists. But the Marrow men attacked the doctrines of Calvinism on a different front. Not the idea of free will which had been promoted by the Arminians; not the open and blatant attack against predestination which was characteristic of the enemies

of Calvin; rather, the attack was made on the preaching of the gospel. That was where the Marrow men assaulted the Reformed faith. They said, as it were, "The preaching of the gospel has to go forth into all the world. It has to be put into such a form that it not only confronts man with the obligation to forsake sin, repent of it and believe in Christ, but it has to be presented in the most attractive form possible. There is in the preaching of the gospel an element of God beseeching men to believe, of God doing all He can to persuade men of the desirability of accepting the gospel and believing in Christ." That very aspect of the preaching, which was, in the minds of the Marrow men, the only way it was possible to bring the gospel to the unconverted, had to express itself in a universal desire of God to save all men. In God's love for all men He pleaded with men to "close with Christ," if I may use a favourite expression of the Marrow men. Desiring to save all men, God loves all men; but God's love has its judicial basis in the cross; and so included in the views of the Marrow men was a universal atonement. I know the Marrow men fudged on the point. They insisted that Christ died for His people. But nevertheless, they also taught that He "is dead for all men." While some of the things the Marrow men said about preaching were undoubtedly true, in their development of preaching they erred grievously. They ended with the doctrine of universal redemption. Whatever you may make of distinction between "Christ died for the elect" and "Christ is dead for all men," it is clearly a repudiation of the truth of Christ's particular redemption.

Marrow theology, with its well-meant gospel offer, has prevailed in the British Isles and has spread into America and elsewhere. And so now, since the time of the Marrow men, the great enemy of sovereign grace has been what we have all come to know as the well-meant offer of the gospel in which God expresses His desire and intention to save all men. We must tell all men, if we are to make the gospel palatable to the unconverted, "God loves you. God has made Christ available to you. Because of the nature of

His atonement, you have a warrant to believe in Christ. God has done all He can to persuade you of the favourableness of receiving Christ and closing with him.” You are all acquainted with that aspect of the attack on the doctrines of grace: clever, dangerous, deceptive, ultimately destructive of all the truth of Calvinism. That is the point where the battle rages today.

Attacks on Calvinism: Common Grace

It is interesting that there was one more attack on Calvinism that in some respects is very closely connected to the well-meant offer of the gospel and in other respects is not. When the Lord preserved His church in the Netherlands in 1834, through the work of the Afscheiding (Secession) under the leadership of DeCock, VanVelzen, Brummelkamp and Van Raalte, the Secession was in some respects very strong, and in other respects very weak. The strong theologians of the Secession were ardent defenders of sovereign grace. DeCock had been a humanist. Minister in the state church, the Reformed Church of Ulrum, he was little more than a modernist. Partly through his own congregation and partly through a friend who pointed him to the *Institutes* of Calvin and the *Canons of Dordt*, DeCock became persuaded that the truths of sovereign grace were indeed the teachings of Scripture. He was impressed by an old farmer from his congregation, uneducated but godly, pious and knowledgeable in the truth, who said to his pastor, “Dominie, if I had so much as to contribute one sigh to my salvation, I would be lost.” Through DeCock and others, God brought reformation in the church.

But there were those in the movement who taught the well-meant offer, notably Brummelkamp and to some extent Van Raalte. When DeCock heard that his colleague in the Afscheiding, Brummelkamp, taught the well-meant offer of the gospel he said, “He is no brother; he is a nephew.” Those who taught the well-meant offer ultimately prevailed.

Interestingly enough, it prevailed partly because of the influences of what was called the “further reformation” or “later reformation,” a movement that had been a significant element in Dutch church life prior to the Afscheiding. Groups of believers who still loved the truth of sovereign grace and were wholly disgusted with the apostasy in the state church met together in house worship in order to maintain the truths which were dear to their souls. These house meetings were not always what they should have been, and particularly because of wrong views of conversion and of the place of infants of believing parents in the covenant, these house groups were open to the well-meant offer of the gospel. Because the contact between the Netherlands and Scotland was close, many writings of Scottish theologians, particularly of the Marrow men, were translated into Dutch and avidly read by those who worshipped in their homes. But the heresies of the Marrow men were included in these writings and influenced the thinking of those whom we would probably call the best of the Calvinists in the Netherlands. It is not surprising, therefore, that we find Marrow teachings in the Afscheiding.

Closely associated with the well-meant gospel offer was the doctrine of common grace. If God loves all men, if God desires the salvation of all men, then God is gracious to all men. That opened the door to the teaching of a common grace of God shown to all who heard the preaching, which proclaimed that God loves all men. But this grace was a grace that did not save. Thus, the idea of a particular and sovereign grace was drowned in the error of common grace.

Dr. Abraham Kuyper looked at the question of common grace from a different point of view. He wanted nothing of the well-meant offer of the gospel; he understood the truths of sovereign grace sufficiently to react against the well-meant offer and to warn the people against its evils. But especially toward the end of his life, when he resigned from the ministry, ran for the Dutch

parliament and became Prime Minister of the Netherlands, he began to teach that genuine Calvinism includes a common grace, not now a grace expressed in the well-meant offer of the gospel, but a common grace that opens the door to cooperation with the wicked, a common grace that is a bridge between the church and the world, a common grace that enables the Christian to link arms with the man who is an enemy of the truth in various endeavours to make this world a better place and to bring the world and all its institutions under the rule of Christ.

That was deadly. Today there are many Kuyperians, but Kuyperians that will ever quote Dr. Abraham Kuyper's works on the sovereignty and particularity of grace are extremely rare. Most of them appeal over and over again to the one heresy in Kuyper's teachings that really destroyed all Calvinism: common grace.

The Covenant in the History of Calvinism

To a certain extent, both in Presbyterian thinking and in continental Reformed theology, the issue of sovereign and particular grace was considered in connection with the doctrine of the covenant. Westminster already had, under the influence of federal theologians who emphasized the truths of Adam's federal headship of the human race and Christ's federal headship of the church, begun to deal with the doctrine of the covenant. However, Presbyterian thought, because of the teachings of the *Westminster Standards*, emphasized particularly the covenant of works. And covenant of works theology is inescapably bound up with the doctrine of merit.

I recall a number of years ago I was in correspondence with a Chinese minister, pastor of an independent Presbyterian church. A soundly Reformed man, he even agreed with our churches on the question of common grace and the well-meant gospel offer. In the course of our correspondence on various doctrines related to sovereign grace, we came to the idea of the covenant of works. I made a remark to the effect that one serious objection against

the covenant of works, among many others, was its idea of merit. I did so rather naively, thinking that he would agree with me on that point and see that the Achilles heel of the covenant of works was the doctrine of merit. However, to my surprise, he insisted—a soundly Reformed man though he seemed to be—on the idea of merit. I learned later that the idea of merit, because of its relation to the covenant of works, is widely held by Presbyterian thinkers.

The idea of merit is contrary to the doctrines of grace. Merit implies that we can earn something from God, just as Adam in paradise, under the covenant of works, if he had been faithful for an unspecified period of time, would have earned heaven for himself and the whole human race, so we, under the covenant of grace, can earn a place in heaven. The idea has got to be that sinful man, totally depraved man, can nevertheless merit with God—in spite of Jesus' own clear words: "when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do" (Luke 17:10).

That idea of merit has prevented covenant theology from being developed extensively and correctly in Presbyterian circles. I am not denying the fact that there were certain periods of time in the history of Presbyterianism when Calvinism flourished. I think, for example, of the glory days of Princeton under the Alexanders, the Hodges and B. B. Warfield, when Calvinism was set forth in powerful writings as the truth of the everlasting gospel. But even then, because New School Presbyterianism, with its wrong view of the preaching of the gospel, was tolerated in the church, the doctrines of sovereign grace were compromised. Even J. Gresham Machen, as staunch a defender of sovereign grace as he might be, never did battle in any significant way with the real enemies of sovereign grace. By the time Machen took his stand against the apostasy within the Presbyterian Church of the United States, the Presbyterian Church had become so liberal and so modern,

that it had gone beyond Arminianism and Machen found himself entangled in a battle with outright liberalism and outright modernism. It was too late to reform the church.

The doctrine of the covenant became an integral part of the theology of the Reformed faith in the Lowlands. But the struggle to develop a proper view of the covenant became a battle in defence of sovereign grace. (A noted Dutch author wrote a book to which he gave the title: *A Century of Strife Over Baptism and the Covenant*.) It was a battle chiefly because a widely held conception of the covenant in the Lowlands was that of a conditional covenant. Because that idea of a conditional covenant was common in the thinking of continental theologians (with some exceptions here and there), the doctrine of the covenant destroyed the doctrines of sovereign grace in the Lowlands. For one thing it denied the place of children in the covenant because children cannot fulfil conditions. They had no place in the covenant. The blessings of the covenant could not be theirs; they are insufficiently mature to agree to the provisions of the covenant. For another thing, a conditional covenant involves a general promise which God makes to all the children at baptism. This general promise is identical with the general and well-meant offer of the gospel, except for the fact that it is limited to the covenant. But a general promise rests on conditions, as is the case with a well-meant offer. And, though God expresses His desire to save all who hear the gospel and/or are baptized, the final salvation of those who hear the gospel or receive the promise of the covenant rests with man.

The Protestant Reformed Churches stand today as a Calvinistic denomination. Unabashedly, I plead with you to understand our position. Our position is in defence of sovereign and particular grace. Our position is one of unrelenting warfare with every form of Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, Arminianism, Amyraldianism, Marrowism. Our position is one of applying and integrating the truth of sovereign and particular grace with all the doctrines of the Christian faith. We believe with all our hearts that sovereign

grace is the teaching of the *Three Forms of Unity*. The *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Canons of Dordt* are the basis on which *we* stand in defence of sovereign and particular grace. God has graciously given unto us this too: that the spiritual fathers of our churches have seen that these truths of sovereign grace must indeed be integrated with the doctrines of the covenant and that the covenant requires redefinition if it is to be in harmony with the Scriptures. It must be viewed as God's sovereign work whereby He takes His people through Jesus Christ into His own covenant fellowship. There is no discrepancy, there are no contradictions, between the truth of the covenant and sovereign grace. In fact, it is the truth of sovereign grace which lends beauty and power, significance and blessedness, to the truth of God's everlasting covenant of grace.

We came to that position through our own battle, our own battle against Kuyperian common grace and our own battle against the well-meant offer of the gospel.

Join us in the battle. This is where the battle is hottest; this is where the enemy is the strongest; this is where the fight rages most fiercely. If you draw back from the battle at this point, you are of no use to the armies that march under the banner of the cross. You are casualties on the battlefield. It is at this point of the defence of sovereign and particular grace that the church today will stand until the Lord Himself returns. The truths of sovereign grace are the truths of God, of His own greatness and glory and infinite perfection. The truths of One who does all His good pleasure, the truths of One who is alone worthy of all praise. In Him rests our hope, our salvation, our blessedness in this life and in the age to come. May God give us grace.

Chapter 2

Unconditional Election



Prof. David J. Engelsma

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out (John 6:37).

Introduction

The important, indeed grand, subject of this book is the Five Points of Calvinism, or the doctrines of grace. These are five outstanding truths of Scripture that were highlighted, defined, and defended by one of the great synods of the church. They are unconditional election (accompanied by reprobation), limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible (or, efficacious) grace, and the perseverance (or, preservation) of saints.

The order of our treatment of these truths in this book is not the same as the order in which many of us have memorized them. Many of us have memorized them in the order, total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of saints. The reason for this order is that the first letters of the doctrines in this order spell the word TULIP. This is a mnemonic order. It is fitting because the tulip is a favourite flower in the Netherlands, where the synod was held (in the city of Dordt, in 1618-1619) that defended the five doctrines against attack upon them by a heretic named James Arminius.

In this book we will follow the order in which the Dutch synod treated the doctrines, beginning with the doctrine of election.

The name for these doctrines, the Five Points of Calvinism, is not entirely satisfactory. The doctrines were the theology of the Reformer, John Calvin. Calvin defended these five truths. He showed the Reformed branch of Protestantism their fundamental importance.

But these five doctrines are not the creation of Calvin. They are fundamental truths of the gospel of grace. This is how the Synod of Dordt viewed and described these five truths.

These five truths describe God's work of salvation. They make known *how* God saves a sinner and *why* He saves him. The sinner is saved by irresistible grace when his spiritual condition is that of total depravity. The basis for this salvation is the limited atonement of the cross of Christ. The reason why God saves this sinner by irresistible grace on the basis of the atonement of the cross is God's unconditional election of this sinner unto salvation in eternity. Such is this salvation that everyone in whom God begins the work will certainly persevere to the end and will inherit eternal life and glory in body and soul.

Contrary to a popular notion, these five doctrines are not incidental truths. They describe God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ. To deny them is to corrupt the truth of salvation. They cannot but be preached. To deny them is to preach another gospel than that of Scripture. They must be confessed. To deny them is to boast of oneself as one's own saviour. They directly affect the comfort of the believer and of the children of the believer. To deny them is to live in doubt of salvation and, if one does possess some assurance of salvation, in fear of falling away.

It is my intention to demonstrate that the three doctrines that fall to me to explain, defend, and apply in this book, namely unconditional election, total depravity, and the perseverance of

the saints, are the teachings of the Bible. More particularly, they are the teachings of Jesus in the gospel of John.

With the Synod of Dordt, we begin with the doctrine of election, or, more comprehensively, with the doctrine of predestination. Predestination in Reformed theology refers to God's eternal decree ordaining some humans to eternal life (election) and others to eternal damnation (reprobation). Since election is the more important aspect of the decree, but is accompanied by the other aspect, reprobation, like the Synod of Dordt I will concentrate on election.

The Teaching of Calvin

Although Calvin was not the origin of the Five Points that are called by his name (Scripture is), he certainly taught them as fundamental truths of the gospel, particularly predestination. It is necessary to assert and prove this today, because many professing Calvinists, desiring to excuse the absence of predestination in their own preaching and teaching, minimize the importance of predestination in Calvin's.

Predestination may not have been the "central dogma" for Calvin, but it certainly was fundamental to the gospel in Calvin's thinking. In all his sermons and writings, Calvin not only taught predestination, but also emphasized it.

Indeed, Calvin stressed predestination ever more strongly as he grew older. In 1552, he wrote his *A Treatise on Eternal Predestination* in connection with the Bolsec controversy. In 1559, he set forth and defended predestination in the final edition of his *Institutes*. Also in 1559, only five years before his death in 1564, he began the series of sermons on Genesis that included thirteen sermons on the election of Jacob and the reprobation of Esau that were at once published separately in French (1562) and soon thereafter in English translation (1579). This English translation of the sermons has recently been republished, with modernized

spelling, by Old Paths Publications as *Sermons on Election & Reprobation* (1996).

In his biography of Calvin, the Frenchman, Bernard Cottret, who himself is an unbeliever, frankly acknowledges that, with regard to Calvin's own theology, Calvinism is virtually predestination. "Calvin [sharpened] the edges of his doctrine [of predestination] rather than smoothing them down, to such a point that it is right to ask whether Calvinism is not simply predestination" (Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* [Great Britain: T&T Clark, 2000], p. 322).

This fundamental importance of predestination in the theology of Calvin certainly is apparent in the churches and tradition that maintained the confession of the truth as the Holy Spirit made the truth known to Calvin. Think of Turretin in Switzerland, of Perkins in England, of Gomarus and Bavinck in the Netherlands, and of Warfield and Hoeksema in North America.

More significantly, both branches of the churches that carry on Calvin's (and, for that matter, the Reformation's) teaching have made predestination fundamental to their confession *in their creeds*. The Reformed churches have given predestination a central place in the *Three Forms of Unity*, especially the *Canons of Dordt*. The Presbyterian churches have done the same in the *Westminster Standards*, especially the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

Opposition to Predestination

This zeal for the doctrine of predestination is lacking among professing Calvinists today.

The false churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, the modernists of the World Council of Churches, and the churches that openly espouse salvation by the free will of the sinner hate and despise predestination. They blaspheme it at every opportunity. Doing so they show themselves children of their fathers. Rome burned Jan Hus for teaching that the church is the company of the predestinated. Erasmus, liberal churchman of his day, broke

with Luther and the Reformation over Luther's doctrine of predestination, which Erasmus detested. The charismatic Anabaptists, forerunners of today's fundamentalists, evangelicals, and charismatics, utterly rejected predestination.

What is startling is that nominal Calvinists have no love for predestination. Most are silent regarding predestination. Others are afraid of predestination. They speak ominously of the "shadow" election casts upon the gospel, or of "tension" between election and the covenant, or of the danger predestination poses to missions and evangelism, as well as to a life of good works. These fearful souls warn incessantly against "hyper-Calvinism," by which they mean the bold, emphatic, consistent teaching of predestination, reprobation as well as election, as taught by Calvin and as confessed in the creeds.

Others who claim to be Reformed and Calvinistic are subtly—and dishonestly—attacking predestination from within the Calvinist churches. They reject reprobation, which rejection Calvin expressly described as the loss of biblical election. They teach a universal love of God in Christ for all humans without exception and a sincere desire of God to save all without exception, which love and desire are said to be expressed in the well-meant offer of the gospel. This is the Arminian doctrine of a universal will of God unto salvation and resistible grace.

In North America in recent years, there has appeared in virtually all the reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches, including the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the United Reformed Churches, a teaching about the covenant that holds that God elects every baptized child without exception unto salvation. All are elect in the sense of Ephesians 1:4: "he [i.e., God] hath chosen us in him [i.e., Christ] before the foundation of the world." But this election is said to depend for its continuation and fulfilment upon conditions (works) that the members of the covenant must perform. Failing to perform

the conditions, many of the elect become reprobate and perish eternally. This heresy calls itself the “federal [i.e., covenant] vision.”

The seriousness of all these departures, denials, and attacks is exactly what Calvin and the Reformed creeds teach about predestination: Predestination is fundamental to the gospel of grace, so that departure from predestination is departure from the gospel, denial of predestination is denial of the gospel, and attack on predestination is attack on the gospel.

This is evident from the teaching of Jesus in the gospel of John, particularly John 6:37 in its context. Calvin, like Augustine before him, taught predestination because predestination is the teaching of the Bible. Jesus taught predestination. He was not silent about predestination, which would have been a way of denying it. He was not fearful of it as a dangerous doctrine. Rather, He taught predestination as fundamental to the gospel of salvation.

Indeed, in John 6 Jesus taught predestination as part of an evangelistic message. On the occasion of His miracle of feeding the multitude with five loaves and two small fish, which itself was a summons to the audience to believe on Him, when many refused to believe, Jesus said, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me” (v. 37).

God’s Sovereign Choice

The Father, that is, the Triune God, gives some persons to Jesus. Jesus speaks of this act of God more often in the gospel of John. In verse 39 of chapter 6, Jesus says, “And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.” With regard to those whom He has called His “sheep,” men and women who hear His voice and follow Him, Jesus declares in John 10:29, “My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.”

God’s giving of people to Him is of great importance to our Lord in John 17, His high-priestly prayer the night before His

crucifixion. Looking to His redemptive work on the cross, Jesus says in verse 2: “As thou [i.e., the Father] hast given him [i.e., the Son] power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.” In verse 9, Jesus prays for those, and those only whom the Father has given Him: “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine” (see also vv. 6, 11, 12, 24).

Giving these persons to Jesus is something God has done before they come to Jesus in faith. John 6:37 teaches that their coming to Jesus follows God’s giving of them to Jesus as the effect of the giving. According to verse 39, God gave them to Jesus even before He sent Jesus into the world in the incarnation.

