



**GCLI, Spring-2012:  
Calvinism, Arminianism, and the Nature of Grace, Faith and Works  
A Conversation of Great Commission Church Pastors**

**The Purpose of this Paper: John Hopler, Director of Great Commission Churches**

In the history of the church, there has been an ongoing theological discussion (and controversy) between those who hold to Arminianism and those who hold to Calvinism. This paper addresses one aspect of that controversy. There are 5 points to this controversy:

1. Depravity of Man Calvinists and Classical Arminians both agree that man is totally (or radically) depraved, in that sin has affected every part of his make up, and he is unable to respond to God apart from God's working and calling.
2. Election Calvinists and Arminians believe that God has elected those who are saved. However, Arminians believe that God elects based on His foreknowledge of who will respond to His calling, whereas Calvinists believe that God's election is unconditional according to His own divine purposes.
3. Atonement Calvinists and Arminians believe that Christ's death on the cross is efficient in paying for the sins of those who believe, and sufficient to pay for the sins of the whole world. However, Calvinists believe that God's intent in the atonement of Christ was limited to paying for the sins of the elect, whereas Arminians believe that God intended for Christ's atonement to pay for the sins of the whole world, yet only to actually cover the sins of those who believe.
4. Grace Calvinists and Arminians both believe that mankind is helpless to come to God apart from His grace. However, Arminians believe that God sovereignly gives all men the freedom to accept or reject His grace, whereas, Calvinists believe that God's grace in salvation is sovereignly and unconditionally given only to the elect, and is always effective.
5. Persevering in the faith Calvinists and Arminians both believe that only those who continue in the faith are truly saved. However, Arminians believe that Christians are able to fall away from the faith, whereas Calvinists believe that true believers will never fall away, but are eternally secure as a result of God's promises to preserve them.

In Great Commission churches, the eternal security of the believer (Point Five) is taught. However, there are different views in Great Commission churches on the other four points.

In addressing this issue, this GCLI paper has three parts. Part I gives an overview of the historical debate, with two views that focus on the specific issue of “The Nature of Faith, Grace, and Works.” Part II presents a view that is commonly held by GCC pastors. Part III addresses the importance of love and unity in working through this issue.

Finally, this paper is written with the following two purposes in mind:

First, we want to educate leaders in Great Commission churches on this controversy. In particular, the nature of grace, faith and works was selected because it highlights the difference between these two theological positions. Our hope is that each leader will have a better grasp of the theological issues and that he will develop his own convictions on this issue as a result of reading this paper.

Second, we want to affirm different views on this issue. We believe that as leaders devoted to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can effectively work together, even if we have different views on this issue. In that regard, please consider the following testimony from Tom Short:

*In 1978 or 1979 I was a newly appointed elder. I felt a deep personal responsibility for what we taught in our church. Somehow, I came across a short book teaching the doctrines commonly known as the Five Points of Calvinism. There was very little commentary on it; it simply included the five points, a number of sub-points and a whole lot of Scripture backing up each point. I really enjoyed the book. It was the first I'd ever heard about these doctrines and, to be honest, I didn't even know there was another opposing point of view.*

*At our next elder's meeting, I enthusiastically shared what I was learning with the other brothers. But I was quite taken aback when one of my fellow elders stated that he didn't agree with these doctrines and actually shared some verses to the contrary. I didn't agree with his verses and its obvious he didn't agree with me. Over the next several days, I began to develop a pretty negative attitude toward this brother and couldn't figure out why he held such a view that seemed so unscriptural to me. We were becoming divided over this issue.*

*As “fate” would have it, I was reading the biography of George Whitefield at this time. Whitefield and John Wesley had been best of friends, but they became divided over this very issue. As I contemplated this and the division that was occurring between me and my fellow-elder, I believe God spoke to me with a very simple message: “Tom, I used both George Whitefield and John Wesley in mighty ways even though they believed differently on these doctrines. If you would like Me to use you in a mighty way as well, focus your life on what these two men had in common – not on where they differed.”*

*That is exactly what I have attempted to do these past 30-plus years. Whitefield and Wesley were men of humility, prayer, faith, and fervent, tireless evangelism. I have sought to become this type of man. And, until God shows me otherwise, I am content to leave these*

*controversial doctrines on the back burner. While I do hold to my own personal opinions on these doctrines, I hold them with humility, respect for those who differ and a firm conviction that there are plenty of far more important teachings in the Word for me to stand firm upon. And, as I changed my own attitude about this subject and my brother with whom I disagreed, I have maintained a wonderful working unity with that fellow-elder. In fact, over all of these years, that brother and I have continued to closely work together for the furtherance of the gospel without one single difficulty arising from this difference of perspective.*

In the spirit of love and unity, as men committed to unite together to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ, this paper is offered.

## **Part I (a): An Overview of the Historical Debate** **By Perry Paulding**

### **I. Introduction**

As a movement of churches that is deeply committed to God's Word, and hence, its accurate interpretation and application, we would like to begin the process of addressing what has been one of the most controversial topics in Christian history: God's sovereignty and man's free will (or predestination), and the seemingly irreconcilable tension that exists between the two.

From the fierce debates between Augustine and Pelagius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., to Martin Luther vs. Erasmus in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to the opposing teachings of John Calvin and James Arminius, (as well as many more prominent figures, synods, and councils down to the present), this continues to be one of the most volatile and divisive doctrinal disputes that the church has ever had to face. Today, nationally recognized proponents of each side continue to bring the debate to the attention of the Christian community. Their vigorously disseminated books, sermons, and media resources are profoundly influencing the ideologies of pastors, leaders, and local church members, and are, in some cases, creating disharmony, distrust, and discontentment.

While the Great Commission Association of Churches has never formally identified itself with one, particular camp, our roots could be characterized by a *tendency* to emphasize man's innate ability to believe the gospel, rather than his innate inability. Today, however, the convictions among our pastors on this issue are more diverse. One legitimate concern is that as more resources from prominent teachers are becoming available, our movement of churches is not only becoming more informed on the issues, but also more sensitized, and thus, more polarized.