Giving persons to Jesus was an act of God’s will. Verses 38 and 39 of John 6 teach that Jesus came down from heaven to save those who were given to Him by God, and ordained to salvation, in God’s will: “I came down from heaven ... to do ... the will of him that sent me.” The giving took place in eternity, as Paul, deriving his doctrine from Jesus, writes in Ephesians 1:4: “before the foundation of the world.”

In a sense, the giving was an act of God in the past, that is, before time. Verse 39 says that God “hath given” certain persons to Christ. What God has decided in eternity past He keeps on willing, for the will of God is not a dead plan, but the living purpose of the God who is eternal, that is, above time. Therefore, verse 37 says that the Father “gives” people to Jesus.

Giving certain persons to Jesus was (and is) God’s choice of some persons to be Christ’s in the decree that Scripture elsewhere calls “election.” Election is one of the two aspects of predestination. Predestination in Christian and Reformed theology is the eternal decree of God ordaining the everlasting destiny of all humans and angels: life and glory in the new world for some; death and shame in hell for others. Our concern here is the predestination of humans.

Election is the predominant and pre-eminent decree according to the Bible and the Reformed confessions. It is God's appointment of some humans to salvation.

Jesus Christ taught election. It was not Calvin, it was not even Paul, who first taught election, as though, as the critics allege, the doctrinal Paul spoiled the lovely gospel of Jesus with the grim doctrine of predestination. But Jesus taught election.

Concerning election, Jesus taught that it is God's choice of a certain number of particular individuals. Verse 37 describes those given to Jesus as "all that." The individuals given to Jesus form one group, a great unified whole, a complete body. From it "nothing," not one member that makes up the body, will be, or can be, missing: "I should lose nothing" (v. 39).

That this body is made up of individual humans, the second part of verse 37 indicates: "*him* that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

The entire body will come to Jesus, and it will come in this way, that every single person who makes up the body by divine election will come to Jesus.

Thus, Jesus taught that election is not simply the choice of a number of individuals, but also the election of these individuals as the church, the body and bride of Jesus Christ: "All that" God gave Him, not simply "every one whom." Two truths are implied here that our age needs to be reminded of. The first is the essential importance of the church. God did not simply choose individuals unto salvation. God did not simply give Jesus a mass of individuals. God chose the church. God gave Jesus a church: "All that!"

The second truth is that, although the church is manifested in the local congregation, the church is the universal body of Christ in all nations, at all times, and consisting of the elect yet unborn and unconverted (the church latent), the elect converted and believing at the present time (the church militant), and the elect

already taken up to heaven in their glorified souls (the church triumphant). It is grievous error, and contrary to a doctrine that all the Reformers considered essential, to deny, as some Reformed are doing today, the “invisible church” as the whole company of the elect. Christ taught the election of “all that,” and “all that” is not limited to any one congregation or denomination of churches.

Concerning election, Jesus teaches as well that it is God’s ordaining of humans unto salvation. God gives these people to Jesus Christ, to be His people, to be the objects and beneficiaries of His saving work. According to verse 37, the end, or purpose, of the giving is that Jesus not cast them out into everlasting desolation. According to verses 39 and 40, the end is that Jesus raise them from the dead at the last day and give them everlasting life.

Election is not merely unto service, as the modern foes of the Reformation’s doctrine of predestination propose. Neither is the meaning of election merely encouragement of the church in times of persecution, as Reformation scholar Heiko Obermann suggested in his recent book, *The Two Reformations: The Journey from the Last Days to the New World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). God chose men and women unto the salvation of Jesus Christ. He gave these persons to Jesus Christ, to receive and share everything that Jesus Christ becomes and obtains by His cross and resurrection.

There is another truth about election that Jesus teaches in John 6:37 that can easily be overlooked: In the decree of election, God chose Jesus Christ first. If God gave us to Christ, Christ was there, in the decree, to receive all that the Father gave Him. The Triune God chose the man, Jesus Christ (whose Person is the eternal Son of God), first, to glorify God as head of the church. Then, God chose the entire company of the elect, as the body and bride of Jesus Christ.

Christ does not appear in the decree of election only as the executor of the decree—the one who carries out the salvation to which the

elect were appointed. But Jesus Christ is pre-eminent in the decree. He is first in the decree. He shapes the decree. He determines the “all that,” which is given to Him, as the head determines the body, as Adam determined the Eve who was to be his complement and help, and as the foundation determines the house that will be built on the foundation.

The question, “Why did God give men and women to Jesus Christ?” is both unavoidable and important. “Why did God elect people unto salvation?” And, “Why did God choose the specific people He did?” More personally, “Why did God give me, my wife, and my children to Jesus Christ?” “What moved God to do this?”

There are two possible answers to this question, and every professing Christian and church and theologian gives one or the other of them. One answer, which prevails in our apostate age, is, “because those given to Christ deserved it, showed themselves worthy of it, or distinguished themselves in some way from those whom God did not give to Jesus.” This is the root of the false gospel of salvation by the will and works of the sinner.

The other answer is, “because God freely loved those whom He gave to Christ, despite their unworthiness, indeed, in spite of their deserving the very opposite of being given to Christ,” which verse 37 describes as being “cast out.” This is the root of the gospel of salvation by grace alone.

Jesus proclaims that the explanation of the giving is grace—sheer grace; sheer grace only; sheer sovereign grace. God did not give us to Jesus because we came to Jesus, or because we would come to Jesus, or because God foresaw that we would come to Jesus. But we come to Jesus because God gave us to Jesus in eternity. Our coming to Jesus, which verse 40 describes as believing on Jesus, having seen Him in the Word as He is presented in the preaching of the gospel, is due to God’s giving of us to Jesus. Jesus did not say, “All that shall come to me, the Father will give to me.” But He said, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me.”

Expressing this truth theologically, Jesus taught that faith follows, depends upon, and is due to eternal election.

Since all our goodness is the fruit and result of coming to Christ, thus receiving from Him the goodness that is in Him, there was nothing in us naturally that could have made us worthy of election, that could have distinguished us from others, or that could have attracted God's choice of us.

The only reason for God's giving of us to Christ was in the electing God. That reason was, and could only be, grace.

Our unworthiness to be given to Christ, and God's grace in giving us, are implied by Jesus' striking description of election: giving persons to Jesus. There is only one reason why anyone needs to be given to Jesus: he or she is a sinner. He or she is guilty, needing the pardon of Jesus. He or she is depraved, needing the holiness of Jesus. He or she is alienated from God, needing reconciliation. He or she is dead, needing resurrection unto life.

So we appeared to the mind of God when He chose us, indistinguishable from those not given to Jesus Christ, as incapable of any good, including the good of believing on Jesus, as those passed by in the decree of election.

This is how the apostle describes election in Romans 11:5: "the election of grace."

This is how the *Canons of Dordt* describe election when they define predestination as "the profound, the merciful, and at the same time the righteous discrimination between men equally involved in ruin" (I:6).

God does not show us grace for the first time when He converts us. II Timothy 1:9 teaches that God was gracious to us already in eternity: "Who hath saved us ... not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, *which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.*"

This graciousness of election, the Reformed faith confesses as *unconditional* election. God's choice of certain persons unto salvation was not dependent upon, or conditioned by, their doing anything, for example, believing in Christ, or their being something, for example, people who naturally love God and are naturally lovable to God. God's election of persons was not dependent upon those chosen, as though God foresaw who would believe and continue believing, and gave them to Jesus. This was the teaching of the Arminians at the time of the Synod of Dordt. The *Canons*, or decisions, *of Dordt* condemned this teaching of the Arminians as a false gospel. This judgment of Dordt stands as the official verdict of the Reformed faith upon the doctrine of conditional election to this day.

To speak, as many professing Calvinists do, of "evangelical Arminians" is a rejection of Dordt and an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. "Evangelical" means confessing the gospel (the evangel). One who confesses the gospel, which is the message of grace, rooted in unconditional, that is, gracious, election, cannot be an Arminian. An Arminian, holding (as every Arminian does) that election, indeed, his own election, is conditional, that is, dependent on himself, is not an evangelical. He does not confess the gospel of grace. He is un-evangelical, indeed, anti-evangelical. Those who are truly evangelical must witness to him of the gospel of grace and call him to repent and believe the gospel.

How important is this truth of unconditional election for the assurance of salvation! My coming to Jesus Christ in faith is assurance, not only of present salvation (for Jesus will not cast out anyone who comes to Him), but also of God's eternal election of me (for coming to Jesus is the fruit and effect of election). Because election, as the unconditional will of God for my salvation, is unchangeable (it depends on nothing in me, but only on God's grace), I am assured of my everlasting salvation. This is the comfort of the Reformed believer and his elect children.

On the other hand, those who suppose that God's election of them depends upon their faith can never have certainty of their salvation. They believe of their own free will today, but they may lose their faith by their own free will tomorrow. Because their election depends at every moment on their highly unstable free will, they may become reprobate tomorrow, and perish everlastingly. In fact, they are not even certain of the genuineness and worth of their faith. For them, faith is nothing more than a human decision for Christ. For the Reformed believer, his faith is a spiritual bond with Christ and a heavenly activity of knowing and trusting Christ, worked in him by the power of the electing God.

God's Sovereign Rejection

What peculiarly illustrates and recommends the grace of God's giving of certain persons to Christ in the decree of election is that God did not give all men without exception to Jesus Christ (cf. *Canons* I:15). God has excluded the others from that great body of humans He gave to His Son. God's rejection of some in the same eternal decree in which He elected others is clearly taught by Jesus in John 6:37. If all that the Father has given to Jesus shall come to Him and if, in fact, not all men come to Jesus, then some men—all those who do not come to Him in faith—were not given to Jesus by the Father, but rejected by Him.

The decree of election is a selective decree: it chooses some out of the human race, and passes others by. This is an important aspect of Jesus' teaching in John 6. In verse 36, He addresses those in His audience who do not believe on Him: "ye also have seen me, and believe not." But their unbelief does not indicate the failure of God's will, or the failure of Jesus' ministry. Verse 37 emphasizes that God never gave them to Jesus, that it never was God's will that they believe and be saved, and that Jesus, who came to do God's will, never sought their salvation.

Jesus teaches reprobation in verse 37, as well as election. God passed some by with the eternal decree giving certain persons to Jesus

Christ. This passing by with election was the eternal decree appointing these persons to the everlasting destiny of being cast out forever.

This was just on God's part. He owes no one, that He give him to Jesus Christ. Giving someone to Jesus Christ is a gracious act of God. Those who object to reprobation really take the position that God *ought* to choose everyone, thus denying the grace of election. Besides, the punishment to which God ordains some, they deserve on account of their unbelief and all their other sins.

The justice of God's reprobation does not detract from the sovereignty of the decree. Reprobation is equally unconditional with election. The reprobate are involved in a common misery with the elect. That God should have reprobated some, while choosing others, is to be explained only by the sovereignty of God. It was His good-pleasure to do so. This was Jesus' own explanation of God's work of hiding the gospel from some, while revealing it to others: "Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight" (Matt. 11:26).

Especially this aspect of predestination is hated and opposed. The open enemies of the Reformed faith—Rome and the Arminians—have always made reprobation the special object of their rage and contempt. When the Arminian party appeared before the Synod Dordt in 1618, they opened up their assault on the gospel of grace by an attack on the doctrine of reprobation.

Today, professing Calvinists oppose reprobation. Some reject it outright. Others, less honest, reject reprobation equally effectively by maintaining total silence concerning it and, at the same time, emphasizing a teaching that flatly contradicts reprobation. This is the teaching that God wills the salvation of all humans without exception in the love He has for them all. This loving will of God for the salvation of all, He then expresses and attempts to realize in the preaching of the gospel of Christ as an impotent "offer." Iain Murray of the Banner of Truth in Great Britain vigorously

promotes this denial of reprobation up and down the land, and throughout the Calvinistic world, for instance, in his *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1995).

What this amounts to is the teaching that God has two decrees of election. One is the gracious will of God for the salvation of all men without exception. This will, or purpose, of God is conditional. It depends on the acceptance of the offer of salvation by the sinner. This will of God is ineffectual. Indeed, it is often frustrated. The other decree of election is the will of God for the salvation of some only—those who actually will be saved. Because this particular decree is preceded by the will for the salvation of all conditionally, this decree too is, in reality, conditional, that is, dependent upon the faith of those who are chosen.

Precisely this was the heresy of the Arminians at Dordt. They too taught a particular decree of election, especially when they wanted to impress and deceive the orthodox. But with this particular decree they taught a general, indefinite, non-decisive, conditional decree, desiring the salvation of all without exception. The Reformed faith has condemned this doctrine of two contradictory wills, or purposes (or desires, or wishes), of God regarding the salvation of sinners. The Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) said this about Arminius' (and Murray's) doctrine of two elections of sinners:

The true doctrine concerning *Election* and *Rejection* having been explained, the Synod *rejects* the errors of those ... Who teach that there are various kinds of election of God unto eternal life: the one general and indefinite, the other particular and definite; and that the latter in turn is either incomplete, revocable, non-decisive, and conditional, or complete, irrevocable, decisive, and absolute ... For this is a fancy of men's minds, invented regardless of the Scriptures, whereby the doctrine of election is corrupted, and this golden

chain of our salvation is broken: *And whom he foreordained, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified* (Rom. 8:30) (*Canons I:Rejection of Errors:2*).

Denial of reprobation is necessarily the denial of biblical election. It is the denial of election as taught by Jesus in John 6. If God has rejected no one in the eternal decree, He must have chosen all. Then, the failure of some to believe represents the frustration of God's grace and the failure of Jesus Christ. And the coming of others is not due to the grace of election (for God has willed salvation for all alike), but is their own achievement. Thus, the denial of reprobation is the loss of the gospel of grace.

Contrary to the embarrassment, fear, and silence of so many spineless and compromised Calvinists regarding "double predestination," that is, election accompanied by reprobation, Jesus publicly proclaimed predestination. He proclaimed it in an evangelistic setting, in John 6. Jesus proclaimed it because He was determined to preach that salvation is gracious.

The Cause of All Salvation

Jesus taught God's giving of men and women to Himself as the source and cause of all salvation. He Himself as the Saviour of lost, sinful men and women and all His saving work are due to God's giving of people to Him in eternity. Why did He come down from heaven? Why did He preach and perform miracles? Why did He suffer and die? Why will He raise men and women at the last day?

Because the Father had given Him a people!

Specifically, our coming to Jesus has its source and cause in God's giving us to Jesus in the decree of election. This is the absolutely vital truth Jesus teaches in John 6:37. Some refused to come to Him when He performed the miracle of feeding the multitude and

when He proclaimed Himself the bread of God from heaven. Jesus recognized this in verse 36: “ye also have seen me, and believe not.” Jesus was not discouraged, as though God’s will was frustrated and His ministry, a failure. He did not respond, “God sincerely desired to save you, but you resisted His grace.” But He said to the unbelievers, “All that the Father gives to me shall come to me,” clearly implying that their not coming to Him was in accordance with God’s reprobation of them.

John 10:26 records Jesus’ word to certain unbelievers, “But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep.” Because certain persons are not of Christ’s sheep *by being given to Christ in the decree of election*, God withholds faith from them, when the gospel is preached, and instead hardens them in their natural unbelief.

Coming to Jesus Christ is not in the natural power of the sinner. Coming to Christ is not a condition the sinner must perform in order to be saved. Coming to Christ is not the act of the sinner upon which God’s gracious will for the salvation of all men without exception depends for its efficacy.

Coming to Jesus Christ is the gift of God to certain humans.

This is the teaching of Jesus in John 6:37: “All that the Father giveth me *shall come to me.*”

Coming to Jesus is the spiritual activity of a sinner of trusting alone in Jesus Christ for forgiveness and eternal life. It is the activity of one who, knowing himself as a guilty, depraved, needy sinner, worthy of damnation by the just judgment of a holy God, casts himself on Jesus Christ for all his salvation.

In one word, coming to Jesus is faith.

And faith flows from, is due to, and is caused by election. All that the Father gives to Jesus shall come to Him, that is, all that great body of the church, made up of a certain, definite, large number of individuals from all nations and races, chosen by God, will believe on Jesus Christ. They will all come *because God gave them*

to Christ. God's will—His eternal, gracious, electing will—is almighty, drawing “all that” He gave to Christ unto Christ by a true faith. “No man can come to me [i.e., Jesus], except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44).

Since coming to Jesus Christ, or faith, is the means of receiving Christ Himself as Saviour and all the blessings of salvation, election is the source and cause of all salvation.

The Cause of Salvation in the Covenant

What particularly needs to be defended today in Reformed circles is that election is the source and cause of salvation, determining who will be saved, *in the sphere of the covenant*, among the children of believing parents. This is widely denied by Reformed preachers, theologians, and churches. The denial often is expressed in the misleading, foolish statement, “Election and covenant are not identical.” (No Reformed theologian or church in all the history of Reformed Protestantism has ever been so dense as to suppose that election and covenant are identical.) What is meant is that election really has nothing to do with salvation in the covenant. In the sphere of the covenant, especially among the physical children of believing parents, all alike are said to be objects of the gracious promise and saving love of God in Christ. But the actual and everlasting salvation of a particular child depends on his fulfilment of the required condition. The condition is his act of believing. What this popular teaching amounts to is the doctrine that the will of the sinner, in this case the sinful infant, decides salvation in the sphere of the covenant.

Jesus Christ taught otherwise in John 6. Speaking to Jews, *physical children of Abraham (to whom God gave the covenant promise, “I will be the God of your seed”), circumcised with the covenant sign and seal*, Jesus said, “In the sphere of the covenant, regarding the physical children of Abraham, all that the Father gives me shall come to me.” Election is the source and cause of salvation in the covenant, as on the mission field. Regarding our children too,

it is true that they cannot come to Jesus except the Father draw them, and He draws those, and those only, whom He has given to Christ.

Having its source and cause in unconditional election, all of salvation is gracious—entirely and exclusively gracious, from the gift of faith to the wonder of the resurrection of the body at the last day.

Why are the Reformed theologians afraid of election then? Why are the preachers silent about it? Why do the churches tolerate the flat contradiction of it by the teaching that God has a gracious, conditional, ineffectual will for the salvation of all without exception?

As the source and cause of all salvation, election ought to be preached, confessed, sung, and defended.

The warning that election implies, leads to, or encourages carelessness and passivity, particularly with regard to coming to Christ for salvation, is a bogeyman. “The church that wholeheartedly maintains election and reprobation cannot call sinners to come to Christ!” “The person who is convinced of his own election will not come to Christ, or will minimize the importance of coming to Christ his life long!”

Jesus teaches both election and the importance, indeed necessity, of coming to Him. That all whom the Father gives to Him will come to Him does not imply the unimportance of coming to Him for salvation. On the contrary! Coming to Jesus is the only way to receive the salvation God has willed for us in the decree. Election itself establishes that coming to Christ is the only way of salvation. Election does not only determine the end (salvation), but it also determines the means and the way (coming to Christ).

Therefore, believing election, believing that election has provided Christ as Saviour of sinners, believing that election has opened a way of salvation for sinners, believing that election will make

preaching fruitful in the saving of sinners, the church goes out in missions to preach Christ to all and sundry and to call all and sundry to come to Christ. Likewise, the church calls all the children of believers to come to Christ.

In this call, the church does not deny election by preaching that God loves all, that Christ has come down from heaven to be the Saviour of all, and that God has a gracious will for the salvation of all. Rather, the call declares that Christ will receive, and in no wise cast out, every one who comes. And the call will assure all those who do come to Christ that they come because God gave them to Christ in eternity.

In the way of coming to Christ, we have assurance of our election.

Assurance of Being Given to Christ

The doctrine of unconditional election affords assurance.

There is the assurance that all the elect will come to Christ and be saved. Election of the “all that” in John 6:37 is certain. Not one of those included in the “all that” shall be lost. The entire church will live in everlasting life and glory.

This was assurance for Jesus Himself as He experienced the rejection of Himself in unbelief by many in His audience. He assured His own very human soul when He said, in the face of the unbelief of the crowd, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me.”

The church, her ministers, and her missionaries also have this assurance in their often difficult and discouraging labour.

But the assurance of election I refer to is our own personal assurance of having been given to Christ by God in His eternal counsel.

Is Jesus’ teaching for me personally? Can I be certain that I will never be cast away? that Jesus will raise me at the last day? that I am included in the “all that” which the Father gave to Jesus?

Jesus' purpose in John 6 is the assurance of every one whom the Father has given to Him, assurance of present and future salvation, grounded in election, of which election every one is to be assured. The entire passage, verses 37-40, breathes the purpose of assurance: All *shall* come; him who comes, I *will in no wise* cast out; this is my Father's will, that of all which He has given me I should lose *nothing*; *every one* who believes may have everlasting life, and I *will raise him up*.

Strikingly, in the second part of verse 37 Jesus' language becomes personal and individual. Having begun by speaking of "all that"—the whole church—He now speaks of each individual: "*him* that cometh to me." Emphatically, the assurance He wants every one of the "all that" to have, and the assurance He gives by this very word, applied to the heart of each one by Jesus' Spirit, is the certainty that God gave him, or her, to Jesus—the certainty of his or her election.

The *Canons of Dordt* are biblical when they confess, "The elect in due time ... attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election" (I:12).

Each of us receives the assurance of election *by coming to Christ*, that is, by faith in Him. That this is the way, the *only* way, to be assured of election, Jesus teaches when He connects election and faith as He does. Since faith is the sure fruit of election, every one who believes, from the heart, is assured of his election. Faith itself is the assurance of gracious salvation, rooted and grounded in unconditional election. Faith is also the evidence of election: No one can or would believe, except God gave him to Jesus.

What a rich assurance this is: I have been Christ's from eternity! I am Christ's now! I will be Christ's forever! and all because of a gracious decision of God, that does not depend on my will, my works, or my worth!

There is such assurance only where the gospel of unconditional election is proclaimed and believed. Under the teaching of

conditional election, whether by Rome, or by the “evangelicals” and charismatics who openly teach salvation by the free will of the sinner, or by professing Calvinists with their universal, conditional election of the gracious will of God to save all, or by the men of the federal vision teaching conditional election in the covenant, there is only the terror that present salvation and election itself *can be lost, and are lost by many*. Although one comes to Christ today, he may be cast out tomorrow, and forever. Although one believes and has eternal life now, he may not be raised unto life at the last day. Multitudes live and die in this fear—multitudes of professing Christians.

Dreadful!

Doubt of election is not the Father’s will, not for those whom He has given to Jesus.

In His grace, the Father wills our salvation.

In His grace, He also wills our certainty of salvation.

Chapter 3

Particular Redemption



Prof. Herman Hanko

Introduction

There are no four-point Calvinists in the world. I am sure that at one time or another, as you have discussed matters of the truth with others, you have met people who have claimed to be four-point Calvinists. Not in every case but in almost all cases, the one point of Calvinism that four-pointers claim to reject is particular redemption. We must establish the fact at the outset that it is impossible to maintain the other four points of Calvinism and repudiate particular redemption.

I have met these four-point Calvinists; it is clear that they are not Calvinists in any respect. They do not, for example, hold firmly to the biblical doctrine of sovereign, double predestination. They cannot; it is impossible. Even as far as one's own thinking and commitment to the Word of God is concerned, it is impossible to deny particular redemption and hold to predestination, for the two are inseparably connected. They are inseparably connected because, first, the Five Points of Calvinism, taken together, form a unity that constitutes the biblical doctrine of sovereign and particular grace. To deny one point is to detract from the truth of sovereign and particular grace and thus to deny the other points. Second, the work of redemption that Christ performed on Calvary was God's revelation of His whole plan of salvation for the elect.

We must not say to a four-point Calvinist, “Brother, you believe four points of Calvinism? You are not far from the kingdom; you have only one to go.” That is not true. Without committing himself to particular redemption, one does not and cannot believe any of the other four points.

The truth of particular redemption is a truth at issue today. It is a truth which is denied by almost the entire ecclesiastical world. It is strange, almost unbelievably strange, that there are so few who hold to the truth of particular redemption. This denial of particular redemption is found even among those who claim to be Calvinists. So adamant are the universalists that they write books to attempt to prove that Calvin himself believed in universal atonement.

Although a major part of what I have to say is going to deal with the question of the *extent* of the atonement (i.e., for whom Christ died), I want to speak of Christ’s suffering and death from a more positive point of view as well. We are dealing with what is the heart of the gospel. Paul sums up his entire gospel ministry with the words: “we preach Christ crucified” (I Cor. 1:23). That means that if one denies the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ in any respect, including the particularity of the atonement, one destroys the gospel of Jesus Christ. And if I may make that personal for a moment, it means that in destroying what is the very heart of the gospel, one destroys what every believer needs to know and wants to know. A believer never wearies of hearing the gospel of his redemption.

First, we shall consider the meaning of the terms Scripture uses to describe the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Second, we will consider the objections that have over the years been brought against this second point of Calvinism. Why have these objections been made? What is the character of them? What are the consequences of such a denial? Finally, I want to make a few remarks about how the atoning sacrifice of Christ becomes our salvation.

Redemption

It is best to deal, first of all, with those words in the Bible which describe Christ's work on the cross as He suffered and died for sin. Scripture makes use especially of various terms, four of which are particularly important, for they help us understand the nature of Christ's work.

The first word to which I want to call your attention, used repeatedly in the New Testament, is the word "redemption." The work of Christ on the cross is described in many passages as being the work of redemption. In Galatians 3:13, Paul states, in relationship now to the law of the old dispensation, "Christ hath *redeemed* us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." Peter speaks of being redeemed "not ... with corruptible things, as silver and gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (I Peter 1:18-20).

Redemption is a word that the Scriptures took from classical Greek. In both classical Greek and the Greek spoken in the days of the apostles, the word redemption referred to the payment of a price for a slave. If someone happened to see a slave in the slave market in Rome, for example, and wanted to purchase that slave, not for purposes of making that slave his own, but for purposes of securing the freedom of that slave, he would pay a price that was equal to the slave's worth. Having paid the price, he would set the slave free. Scripture makes use of that term to describe an aspect of the suffering and atoning sacrifice of Christ. He redeems us.

The obvious implication is, first of all, that He sees us as slaves, slaves who, in the tangled chains of our slavery, are doomed to destruction. He pays a price that will secure our freedom from the slavery in which we are held, the slavery and bondage of sin. One aspect of the term redemption is that the price to secure our freedom from the slavery of sin corresponds to the value that we have in

the sight of God. God paid the price of the blood of His own Son, the highest possible price that He could pay. When therefore, the word “redemption” is used in Scripture to describe Christ’s sacrifice, Scripture indicates that in God’s sight those for whom the price of the blood of the Son of God was paid commanded the highest possible price because the people of God are of almost infinite value to God.

Now we must be careful that we understand this. The value which God sees in us is not a value that is to be found in us. *We* have no value. We have no value, first of all, because we are creatures, created by God, upheld by His power, sustained every moment by His providence, so that we are utterly and totally dependent upon Him and so that our existence could be ended in a moment by His simply ceasing to speak His Word which upholds us. But far more than that, we have no value in the sight of God because we are sinful. How can a sinner, a rebel, one who shakes his fist in God’s face, have any value in God’s sight? When the Scriptures speak of the great value which the people of God have in the mind of God, they speak of it from the viewpoint of God’s eternal and unchangeable purpose to glorify Himself through Christ in His church. God loves His people. God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son (John 3:16). “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (I John 4:10). In the mind of God, according to the decree of election and in His eternal and unchangeable purpose, He sees His people as of great value to Him, not because of what they are but because He has purposed to make them His bride and dwell with them in covenant fellowship forever.

The love of God is a crucially important factor in Christ’s redeeming sacrifice. He loves us. He loves us not for what we are; not for what we can contribute to His glory; He simply *loves* us for *His own name’s sake* because He has *purposed* to love us, and that love is so great that no price is too high to pay in order to secure

our salvation. It is a love that is rooted in His love for Himself as the only true and living God. It is a love powerful and efficacious. It is a love that will determine all that happens in heaven and on earth and in all the history of the universe, so that history may serve to bring His people to Him. Everything in God's eternal counsel is determined with His eye on His people. That is the love that accomplishes redemption in Christ. Further, by Christ's purchase of us with His blood, He not only frees us from the slavery of sin, but He makes us His possession, His slaves. We say, confidently, that our only comfort is that we *belong* to our faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ (*Heidelberg Catechism*, A. 1).

Now try to fit that into the scheme of universal atonement. It can not be done. Redemption is rooted in the eternal and unchangeable love of God that will do anything that has to be done to save the church. God's love revealed in redemption cannot be a love for all men. It is a price that is paid by God Himself in His own Son, to secure our redemption from slavery. Only one of two options is possible: either all are saved because God loves all men with a saving love (in which case no one can go to hell) or God loves only those for whom Christ died.

Reconciliation

The second word which is used in Scripture which is an equally important word is the word "reconciliation." That word is found, for example, in Romans 5:10: "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." Reconciliation is a powerful word; it is a word that must be properly understood by a Reformed believer.

The figure of a marriage broken by the adultery of one of the marriage partners is often used to explain reconciliation. The whole picture of reconciliation is described in such a fashion that the adultery of one of the spouses has brought about a disruption in the marriage relationship. But there is hope of reconciliation, and

so a third party is called in: a marriage counsellor with a degree in psychology and counselling, who brings the two parties at odds with each other together. He seats them about a table and hears this one's side of the story and that one's side of the story. He learns what the complaints are of this one and what the complaints are of that one. And if he is a skilful counsellor, successful in the art of compromise and skilled at soothing the irritation of those who are at odds with each other, he can bring the two together. So the figure is presented as the biblical doctrine of reconciliation. We have sinned and the result is that God is angry with us. A third party is now called in to intervene in this dispute between God and man to see whether reconciliation can be brought about. Christ is the mediator. He intervenes to placate God and appease His wrath, and He attempts to convince man that he ought now to be reconciled to God. Thus Christ does His part to restore harmony between God and man.

Now, it is true that God is married to His people. He has eternally purposed to be married to His people. It is also true that that relationship, from our point of view, has been broken by our sin. If we go back to Adam, it was broken by the sin of Adam for which we are responsible, and for which we must be punished. But from God's point of view, the sin of which we are guilty never broke the marriage relationship. God remains faithful. Christ is not one who is called in as a third party to try to bring God and man together to placate the wrath of God and somehow or another to persuade us to be reconciled to God, so that after successfully intervening as a mediator, God is reconciled to us and we are reconciled to God. No, notice how the text in Romans 5:10 puts it. "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son ..." While we were enemies, God reconciled us to Himself. Or, as Paul puts it in II Corinthians 5:19, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." We do not have our side in the dispute; we do not have anything we can plead. God on His part does not have to be placated towards us, for His

attitude toward us is an everlasting love, unchangeable in His own divine being. God was in Christ reconciling us to Himself by the death of Christ. God is the reconciler. He accomplishes reconciliation by taking away the cause of our alienation, namely, our sin. Through Christ's Spirit, we are sovereignly brought back into the marriage bond and are made faithful to it. We have nothing to do with it except to be the objects of His great and marvellous work of reconciliation. And again, behind the atoning sacrifice stands the wonder of the love of God for His people, which love knows no change and which remains eternal in the heavens.

Satisfaction

The third word to which I wish to call your attention is "satisfaction." That word is not found in the Scriptures themselves with reference to the atoning sacrifice of Christ, though the *idea* is there. The word itself appears in our creeds, in the *Three Forms of Unity* as well as in the *Westminster Confession*. It appears in the *Three Forms of Unity*, in the *Heidelberg Catechism* in Lord's Days 5 and 6. It appears as well in the *Canons of Dordt*, when the *Canons* are discussing the death of Christ and the redemption of men thereby (II:1-3), as well as in the *Belgic Confession* (Articles 20, 21, 34). It is a creedal term of great significance and power.

As is true of the terms redemption and reconciliation, satisfaction also implies God's work of accomplishing salvation in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. God is holy, just and righteous. God created man good and upright. Man sinned and, as Lord's Days 4 and 5 teach, man incurs debt because of his sin, a debt that must be paid in order for us to be restored to the favour of God. It would be a denial of God's own nature as holy and just, if God were not to require payment of the debt that man, because of his sin, owes Him. But man cannot pay that debt, not only because he remains a sinner, but because the very payment of the debt is humanly impossible. Even if he owed God a debt for only one sin that he had committed; even if he could be freed from the responsibility

of his sin in Adam; even if he lived a life of perfection from the moment of his birth to the moment of his death, he would not be able to pay the debt.

It is here that the word “merit” enters the picture. In order to pay the debt for even one sin, man would have to merit with God. He would have to have available to him something beyond his daily obligation of obedience to God, for man is a debtor every moment of his life. He always owes God obedience. A life of perfect obedience is only a payment of current bills. But God must be paid for our debt of disobedience. Our debt is enormous: we owe for the sin of Adam for which we are responsible, we owe God for our sinful natures with which we were born, and we owe God for all the sins we commit every second of our lives.

It lies in the nature of God to require that man pay the debt; God cannot simply say to the sinner, “O, I feel so sorry for you, you poor man. You have an awful debt and you can never pay it. I will just forget about it; I will cancel the debt.” That is impossible. It’s impossible simply because of the fact that it would be a denial of the justice and holiness of God. Man tramples under foot God’s holiness. Man despises it; man spits in God’s face. For God to say, “That’s all right. I won’t bother about it; I’ll forget it,” would be a slander of God’s own holiness. The debt must be paid. And when sin is looked at from the viewpoint of debt, then our creeds say that the idea that is behind the atoning sacrifice of Christ is satisfaction. The debt is paid. But do not forget: *God* pays the debt. That is the wonder of the atonement: God pays the debt. I cannot; you cannot; an angel cannot; no one can. All the sacrifices of the old dispensation could not pay the debt. God can; God does; God in the Person of His own Son. That is the cross.

Again, try to fit into the idea of satisfaction, the notion of a death of Christ for everyone. If it is true that Christ died for everyone, the simple fact of the matter is that the debt is paid by Christ for every man. Why then are not all men saved? That is why all

Arminianism and all who do injustice to the cross of Christ by making it a cross for everyone, wind up in the camp of the modernist and are compelled to teach universalism. There is nowhere else to go. Arminianism in all its forms is incipient modernism.

Propitiation

The final word to which I want only briefly to call your attention is found in I John 2:2: “And he is the *propitiation* for our sins: and not for our’s only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” It is almost as if the Scriptures mean to say, “The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is so rich in its significance and the doctrine of the atoning sacrifice of Christ is so great that one word cannot begin to do justice to it. We must use all these words in order that we may understand something of the power of Christ’s great sacrifice.” Propitiation, is a word that really belongs in the Old Testament. It is a word that has reference to the great Day of Atonement on the calendar of the Jewish people. It is a word that refers to the activity of the high priest who went on the Day of Atonement, “not without blood” (Heb. 9:7), into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled blood upon the mercy seat of the ark as an atonement for the sins of the people, as well as for the tribe of Levi and for the high priest himself, thus turning away His holy wrath. The idea was that the ark of the covenant was the symbol of God’s covenant fellowship with His people in Jesus Christ. The ark was a picture of Christ. This truth is taught in Psalm 68. Psalm 68 was the psalm that David wrote when the ark was taken from the house of Obededom to a tent on Mt. Zion. David wrote Psalm 68 at that time to show that in the bringing of the ark to a tent in Zion in Jerusalem, we are given a picture of the ascension of Jesus Christ. So the ark in the temple is the symbol of God’s fellowship with His people in Christ. How is that possible? It is possible for God to have fellowship with His people only because blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat. The word propitiation, therefore, has the idea of blood sprinkled on the mercy seat covering the sins of the people. The

only thing that could cover their sins was blood. But that covering was so complete that God couldn't see them any more. They were hidden from Him. So the Scriptures use propitiation to indicate that because the blood of bulls and goats could not hide sin from God, the blood of Christ, of God's own Son, so completely hid the sins of His people, that God could not see them any more and His wrath is turned away. Indeed, all that He could see was a people without sin, righteous and holy, fit to live with Him in everlasting covenant fellowship as His bride. That is the idea of propitiation.

Try to apply this idea of propitiation to the Arminian concept of universal atonement. All the sins of every man that ever lived are hidden from God's sight, by the blood of Christ. How can He send anyone to hell? It would be injustice of the crassest kind for God to send to hell a person in whom He sees no sin. Moreover, if propitiation was made for all men head for head, and God's wrath was averted from everyone, how could anyone suffer that same wrath in hell?

These words are powerful words, marvellous words, words so important in the sacred Scriptures, that if you speak of a death of Christ for all men, you destroy the meaning of all four words. You rob them of all their power. That is what the Arminians do.

The Preposition "For"

There is one more point in Scripture to which I must call your attention. I frequently make use of this point in Greek class, when I seek to persuade the students, who are learning Greek, to pay attention to every word of the infallible Scriptures, including prepositions. Prepositions are little words that Greek students tend to overlook. The Scriptures make it clear that one aspect of the atonement of Christ, of crucial importance, hangs on prepositions, often only little two- or three- or four-letter words. I refer now to the prepositions that are most frequently translated in our *Authorized Version* (AV) by our English word "for." This is the case in Romans 5:8: "But God commendeth his love toward us, in

that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died *for* us.” It is that little word “for.” Now there are, as a matter of fact, three separate prepositions in the Greek which are translated, generally speaking, in the AV by the word “for.” In those three prepositions are bound up two specific truths. One of those truths is, that Christ died *in our place*. When Romans 5:8 says, “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,” the meaning is that He died in our place, He died when we should have died, He stood where we should have stood. He took upon Himself what was justly ours and *in our place* He performed the sacrifice of atonement. The second meaning of that little word “for” and the meaning emphasized by another preposition is this: He died *on our behalf*, for our benefit, in order to secure something indescribably precious for us. He died, therefore, for the advantage or benefit of others.

Two ideas are, therefore, bound up in these prepositions. They indicate first that the atonement of Christ was a substitutionary atonement. He died, not for Himself, but for others. And, second, what Christ accomplished was for the benefit of others.

In connection with the meaning of these prepositions, the distinction is sometimes made between the active and the passive suffering of Christ. It is probably true that the distinction helps us to understand that Christ both paid for sin and also earned blessedness for us. Nevertheless, the distinction is not altogether proper. In all His suffering Christ was active. He was the obedient servant of Jehovah. In Psalm 40, He sang, “I come to do thy will, O God.” He did not passively bear the wrath of God which was poured out upon Him; He, as it were, reached up into heaven and, as an act of His own, pulled down the wrath of God upon Himself. He walked down the long stairway to hell. He built an altar there and laid Himself upon it. He plunged the knife of God’s wrath into His own heart. He was God’s obedient servant. The whole significance of the atonement of Christ is to be found wrapped up in that little word “for.”