Because another one of our core values as a movement is our commitment to "Love and Unity", we strongly desire to prevent any potential divisions that might threaten our churches, (unless biblically warranted). So prior to the conversation regarding the differing views between the two camps, it is equally vital for us to ascertain the degree of importance that this issue carries. In other words, in the midst of all the potent rhetoric, we must ask the question, "Is the doctrine of predestination an issue over which we are biblically justified to divide and part ways?"

## II. The Gravity of the Issue

At the crux of why The Nature of Faith, Grace, and Works is so passionately contested is the connection that is made between each of them, and how they relate to the *glory* of God. Obviously, any perceived assault on God's glory is going to arouse strong emotions! Calvinists have accused Arminians of robbing God of his due glory (or credit) by granting *man* the ultimate and determinative vote that will result in either his salvation or perdition. This can seem to impinge upon the central teaching of Scripture regarding salvation by grace instead of works (*if* faith is classified as a good work). Similarly, Arminians have accused Calvinists of limiting God's glory by rejecting his prerogative to extend freedom of choice to man. In their minds, for God to choose to delegate such freedom to man neither detracts from, nor nullifies his sovereignty. They have also accused Calvinists of over-emphasizing God's sovereignty to the neglect of his other glorious character qualities, such as his love.

Another reason why there is such interest in this dispute, is because it involves how we view 1) the nature of God, 2) the nature of man, and 3) the nature of saving faith. It all begins in Genesis 3 with the Fall. Just *how* fallen is fallen man? How one answers that determines how much help from God one needs—(i.e. from a slight nudge, to a complete rebirth). Just as a caterpillar must have its *physical* nature changed before it has the physical ability to fly, so the Calvinist would say that God must change fallen man's *spiritual* nature (from dead to alive) before he is able (volitionally, not physically) to respond to God's spiritual call. This change of nature is called *regeneration*, or new birth (John 3:3-8), which then enables a person to desire, pursue, and respond to God and His gospel. It overcomes the seemingly insurmountable human condition which Martin Luther called "the bondage of the will".

The rationale for this can best be summed up by author Michael Horton, who writes, "We cannot find God for the same reason that a thief can't find a police officer."<sup>1</sup> Hence, the Calvinist's argument goes something like this: I will always choose in accordance with my strongest desire, or preference. Because of my fallen nature, I will never *prefer* Christ's righteousness to my own. God must change my preference. And in order to change my preference, He must change my *will*. And in order to change my will, He must change my *nature*. And in order to change my nature, He must *regenerate* me. The Arminian sees this as an unnecessary extreme, and even a violation of man's God-given nature of self-determination and choice. To him, any such radical manipulation of man's will seems coercive, and therefore, inconsistent with God's loving character.

What seems to be most unsettling to us as volitional creatures, is the prospect that our eternal destiny may not *ultimately* reside within the power of our own choice. We all accept the fact that none of us had any choice whatsoever regarding our *physical* birth, so the prospect of God, rather than us, having the ultimate choice regarding our *spiritual* birth is not so far-fetched. Both camps believe we are *saved* by grace, and that we *believe* by grace. But how much grace is necessary? More importantly, is that grace effectual or thwartable? Author T. J. Williams sums up what I believe to be the most salient distinction surrounding the question of divine action:

The relevant question is if God's contributions to human love [for God] are efficacious or thwartable. Does divine action reach the innermost core of the person, resulting in love without dehumanizing the lover? Or does God reach only the outer courtiers, leaving an untouched throne of executive human power from where divine contributions may be shunned?....

Limiting divine action to a thwartable "contributory cause" of human love overlooks biblical contexts in which God's contributory causation is efficacious.... Thwartable causation can go only so far as *the capacity to love* as a divine gift, not to *the love itself* as a divine gift. Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, John, and Paul credit God with both the capacity to love [God] and the love itself.<sup>2</sup>

### III. What Is the Gospel?

The escalation of the debate reaches its zenith whenever the term "gospel" is invoked. This raises the discussion to the highest possible stakes, and because it is largely contingent upon how we define the word "grace", it has become an easy step for each camp to contend that the other is preaching a "different gospel". This is a serious charge, because the apostle Paul calls down a harsh curse upon anyone who is guilty of preaching a different gospel. In Galatians 1:8 he warns, "But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be *accursed*." (He then repeats this curse for even more emphasis!) Fortunately, Paul defines "the gospel" for us in clear terms, in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4:

<sup>1</sup> Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you... <sup>2</sup> by which also you are saved... <sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

Notice that nothing is mentioned regarding the origin of faith—whether it is a gift of God, or something innate. Nor are we required to believe that new birth precedes faith, or vice versa. Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. That is the *good news*, and those ten words are sufficient to save the whole world. On these things the Calvinist and Arminian agree. Both agree that it is by grace alone that one is saved, and that God does not exercise our faith for us, or coerce us against our will to believe. The primary points of disagreement are over the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), or logical sequence of events that take place in bringing a person from spiritual death to life, and whether or not faith is a virtue that can be classified as a good work. If faith is purely a gift, then it cannot be meritorious. But if it is innate, and self-generated, then it can certainly *seem* to be a virtuous determinant on one's salvation. And if belief is entirely an autonomous, unforced, independent decision, then it logically follows that the *possibility* existed, that *no one* might have chosen to believe the gospel and thus be saved.

The issue of merit is central to the debate. Contrary to some Calvinist's contentions, the Arminian's faith is not *in* his faith (as if it was a meritorious, good work). Like the Calvinist, the *object* of his faith is Christ and his finished work on the cross. The Arminian merely believes he can take *advantage* of it by his own choice. So this is not on par with any clearly heretical doctrines, like a denial of the deity of Christ. Because this dispute surrounds the *origin* of one's

faith, and not the *object* of one's faith, this should *not* be regarded as a "core-gospel issue" that warrants our dividing over. Therefore, we are called to think well of, speak well of, and extend full fellowship to our brothers and sisters in Christ whose understanding on this may differ from our own.

#### IV. The Origin of Saving Faith

Can the light of the gospel penetrate a sinner's heart when that sinner is described as being insensible and unable to accept it? Both the Calvinist and Arminian would say "yes". For the Calvinist, this is contingent upon regeneration, while for the Arminian, it is contingent upon *prevenient grace*. This is a divine, universally-given grace that allows persons to engage their God-given free will to choose the salvation offered by God in Jesus Christ, or to reject that offer. Prevenient grace functions in a similar manner to the Calvinist's concept of regeneration, (though contrary to regeneration, it is not *selective*, nor does it *ensure* personal acceptance of the gift of salvation). Both can be classified as a necessary act of divine enablement, and both have much to overcome, in order to counteract the following known effects of the Fall. For example:

1. We are dead in trespasses and sin (Ephesians 2:1-2)
2. We are by nature children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3)
3. We love darkness and hate the light (John 3:19-20)
4. Our hearts are hard like stone (Ezekiel 36:26, Ephesians 4:18)
5. We are unable to submit to God or please God (Romans 8:7-8)
6. We are unable to accept the gospel (Ephesians 4:18, 1 Corinthians 2:14)
7. We are unable to come to Christ or embrace him as Lord (John 6:44, 65; 1 Cor. 12:3)
8. We are slaves to sin (Romans 6:17)
9. We are slaves to Satan (Ephesians 2:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:24-26)
10. No good thing dwells in us (Romans 7:18) <sup>3</sup>

It is a reasonable premise, that the more radical the problem, the more radical must be the solution. One thing is apparent: based on the above list, humanity's problem was *truly* radical. Why then, did I believe and another did not? Was I more intelligent, humble, spiritually-minded, or decisive? No. So when I exercised saving faith, where did it come from?

Perhaps the bottom-line answer can be found in the distinction between a *general* vs. *effectual* call of God. Both Calvinists and Arminians believe in the biblical doctrine that God offers a general call to all people through creation, his word, human conscience, the gospel, etc. But the Calvinist views these as insufficient means to draw people to saving faith in Christ. They would be analogous to a doctor yelling at a corpse in order to heal him. To the Calvinist, a more potent and effective faith-imparting call is needed. Romans 8:29-30 seems to support this:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren; <sup>30</sup>and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

The inescapable implication here is that 100% of those whom God foreknew are predestined. 100% of those who are predestined are called. And **100% of those who are called are justified**. Clearly, this is *not* characteristic of a general call, so it is a strong evidence for an additional, internal kind of call from God that is *not* given to everyone, but is **100% effective** in producing saving faith in the lives of those whom God calls his “elect”. This is known as “The Golden Chain of Salvation”, and despite the insight it gives us regarding the workings of God to save, the mystery will always persist when we look back upon it and ask the questions, “Why me? Why Paul, who was not even seeking God? Why anyone?” May this remind us that the ultimate goal of this debate should not be mere intellectual satisfaction, but awestruck worship!

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Horton, *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 1991), 55

<sup>2</sup> Thaddeus J. Williams, *Love, Freedom, and Evil* (Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam - New York, NY) 164-165

<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *Finally Alive* (Scotland, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., 2009), 56-58

## **Part I (b): Faith, Works, and Grace**

**By Dave Bovenmyer**

Great Commission Church’s doctrinal statement affirms that all people receive justification from God by grace through faith in Christ, apart from any good works. We believe that salvation is monergistic—worked by God alone. God does the saving through Christ and we add not even one good work to it. Yet our statement also declares that people must “place their faith in Christ” in order to be justified. God doesn’t believe for us; we must believe. However, none of us would believe without God’s drawing and calling. Therefore faith is synergistic—people believe with the influence and help of God. Almost all Christians believe that faith is synergistic, yet there is a debate about *how* the work of God and the will of man come together in faith. Those of a more “Arminian” persuasion believe that God gives people a true choice in faith—they could have chosen otherwise. In this paper, I’ll call this view “chosen<sup>i</sup> faith.” Those of a more “Calvinist”<sup>ii</sup> persuasion also believe that people “freely”<sup>iii</sup> choose to believe without coercion, yet they could not have chosen otherwise, since their choice is entirely determined by the working of God in their hearts. I’ll call this “determined faith.” In this paper, I will argue the following three points: 1) Whether “chosen” or “determined,” faith is not a work that can be boasted in; 2) “Chosen faith” does not contradict grace; and 3) “Chosen faith” better fits the overall teaching of scripture than “determined faith.”

**Is faith a good work?** Since repentance and faith are good, commendable acts, aren’t they good works? Consider the following logical argument:

1. People do not receive justification from God through good works.
2. Any good decision or act that people do is a good work.
3. Faith in Christ is a good decision that people do.
4. Therefore, people are not justified through faith in Christ.

Clearly, the conclusion of this argument is false (Rom. 3:28). Since the first statement is true (Gal 2:16), one or both of the middle statements must be false. Some people try to make statement three false by advocating “determined faith”—faith is not really a human decision.<sup>iv</sup> I will argue that statement three is true and statement two is false, and that faith, whether chosen or determined, is the opposite of a good work.

In Romans 3:28, Paul says, “*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*” Paul states that faith is, “apart from works of the law.” Yet, he states that a person is justified by his faith. Paul viewed faith as something people do to be justified, yet not a “work.” He argues similarly in Galatians 2:16, “...*even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.*” Referring to himself and his fellow Jews, Paul says “even we have believed.” Clearly, they were the ones doing the believing, yet they were justified by faith, “not by works.” These passages prove that believing is something *we do*, yet it is not a “work.” So, statement three is true and statement two is false, at least in respect to faith.