Pelagian, Romish and Arminian Theories

It is no wonder that the Arminians, and those who ascribe to man certain powers which contribute significantly to their own salvation, must say something about the atonement of Christ; it is inevitable. Already in the days of Augustine, in the heat of the Pelagian controversy, those who opposed Augustine's biblical doctrine of sovereign and particular grace, who spoke of a universal love of God for all men, and, significantly enough, a universal desire of God to save all men, claimed also that the death of Christ had to be for all men. In support of that doctrine, they appealed to the same texts of Scripture as Arminians appeal to today. The Arminians sometimes boast that they have a new insight into the gospel and those who favour universal atonement boast that they have seen things concerning the atonement of Christ which are of particular significance and value. As a matter of fact, their heresy is two thousand years old.

Further, anyone who wants a universal atonement must understand that Rome denies sovereign grace and teaches salvation by works. But to maintain that position successfully, Rome also teaches a universal atonement. In fact, Rome has taught that for over a thousand years. Rome committed itself to Semi-Pelagianism at the Synod of Orange (529). Rome sealed that decision with the blood of Gottschalk (c.805-c.869), a faithful defender of particular redemption.

When the atonement of Christ was discussed in the centuries of Roman Catholic domination, it was discussed in a rather interesting way. It was discussed from the viewpoint of the *necessity* of the atonement. Was the atonement really necessary? All Roman Catholic theologians prior to the eleventh century, so far as I know, taught that the atoning sacrifice of Christ was only *relatively* necessary, if it was necessary at all. They spoke of God's great love. God's love is so great that He can easily forgive sins without an atonement. They spoke of the infinite depths of the mercy of God.

If God wanted to, and if it was His will to do so, it would be perfectly in harmony with His will to reveal the riches of His mercy by saying to man, “I am so merciful that I will require no payment of your debt from you. I will simply forgive your sins.” The atonement was not essential. The atonement did not arise out of necessity.

However, Anselm (c.1033-1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, taught in his book *Cur Deus Homo (Why Did God Become Man?)* that the atonement was absolutely necessary, that is, that there could be no salvation from sin apart from Christ’s death. He taught that the atonement was absolutely necessary because of the fact that God was holy and just and that man owed God a debt that had to be paid, and that man could not pay. The only way in which the debt could be paid was through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Anselm was so correct in his view of the atonement that the whole structure of his argument was incorporated into the *Heidelberg Catechism* in Lord’s Day 4-6. When you read Lord’s Days 4-6, you can almost hear Anselm talking.

At the time of the Arminian controversy in the Netherlands, the Arminians invented an additional way to get around the significance of the atonement and its extent. They invented what is sometimes called the Governmental Theory of the atonement. The Governmental Theory of the atonement also teaches that the atonement of Christ was not necessary for salvation. The atoning sacrifice of Christ is something comparable to what a captain on a ship would do if his crew mutinied. If he was successful in suppressing the mutiny and regaining control of the ship, all those who had been guilty would be responsible for mutiny on the high seas and would be worthy of death. But if the captain of the ship would kill all those worthy of death, he couldn’t sail the ship. So he might take one, maybe the ringleader, and hang him from the yardarm. The captain then turns to the crew and says to them, “Now you saw this. This is what you all deserve, but I am not

going to do this to all of you, because I am a merciful captain. As long as you behave yourselves and obey orders, and with your skills sail the ship, you will not suffer the same fate as your co-mutineer suffered.” God does the same. We all deserve death but God in His mercy says to us, “I am a merciful God and so I will take only My own Son and I will cause Him to die as an example to you of what I could do to you, if I were not so merciful. And, therefore, if you will behave yourselves and if you will believe in Christ, if you will walk in obedience, then, although you deserve to die, I will spare you and I will save you. Christ is the One who is living testimony of the fact that I could kill you though I will not do that.” That was the theory of the Arminians and under that overarching theory they found room for an atoning sacrifice that was of value to all men and significant for all. All ought, therefore, to see what God could do to them. However, God’s mercy and love for all now make the atonement universally available. Christ is the great example of willingness to die for all. Salvation now rests on man’s willingness to accept the available salvation.

Controversies in Scotland, Wales and America

There were other theories. I need not go into them. But there is one of significance that strikes me as being important. It was developed by the school of the Frenchman, Moise Amyraut (1596-1664), held to by some present at the Westminster Assembly, taught by Richard Baxter, and developed by the Marrow men in Scotland in the eighteenth century. It was an important factor in the death of Calvinism in Wales as well. The importance lies in its close connection to the doctrine of the well-meant offer of salvation.

In eighteenth century Scotland, a controversy arose over the preaching of the gospel. There were those in the (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland who believed that the preaching, generally speaking, was cold and abstract, and conducive to antinomianism. They pleaded for a more direct and personal address of the gospel, which would confront the sinner with the demands of the gospel,

but also with the desire of God to save them. Briefly, they held to the position that the power of the gospel lay in the presentation of Christ as One who earnestly desired their salvation, loved them greatly, and had done all that He could to make their salvation possible; or, to use their own language, “had given them by His death a warrant to believe.” These Marrow men, so called, realized that this idea required some adjustment of the doctrine of the atonement. And so they described the atonement in a strange way: “Christ did not die for all, but He is dead for all.” They wanted to be known as Calvinists who believe in particular redemption, but they also wanted a well-meant offer of salvation. To put it in different words, the gospel is a well-meant offer on the part of God to all men based on Christ’s cross on which He suffered that He might be dead for all.

The idea took hold in Wales. There was a strong Calvinist church in Wales, at least as far as doctrine is concerned. The Calvinistic church in Wales had defects in church polity because it was established under the influence of George Whitefield, but in doctrine it was strong. It held to double predestination, to limited atonement and the other points of Calvinism. There were some outstanding Calvinistic preachers in the history of Welsh Calvinism. But there were those who wanted the well-meant offer of the gospel and saw that a well-meant gospel offer required a universal atonement in some sense, for God could not freely offer a salvation to all without that salvation being, in some sense, available to all. Others opposed universal atonement but were persuaded that in order to preach the gospel to the unconverted and in order to engage successfully in mission work, one had to have a well-meant offer of the gospel. That is, one had to preach, “God loves you. God wants to save you,” to everyone who hears the gospel. One had to say that, otherwise he could not preach.

It is still true today that the charge is made against Reformed people that they cannot preach on the mission field or to the unconverted except by means of a gospel offer. Because even the

Welsh Calvinists did not understand the issues, they were led astray, and said, “Yes, that is true. How can we preach unless we can say to every man, ‘God loves you, God wants to save you?’” But then the big question was: What right do we have to say to men that God loves them? The answer was: Christ died for all men.

We had the same thing in the history of our Protestant Reformed Churches when the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 1924 adopted the well-meant offer of the gospel as one of the points of common grace. The question was repeatedly put to them, what is the judicial ground for God’s grace to all men? What is the legal ground for His love for all men? How *can* He love all men when all are totally depraved? To that question there never was given a satisfactory answer until a synod of the CRC officially refused to condemn a professor in their seminary who taught that the death of Christ was universal in its extent, its intention, and its sufficiency. I was at that synod listening to the debate. There were those on the floor of synod who opposed vigorously the position of the seminary professor who taught a universal atonement, who was, as a matter of fact, a professor of missions. He was teaching in the churches that the death of Christ was universal with regard to its sufficiency, its intention and its availability. The only particular aspect of the atonement of Christ that was not universal was its efficacy. I recall that the debate was rather hot and furious, but finally one of the delegates to the synod got up and, in a rather lengthy speech, made this remark, “Brethren, what is the matter with you? We believe in the well-meant offer of the gospel, do we not? And if we believe in the well-meant offer of the gospel, how can we condemn one who teaches a universal cross of Christ?” With that, the debate was over. The death of Christ was officially decided to be universal.

“Sufficiency”

Those who argue that, because of the well-meant gospel offer, the atonement has to be universal in some sense, stress especially the

word “sufficiency.” Even our creeds teach that the cross of Jesus Christ is sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world. Thus a few things must be said about the word “sufficiency.” The *Canons of Dordt* II:3 read, “The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.” “See,” the opponents of particular redemption say, “even the *Canons* teach a universal sufficiency.”

Two points have to be made in this connection. First, the fathers at Dordt were answering an objection of the Arminians against the doctrine of limited atonement. The Arminians charged the Reformed, “You speak in a derogatory fashion of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, because you limit its value.” What the Arminians meant to say was that by limiting the atonement to the elect, they were limiting the atonement to only a few people, and thus speaking in an insulting way about the death of Christ. The theologians at Dordt fiercely rejected that charge. In *Canons* II:3, the fathers were, in effect, saying, “The atoning sacrifice of Christ is not to be measured in quantitative terms, as if it can be measured in pints, quarts or gallons, or in inches, feet or yards. But”—and here is the crucial and fundamental difference—“if one looks at the atoning sacrifice of Christ from the viewpoint of the dignity of the One who made it, then, because He who suffered and died is the Son of God, His death would have been sufficient to save all mankind, if God had so decreed.” The Reformed refused to admit that they cast aspersions on the wonder of the death of Christ. In fact, the Reformed insisted that not they but the Arminians made light of the sacrifice of Christ, for the Arminians made His atonement ineffective in that it was unable to save unbelievers. Some for whom Christ died actually perished.

Second, all those who appeal to the word “sufficiency,” as proof for a universal atonement use the term in an entirely different sense from the fathers at Dordt. They take the word “sufficiency” and maintain that the term expresses God’s *intention* to save all

men. He has provided an atonement sufficient to save all men. The gospel offer is the revelation of God's love and mercy towards all men rooted in the cross, and that is why the atonement is sufficient for all. Thus claim the Arminians.

As a matter of fact, the fathers expressly repudiated such an interpretation as totally foreign to Scripture. This is clear from *Canons* II:8:

For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them *alone* the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation; that is, it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby He confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language all those, *and those only*, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to him by the Father ...

Notice that the article is speaking of the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of the Father. That is, *Canons* II:8 is speaking of God's *intention* in the death of Christ. That intention was not to save all men, but to save the elect *and those only*. The appeal of Arminians to the term "sufficient" is wrong.

"World" and "All"

I must say a few words in this connection about the appeal to those texts in the Bible that use the words "world" and "all" in relation to Christ's death. For example, John 3:16 speaks of God's love for the *world* which prompted Him to give His son. And I John 2:2: "he [i.e., Christ] is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our's only, but also for the sins of the *whole world*." Again, in I Timothy 2:5-6, we read, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for *all*, to be testified in due time." I don't want to say too

much about these things because it seems to me we are dealing with such basics of the Christian faith that anyone who gives any thought to the matter ought to know better. But let me say a few words about it, nonetheless, lest I be charged with dodging the issue.

In the first place, the word “world” is most frequently found in the writings of John, in his gospel and in his epistles, particularly in his first epistle. When John uses the word “world,” he does so because he is so astounded at the greatness of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, for the cross is of cosmic significance. Heaven and earth reverberated with the power of the death of Jesus Christ. What does John mean? He means, first, that when Christ died for the world, He died for the world of the human race. You must not think that He died for Jews, or Welshmen, or Dutchmen, or Germans only. He died for the *world*. But the world for which he died is the world of eternal election: the true world, the world of God’s eternal decree, the world that is gathered by the preaching of the gospel throughout all the ages of time, the world that God determined to save from all eternity. God is not a narrow God who limits his salvation to a few; God saves the world.

You say, “Yes, but all mankind belong to the world.” This is not true from the viewpoint of God’s counsel. The world is the world of sovereign election: the world is the world He gave to Christ. This is the world that He loves—the true human race. The reprobate are the scaffold that God uses to build the temple of the elect church by the preaching of the gospel. They are the chaff that at the end of time will be separated from the wheat. God saves the whole human race, even as the farmer saves his whole crop of wheat, even though it must first be separated from the straw. That is why John 3:16 adds, “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Only the elect believe in Christ.

Second, as Paul points out in Colossians 1:20, God reconciles all things to Himself by the death of His Son on the cross. He reconciles

not only the elect world, the church gathered from every nation, tribe and tongue; He reconciles to Himself the entire earthly creation. He established His covenant with Noah and set a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of the universal implications of Christ's death. Christ died for the universe: the power of His death is cosmic.

Third, Paul also makes clear in Colossians 1:20 that so great is the atoning sacrifice of Christ that, wonder of wonders, God reconciled to Himself things on earth and in heaven. The heavenly creation, into which sin had entered through the rebellion of Satan, God reconciles to Himself in the death of His Son. But not only the heavenly creation is saved; also the world of elect angels who, as our *Belgic Confession* puts it, remained standing by the grace of God (Article 12). Therefore, the angels remain standing by the grace of God that comes only through the cross of Christ. All things in heaven and on earth are reconciled to God by the death of Jesus Christ. John sees the grand, broad, all-encompassing power of Christ's atoning work at that moment when He died on the cross and said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Heaven and earth reverberated with the powerful effects of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Arminians may never charge the Reformed for being narrow. We have a far more grand and glorious conception of the power of the cross than is ever possible for an Arminian.

So it is with the word "all." It wasn't so long ago that in the *Grand Rapids Press* there was a story of a major fire in one part of the city. This statement appeared in that story: "All Grand Rapids was there." Everybody in the rest homes? in the hospitals? every babe in arms? every mother giving birth to a baby? every old and bedridden person? That is not what the *Press* meant. Was it hyperbole? Was it an unnecessary exaggeration? No, the *Press* correctly meant that the fire was so great and of such magnitude that every single part of Grand Rapids was represented there. There were people from the Southeast and Southwest ends, as well as other parts of the city; there were adults present, young people and children; there were whites, blacks and Mexicans who came to

see the fire. Rich and poor were present. There was no single aspect of the multi-cultural life of the city of Grand Rapids that was not represented at that fire. When the Scriptures tell us that John the Baptist was baptizing at the Jordan River, and “all Judaea” (Matt. 3:5) came to John to hear him and be baptized by him, the meaning is not that each and every man, woman and child and babe in arms came to the Jordan to hear John preach and to be baptized by him. No one would think of giving the expression Scripture uses that kind of meaning. What the Scriptures mean is that representatives from the entire province of Judaea came to John. And so Scripture, in making use of the term “all,” speaks of all kinds of men, as is obvious from the context of I Timothy 2:5-6 (cf. vv. 1-2). God saves the human race; God saves an almost infinite variety of people of different nations and tribes and tongues, of different characters and personalities, of different strata of society and age. They are reconciled in the blood of the cross to weld them together into the true human race, conceived by God from all eternity in His decree of election and saved in the power of the cross.

Union with Christ

The power of the cross is ours because on that cross you and I were represented. We were in Christ. There is a hymn (I am not fond of it), the lyrics of which go like this: “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” I am not interested in that question; it is the wrong question to ask. It is a question that nobody ought to be asking: Were you there when they crucified my Lord? As a matter of fact, historically, I was not there. But if you mean, Did I by my sinful nature participate in the horror of crucifying the Son of God? The answer is, Yes, I was there, performing the same dastardly deed that the Jews, with the connivance of Herod and Pontius Pilate, were performing. Rather, the question is: Were you *in Christ* when they crucified my Lord? That is the question for you: Were you in Christ? To be *in Christ* is the one important point.

That question brings me to an amazing and marvellous doxology of the apostle Paul, as he concludes chapter 2 of his epistle to the Galatians, after affirming the doctrine of justification by faith alone: "I am crucified with Christ." That is the shout of triumph which he raises. When Christ hung on the cross, I was crucified; I, dead, depraved, hell-bound, unworthy sinner. I hung there on the cross. I know that and believe that because He stood in my place. He represented me; He was my judicial head. I died in Adam because I sinned in Adam. But I am crucified with Christ, and because I was crucified with Christ, I live.

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

During this life, I walk in this valley of the shadow of death. I am sinful and prone to evil. My pathway ends in the grave. I am surrounded by death and taste death every day. But I am crucified with Christ. Therefore I live, yet it is Christ who lives in me. That life is mine by faith, for He not only died for me, but rose again unto a new life. That life is mine. That is the personal confession of the child of God.

Hence we have only one song to sing. It is the song of the same apostle Paul in the same epistle to the Galatians, as he concludes his epistle: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

Chapter 4

Total Depravity



Prof. David J. Engelsma

... without me ye can do nothing
(John 15:5b)

Introduction

Within a few years after the Reformation began in 1517, a prominent scholar and churchman attacked the Reformation. Alas, I must acknowledge that that enemy of the Reformation was a Dutchman, Erasmus of Rotterdam. He did not attack the Reformation for the Reformation's condemnation of the papacy, for the Reformation's rejection of the five sacraments added by Rome to the two instituted by Jesus Christ, for the Reformation's criticism of the mass, for the Reformation's exposure of the immorality of the clergy, or for the Reformation's condemnation of many other glaring errors of the Roman Church. Erasmus attacked the Reformation for denying that the will of the natural man is free, that is, for teaching that the will of the unsaved man is enslaved to sin so that it is unable to choose God, Christ, and the good.

In December of 1525, a mere 8 years after Luther nailed the ninety-five theses to the church door and thus began the Reformation, Luther responded to Erasmus's attack on the Reformation with a

big book entitled, *The Bondage of the Will*. This is a great book in every respect. Luther himself at the end of his life judged this book to be one of the two or three of his books that were worth saving— and he had written libraries of books. The book is delightful and edifying. It is delightful because of the vigorous style of Luther. It is edifying because of the doctrine of Scripture that Luther teaches in the book. It is edifying because of his careful interpretation of many important passages of Scripture. And it is edifying and important above all because in this book Luther indicates the main issue of the Reformation.

In the book, Luther congratulated Erasmus, that Erasmus alone, among all of Luther's opponents (and by this time they were legion), had addressed the real issue of the Reformation.

Moreover, I give you [i.e., Erasmus] hearty praise and commendation on this further account that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous issues about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like trifles, rather than issues in respect of which all to date have sought my blood (though without success). You, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot.

And what in Luther's judgment was that "hinge on which all turns" and the "vital spot"? The Reformation's denial of the freedom of the will of the natural man! The false doctrine of the freedom of the will as taught by the apostate church at that time, and as taught by the Roman Catholic Church still today, is the teaching that fallen man retains the spiritual ability and goodness to desire and choose Jesus Christ when He is presented in the preaching of the gospel. This the Reformation denied as the very heart of the Roman error. Instead, the Reformation taught that the will of man is so under the mastery of Satan and sin that the will of man

can only reject God as God is revealed in creation and can only reject Jesus Christ as Jesus Christ is made known in Scripture.

What is striking about the struggle over free will between Erasmus and Luther is that Erasmus was careful not to ascribe very much to the power of the free will of the sinner. Erasmus ascribed to the will of the unsaved man only a *little* goodness and a *little* power. This was Erasmus's description of free will: "I conceive of free will as a power of the human will by which a man may apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from the same."

In contrast to the little ability that Erasmus attributed to free will, how bold are Protestant defenders of free will today! Protestant defenders of free will ascribe great goodness and almost unlimited power to the will of the unsaved sinner. According to much of Protestantism today, the will of the sinner is able to accept Jesus when, as they say, Jesus is offered to everyone in the preaching of the gospel. The will is mighty to open up the heart to Jesus, who is knocking frantically and powerlessly at the door of that heart. The will is able to make a decision upon which depends salvation, the efficacy of the death of Christ, and even God's eternal decision for or against a sinner. Everything depends upon the power of the free will. Indeed, according to much of Protestantism, the will of the sinner is almighty. It is able to resist the will of God, for, according to them, God wills the salvation of many, who by their contrary will frustrate and resist God Himself.

Erasmus, heretic though he was, and the Roman Church of the sixteenth century, corrupt as it was, would have been embarrassed by the extolling of the powers of the free will of the sinner on the part of many Protestants today.