How can faith—a good, humble, righteous decision—not be a “good work”? It has to do with the way Paul is using the word “works.” Notice that in both passages, Paul uses the phrase “works of the law.” In his writings, Paul uses the Greek word “works” (*ergon*) 17 times in the sense of good works that do not justify. Nine of these instances include the phrase “works of the law.” In five instances, the words “earn,” “gift,” “boast,” “rely,” or “due” interact with these “works.” Indeed in every one of the 17 instances, the words carry the sense “deeds done to earn salvation through our own righteousness, good works or law keeping.” Since faith is not a “deed done to earn salvation through our own righteousness,” it is not a “work” in the sense Paul is using the word. Let’s look at a third example in Romans 4:4-5: “*Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.*” Paul presents two potential means of justification. The first person “works”—seeks to be justified through his own goodness and good works. If he could be successful, justification would be “due” him. He has earned it. The second person “does not work,” but is justified as a “favor” to one who is “ungodly.” But notice that the two people do have something in common. Something *they do* is credited to them. The second person “believes” and “his faith is credited as righteousness.” Yet, though he does this act, he “does not work.” So, faith is a deed we do, yet it is not a “work” in the sense Paul is using the term—a deed done to earn salvation through our own righteousness, good works, or law keeping.

**By its very nature, faith is the opposite of works.** Faith in Christ requires us to abandon any hope that our good works can earn salvation. Instead, we must trust entirely in Christ’s death on our behalf. We must come to God not as the Pharisee, but as the tax collector who would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, pleading, “*God, be merciful to me, the sinner.*” Jesus said “*I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted*” (Lk 18:14). The proud Pharisee’s hope was in his own goodness and law keeping; the humble tax collector’s hope was in God’s mercy toward a sinner. Since faith in Christ requires us to humble ourselves like the tax collector and to view ourselves as helpless, hopeless sinners who cannot save ourselves, faith is *by its very nature* the opposite of “works” (as Paul is using the term). Yet, according to Jesus, this act of humility, which He commends, is what gains justification.

**Faith excludes boasting.** In Romans 3:27, Paul states: “*Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.*” But does the law of faith really exclude *all* boasting? Even a Supralapsarian<sup>v</sup> Calvinist could boast, “God chose me and not you. He loved me, not you.” Such boasting would certainly be

illegitimate. But Paul's statement refers to legitimate boasting. In Romans 4:2, he writes that if a person could be justified by good works, he could *legitimately* boast—his justification would be “due” him. This is the boasting the gospel excludes—boasting in our own goodness, good works, and law keeping. Faith in no way *earns* justification. It is not some super-deed, so weighty and sacrificial, that we thereby earn salvation. Faith in Christ is *required* for righteousness to be credited to us, but the only *ground* of salvation is the death and resurrection of Christ on our behalf. Without that, faith would be utterly powerless to save. Salvation is totally by grace—totally unearned and undeserved. Faith does not earn it. God owes salvation to no rebel, and none will ever *earn* it or *deserve* it by anything they do, including his faith.<sup>vi</sup>

But could a person boast, “I believed and you didn't. I'm better than you”? Again, such boasting would be illegitimate, even reprehensible. Will an adulterer boast that he accepted his spouse's forgiveness? It does take some humility to do so, but the despicable nature of the offense so far outweighs the humility required to receive the spouse's forgiveness that no one could legitimately boast about it. Anyone who would boast in such humility would not understand the depth of his crime or appreciate the immensity of the grace given by his spouse. What a horrible insult to the forgiving spouse! In the same way, any boasting that we humbled ourselves while others didn't could only be illegitimate boasting that ignores the immensity of our crimes against God and the glory of the grace of Christ, who brutally suffered and died to forgive wretched, rebellious sinners like us. In their contexts, the passages that say that the gospel excludes boasting are saying that no one will be able to *legitimately* boast that they have *earned* salvation by their own goodness or law keeping.

**An impossible dilemma:** Paul makes it clear that justification is “apart from works” and that we should not pursue salvation by “works” (Rom 9:32, 11:6). But if we make the mistake of expanding the concept of “works” beyond the scope of Paul's thinking, and claim that it includes *any* human deed or response (including repentance and faith), we create an impossible situation. We cannot tell people to do anything to be saved. If we encourage them to read the Bible, pray, or humble themselves, we would be preaching salvation by works. We would have to tell them “*Don't* seek God; *don't* read the Bible;” and even “*Don't* repent; *don't* believe, lest you do a good work. Your only hope is to do nothing and hope and pray that God will unilaterally put faith in your heart.” But we couldn't even tell them this, since hope and prayer would be good works that they might ultimately boast in. All we could tell them to do is to keep on sinning.

**Is “chosen faith” opposed to grace?** Grace is the favor of God bestowed on the undeserving. God sometimes gives grace unconditionally. An obvious example is creation. No creature ever earned, deserved, or fulfilled any requirements to be created. Yet grace, although always free, unearned, and undeserved, can sometimes be conditional. For example, Peter and James declare, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5 & Jam 4:6). So, consider God's grace given in salvation and justification. Is it conditional or unconditional? First, we must note that justification by faith is “according to” grace, “*For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace...*” (Rom 4:16). Faith in Christ does not contradict grace. The two accord with each other—they go together. Second, note that we obtain access to grace through faith: “*Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand...*” (Rom. 5:2, ESV). Third, the scripture everywhere teaches that we must believe in Christ to receive eternal life and be justified. Salvation is free,

yet conditioned upon faith. We must believe in Christ to receive the grace of justification (Rom 3:26, 28, 30; 4:5, 28; 5:1; Gal 2:16; 3:8; 11, 24), the grace of forgiveness (Acts 10:43), the grace of the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:39; Acts 11:17; Eph 1:13-14; Gal 3:2, 5, 14, Eph 1:13), the grace of salvation (Luke 7:50, 8:12; Acts 16:31; Rom 10:9-10; 1 Cor 1:21; Eph 2:8; 2 Tim 3:15; Heb 10:39; 1 Pet 1:9), the grace of adoption (Jn 1:12; Gal 3:23-26), the grace of regeneration (Jn 1:12-13; Eph 2:1-9<sup>vii</sup>; Col 2:12-13),<sup>viii</sup> and the grace of eternal life (Jn 3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47). So, although God sometimes gives grace unconditionally, the graces of salvation, forgiveness, justification, adoption, regeneration, and eternal life are conditioned upon faith in Christ. These favors are free, yet given on condition of faith.<sup>ix</sup>