Importance of the Bondage of the Will

One can only imagine the violence of Luther's language if he had to contend with the teaching of free will as it is propounded by many Protestants today.

Luther was right about the fundamental importance of the truth of the bondage of the will. It is basic to the gospel of salvation by grace alone. Whatever message about Jesus Christ and salvation rests on the teaching of the freedom of the will is another gospel. It is a false gospel. That is not merely my judgment; it is the judgment of the apostle in Romans 9:16. Salvation “is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.”

This indicates the importance of the doctrine of total depravity, for the truth of the bondage of the will is simply an aspect, the *crucial* aspect of the doctrine of total depravity. The issue is this: lose the truth of total depravity, and you lose the truth of the bondage of the human will. Lose the truth of the bondage of the human will, and you lose the gospel of Jesus Christ. This will be our concern in this chapter: the importance of total depravity for the gospel of grace.

The learned, unbelieving world does not understand this. The learned, unbelieving world assails the teaching of total depravity as the result of a psychological defect in what the world calls “grim,” or “pessimistic,” Calvinists. One might respond, especially in light of the dreadful atrocities of the twentieth century—the atrocities of Hitler’s Nazism, the atrocities of Stalin in the Soviet Union, the atrocities of Mao in China—and, in light of the unspeakable horrors that have been taking place in Africa and in the Middle East, and in light of the sinking away of western civilization today into the depths of depravity by approving the perversity of homosexuality, that those who confess total depravity are not pessimists, but realists. Confession of total depravity has nothing to do with a pessimistic outlook on life. Rather, total depravity is the humbling judgment of the gospel on the wicked sinner in order that, by the grace of Christ working through this very judgment, he may believe on Jesus Christ, and be saved.

Although this is our main concern with the doctrine of total depravity, as it was the main concern of the Reformation, there is

one other important issue at stake in the denial of total depravity. This other issue is the denial of total depravity in order to ascribe to unregenerated sinners the ability to do genuinely good works in the realm of civil society by virtue of a common grace of God. This ability is supposed to justify the cooperation of believers with unbelievers in order to establish a good and godly culture, if not an earthly kingdom of God. This was the project of the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper in his teaching of common grace at the turn of the twentieth century, as it is the project of Richard Mouw in his recent book, *He Shines in All That's Fair* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

Total depravity is denied by means of a doctrine of common grace. Those who hold this teaching maintain that there is a grace of God, quite apart from Jesus Christ, that enables all humans without exception to do good works, so that unregenerated people can build a good society. Because of this grace, which enables the wicked to do good works, the church, they say, can and should cooperate with the unbelieving world in this grand venture. The result of this teaching of common grace, and thus the denial of total depravity, has been the worldliness of the church and the loss of the spiritual separation between the believer and the unbeliever, as the past one hundred years prove.

My concern is the truth and necessity of total depravity with regard to the bondage of the will, and, thus, regarding the gospel of grace. Once again, we listen to the teaching of Jesus Christ in the gospel of John. Jesus teaches total depravity in the second part of verse 5 of John 15: “without me ye can do nothing.”

Humbling Man

As though in a kind of redemption for having produced Erasmus, the Netherlands also produced the clearest, the fullest, and the strongest explanation and defence of the doctrine of total depravity. I refer, of course, to the Synod of Dordt in the early seventeenth century, and to the doctrinal decisions produced by the Synod of

Dordt, which are called *Canons*. The *Canons* express themselves on the matter of total depravity in the third and fourth heads, or chapters, of doctrine. In fact, the phrase, “total depravity,” does not occur in these *Canons*. But the description of the spiritual condition of the fallen sinner apart from Jesus Christ, is certainly accurately expressed by the phrase, “total depravity.”

The *Canons of Dordt* confessed total depravity in order to settle a doctrinal and spiritual controversy that had been taking place in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century. The struggle of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands leading up to the Synod of Dordt, and occasioning the work of the Synod of Dordt, particularly regarding the doctrine of total depravity, perfectly illustrates the truth of Luther’s insistence that the bondage of the will, rooted in total depravity, is essential to the gospel. Heretical ministers and theologians in the Netherlands were denying total depravity, and they were denying total depravity in the interests of their teaching that salvation depends upon the free choice of the will of the sinner. Their gospel ran like this. God loves all without exception. In that love for all without exception, He desires sincerely to save all without exception. Accordingly, He gave Jesus Christ to die for everyone without exception. And now, in the preaching of the gospel, in that love that God has for all without exception, He offers Christ and salvation to all without exception. The actual salvation of the sinner, however, depends upon the will of the sinner. The sinner must accept this offer of Jesus Christ, and only if he accepts will he be born again and saved. Only then does the death of Jesus Christ have any power for him, and only then does God’s choice of him unto salvation take place.

According to those who were teaching this false gospel in the Netherlands, every sinner has the ability of free will because fallen mankind is not totally depraved. The fall of Adam left the human

race depraved, but not totally. Fallen man retains the ability of a free will, that is, a will capable of accepting the offered Christ and choosing for God's salvation.

The whole controversy, which convulsed not only the Netherlands but also much of Europe, started, in fact, when the leading heretic, James Arminius, in a sermon on the seventh chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans, explained Romans 7 as describing, not a converted man, but an unconverted man, not a regenerated human, but an unregenerated human. But Romans 7 has this man saying, "I will to do the good," and even, "I delight in the law of God." If the one speaking in Romans 7 is an unconverted, unsaved, lost man, the unconverted, lost individual *has* a free will, a will that can and does choose for God, Christ and the good.

It is worth noting that within seventy-five years after Luther wrote *The Bondage of the Will* in 1525, explaining that the main issue in the Reformation was the matter of the freedom or bondage of the will, the Reformed Churches were troubled by the very heresy that Luther damned in *The Bondage of the Will*. Satan is determined to destroy the gospel, and in his determination to destroy the gospel, Satan is determined to destroy the truth of total depravity. He has an ally in the sinful nature of every one of us. Human nature finds the truth of total depravity objectionable.

The Synod of Dordt condemned the teaching of the freedom of the will and set forth the clear, biblically-grounded doctrine of total depravity including the bondage of the will. About fallen man, the Synod of Dordt said this: Fallen man is "wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will" (*Canons III/IV:1*). The *Canons* went on to state,

... all men are ... dead in sin, and in bondage thereto, and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation (*III/IV:3*).

But the synod had no independent interest in this truth, as though a group of pessimistic Calvinists gathered in 1618 and 1619 in the Netherlands, in order to rub man's nose in the mud. Rather, the synod confessed total depravity with the purpose of defending and proclaiming salvation by the sovereign grace of God in Jesus Christ. This comes out in Article 10 of Heads III and IV of the *Canons*:

But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, whereby one distinguishes himself above others equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversion, as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains; but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as He has chosen His own from eternity in Christ, so He confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of His own Son, that they may show forth the praises of Him who hath called them out of darkness into His marvellous light, and may glory, not in themselves, but in the Lord, according to the testimony of the apostles in various places.

In this confession of total depravity the *Canons* were only defending and expanding what had earlier been confessed in the *Belgic Confession*. In Article 14 of the *Belgic Confession*, the Reformed church of the Lowlands, the Netherlands and what is now Belgium, confesses, "we reject all that is taught repugnant to [man's total depravity] concerning the free will of man, since man is but a slave to sin, and has nothing of himself, unless it is given from heaven." The article concludes thus: "there is no will nor understanding conformable to the divine will and understanding but what Christ hath wrought in men."

The article in the *Belgic Confession* clinches its condemnation of the false doctrine of the freedom of the will by quoting Christ's

words in John 15:5: “which He teaches us when He says, *Without Me ye can do nothing.*” In this text, Christ teaches the doctrine of total depravity. Christ teaches total depravity clearly and conclusively. Christ is describing fallen men and fallen women; Christ is describing *all* fallen, unsaved human beings, for He is referring to humans who are *apart from* Himself. These are the people who are not united to Him by the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit in the bond of faith. Jesus Christ passes this judgment upon the entire human race that is naturally separated from Him: they can do nothing.

Jesus was teaching that men who are separated from Him cannot perform good works. This is what Jesus meant by nothing: nothing that pleases God; nothing that God approves of; nothing that God calls good. Therefore, men can do nothing that *is* good, for only that which is approved by God is good.

Obviously, human beings can do many earthly things apart from Jesus Christ. They can eat and drink; they can work and sleep; they build civilizations; they can make many inventions; they can worship idols; they can take God’s name in vain; they can profane the sabbath day; they can deny the doctrine of total depravity, and they can do many other things besides. Union with Christ is not necessary for *these* activities.

The context in John 15 shows that Jesus referred to His disciples’ “bearing fruit,” which glorifies His heavenly Father. “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me” (John 15:4). Then, He said, “without me ye can do nothing.” Fruit-bearing is the performance of *good* works. With regard to *good* works, no one who is apart from, or separated from, Jesus Christ can do anything at all.

These good works that no one can do apart from Jesus Christ consist of the outward aspect of our works, that aspect of our works that we and other people see: faithfulness to one’s wife or husband;

attending church; honesty in business; giving money to charity; writing a good book; giving a speech; attending a Reformed conference; singing the Psalms. But also included is the inward aspect of the work, what other human beings cannot see: the attitude and motive of the heart toward God and toward the neighbour; the thought of the mind; the desires and purposes of the will. This inward aspect is also part of every work that a human being does.

Fallen men and women, teaches Jesus, can do *nothing* good. Jesus words are a total condemnation of men's works, that is, the works of men who are separated from Jesus Christ. All of the works of all these men are sinful, and all of the works of all men are sinful *totally*. If the works are not good, they are bad, they are sinful. Jesus did not say, "Without me ye cannot do very much, without me ye can only do very little," but rather, "Without me ye can do *nothing*." The whole work is sinful, the inward aspect and the outward aspect. There is nothing good in the works of human beings apart from Christ whatsoever.

When people oppose the doctrine of total depravity and insist that men apart from Christ are still able to do some good, they are so bold as to contradict Jesus Christ Himself. This opposition is found among Presbyterian, Reformed and nominally Calvinistic churches and theologians. Almost the entire Calvinistic community insists that men and women who are unregenerated, and, therefore, in the language of John 15:5, separated from Jesus Christ, can do some good and do, in fact, perform some good works. These churches and theologians turn on those few churches, ministers, and people who deny that fallen human beings are able to do any good with the reproach, "hyper-Calvinists," "extremists." In their writings, conversations, conferences, and even synodical decisions, the Reformed community virtually excommunicates those who maintain total depravity from the fellowship of the Reformed community.

This is exceedingly strange. It is exceedingly strange that the Reformed community should condemn churches for teaching that all of the works of unregenerated persons are sinful, sinful completely. The total depravity of the natural man was, as Luther taught Protestantism in *The Bondage of the Will*, the issue of the great struggle of the Reformation. Every single Reformed creed teaches the total depravity of the unregenerated man. Every single Reformed and Presbyterian creed teaches that the natural man is incapable of doing *any* good.

How exceedingly deceitful and shameful that almost the entire Reformed community, in order to justify its grave departure from this fundamental truth of the gospel, corrupts language. (The corrupting of language in the interest of teaching the lie has always been the characteristic and tactic of theological modernism.) “We believe ‘total depravity,’” the Reformed community is saying. “But we understand by ‘total depravity’ merely that every part of the fallen human being is wicked and depraved. Part of him is his mind; that’s partly depraved. Part of man is his will; that’s partly depraved. Part of man is his feelings; his feelings are partly depraved. Part of man is his body; his body is partly depraved. Because every part of him is partly depraved,” they say, “we teach ‘total depravity.’”

The example that illustrates what the Reformed community means by “total depravity” is this: There is a bushel of apples, and every apple in that bushel is partly rotten, but also every apple in the bushel is still partly healthy or good.

Consider what this explanation of total depravity implies concerning the natural or unsaved man. If total depravity now merely means that every part of man is tainted by wickedness, but that every part of man still retains some goodness, the *will* of man still retains some goodness, still has some ability, indeed the ability to choose for Christ when Christ is presented in the gospel.

Not only is this explanation of total depravity by the Reformed community the denial of the biblical and creedal teaching of total depravity, but it is also a dishonourable debasing of language. This is not what the Reformed church meant by total depravity: that every apple in the bushel is partly rotten. What the Reformed faith has always meant by total depravity is that every apple in the bushel is completely rotten, and there is no good spot on any one of the apples whatsoever. The whole mind of man is darkened, and the whole will of man is in rebellion. All his feelings are disordered, and his body is completely the agent of his hard heart as a servant of iniquity.

The explanation by most of today's Reformed community of "total" depravity is not what we mean by the word "total" in our everyday language. Suppose I owe you three bills, three debts, and I put a cheque in the mail with a letter. The letter says, "Here is the total payment of my debt." But when you examine the cheque, you discover that the cheque covers part of each of the three debts. I have no doubt, that you would enlighten me as to the meaning of the word "total" in a hurry. Total means complete, every penny of the debt, and this is what the word total means in the church's confession of total depravity.

We are not crushed by the reproach of the Reformed community for confessing total depravity. This is reproach that we gladly bear for the sake of Jesus Christ. Our Lord said, "without me ye can do nothing," and our confession of total depravity is simply the confession of this teaching of the Lord.

And Jesus' apostles, the disciples to whom He taught total depravity in John 15, were faithful to the Lord's teaching concerning the total depravity of the natural man. In Romans 3:10-18, the apostle passes on fallen men the devastating indictment that "there is none that seeketh after God ... there is none that doeth good, no, not one," quoting Psalm 14. II Corinthians 3:5 denies that we are sufficient of ourselves even to think anything that is good.

Ephesians 2:3 confesses that the desires of unsaved men are fleshly, that is, sinfully corrupt. Roman 8:7-8 teaches that “the carnal mind is enmity against God” and that people “in the flesh” (“in the flesh” is Paul’s description of unsaved people, unregenerated people, *all* unregenerated people, not only the slum dwellers but also the aristocrats who drink tea with their pinkies cocked in the air—all human beings apart from Jesus Christ) “cannot please God.”

All this overwhelming apostolic description of total depravity is nothing more than further explanation of Jesus’ words in John 15:5, “without me ye can do nothing.”

In the text, Jesus teaches that men are *unable* to do any good. There is far more here than only a condemnation of man’s works. Jesus condemns man himself. *Inability* to do good reflects on man’s nature, what we are, body and soul. The truth of man’s spiritual condition by nature comes out in the figure that Jesus uses in John 15: the figure of the vine and the branches. A branch that is separated from the vine is a dead stick on the ground. A dead stick on the ground does not produce any fruit, and it does not produce any fruit because it *cannot* produce any fruit. The nature of the branch separated from the vine is the problem. So it is with all human beings, us included by nature.

When Adam sinned, he separated himself from God, the good One and the source of all goodness. Yes, and God punished Adam by banishing him from Himself, particularly from God revealed in the tree of life. Adam lost the goodness with which God had created him. Adam lost all the spiritual abilities with which he was enabled and ennobled by his creation. Adam’s nature became wicked. His entire human being became incapable of any good. Adam died spiritually. Adam was a dead stick on the ground in paradise, separated from the vine, who is God.

Because Adam was the head of the human race, as Romans 5:12ff. teaches, every human comes into the world depraved by nature, incapable of any good. That is the testimony of Psalm 51:5: “I was

shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Every human comes into the world by natural conception and birth a dead stick, and death is the very word and reality Scripture uses to describe the condition of total depravity: “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1).

This is Jesus’ humbling judgment upon every human being. This is His humbling judgment upon us.

This judgment upon us by Jesus is resisted; it is strenuously resisted. I am not going to mention now the resistance to it by the unbelieving world, but I call attention to the resistance to this judgment upon the human race by Jesus on the part of nominal Christians. This judgment is resisted by modernism’s teaching of the goodness of the human being. Modernism makes the grace of God and the atonement of Jesus Christ completely unnecessary for the performance of good works and even for the accomplishing of salvation. Modernism boasts that we can do all things *apart from* Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ judgment is resisted also by the more subtle error of free will. This is the teaching that, although the sinner is unable to do very much good, he still has the ability to choose Jesus Christ, or make a decision for Christ, or open his heart to let Jesus come in. That is, he has the ability to believe in Jesus Christ when He is presented in the gospel. And according to the subtle error of free will, upon this act of the free will depends the salvation of the sinner. God will save the sinner, God will unite the sinner to Christ, God will take him to heaven, if only the sinner will exercise his free will to accept and choose Jesus Christ.

The Arminians at Dordt were extremely subtle in their presentation of this error, so subtle that I find myself marvelling at the presence and wisdom of the Spirit of Christ at that synod. The Arminians did not simply teach that man naturally has a free will that is able to believe in Jesus Christ. The Arminians said that man does not have the ability of himself to believe in Jesus Christ. But they

taught that God gives His grace to all human beings alike, to enable all human beings to believe in Jesus Christ, if only they will. They admitted that fallen man needs help to believe, the help of the grace of God. But, according to them, the grace of God is common to everyone, giving that help and enabling everyone to believe in Jesus. But it still depends upon the will of the sinner whether he will avail himself of that help of the grace of God and choose to believe in Jesus Christ.

Such is the importance of this notion of free will, that it is the centrepiece of another gospel than the gospel of grace. All of God's saving work depends on the free will of the sinner. God, according to this gospel, doesn't save the sinner. God does not save a single sinner. God only helps the sinner to save himself. The free will gospel is not the gospel of grace, but a gospel of man's own work. The great, glorious, decisive work of uniting oneself to Christ, and thus with God, is the work of man himself.

This is why Luther wrote the following about the free will doctrine already four years before he wrote *The Bondage of the Will*. In 1521, he wrote a little work called *Defence and Explanation of All the Articles*. Notice the vehemence with which Luther condemned the error of free will.

This error about free will is a special doctrine of antichrist. Small wonder that it has spread all over the world, for it is written of this antichrist that he will seduce the whole world. Only a few Christians will be saved (II Thess. 2:10). Woe unto him!

Jesus Christ denies this ability of a free will: "without me ye can do nothing." These words mean, "Without me, you cannot choose me, you cannot come to me, you cannot believe in me." All that the will of the sinner can do is reject Christ and choose sin, death, and the devil. The will of fallen man chooses for sin, death, and the devil voluntarily. It is not constrained by some external force

to do so. But the will of the natural man chooses against Christ necessarily, for the will of natural man is in bondage; it is a slave.

Jesus' judgment in John 15:5 is also resisted by the teaching of common grace. The doctrine of common grace teaches that there is a gracious operation of God upon the hearts of all men which restrains sin in them and enables them to do something truly good—good in the estimation of God—in everyday, earthly life. The doctrine of common grace denies total depravity: no one is totally depraved, no one is incapable of good, except perhaps Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. By virtue of common grace, all humans now have some ability for good, and all humans do some good.

The refutation of this popular doctrine among Reformed and Presbyterians is simply the words of our chief prophet and teacher, Jesus Christ: “without me ye can do nothing.” Unbelievers are “without,” or apart from, Jesus Christ. And Jesus said that in separation from Him men can do nothing, whether by natural light, or by common grace, or by some innate goodness of man. Only those who are in Christ, as a branch is in a vine, can do anything.

These are not the words of Martin Luther, or of pessimistic Calvinists, or of hyper-Calvinists, but of Jesus Christ.

The seeming good done by unbelievers is sin. Augustine called these apparently noble deeds of the pagans “glittering vices.” That the seeming good works of unregenerated men are in reality sins, and why they are sins, the *Westminster Confession* teaches,

Works done by unregenerate men, although, for the matter of them, they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God,

or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful, and displeasing unto God (16:7).