**Is faith conditioned on grace?** Does God grant people grace (undeserved favor), leading them to faith? The scripture is very clear that He does, and that no one would come to Christ apart from God's grace. The fact that rebels remain alive for even a second after insolently sinning against God shows the grace of God's patience and tolerance. Additionally, our ability to reason and deliberate and choose is a gift of God, without which faith would be impossible. And human fallenness is so pervasive that no one would come to Christ without the grace of God's calling and drawing him (John 6:44; Rom 1:6, 7; 1 Cor 1:9, 24, 26; Gal 1:6, 15; Eph 1:8; 4:1; 2 Thes 1:14, etc.). Finally, the gospel itself is all of grace. God's undeserved favor is shown in every aspect of the work of redemption, accomplished through God's promises to Abraham, His revelation of Himself in the nation of Israel, and the climax of His plan in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. All of salvation history demonstrates God's initiative and grace. Most, if not all, Christian theological traditions believe in prevenient grace—grace given before faith in Christ.<sup>x</sup> The issue is whether God grants the grace necessary to believe only to those He elects, or to all men—yet some reject His grace.<sup>xi</sup> I'd like to present several arguments that God gives all men the ability to respond to Him in faith, and that faith involves a real, human choice and is not deterministically given to people by God.

**God's love.** The Bible teaches that God loves all people (Jn 3:16, 1 John 4:16, Ps 145:8-9). In Jesus, God has provided salvation for all people (1 Tim 2:5-6; 1 Jn 2:2; Jn 3:16, 4:42; Rom. 5:18; 2 Cor 5:14-15; Heb 2:9; etc.); and Jesus freely offers salvation to all (Jn 3:14-16; 6:35-37; 7:37-39; Mat 11:28-30; Rev 22:17). God desires for all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-7) and for none to perish (2 Peter 3:9). He commands all people everywhere to repent and believe (Acts 17:30, Mark 1:15, Is 45:22). Jesus is drawing all to Himself (Jn 12:32), and the Holy Spirit is convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn 16:7-11). God's universal provision, universal desire, and universal call demonstrate his love for all people.<sup>xii</sup> Yet if people are unable to respond to the calling of God and if God only provides some people with a remedy for this inability, then the universality and glory of His love are diminished. Imagine that some children away at a camp were disobedient and for this reason came down with a deadly virus that could only be cured by eating large quantities of potatoes. But the virus also took away the children's appetites and they needed a serum to stimulate their appetites. What would the parents think if they came to pick up their children and found that the camp directors, who had plenty of serum, had only given it to some of the children? Such a withholding would clearly show a lack of love, no matter how much the directors might talk about how it was the children's *own fault* that they got sick and that they had *genuinely* offered *all* the children potatoes every day and had patiently *cared* for the children who died. No one would think that they loved the

children from which they withheld the serum. The idea that God only grants some people the ability to believe and be saved reduces the glory and universality of God's love.

**God's expectation.** In Deut. 30:19-20, Moses entreated the children of Israel, ““*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live....*” God expects and commands people to choose Him (see also Is 45:22, Josh 24:14-15, Acts 17:30-31). Evidently, God believes that people have the ability to make such a choice.<sup>xiii</sup> Even more telling is that He sometimes was “full of wrath” *specifically* “because they did not believe in God and trust his saving power” (Ps 78:21-22). Jesus denounced the cities where He had preached “because they did not repent,” saying that their sin of indifference and unbelief was more worthy of judgment than the evils of Sodom and Gomorrah (Mat. 11:20-24). See also Num 14:11-12, 21-23; Deut 9:23-25; Ps. 78:21-22; Mat 12:38-42; Rom 1:18-23; 2 Thes 2:9-12; Heb 10:28-29, 12:25. God's wrath at people's refusal to repent and believe indicates that He believed they could do so, but chose not to. Otherwise it would be unloving for Him to be angry. Imagine a father who is enraged at a deaf child who did not come when spoken to. None of us would respect such a father. The child's inability to hear deserves pity, not wrath. God, the most loving of Fathers, would never be “filled with wrath” because people do not do what they have no ability to do.<sup>xiv</sup>

**God's longing.** In addition to anger, scripture teaches that God longs for people to believe and grieves when they don't (Dt 5:29, Ps 81:8-16, Is 48:17-19, Jer 13:15-17, Lk 13:34-35, 19:41-44). Many verses show that God's desire to save and bless people was thwarted by their refusal to submit or believe (Num 14:11, Deut 5:29, Is 5:7, 30:15-18, 65:12, 66:3-4, Jer 3:12, 31:22, Ezek 24:13, 33:11, Hosea 6:4-7, 7:13, Matt 23:37, Lk 7:30, Acts 7:51, 13:46, Rom 10:20, 2 Cor 5:20, 6:1) (Please look these verses up.) If faith is unilaterally produced by God with no free human choice involved, these verses make no sense. Why would their unwillingness even be a factor or concern to God? No human resistance would thwart His desire to save. Yet these verses show that human refusal to respond *does* thwart God's desire to save. And if the ultimate reason for their unbelief is that God chooses not to give them the ability to believe, His longing for their salvation becomes disingenuous, and we are left with a situation where God's *true* intentions (that they not be saved) are in opposition to His words.

**God tests hearts.** The fact that God tests men's hearts, particularly their faith and obedience, indicates that faith involves freedom of choice and is not given unilaterally by God. He tested Abraham's faith (Gen 22:1, 12; Heb 11:17-19). Jesus tested His disciple's faith (John 6:5-6). Other examples of testing are: Ex 15:25-26, 16:4, Deut 8:2, Judg 2:21-22, 3:1, Ps 7:8-9, Jer 11:20, Prov 17:3, 1 Pet 1:7. The concept of “testing” often includes the idea of refining, but, as these verses show, it also carries the idea of testing genuineness.<sup>xv</sup> It goes without saying that God would not need to test faith if people have no ability to believe. God would be testing His own ability to unilaterally produce faith.

**God Commends Faith.** The Bible everywhere commends people for their faith. Those in the “hall of fame” of faith were “commended” by and through their faith (Hebrews 11:2, 4, 5, 39). Jesus often commended people for believing, “Your faith has saved you” (Mark 5:34, Mark 10:52, Luke 7:50, 17:10). Paul commends Abraham's faith, which God counted to him as righteousness (Rom 4:2-24). It would seem inappropriate for God to commend people for doing

something they had no choice or part in.

**Conclusion.** The understanding that faith involves a human response and choice, *initiated* and *influenced* but not *caused* (in a necessary way) by God, best represents the scripture's depiction of repentance and faith. And faith, whether chosen or determined, is not a work that earns salvation. In either case, salvation is a free gift of grace.

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<sup>i</sup> I'm using "chosen" with the sense that a choice is made between truly viable alternatives—an alternate choice could have been made.

<sup>ii</sup> I consider myself neither an Arminian nor a Calvinist, disagreeing with major parts of both systems.

<sup>iii</sup> I put the word "free" in quotes because they restrict the meaning of the word "free" to "not forced against the will." People do choose, but choose necessarily. The influence of God is so strong that they could not have chosen otherwise.

<sup>iv</sup> This argument falls short, since even if faith is necessarily determined by God, it is still something humans do. Faith is still a human deed. At issue is the *nature*, not the *source* of the deed. If someone argued that he is saved by his good works, which are produced in him by God alone, we would reply, "No! Salvation is by faith *apart from* good deeds, *even good deeds produced in us by God*. It is the *nature* of faith that makes in not a good work, not the *source* of faith.

<sup>v</sup> A supralasarian believes that God elected humans logically prior to decreeing the fall and to electing Christ as Savior. Ephesians 1:4 contradicts this idea, stating that believers were chosen in Christ. Christ was elected as Savior logically prior to the election of humans, who were elected "in Him."

<sup>vi</sup> If we seek to exclude *all* boasting by making saving faith necessarily determined by God, we must do the same with sanctifying faith and obedience, making every *Christian* act also determined by God. But Paul's statements about boasting are in the context of *earning* salvation through good works and do not eliminate all commendation and glory to humans. God will honor humans in many ways for their faith and obedience. If sanctifying acts can earn commendation, why should the most important act be excluded from any commendation whatsoever?

<sup>vii</sup> The salvation spoken of in Ephesians 2 primarily refers to regeneration—being raised to life from a state of death (note verse 5). Verse eight says that we have been saved (brought from death to life) "*through faith*." So, we are regenerated through faith. For my views on the proper interpretation of Ephesians 2, see [https://davebovenmyer.wordpress.com/2010/05/03/dead-men-can-believe/#\\_ftnref1](https://davebovenmyer.wordpress.com/2010/05/03/dead-men-can-believe/#_ftnref1)

<sup>viii</sup> For a discussion of 1 John 5:1, which some have claimed teaches that regeneration precedes faith, see <https://davebovenmyer.wordpress.com/2010/05/03/does-1-john-5-1-teach-that-faith-is-caused-by-regeneration/>

<sup>ix</sup> If receiving a free gift meant that we earned it, it would be impossible to receive a free gift.

<sup>x</sup> Many Calvinists even include regeneration in prevenient grace, believing that it precedes faith. For my views on this issue see <https://davebovenmyer.wordpress.com/2010/05/03/is-regeneration-by-faith-or-is-faith-by-regeneration/>

<sup>xi</sup> Since all traditions believe that God gives grace prior to faith, I will not take my allotted space in this paper to consider the extent of human fallenness and whether fallen humans can naturally do any good or seek God. Jacobus Arminius argued, and classical Arminians today argue, just as strongly for the utter moral and spiritual depravity of humans as do Calvinists. Whether they are right or not, I will leave to another paper.

<sup>xii</sup> The scripture is clear that God's love is not everlasting to those who continue to reject Him (Rev 21:8). Even while they are still alive, God judges some people by intentionally hardening them as a sort of pre-judgment day rejection (2 Thes 2:9-11). God sometimes hardens people's hearts (Ex 9:12, 10:1; Deut 2:30, Is 63:17, Jn 12:39-40). Such hardening does not mean that He never loved them nor never gave them the ability to believe and be saved.

<sup>xiii</sup> The fact that one of God's purposes for giving the law was to show us that we are sinners and cannot perfectly keep the law (Rom 3:30, 7:13) does not negate the fact that God expects people to repent and believe, since He gave the law with the specific purpose of exposing sin and cultivating humility and faith.

<sup>xiv</sup> This analogy involves a natural inability not a moral one. Yet anger at an inborn lack of moral ability would be just as inappropriate. It would be unjust for God to judge people more harshly than Sodom and Gomorrah *specifically because* they did not do something they never had a power to do, whether that inability is natural or moral or spiritual.

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<sup>xv</sup> I will leave to another paper the question of why an all-knowing God would need to test someone when He already knows how they will respond. The scripture says that He sometimes tests “in order to know” (Deut 8:2, Gen 22:12).