When the doctrine of common grace includes the teaching that God loves all men and has a desire to save all and that He expresses and tries to realize this desire by a gracious offer of salvation to all in the gospel of Christ, as is the teaching of the Banner of Truth in the United Kingdom, the doctrine of common grace is, in principle, the heresy of free will. For it is the doctrine of universal grace—grace for all men without exception, at least all men who hear the gospel—that fails to save all to whom it is extended. The doctrine of universal, resistible (saving) grace is, as such, the heresy of free will.

What do sinners understand when an Iain Murray or a David Silversides tells them, “God loves all of you with a love in Jesus Christ that desires to save you, and God now in the gospel graciously offers all of you salvation,” and then begs them to accept the offer? What sinners understand, and are taught by these preachers to understand, is that their salvation is up to them, that their salvation depends upon their choice, their will, their acceptance of the offer. (See Iain H. Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism* [Edinburgh: Banner, 1995] and David Silversides, *The Free Offer: Biblical & Reformed* [Great Britain: Marpet Press, 2005]).

This is the view of preaching that the Arminians defended at Dordt. Those advocates of the false gospel of free will described their view of preaching in these words:

Whomever God calls to salvation, He calls seriously, that is, with a sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and will to save; nor do we assent to the opinion of those who hold that God calls certain ones externally whom He does not will to call internally, that is, as truly converted, even before the grace of calling has been rejected.

There is not in God a secret will which so contradicts the will of the same revealed in the Word that according to it (that is, the secret will) He does not will the conversion and salvation of the greatest part of those whom He seriously calls and invites by the Word of the Gospel and by His revealed will (“The Opinion of the Remonstrants [i.e., Arminians] regarding the third and fourth articles, concerning the grace of God and the conversion of man,” in Peter Y. De Jong (ed.), *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* [Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968], pp. 226-227).

If one did not know that the authors of this conception of preaching were the seventeenth century Arminians—Episcopius and his crowd—one would suppose that the authors were the theologians of the Banner of Truth.

Indeed, the Arminians at Dordt were more knowledgeable, or more honest, than the men of the Banner of Truth. As their description of preaching indicated, the Arminians recognized that the Reformed doctrine of preaching (which the Arminians rejected) holds that God calls some without a sincere intention and will to save them; that God calls certain ones “externally” whom He does not will to call “internally;” that the external call is not issued in grace to all; and that there is in God a secret will (known as reprobation—a word seldom found in the writings of the Banner of Truth men) according to which He does not will the conversion and salvation of many whom He seriously calls by the preaching of the gospel. This was, and still is, the orthodox Reformed doctrine of the preaching of the gospel. The Arminians understood this well, and rejected it. The men of the Banner of Truth, either in ignorance or malice, call this doctrine of preaching “hyper-Calvinism,” and reject it also.

The doctrine of a common grace that consists of a universal grace of God in the gospel necessarily implies that salvation depends

upon the will of the sinner. If God loves all alike, sincerely desires to save all alike, and, in this grace, offers salvation to all alike, what accounts for the salvation of some, in distinction from others, is not God's grace, for His grace comes to all alike. That which accounts for the salvation of some must be something in the sinner, namely, his will.

Against this form of the lie of free will too stand Jesus' words, "without me ye can do nothing."

Exalting Jesus Christ

By this word, Jesus utterly humbles man. He takes salvation completely out of the power of man. He leaves sinful man utterly helpless regarding salvation.

Jesus' purpose is to exalt Himself, to reveal that salvation is solely in *His* power, and to cause His own to trust in Him alone for salvation.

When Jesus said, "without me ye can do nothing," He exalted Himself. He made the greatest claim for Himself: He and He alone is the source of all goodness in the world; He and He alone is spiritual light and spiritual life. If men can do good only in union with Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ is the sole fountain of good. Jesus is the living and life-giving vine, producing fruit in its branches.

Jesus Christ is the ability—the dynamo—of all goodness *for us*.

This is true, first, because personally Jesus is the eternal Son of God in the world. God alone is good, and the source of all good.

Second, Jesus is the source of good because, by His death and resurrection, He has become the source of spiritual life and goodness in a world of unmitigated spiritual death and wickedness. This life and goodness He gives to His own. He raises us from our natural condition of spiritual death into spiritual life, unites us to Himself by the bond of faith—the mystical union—and, through this bond—this "graft"—bestows on us the grace and power of His Spirit so that we do good and bear fruit.

In Him, we can do something. In Him, we must do something. In Him, we cannot but do something. In Him, we can and must and cannot but bear the fruit of good works. Even then, it is always Jesus Christ who is our ability to do good. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. We must abide in Him.

This is why the Reformation fought for total depravity, particularly the bondage of the will. This doctrine exalts Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the doctrine of man's ability and goodness apart from Christ detracts from Christ and invariably results in the false gospel that man saves himself.

Now we understand Luther's zeal in *The Bondage of the Will* in his controversy with Erasmus over the freedom or bondage of the will:

Let me tell you and I beg you to let this sink deep into your mind—I hold that a solemn and vital truth, of eternal consequence, is at stake in this discussion; one so crucial and fundamental that it ought to be maintained and defended even at the cost of life, though as a result the whole world should be, not just thrown into turmoil and uproar, but shattered in chaos and reduced to nothingness.

There are two important implications of the truth of total depravity, as taught by Jesus in John 15:5. The first is that whatever good is in us and whatever good we do is *of Christ*. It is a gift, not a merit. It is of grace, not nature. There is no place in our life, therefore, for boasting. Rather, all our good is reason for more praise of Christ and more thanks to Christ.

Our spiritual activity and good works do not earn, do not obtain salvation, do not make us worthy of grace and salvation, are not conditions unto salvation. They are fruit-bearing, the product of saving union with Christ.

The second implication is that our union with Christ, which is the very beginning of salvation, is not our deed. It is not even

due to our cooperation with Christ. Rather, our union with Christ is Christ's free, gracious, sovereign work in us. We cannot, of ourselves, choose, accept, open our heart, make a decision for Christ, or believe. We cannot, of ourselves, *desire* to choose, accept, open our heart, make a decision for Christ, or believe. This is no more possible for us as we are by nature than it is possible for a dead stick on the ground to take up the notion to unite itself to the vine and then leap up and attach itself to the vine. Indeed, our condition by nature is worse than that of the dead stick. The dead stick does not hate the vine. We do.

Christ must unite us to Himself in the mystical union by the mighty work of His Spirit. Christ must regenerate us. Christ must open our heart. Christ must enlighten our mind. Christ must liberate our bound will. Christ must draw us. Christ must work faith in us.

Then we come, believe, and choose.

Having come, we abide in Him, and bring forth fruit.

Our abiding in Him and fruit-bearing were Jesus' purpose with His instruction in John 15:5. He taught us that we can do nothing apart from Him in order to motivate us to heed His exhortation in verse 4 to "abide in me," so that we bring forth fruit in a life of good works. Christ was speaking to His disciples in John 15, to those who were united to Him and who were, therefore, bearing fruit. To them He gave instruction concerning total depravity. Disciples of Christ need to know the truth of total depravity.

We need to know the truth of total depravity so that we are humbled. Total depravity humbles us regarding all our earthly abilities and accomplishments. Apart from Christ, they are worthless in God's sight. Total depravity humbles us regarding our spiritual gifts and deeds. They are not our own, but the fruit of Christ in us. Total depravity humbles us regarding our attitude toward the ungodly and immoral. The only difference between them and us is the grace of God towards us. As the apostle reminds us in Titus

3:3, “we ourselves also were sometimes foolish.” Total depravity humbles us regarding our salvation. Our salvation was not and is not our own work, but Christ’s work, wholly and exclusively. Salvation is by grace alone. In light of Jesus’ word in John 15:5, there lives in the soul of us who are saved, “Why me?”—a question the defender of free will never asks.

We need to know the truth of total depravity, second, so that we will glorify God. God saves sinners, whose natural condition is that we can do nothing—nothing good, nothing that pleases God, nothing that earns or makes us worthy of salvation, nothing that contributes to salvation, nothing upon which salvation depends. God saves, not according to the will, worthiness, or work of the sinner, but according to His own gracious will, that is, election.

Third, we need to know the truth of total depravity—the truth of *our own* total depravity by nature—so that we heed the exhortation of Christ to abide in Him. O, how great always is the temptation to withdraw from Christ and depend upon ourselves! By this word in John 15:5, Christ calls us: “Stay by Me! close to Me! always closer to Me! in living faith! in a true church, that proclaims Me and My grace! in the diligent use of the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments! in prayer! in a daily walk with Me!”

Apart from Christ, we can do nothing. Apart from Christ, one is a dead branch, which does not bear fruit. Apart from Christ, there is the judgment of God upon those who profess to be members of Christ and His church, but are not, manifesting their spiritual separation from Christ by their failure to bring forth fruit. “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:6).

We need to know the truth of total depravity also so that we have confidence. This is, first, the confidence of our own salvation. The good I see in my life, especially the union with Christ and the active coming to Christ of faith, as well as the fruit-bearing of

confession of the truth and of obedience to the law from the heart, is sure evidence of my salvation. No unsaved men and women, whose natural condition is that they can do nothing, believe in Christ or love God and the neighbour.

Second, our confidence is certainty concerning our active Christian life of obedience to Christ. We are confident that, regardless of the difficulties and obstacles, indeed regardless of our own weaknesses, we will be able to do whatever Christ calls us to do in life. We are confident that we can carry out every task, fulfil every duty, carry every burden, and endure every sorrow. Apart from Christ, we can do nothing. But *in* Him, *abiding* in Him, we can do all things (Phil. 4:13).

Chapter 5

Irresistible Grace



Prof. Herman Hanko

Introduction

Although the truth of irresistible grace has its own unique place in the Five Points of Calvinism, it is inseparably connected to the other four points. This can be easily demonstrated. Sovereign and double predestination is the eternal reason why God gives some grace and does not give that same grace to others. Augustine, the great bishop of Hippo, who died in AD 430, came to know from experience that the grace that had saved him was irresistible. Proceeding from the doctrine of irresistible grace and pondering why some received such grace and others did not, he concluded that sovereign predestination alone was the explanation. Further, predestination is a decree of God's counsel, but God's counsel is His own living will. It is therefore, the final explanation of all things, particularly of the work of salvation.

The judicial ground of all our salvation, as well as the historical execution of eternal predestination is the cross of Jesus Christ. He died to earn salvation for all the elect who were given Him eternally. As the judicial ground of salvation, it is the judicial ground and fountain of all the grace by which we are saved. Without the cross, there is no grace. And the saving power of grace is the perfect work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Irresistible grace is alone that which can save us because we are, by nature, totally depraved. If man is given the power of a free will to choose for himself heaven or hell, he is able to resist grace. Irresistible grace implies total depravity and is necessary to saved a totally depraved sinner.

And if grace is irresistible, then the good work which God begins in us is continued and perfected. The perseverance of the saints necessarily follows upon irresistible grace. If grace can be resisted, I have no guarantee that I will go to heaven when I die, for before I die it may very well be possible that I resist the grace of God, lose it, and end in hell in spite of the work of salvation begun in me.

The Five Points of Calvinism stand or fall together.

The doctrine of irresistible grace is also a truth which I need to know for my own assurance of salvation. I know the depths of my own depravity. I know that I will always resist the grace of God. How am I to say, "My comfort in life and in death, for time and eternity, is that I belong to Christ and am an heir of everlasting life?" I can only say this with assurance when I know and confess that the grace that saves me is irresistible.

Grace

What is meant by grace?

In its most basic meaning in Scripture, grace is God's attitude of favour towards His people in Jesus Christ. I wonder how often we really give any thought to this, how deeply the miracle of this is written on our consciousness. God looks with *favour* upon us. That is the most wonderful thing that can happen to us. If it were not written on every page of Scripture, and if God by grace did not work faith in our heart, it would be too great a wonder to appropriate.

Consider how Isaiah, speaking in the name of God, describes all the inhabitants of the earth from creation to the end of time as

grasshoppers in God's sight. Or, using another metaphor found in Isaiah 40, all the nations of the earth are as dust of the balance. A speck of dust falling on one side of the scale makes no difference in the scale whatsoever. Or, again, all the nations of the earth are as a drop of the bucket. That is, a man carrying a bucket has something if the drop is *in* the bucket—not much, but a little bit. But if a man is carrying a bucket with a drop clinging to the bottom rim, ready to fall into the dust, he has nothing. All nations are less than that drop in the sight of God who has created all things by the Word of His power. What are we then, each of us? One among billions that have occupied the earth? Yet, God, the creator and sustainer of all, has *favour* on us.

But we have not said it all by any means. We are not only nothing in God's sight, but we are desperately wicked sinners. We mock Him and laugh in His face. We transgress His holy commandments and dare Him to do anything to us. We are His enemies and vow to do all in our power to destroy Him and steal His creation from Him. Yet, He looks on us in favour. To have favour on us means that God delights in us. He finds us most desirable. He has pleasure in us and is determined to make us as happy as it is possible for us to be. He wants us to be His wife so that we may live with Him eternally so that He may take everlasting delight in us. So great is His favour to us that He will do anything to make us happy, even to the point of giving His own Son to the awful agony of hell.

Grace is therefore “favour,” but favour to totally undeserving sinners. It is to show favour and love to those who are His enemies. It is to bless those who hate Him. It is to make happy those who try to destroy Him. It is, therefore, *undeserved favour*. It is unmerited favour, for we cannot merit anything when we are God's enemies. Grace is freely given to those who have nothing with which to buy it. Grace is a favour which is hated and blasphemed by those who are its objects. The impossibility of this is possible only because of the cross of Christ.

That grace is also a power. I may look in favour upon someone. In an extremely rare instance I may even look with favour on someone who does not even know me. It is impossible for us to look with favour on someone who hates us and does all he can to kill us. But whether I look with favour on someone or not, it makes no difference to the person who is the object of my favour. But God's favour is a power. It is a powerful favour that actually transforms those who are the objects of God's favour into beautiful and holy saints. It is a power that makes praying saints out of blasphemers, makes of prostitutes the bride of Christ, makes ugly and useless rocks blocks of marble to be used in the temple in which God dwells. "By grace are ye saved ..." (Eph. 2:8).

That same grace is a power operative within the hearts of God's people, which enables them to walk in a world of suffering and opposition, faithful to their God. It is a power to bear one's burdens, take up one's cross, remain faithful in temptation, and love God and our neighbour. Paul thought that the removal of a thorn was necessary to carry on his calling as a missionary to the Gentiles, but God refused to take away the thorn, assuring Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee" (II Cor. 12:7-10).

Grace is the source and fountain of all our salvation.

Irresistible Grace

The grace of God of which we are the objects is irresistible. The word "irresistible" immediately brings to our minds how we, on our part, resist that grace. I would not speak of an irresistible rock in my pathway unless I had tried to move it, but found I could not. It resists me. The irresistible grace of God is resisted by us. We on our part always resist the grace of God. We resist it *before* we are saved; we even resist it when we are conquered by irresistible grace. We resist God's grace before we are saved because we are enemies of God and hate Him and all His works. We resist His grace after we are saved because we still, even though conquered

by grace, have a very sinful and depraved nature that is not yet overcome by the power of grace.

In our resistance to grace, even after we are saved, we show our dislike of spiritual exercises, including the worship of God on the Lord's Day. We refuse to heed the admonitions that come to us with the promise of true happiness in the keeping of them. We resist the overtures of the sweetness of fellowship with God because we prefer the empty pleasures of sin. Though married to Christ, we commit spiritual adultery with the wicked world when we become friends of the world rather than friends of God. As far as we are concerned, our resistance of grace is constant, implacable, and relentless.

Irresistible grace is, therefore, that favour of God towards His elect in Christ by which He actually makes them His people by overcoming all their resistance. By sovereign grace, He breaks down the citadel of our resistance, destroys the walls of our hatred of Him, smashes our pride, enters the very depths of our being and turns us into saints who are fit to live with Him as His bride.

The Arminian says that grace is not irresistible. He says that God's grace of salvation is offered to a man. The only access to man's heart is by means of blandishments and persuasive techniques. God has to be a skilful salesman who overcomes man's resistance by His selling powers. But as long as the sinner resists, God is helpless.

Calvinism says that man is always resistant to God's work. He is so depraved that he cannot even desire salvation. Irresistible grace teaches that God, through the Spirit of Christ, overcomes that resistance. God's grace is greater than mere persuasion of the sinner. It is itself the attitude of God's favour towards His people in Christ, which has such great power that it actually saves.

Grace, irresistible grace, saves from sin and death, from total depravity and the fire of hell. But it is also a grace that, once

having saved, preserves that work of salvation in the hearts of the people of God. Even after we are saved, we continue to live with our depraved natures which are in a continuous state of rebellion against God. If it were not for irresistible grace, the work of salvation would be overcome again by our resistance. God must, graciously, preserve His work against our resistance.

Further, irresistible grace so works in us that the resistance that remains in our sinful natures is gradually overcome. The first work of grace in regeneration is a fundamental change in the depths of man's being. Because it is fundamental, it is a victory so complete that defeat can never follow. The salvation begun in God's elect is an indestructible salvation. Grace that saves is like a decisive defeat of the enemy, which has routed all the forces of the opposition and brought about total victory. But there may remain certain "mopping up" work to be done to clear out pockets of resistance too weak to pose a long-term threat, but a nuisance nonetheless. So is the work of grace at its beginning. It is the decisive defeat of the enemy of our own sinful natures, and the progress of that work is God's "mopping up" of what remains of sin in us. Both are the fruit of irresistible grace.

But even that is not all. When we die and our bodies are put in the grave, our souls are cleansed and purified and the last vestiges of sin are taken from them. This too is irresistible grace. And when Christ comes again at the end of history and raises our bodies from the grave, they are transformed to be like the glorious body of Christ. Then we are completely changed by the power of grace. Grace has accomplished its purpose.

We must add yet one more truth to this wonderful list of irresistible grace's accomplishments. When we are in heaven with Christ and with all the saints, we will continue in our state of total bliss only by the grace of God. Grace delivers us, grace sustains us, grace perfects us, grace preserves us in everlasting blessedness. All is of irresistible grace, and thus God alone is praised!

How God Works His Grace in Us

God works this irresistible grace in the hearts of His people in a special way. Our *Canons of Dordrecht* describe this working in a way better than we are able to do it.

But that others [in distinction from those who reject the gospel] who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, whereby one distinguishes himself above others equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversion, as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains; but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as He has chosen His own from eternity in Christ, so He confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of His own Son, that they may show forth the praises of Him who hath called them out of darkness into His marvellous light, and may glory, not in themselves, but in the Lord, according to the testimony of the apostles in various places.

But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect, or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, and powerfully illuminates their minds by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God ... (III/IV:10-11).

We should pause in this quotation of the *Canons* to notice what sovereign and irresistible grace is said to do. Grace through the gospel powerfully illuminates the minds of God's people so that they are able to understand and discern the things of God. Sometimes, when we hear the truth of the gospel proclaimed in such a way that we are moved deeply by it, we say, "The gospel is so beautiful, so clear, so easy to understand. Why cannot men see it? Why are there those who still oppose it? It is so glorious, so

appealing, so clear that a child can understand it and delight in it. Why do the wicked contradict it?" The answer is: We would do the same no matter how sweet the promises of the gospel are and no matter how clearly these truths were presented. Opposition to the gospel is rooted in hatred, not mere ignorance. Sin is so great that the most blessed gift that can be given us, we despise and scorn. That the gospel is sweet to our taste is the work of irresistible grace.