## **Part I (c): What Does It Mean to Be Saved By Grace Through Faith?** **By Kurt Jurgensmeier**

*Personal note: The purpose of this paper is to inform the reader of the historical Protestant Reformed position on the nature of saving faith. While Scripture is our final authority and I originally came to the following conclusions in my own Bible study many years ago, over time I discovered that everything written below was also the view of St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, and the “fathers of modern missionaries,” William Carey and David Livingstone in the past, and John MacArthur, John Piper, John Stott, D. A. Carson, J. I. Packer, and Wayne Grudem in the present. Therefore, it would be an unfair distortion to refer to the following as merely “Kurt’s view.”<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, I understand some of the positions below may be new to some—and perhaps even offensive. I do not desire to offend anyone and I greatly respect and love the other authors of this paper and anyone in our movement who would read it. I appreciate the effort in our churches to hold grace and truth together, like our Savior did (cf. John 1:14, 16), and to be in a movement where men can strongly disagree on important issues but still respect one another and serve God together. The God-pleasing unity of our movement this side of Heaven will never depend on full agreement, but rather exercising the love and humility our leaders have exemplified for us throughout our history. I believe that those who hold different views, including Arminianism, could still be saved and preach a Gospel that would save others. But we should encourage one another and be serious about “**accurately handling the word of truth**” so that we may “**present**” ourselves as “**approved**” by God, rather than “**ashamed**” before God, on that Day that particularly Pastors must give an account of our interpretation and teaching of Scripture to its Author (2 Tim 2:15). If “**accurately handling**” the Scriptures on this issue is not important to you now, I believe it will be on that Day. Additional writings that more fully support what is below are on my website: [www.TrainingTimothys.org](http://www.TrainingTimothys.org).*

Why are you saved and another person is not? The way we answer this reflects whether we believe we are saved by God’s grace or our works. The Protestant Reformers believed that if we deny that every single part and requirement of our salvation, including saving faith, is the work and gift of God alone, then we believe in salvation ultimately by a human work. I write to

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defend the historical doctrine that our salvation is by the grace of God alone, through the gift of God alone, to the glory of God alone.

We need to begin with a biblical understanding of what is required to be saved. Romans 10:9 says, **“If you [sincerely] confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead [for your sin], you will be saved.”** Obviously, submitting to the belief that **“Jesus is Lord”** and our only Savior, requires a lot of *humility*. A person who does not *humbly* admit they are sinners deserving Hell, and *humbly* submit to Christ as Lord will not be saved, because God only **“gives grace to the humble”** (1 Pet 1:5), including saving grace.

The Bible says that such humility is both a **“good”** work and **“required”** by God: **“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”** (Mic 6:8). To be humble before God is a very good, virtuous, moral, and praiseworthy work, and the very first step of getting saved. The faith that saves is not a morally neutral decision like believing in George Washington. Obeying Romans 10:9 to be saved requires all kinds of good, moral, and meritorious attitudes and actions. Biblical faith of any kind requires *love* for God, as the Apostle said, **“The only thing that counts [for salvation, cf. vs.4- 6] is faith expressing itself through love”** (Gal 5:6). Who gets saved without loving God? Accordingly, saving faith requires a great deal of humility, repentance, and even love for God. Unfortunately, it seems that many dilute what is required to be saved by diluting what saving faith includes. They speak of it as merely “accepting a gift” or “making a choice” which requires nothing virtuous at all.

Therefore, if saving faith requires all sorts of good, moral, virtuous acts and attitudes, we must now answer the question of who is the source of this saving faith, and the humility, repentance, and love it requires? If we say we were ultimately saved because we chose to be humble, repentant, and loving toward God, then it seems we are saying we were ultimately saved by our good works. Especially when we also claim anyone could have made the same choice. And when someone from that perspective tries to explain *why* they chose the humility, repentance, and love required in saving faith, and others did not, it would seem rather impossible to avoid the conclusion that they were ultimately saved by a good work they did. However, if we claim that all of the good acts and attitudes included in saving faith are completely *God’s work in us and gift to us*, then it would seem we maintain the historically orthodox Christian belief that we are ultimately and completely saved by God’s grace and good works, instead of our works.

This is why I believe saving faith is contrasted with good works throughout Scripture (cf. Rom 4:1-6; Eph 2:8-9). The reason that saving faith is *not* a meritorious human work is *not* because it is a morally neutral or rather mundane act. Saving faith is contrasted with human works in Scripture because all of saving faith’s ingredients are God’s work! Accordingly, salvation: **“does not depend on man’s desire [choice] or effort [action]”** (Rom 9:16). If we misunderstand this, it would seem we will fundamentally misunderstand what it means to be saved by God’s grace instead of our works. Along these lines, English scholar William Temple famously wrote: “The only thing of my very own which I contribute to my redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed.”<sup>2</sup>

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Likewise, Charles Spurgeon believed:

[T]he doctrine of justification as preached by an Arminian, is nothing but the doctrine of salvation by good works, lifted up; for he always thinks faith is a work of the creature and a condition of his acceptance. We are saved by faith as the gift of God, not faith as our work. Otherwise we are saved by works, and not by grace at all.<sup>3</sup>

Along the same lines, Martin Luther wrote:

God has surely promised His grace to the humbled . . . But a man cannot be humbled till he realizes that his salvation is beyond his own powers and pleasure [decision], and is the work of Another—God alone. As long as he is persuaded that he can make even the smallest contribution to his salvation, he remains self-confident and does not despair of himself, and so is not humbled before God . . . These truths are published for the sake of the elect, that they may be humbled and . . . so saved. The rest of men resist this humiliation . . . they want a little something left that they can do for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

“They want a little something left that they can do for themselves.” In my humble opinion, this would seem to be an appropriate description of any view of salvation that undercuts the full meaning of being saved by God’s grace.

It is also my humble opinion that the primary reason that some “want a little something left that they can do for themselves” is to maintain a sense of fairness about God’s plan for salvation. It is admittedly unfair if no one can be saved by anything they do, and must be saved only and ultimately by the choice, work, grace, and mercy of God. But an unfair plan of salvation is precisely what the Apostle taught us in Romans 9:1-11:32 (and don’t miss the last verse which may be the most unfair of all). *Grace is never fair*. It would seem that the only way to make God’s plan for humanity fair in our eyes is to make it ultimately dependent on our works. Therefore, it would seem that you can either have a plan of salvation that is fair and ultimately dependent on our works, or a plan that seems unfair and ultimately dependent on God’s works, and unconditional choice and grace. God chose the latter.