But let us go on with the teaching of the *Canons*:

... but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit pervades the inmost recesses of the man; He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree it may bring forth the fruits of good actions.

And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid. But this is in no wise effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral suasion, or such a mode of operation that after God has performed His part it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not, to be converted or to continue unconverted; but it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead, as the Scripture inspired by the Author of this work declares; so that all in whose heart God works in this marvellous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe ... (III/IV:11-12).

If we should entertain, even for a moment, that faith is our work and not the work of grace, the *Canons* go on to say that grace is responsible, not only for the gift of faith, but even for the act of believing itself. In proof of this the *Canons* quote Philippians 2:13: “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (*Canons* III/IV:14).

Grace for All of Our Life

I am sure that when finally we arrive at what John Bunyan called the Celestial City, after the years of our pilgrimage, when this weary life is finished and the whole church is present in all its glory, we shall look back on our life of sin and temptation, of sorrow and pain, to contemplate the grace of God that has brought us to such great blessedness. We shall say with the Queen of Sheba, as she marvelled at the riches of Solomon’s kingdom, “The half was not told me” (I Kings 10:7). We shall see and understand grace for what it is, in all its power to overcome our sin and give to us, so undeserving, such great riches.

We shall see that the *entire* life we lived, with every detail of it, in all its experiences and troubles, which God was pleased to send us in this valley of tears, was only, ever grace. Common grace robs us of seeing the blessedness of grace. Common grace teaches that God is gracious to all men, and that this grace is manifested in the good gifts which come to the wicked and to the righteous alike. What problems this creates! Scripture tells us that as a general rule the wicked are more prosperous than the righteous—in Psalms 37 and 73, for example. Are then the wicked more blessed than the righteous? Indeed, all Scripture teaches that the righteous suffer far more than the wicked, for this is their lot in life ordained by God (e.g., Acts 14:22). If prosperity is blessing and favour, is suffering a curse and God’s hatred of us? How grievous for the child of God such heresy is!

Grace is given to those for whom Christ died. Such grace, irresistible grace, is necessary throughout the whole of this life.

Always the child of God is dependent on the grace of God. How is it to be explained if we were born in a Christian home to godly parents? Irresistible grace. How do we explain that we were given the privilege of drinking the Reformed faith with our mother's milk? Grace and only grace. Or, how is it that we were born of unbelieving parents and that only after many years of leading an unconverted life, we were brought to faith in Christ? The grace of God alone can explain it. Indeed, how is it to be explained that the long road of sin became a road that led us, finally, to the truth of the Reformed faith? God's grace, irresistible, eternal, efficacious, marvellous grace.

Grace enables us to carry our infant child who dies to the cemetery in humble trust in God. Grace enables us to endure with patience in sickness and pain, in the burdens and cares of life. Even when we say, "I can't go on; the burden is too great," God gives His grace that we may carry what seemingly is an impossible load. When our pilgrim's way becomes too difficult to walk, the words of Scripture resound in our hearts: "My grace is sufficient for thee. Press on weary pilgrim; continue to your destination without falling. My grace sustains and supports you. I will be with you to provide help in every need." When Satan comes with his temptations to sin and the horror of battle against evil robs us of our strength; when we are wounded and weary, battered and beaten by sin; when we want nothing so much as to lay down the weapons of our spiritual warfare; God says, "And having done all, stand! I will be with you and give you My grace. I have, in My Son, fought the battle for you and gained the victory in which you participate. Faith is the victory that overcomes the world."

When we sin and God's chastening hand is heavy on us, and we groan under the pain of His anger, we must not say in despair, "The Lord has forsaken us. The Lord does not care what happens to me." We must not say these things because chastisement is grace, the grace of a loving Father who, through the grace of

chastisement, restores our feet, sets us again on the road to heaven, and teaches us the blessedness of His presence.

Grace enables us to persevere in our walk in life, to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily and to continue on our way. Grace leads us to the cross when we sin that we may find forgiveness and joy in Him who loved us to death. And when at last we must walk through the valley of the shadow of death, grace sustains us in that last mile. When we are home at last and hear the words of our Saviour, "Well done, good and faithful servant ... enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matt. 25:23), it is grace, pure grace, never anything but grace.

How God Works Grace in Us Throughout All of Our Life

How does God work that grace in us throughout all our life? That too is an important question.

Many years ago a parishioner, a husband and a father of children at home, but dying of cancer, came to me deeply agitated. He was concerned that he was not a child of God. When I inquired as to the reason for his fear, he told me, "Those who are children of God are content and happy in the way God leads them. I am not contented and happy. I want to stay with my family and I find it almost impossible to think about leaving them. I cannot, therefore, believe that I am a child of God. I lack the grace of contentment."

After we had talked a bit, I asked him whether he considered grace to be similar to a bottle of penicillin, with directions to take a teaspoonful every four hours and the infection would be cured. After a few moments thought, he answered in the affirmative. Yes, he had considered grace in that fashion. But God does not work His grace in that way. He does not send us an affliction of one sort or another, tell us to pray for grace, and let that grace work automatically and apart from our experience to take away our anxiety and fear. He always deals with us as rational and moral people. He does not, as my pastor from former days was wont to

say, take us to heaven in the upper berth of a Pullman Sleeper. Grace is given to us, sufficient grace, irresistible grace, but not cheap grace. Grace comes through the way of struggle, fighting against doubt, prayer, earnest clinging by faith to the Scriptures and looking to Christ, the author and finisher of our faith.

Grace never works automatically and apart from our consciousness. Grace works in such a way that our minds and wills are changed. While we are enemies of God, He begins the work of grace in our hearts. He does so, at that first moment of the Spirit's work, apart from our consciousness. But then the Spirit, graciously given, causes our minds to know and understand the truth, and, understanding it, to love it. He causes our wills, suddenly and mysteriously, to love that which we formerly hated and to seek earnestly that which we once despised. While in its initial operations, there is a sense in which we are pulled into salvation against our wills, grace makes us docile, willing, eager servants of Christ who are thankful for the salvation given us in Christ.

Jesus, in explaining the grace that saves, tells the multitude who would not believe that He was the bread of life, "No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). The word "draw" is a strong word which means "to pull mightily," as one would pull on a rope when he is engaged in a tug of war. Yet this mighty and irresistible drawing of grace is a drawing that draws our stubborn wills into a state of willing and joyful obedience to him, and our sin-darkened minds into the light of the truth.

Jesus then adds, "It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me" (John 6:45, quoting Isaiah 54:13). The Lord's point is clear. The irresistible drawing of grace comes through the preaching of the gospel. The way grace is worked in the hearts and lives of God's people is through the preaching. In fact, since the Reformation, the preaching, along

with the sacraments, has been called the means of grace. These are God's means to work irresistible grace in the hearts of the elect.

While this is not the forum in which to discuss at length the biblical doctrine of the preaching of the gospel, a few points need to be made.

Preaching is a work of the church of Christ, which the church carries out through its ordained ministry. That is, the local congregation, established by Christ, is called to preach, a task accomplished by ministers who are called and ordained for the work. This implies, first of all, that preaching is not the task of anyone who feels called and takes it upon himself to preach. Only the church preaches, through a minister whom the church itself calls. This means, in the second place, that preaching is the *sole* calling of the church. The church is not to engage in the work of bettering social conditions. It is not a social gathering to provide activities for seniors, young people and older singles. Nor is preaching the delivery of moral homilies or learned discourses. Preaching is not geared to moral persuasion; nor is it a presentation of a Christ for all, offered to people, and accompanied by pleas to people to seize the opportunity to accept Christ.

When preaching takes place in a proper and biblical way, and when the Scriptures are the sole content of that preaching, then Christ speaks. This is the clear testimony of Romans 10:14-15 and John 10:3-4. That preaching is not, therefore, the insipid and powerless pleading of a sorrowful Christ whose begging so often goes unheeded. Preaching is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). The Word of God preached never returns to God without accomplishing its purpose. It is preached to save the elect through grace, but also to harden in wrath the unbelievers. Both are God's purpose; both are always accomplished.

The power of preaching is not in a preacher's oratorical abilities, exegetical skills, homiletical talents, or powers of persuasion. The power of the preaching lies exclusively in the work of the Holy

Spirit. The Holy Spirit works grace in the hearts of all those ordained to eternal life. The Holy Spirit is the author of all grace that saves. But the Holy Spirit binds Himself to the preaching of the gospel. He will not operate independently of the gospel. He will not give grace where the gospel is not present. He ties Himself to preaching—preaching the Holy Scriptures of which He Himself is the author.

The Holy Spirit is our instructor in the Scriptures and the author of our love for the truth of the Word of God. When, therefore, the Holy Spirit works grace irresistibly in the hearts of God's people, He does so by instructing them in all that Scripture says. He teaches them of all God's wonderful works. He shows them from the Scriptures what a great work God has done in Christ in saving His elect. He, through the Scriptures, acquaints the people of God with all the promises that God makes to His people. But the Spirit uses all this instruction to apply the very blessings of which the Scriptures speak to the saints so that they actually become the possessors of such great blessings. In other words, all the grace of Almighty God comes to God's people through their knowledge of the Scriptures worked by the Holy Spirit. Grace is irresistible also when it is given through the preaching of the Scriptures.

God's people are taught the Scriptures in such a way that the learning which the Scriptures give is the chief joy of their lives. The Spirit does not instruct us as a teacher forces a child against his will to learn his multiplication tables. The Spirit shows us the beauty of God's teachings and the joy that is ours in learning them. And the Spirit gives us a delight to learn the things of God by applying all these teachings to our life in the world. He shows us how these teachings give comfort in sorrow, help in need, joy in grief, strength in weakness. He shows these things to us by actually comforting us in our sorrow and strengthening us in our weakness. That is the grace which saves. That is the manifestation of God's favour to us who are undeserving sinners.

We may stagger into church on Sunday morning weary with the struggle against sin, aware of all our failures and shortcomings, and afraid to appear before God, because of the grief of our souls. But then come the words of Christ: “Come to me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden” (Matt. 11:28), and the Spirit applies that Word irresistibly to our hearts, overcoming our grief and fear and drawing us to Christ by the power of the Word preached.

We may come into God’s house on the Lord’s Day still weeping with the sorrow with which we buried a loved one. The gospel comes with its good news of the victory of the resurrection of Christ and the glory that is a halo to our death, for it is the door to heaven. The Holy Spirit does not simply explain the truth of the resurrection; He applies it to our hearts in such a way that He says, “This truth is for you.” And our tears are wiped away, by the irresistible grace of the gospel that comes to us.

Grace comes to us in such a way that it works irresistibly the assurance of our salvation in Christ, for faith is assurance. When we appropriate the blessed truths of the gospel by faith, we do so by a faith that gives us the assurance that all these blessings of which the gospel speaks are our inheritance. In other words, irresistible grace brings personal assurance.

Irresistible grace is not, therefore, like a spoonful of medicine. Grace is given in all our weaknesses, in our struggles and trials, in the midst of all our temptations under the battering of Satan. Grace speaks to us God’s own word: “I have great things in store for you. I will take care of you in all your life. I have favour towards you and delight in you. I love you and will marry you in good time. You are my child and I have a great inheritance laid away for you. Press on in your calling and fight a good fight of faith. If you sin, I will forgive you and show you the cross and the work of My Son. If I do things to you that puzzle you, tempt you to question My goodness, fill you with fear and anger, then remember, I am greater than you and know the best way to prepare

you for glory. I call you to walk by faith, not by sight. I do not require of you that you understand My ways, but I do require of you that you believe My Word. My grace is sufficient for you. You will arrive safely home.”

The apostle John, in speaking of Christ’s incarnation, says, “And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace” (John 1:16). The metaphor implied is overwhelming. Grace in the place of grace—like the waves of the ocean on the shore—grace replacing grace, grace coming after grace, wave upon wave; grace for this present need, and, when a new need arises, a new wave of grace. Always we are the recipients of grace. It is there for us pouring in waves out of a great body of the unfathomable sea of God’s unchanging love; always given, always irresistible, always to the praise and glory of God!

The Scriptures speak of our reward that God will give us for our works. The *Belgic Confession* tells us that that reward for our works is also grace:

Therefore we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?), nay, we are beholden to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He *that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure*. Let us therefore attend to what is written: *When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do*. In the meantime we do not deny that God rewards our good works, but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts (Article 24).

Even our reward in heaven is irresistible grace! The truth of irresistible grace is our only comfort and hope.

Chapter 6

The Perseverance of Saints



Prof. David J. Engelsma

Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled (John 17:11b-12).

Introduction

There is a dreadful judgment of God on the false gospel of salvation by the will and the works of the sinner. This judgment of God upon that false gospel is the fear of both the teachers of this false gospel and their disciples that they may fall away from Christ and perish everlastingly. This is the fear of all Roman Catholics. It is Roman Catholic dogma that no one can know with certainty that he shall continue in salvation and be saved everlastingly.

The fear of falling away from Christ and perishing everlastingly is also the fear of the Arminians. I remind us at this point that, although very few today call themselves Arminians, nevertheless, the majority of so-called evangelicals as well as of fundamentalists

and charismatics are thoroughly Arminian in their preaching and teaching. All of them have the fear that, although they consider themselves to be saved today, they may in the end fall away and perish forever.

At the Synod of Dordt, the Arminian party expressed itself as follows concerning perseverance, that is, a believer's continuing in the faith so that he will surely inherit eternal life: "True believers can fall from true faith. True believers are able to fall through their own fault into shameful and atrocious deeds, to persevere and to die in them and finally to fall and to perish."

Falling away from Christ and perishing forever is the fear also of those today who are teaching a certain doctrine of the covenant in reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian Churches mainly in North America. These men are teaching that all those who are united to Jesus Christ by a true faith and who receive the blessings of salvation, including the benefit of justification, can separate themselves from Jesus Christ, lose their salvation, and perish everlastingly in hell. These men are teaching that many who are joined to Christ in the covenant, and enjoy the covenant blessings of salvation, do in fact fall away and perish forever. This is an aspect of the heretical doctrine known as the Federal Vision.

This fear of the real possibility of falling away to perdition is God's judgment upon the false gospel of salvation by the will or by the works of the sinner himself. The fear of falling away from Jesus Christ and perishing forever is awful. It is a terror worse than any other fear. It is the necessary implication of the false gospel that salvation depends upon the will or the work of the sinner. This, in fact, is what Roman Catholics, Arminians, and those who are teaching a new doctrine of the covenant in the reputedly conservative Reformed Churches in North America have in common. They all teach that salvation depends upon the will or the work of the sinner. And upon this false gospel falls the judgment of God that He gives those who believe this false gospel over to

the terror of fearing that they may fall away and perish forever. For if man's will is decisive in his salvation, man's will is also decisive regarding his persevering to the very end. If salvation depends upon the will of the sinner, salvation can be lost. This fear is the necessary consequence of the false gospel that salvation depends upon the will of the sinner. It is the bitter fruit that that tree produces, but it is at the same time God's terrible judgment upon those who teach and believe this false gospel. The false gospel of salvation by the will or works of man robs God of His glory in salvation. Indeed, it blasphemes God. God cannot keep His own people. God is defeated. The cross of Jesus Christ is ineffectual. The Spirit of Jesus, who attempts to save these people who nevertheless fall away, is declared to be powerless. That is blasphemy against God. God in His just judgment then deprives those who preach and teach this gospel of all comfort. He strikes them through with terror, the ultimate terror.

Belief and confession of the perseverance of the saints, on the other hand, is God's blessing upon the faithful proclamation of the gospel of salvation by grace alone. It is God's blessing of the teaching and believing of all five of these grand truths that we call the Five Points of Calvinism. God's blessing upon this gospel is that believers and the children of believers enjoy inexpressibly great comfort. This is our comfort: I, who now believe on Jesus Christ for salvation, will never fall away from Jesus Christ. I cannot fall away from Jesus Christ. One day I will certainly be raised from the dead in the body to live with Jesus Christ in glory forever.

The perseverance of the saints has been the confession of the true church of Jesus Christ down the ages. There is a lovely line in the fifth head of the *Canons of Dordt* in the article in which the *Canons* defend the confession of the perseverance of the saints that goes like this: "the spouse of Christ hath always most tenderly loved and constantly defended [the truth of the perseverance of the saints] as an inestimable treasure" (V:15). The spouse of Christ has always defended the truth of the perseverance of the saints. The spouse of

Christ, of course, is the true church. This raises a very serious question concerning every church which does not prize the perseverance of the saints and which does not love and constantly defend the perseverance of the saints, but which, on the contrary, challenges the perseverance of the saints and throws doubt upon the perseverance of the saints: Can that church be the spouse of Christ at all? The spouse of Christ loved and defended perseverance at the time of Augustine. The spouse of Christ in the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century loved and defended the perseverance of the saints, as the *Canons of Dordt* prove. The spouse of Christ represented at the Westminster Assembly loved and defended the truth of the perseverance of the saints, as is evident from the *Westminster Confession* (17:1-3). And still today there is a spouse of Christ that treasures the truth of the perseverance of the saints.

The reason why the true church loves and defends the doctrine of the perseverance of saints is not the superior goodness of the spouse of Christ, any more than the perseverance of the saints itself is due to the saints themselves. That same article of the *Canons* quoted above explains that the true church loves perseverance because “God, against whom neither counsel nor strength can prevail, will dispose [the spouse of Christ] to continue this conduct to the end.” God preserves the confession of the perseverance of the saints in the church. God preserves the true church in her confession of perseverance.

The true church proclaims and confesses perseverance on the basis of Scripture. As the *Canons* teach, “God hath most abundantly revealed [this doctrine of the perseverance of the saints] in His Word” (V:15). This revelation of perseverance occurs very prominently in the gospel and epistles of John. One especially clear and powerful witness to perseverance in the gospel of John is John 10:28-29:

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.

I want, however, to concentrate on another passage in John's gospel:

Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled (John 17:11b-12).

Jesus teaches the perseverance of the saints: "I have kept them in thy name." The perseverance of the saints was His own confidence on the eve of His crucifixion. He could go to the cross confident that the Holy Father would keep those who belong to Jesus Christ. How encouraging this must have been to Christ Himself on the way to the cross. Also, this passage was His prayer. It was part of His prayer as the great high priest of His people. All those who deny the perseverance of the saints are forced to admit that God failed to hear and answer the prayer of His own Son, that the Father turned down the request of His Son.

I choose this passage especially because in it Jesus Himself acknowledged the great difficulty with the perseverance of the saints. The great difficulty is the seeming falling away of some to damnation who belong to the church. Christ Himself took note of this in His prayer when He said, "none of them is lost, but [i.e., except] the son of perdition."

The Preserving Work of God

In John 17, the second part of verse 11 and verse 12, our Saviour made a request of His Father on behalf of all of them whom the Father has given Him. I pointed out earlier in this book that this is an expression in the gospel of John describing God's election.

John 17 is a very rich chapter on the truth of God's election. Repeatedly, Jesus speaks of those whom the Father has given Him, or elected. Jesus has in mind, first of all, the little band of disciples gathered about Him in the upper room. There are eleven of them now because Judas Iscariot has already been dismissed to go about his nefarious business of betraying Christ to His enemies. Judas had gone out from them into the night (John 13:26-30). Keep this in mind: Judas has already gone out from them when Jesus prayed, "Holy Father, keep them in Thy name." But Jesus was praying for that little band of eleven disciples as representatives of the whole body of His elect church. He Himself indicated this in John 17:20: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word." He was praying for all down through the ages who would believe on Him through the word of the apostles. Jesus' prayer, therefore, was a request for the entire company of the elect. It was a prayer for the universal church which He gathers from the beginning of the world to the end. Well may we be reminded and assured at the outset that Jesus was praying here for you and for me. As those who believe on Jesus Christ from the heart for salvation according to the Scriptures, we are among those for whom He said, "Holy Father, keep them through Thy name."

Jesus asked the Father to "keep" these people. The subject is God's preservation of men and women. "Keep" them is the same as "preserve" them. We commonly speak of the "perseverance" of the saints. This is proper. Perseverance is our activity of continuing faithful to Jesus Christ by believing on Him, confessing His name, and walking in His ways. Perseverance is our activity of abiding steadfastly in the faith of Jesus Christ. It is proper for us to speak of the perseverance of the saints because God keeps, or preserves, us in such a way that we actively persevere. But the cause of our perseverance, the one and only cause, is God's preservation of us, what Jesus called "keeping" in John 17:11.

First, preservation, or keeping, is the work of the Holy Father, that is, the Triune God, of keeping regenerated persons in their spiritual life. It is the work of the Triune God of keeping true believers in the faith. It is the work of the Triune God of keeping saints, people who have been made holy, in holiness of life. That this is what the keeping of us by the Father is, Jesus Himself makes plain in the passage. It is plain in verse 12 where Jesus says that He Himself kept the people that the Father had given Him in the Father's name. When they were saved, they were brought into union with the Father's name. They were brought into communion with the living God Himself. We call this the fellowship of the covenant. And now Jesus prays that the Father will keep us in this covenant communion with God.

In the second place, Jesus Himself explains that preservation means that not one of those whom the Father has given to Jesus is lost, that is, has perished. We might think that the reference is to perishing in hell. That Jesus did not here mean by "being lost" perishing in hell is evident from the fact that Jesus goes on to say that the son of perdition, Judas Iscariot, was already lost when Jesus prayed this prayer. Now Judas had not, on the night that Jesus prayed this prayer, yet committed suicide and gone to his own place. Judas was still alive; Judas was arranging with the high priests' officials to betray Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Jesus says about Judas already on this night that Judas is lost, Judas has perished. There is another aspect of being lost besides perishing in hell. This is that someone is in a spiritual condition of final impenitence and unbelief. When Jesus asks the Father to keep His people, therefore, he is asking the Father to keep His people from falling away into the spiritual condition of final impenitence and unbelief.

In the third place, what follows Jesus' words in John 17:11-12 proves that the preservation that Jesus prayed for is a keeping of Christ's people in spiritual life, in true faith, in holiness. I refer to

verses 15 and 17. In verse 15, Jesus says, “I pray ... that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.” And in verse 17, He prays, “Sanctify them through thy truth.” The Father’s keeping of Jesus’ people consists of preserving us from the evil and, positively, of sanctifying us, making us holy, keeping us in our holiness as saints. God’s keeping, or preservation, therefore, is His work within us by His Spirit of keeping us from losing our spiritual life, from renouncing our faith, from separating ourselves from Christ and denying Him, from falling back into that condition of spiritual death from which God has translated us and delivered us in regeneration.

God’s keeping is His preserving of saints in their holiness. A saint (and this is what every believing child of God is: a holy one) still sins. Indeed, in this life the saint remains sinful: he has a depraved nature. This is why God’s preservation of us is necessary; nevertheless, because God keeps us, in answer to Jesus’ prayer, no saint can commit the sin unto death and fall away from Christ forever. A saint can possibly fall deeply into gross, presumptuous sins and even continue in them for a time, as the examples in the Bible of David and Peter show (cf. *Canons* V:4). But God does not even then remove His Spirit entirely from these saints who have fallen deeply into sin. Nor does He allow them to lose the grace of adoption or forfeit the state of justification. In addition, God will bring these saints again to repentance, and He will cause them once again to live a holy life.

The Reformed teaching of preservation, or perseverance, differs radically from a teaching that has a certain formal similarity to it, a teaching known as “eternal security.” Some groups, some churches, teach eternal security. They will tell Reformed people, we disagree with you on four points of your Calvinism, but we agree on one of them: the last point, the perseverance of the saints. You teach the perseverance of the saints; we teach eternal security. In fact, however, they do not have the same work of God in mind that we do. “Eternal security” for them means that someone is

saved by making a cheap decision for Christ. Then he may be sure of going to heaven, regardless of the fact that all the rest of his life he never sets foot in a church and lives like the devil. We condemn this teaching. The biblical truth of the preservation of the saints is God's keeping of us by working in us by His Spirit so that we maintain our faith, continue in holiness of life, and walk steadfastly and faithfully in discipleship of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Keeping us in faith and holiness is not the entire work of preservation, however. In the way of keeping the elect saints in faith and holiness, God preserves us unto final salvation. Eternal salvation is the goal of the preservation that Jesus asks for, as Jesus Himself makes known in John 17:24: "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am." Not only does He ask that the Father preserve His people in faith and holiness, but He also asks that God preserve His people so that at last they are where Christ is; Christ is in heaven with God. The saints are kept from falling away unto the punishment of everlasting hell. They are kept from perishing in everlasting death. They are kept by God so that everyone of them finally shares in the life and glory of Christ in heaven. This is preservation.

The *perseverance* of the saints, then, is the spiritual activity of all those in whom God has begun the work of salvation of continuing in faith and holiness unto eternal life and glory in the day of Christ. We persevere because God graciously works within us our preservation.

Threats

It is not as though there are no threats to the continual holiness and final salvation of believers and their elect children. On the contrary, perseverance implies threats. God's preservation of us implies that there are enemies who are bent on the destruction of everyone who identifies himself as a member of the church by confessing Jesus Christ and living a holy life. Two words occur in verses 11 and 12 of John 17 that are translated "keep" and "kept."

But the word translated “kept” in verse 12 is an entirely different word from the word translated “kept” in verse 11. The word translated “kept” in verse 12 means “guard” or “protect” as a shepherd guards or protects his sheep against the attacks of the foes of the sheep, the wolves. This makes plain that the church and each believer have enemies. In John 10, Jesus refers to those who attempt to pluck His people out of His hand. Those enemies are the devil and the demons. Those enemies are the “world” of John 17 about whom Jesus Himself says, that they hate those whom the Father has given to Jesus (v. 14). Because the church is not of the world, even as Jesus is not of the world, those enemies are the apostate church with the heretics and the false teachers. The very worst of the threats to our persevering in the faith is our own corrupt nature, our pride, our self-seeking, our earthly-mindedness, our envy, our lusts, our discontent. They make up a whole array of enemies bent on our spiritual destruction that we carry with us in our skin.

The *Canons of Dordt* state that we could not persevere, “if left to [our] own strength” (V:3). Later, we read that our perishing with respect to ourselves “is not only possible, but would undoubtedly happen” (V:8). If our persevering depended upon ourselves, not only is it possible that we would perish, it would undoubtedly happen that we would perish. But God keeps the saints.

The Means of Preservation

We may not overlook the fact that God uses *means* to keep us. To separate preservation from the means by which God preserves us and causes us to persevere would be presumption, not faith. Jesus calls attention to the means in verse 11: “keep [them] through thine own name.” What He refers to He clarifies in the context. In verse 8, He speaks of “the words which thou gavest me.” In verse 14, He mentions “thy word,” and in verse 17, “thy truth:” “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” God preserves His people and the saints persevere by the Word of God, by the truth, by the gospel that was proclaimed by the prophets in the Old

Testament, and by Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament. God preserves His people by the Word of sacred Scripture, which is preached by the true institute of the church. In John 10, Jesus describes this means as His voice: “My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me” (v. 27). The *Canons* indicate the means and their importance: “God ... preserves, continues, and perfects [the work of grace in us] by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, as well as by the use of the sacraments” (V:14).

The means by which God preserves the church in answer to Jesus’ petition are the preaching of the gospel, the administration and use of the sacraments, and the discipline by the instituted church. In dependence on these main means, the lesser, but important, means are one’s own reading of the Bible and meditation upon the Word of God. By these means, God preserves the believer; by these means, God preserves the children of believers; and, by these means, God preserves the church. God does not preserve His people otherwise than by these means. This is why there is no greater threat to the salvation of the people of God than the corrupting of the gospel. This is also why for somebody to boast about his preservation and the preservation of his children, while at the same time he is despising membership in a true church of Jesus Christ, where these means of preservation are found and where God employs these means, is sheer presumption, not faith. When Jesus prayed that God would keep His people, included in that petition in the mind of Jesus was that God also would maintain the *means* of the preservation of the church. Jesus prayed for the maintenance of the true institute of the church.

By these means, God does keep the elect saints. He keeps every one of them so that none of them is lost, not one: “none of them is lost.”

The Seeming Exception

But this does not always seem to be the case. On the contrary, it seems to us as though saints perish. There are seeming exceptions

to the preservation of the saints. There are exceptions in our own experience. We see entire denominations of churches falling away from the Word and gospel of God. What this apostasy means is that whole families perish. Their grandfathers and their grandmothers went to heaven, but the grandchildren perish in these apostate churches. And who of us who has any experience with the church at all is not painfully aware of the church member, perhaps even a long-time elder of the church, who forsakes Christ for the world and abandons the life of holiness which apparently he had been living. The exception may even be one of our own children. He grew up apparently walking in the ways of the Lord. Perhaps, he even confessed his faith and partook of the sacrament of the Supper. And then he turned his back on the church and abandoned Jesus Christ to run with the world of the ungodly.

These seeming exceptions are grievous to us; they cause us great pain. We are grieved by the apostasy of denominations that once stood fast. Members of the congregation are grieved to see one abandon the church, who walked with them for a long time. It breaks the heart of godly parents to see a son or a daughter forsake the church and a godly walk and to run with the world. What is even worse is that these seeming exceptions are occasions for doubt concerning God's preservation of His church. These exceptions raise questions in our mind: Can the church of Christ perish? Can saints fall away? Is it possible, then, that I too in the future will draw back to perdition, before I reach the goal of the race of the Christian life, at my death or at the second coming of Jesus Christ?

I will carry to my grave the grief and spiritual shock of an anguished telephone call twenty or twenty-five years ago now, about supper time, informing me that a long-time member of the church, a man who had served as elder repeatedly, and a very close friend of our entire family, had responded to great troubles by committing suicide. The spiritual shock was expressed by the response of our fifteen- year old son, "Where was God?" And then I had to pray. For the only time in my life, for a fleeting second, I was tempted

to pray for the dead. This is the kind of temptation we experience in the seeming exception to the truth that God preserves His people.

Jesus knew the temptations we would face regarding preservation. Therefore, in this great prayer for the preserving of His people He mentioned the seeming exception in His own experience: “those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but [i.e., except] the son of perdition.” The seeming exception in Jesus’ experience was Judas Iscariot, whom Jesus had already dismissed to carry out His betrayal (John 13:27). Judas was close to Jesus; he was prominent in the sphere of the covenant; he was one of the original twelve disciples; he was privileged to hear all of Jesus’ teaching and to see all of Jesus’ miracles; he preached the gospel and performed miracles.

But he was a disciple of Jesus who was lost. He was lost spiritually already the night that Jesus prayed this petition. He would be lost eternally the next day when he went out in remorse and guilt and hanged himself. If ever there were a real exception to the truth of the perseverance of the saints, it would have been Judas Iscariot.

In fact, however, Judas was no exception. Jesus was at pains to make this plain in His teaching on preservation. Jesus called Judas “the son of perdition.” Judas was the offspring of perdition, born of hell, hell’s child. Earlier, John records Jesus as having said about Judas, “Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?” (John 6:70). Judas never was a saint; Judas never was united to God in Jesus Christ, in the covenant. He never was a citizen of the kingdom by regeneration. He never had been given to Jesus by the Father.

Confirming that Judas’ perishing was no falling away of a saint, Jesus added that Judas perished, “that the scripture might be fulfilled.” That was no excuse for Judas. That did not minimize Judas’ great responsibility and guilt. But it did allay any fear that the other disciples might have had, and any fear that we may

have, as though the perishing of Judas indicated the frustration of God's loving purpose for Judas' salvation, and therefore the possibility that we may fall away from Jesus as well.

Betrayal of Jesus and falling away on the part of Judas were foretold in Psalm 41:9: "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me." If it was foretold, it had been decreed in the counsel of God. God decreed Judas' being lost in the decree of reprobation and prophesied that lostness centuries before it occurred. The falling and perishing of Judas do not indicate the frustration of God's loving will to save Judas. On the contrary, Judas' falling away was in accordance with God's decree of reprobation. Here in a striking way the Bible teaches that reprobation serves election. Judas' going lost, spiritually and eternally, was the means by which Jesus Christ would be brought to the cross for the salvation of all of God's elect. In the passage, Jesus refers to Judas as *the* son of perdition. *The* son of hell is the instrument by which *the* elect, Jesus Christ, accomplishes the redemption of all of the church.

Jesus did not say, "*I* lost none of them, but the son of perdition." This would mean that He lost somebody. But He said, "None is lost, but the son of perdition." Jesus recognized the perishing of Judas. But Jesus did not lose him, because Judas never was one of His.

The seeming exception was no exception, but, as the apostle John teaches in his first epistle, "They [i.e., the apostates] went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us" (I John 2:19). Was not John thinking also of Judas Iscariot? John's thoughts must have gone back to that night in the upper room, when one of the eleven got up and went out into the night. "He went out from us that it might be made manifest that he was not of us."

In light of Jesus' word about apostasy, as further explained by John in I John 2:19, must all of those passages be explained (and

there are not very many of them) to which the defenders of the falling away of the people of God appeal in defence of the falling away of the saints. I refer to Hebrews 6:4-8 and Hebrews 10:29, as well as the passage in John 15:1ff., which speaks of the cutting off of branches that are in the vine. All of these passages teach a falling away of persons who are close to Jesus Christ in the sphere of the covenant; of persons who are in the fellowship of the instituted church; of persons who profess to be saints; and of persons who even experience certain “common operations” of the Spirit upon their mind and emotions. They are people who, in the words of Luke 8:13, “for a while believe,” but whose temporary faith is qualitatively different from justifying and saving faith. These people never were born again, never did receive the gift of true faith, never were united to Christ by a living faith. And they never had been given to Christ in the decree of election. Those who teach that such people were once saved, thus teaching that those who once were truly saved can fall away, whether Romanists, Arminians, or proponents of the Federal Vision in North America, contradict Jesus Christ in John 17, dishonour God as though He cannot keep His own, and throw terror into every believing soul. I too then can very really go lost. The falling away of the saints, the falling away of even one saint, the falling away of even one saint who is the very least and weakest of all the saints, is “utterly impossible” (*Canons* V:8). Whether saints can fall away is not a doubtful matter. It is not something that is up for discussion. According to *Canons* V:8, it is utterly impossible, and the impossibility is due to God’s counsel; God’s promise; God’s call of His own according to His eternal purpose; the merit, intercession and preservation of Jesus Christ; and the sealing by the Holy Spirit.

The Joyful Assurance

Of this perseverance, each of us who believes on Jesus Christ from the heart *may* have certainty, *can* have certainty, and *must* have certainty. We can and may and must have this assurance concerning the whole church, and we can, may and must have this assurance concerning ourselves personally.

It was Jesus' very purpose with this prayer for our preservation in John 17 that all of us have the assurance of our own and of the church's perseverance. The occasion of this petition was His going away from the church to heaven. The church would be left in a wicked and threatening world. In verse 11, Jesus has just said, "I am no more in the world, but these are in the world." The disciples might very well be afraid concerning their own security. Jesus prayed this prayer aloud before His disciples and had this prayer written down on the pages of Scripture for believing people and their children to read through the ages, in order "that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves" (v. 13). This is the joy of our preservation. This is the joy that Jesus' Father will keep us in answer to Jesus' prayer. This is the joy that our faith will never fail, our holiness will never be lost, the Spirit of Christ will never leave us, our covenant union with Christ will never be broken, and we will not be cast out in the day of Jesus Christ. Christ willed that we have the joy of the perseverance of the saints.

Dreadful—dreadful beyond all telling—is the terror of the possibility of the falling away of the saints. There is no fear like this fear. That I might yet hate, deny, and forsake my blessed Saviour, Jesus Christ, and that whether I will or not depends upon me. This is terror. That I may yet come short of everlasting life and glory and perish in the agonies of hell, infinitely far from the smiling face of my heavenly Father, and that whether this will happen to me depends upon me. This is terror. This is the terror of countless millions of people today. I am not talking about the ungodly world. I am talking about millions of professing Christians. All Roman Catholics live and die in this terror. Most evangelicals, fundamentalists, and charismatics, committed as they are to the Arminian theology of salvation dependent upon the free will of the sinner, live and die in this same terror. Today in North America, this same terror is being spread in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the United Reformed Churches by the heresy of the New Perspective on Paul and the Federal Vision.

Believe, O saint, that the One who began a good work in you will preserve it to the end, and keep you (Phil. 1:6). You will persevere. Do not listen to Rome's false gospel of salvation by the works of the sinner, or to Arminianism's false gospel of salvation by the free will of the sinner, or to the Federal Vision's false gospel of salvation dependent upon the sinner's performing conditions. But listen to Jesus Christ: "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me."

The basis of this assurance of perseverance is not our own strength, worth, or work. But the basis is the sovereign, faithful, loving keeping of us by our Father. He heard the prayer of Jesus in John 17, and He hears the intercessory prayer of Jesus now, who stands before the Father on our behalf, having redeemed us by His death. This intercessory prayer is the same as that which Jesus uttered in the upper room the night before His death, "Holy Father, keep ... those whom thou hast given me." The Father is able to keep us, being greater than all our enemies. He Himself wills this very thing, having given us to the Son so that we might have everlasting life.

The basis of our assurance of perseverance, as it is the power of the perseverance itself, is grace.

The fruit of this assurance in our life and experience will not be indolence, or carelessness, regarding godliness, good morals, prayers, and other holy exercises, as the enemies of perseverance charge.

Rather, the fruit will be that described by the *Canons of Dordt*:

This certainty of perseverance, however, is so far from exciting in believers a spirit of pride, or of rendering them carnally secure, that, on the contrary, it is the real source of humility, filial reverence, true piety, patience in every tribulation, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in confessing the truth, and of solid

rejoicing in God; so that the consideration of this benefit should serve as an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works, as appears from the testimonies of Scripture and the examples of the saints (V:12).

About the British Reformed Fellowship

The British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) was founded in 1990 by a group of Reformed Christians set for the defence of the historic Reformed faith in the British Isles. Its doctrinal basis is “the inspired, infallible, inerrant Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as summarized and systematized in the Reformed confessions, specifically the *Three Forms of Unity* and the *Westminster Standards*.”

The BRF produces a biblical and theological journal, the *British Reformed Journal (BRJ)*, four times a year or as frequently as possible. Subscription rates, as of 2008, are £10 (UK, Europe & elsewhere) or \$20US (N. America) for four issues of the *BRJ*. Membership in the BRF, which includes receiving four issues of the *BRJ*, costs the same as subscription to the *BRJ* and is available to Reformed Christians in the British Isles who agree with its doctrinal basis. New subscribers and members are welcome.

The BRF holds biennial family conferences at various locations in the British Isles for a week in the summer, usually in the beginning of August. Previous conference themes include Marriage and the Family, The Covenant of Grace, Sovereign Grace, The Church, The Last Things, The Kingdom of God, Assurance, Keeping God’s Covenant, and (of course) The Five Points of Calvinism. Why not consider joining us for a relaxing week’s fellowship around God’s Word?

The BRF website (www.britishreformedfellowship.org.uk) contains articles from the *BRJ*, as well as information on BRF conferences, contact details, and other material. So look us up on the web!