Some do not believe in salvation by God’s grace alone, but rather, salvation by God’s *generosity*. They suggest God takes the *little* faith, humility, fear, love, repentance, etc. that we choose to exercise toward Him, and He gives us much more in return. But wouldn’t the claim that we add something virtuous like faith to our salvation ultimately seem to credit us for our salvation? With your view of salvation, can you honestly agree with the Apostle who spoke of, “**God, Who has saved us . . . not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace**” (2 Tim 1:8-9; also think about Titus 3:2-8)? Paul believed that to be “**saved . . . because of . . . His . . . grace**” meant that we did not do “**anything**” to be saved. That is what the verse says.

Because the Apostle knew that the real meaning of salvation by faith would be vulnerable to misunderstanding, he wrote as clearly as he could:

**As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. . . . But because of His great love for us, God . . . made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in**

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**transgressions . . . [I]t is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and [even] this [saving faith is] not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.** (Eph 2:1, 4-5, 8-9)

Despite popular efforts to make our salvation ultimately depend on a choice we made, or an action we performed, the Apostle seems to clearly deny this to be the case. First, before salvation we were spiritually “**dead in . . . sins**” “**but**” then “**God . . . made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions**” (Eph 2:1, 4-5). All humans are born spiritually dead (cf. Rom 5:12) and have to be “**made . . . alive with Christ**” before they are able to respond to Christ in a saving way. The best way to understand spiritual death is comparing it with physical death. While many describe our pre-regenerated state as being merely spiritually impaired or corrupted, the Apostle intentionally chose the word “**dead**” (*nekrous*). This is because he believed that just as a physically dead person has absolutely no physical abilities, a spiritually dead person has no spiritual abilities as well. This is why Jesus described spiritually dead people as spiritually deaf and blind, and unable to respond at all to spiritual things (cf. Matt 6:22-23; 13:11-16; 15:14; John 8:37, 42-44, 47). The actions and attitudes necessary to be saved are simply not within the nature or ability of a spiritually dead human. “**The sinful mind [referring to *all* without the Spirit, cf. v. 9] is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law [even the command to repent and believe], nor can it do so**” (Rom 8:7).

This is because, “**The man without the Spirit [i.e. spiritually dead] does not [and cannot] accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, [including the Gospel] for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot [even] understand them [let alone put faith in them], because they are spiritually discerned**” [and he is spiritually dead] (1 Cor 2:14). Jesus said:

**No one can come to Me [for salvation] unless the Father Who sent Me drags him by His power,<sup>5</sup> and I will [without exception] raise him [whom God drags to Me], up at the last day. . . . The Spirit gives [spiritual] life; the [spiritually dead] flesh [which is all the unregenerate have] counts for nothing [in the process of salvation]. . . This is why I told you that no one can come to Me unless the Father has enabled him**” (John 6:44, 63, 65).

The inability of unregenerated humans to “**submit to God,**” “**accept**” what comes “**from the Spirit of God**” or “**come to**” Christ for salvation, is why the Apostle taught that every ingredient of our salvation is the “**gift**” and supernatural work of God, including saving “**faith**” (Eph 2:8-9).

There is a supernatural reason for the spiritually dead being spiritually blind and deaf. The Apostle writes: “**The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel.**” And if they cannot see it, they cannot believe it. How did we see it? “**God . . . made His light shine in our hearts [through regeneration] to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ**” (2 Cor 4:4, 6). There is no other way we would have been healed of our spiritual, demonic blindness. A supernatural problem requires a supernatural solution.

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Of course, people must humbly “**repent**” (Matt 4:17; Acts 2:38) and lovingly “**believe**” to be saved (John 3:16, 6; Acts 13:39), and so we must preach these commandments to unbelievers as the required response to the Gospel. But we must also believe and preach the additional biblical view that only by a gracious, supernatural act of the Spirit, which Jesus called being “**born again by the Spirit**” (John 3:5), and therefore made spiritually alive, will the spiritually dead be able to repent and believe the Gospel.

Divine demands to unbelievers, including any aspect of God’s “**law**,” are not for the purpose of telling them what they can do to save themselves and “trigger” God’s grace (Rom 3:20; Gal 3:2, 24). On the contrary, it would seem that the purpose of these divine demands is to confront us with what we *cannot* do, leading us to desperately depend on Christ *alone* to work salvation in us. Even as believers, when we are commanded to love like God loves (John 13:34), we readily recognize our natural inability to do so, and the need for God to supernaturally enable us to obey such commands.

When something is done by God’s grace it simply means it is done by God. When the Apostle says, “**it is by grace you have been saved**” it means “it is by *God* you have been saved” which is why he describes it as “**the gift of God**” (Eph 2:8). Being saved by grace does not simply mean that God was kind enough to provide a way for us to save ourselves. Being saved by God’s grace instead of our works means that while God demands several requirements for salvation, including *saving faith*, He Himself grants and works all of them in us and for us. The ultimate source of every ingredient required for our salvation is God Himself, including saving faith (cf. Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:29; Rom. 4:16; 1 Tim 1:14; Acts 16:14; 18:27; 1 Pet 1:21). If being saved by God’s grace alone instead of our works doesn’t mean being saved by God’s works alone, what else does it mean?

This is certainly what the Protestant Reformers meant by *sola gratia*. To say that we are saved by grace means more than the fact that we are not saved by any merit of our own. Doesn’t being saved by grace also mean that we were not ultimately saved by any power, act, decision, “**desire or effort**” of our own (Rom 9:16)? God’s saving grace is not just *mercy* to save us if we will do something (like have faith), but it is the supernatural *power* of spiritual re-creation that enables and ensures that spiritually dead but predestined-by-grace humans will fulfill every requirement of salvation, including saving faith.

Accordingly, the Apostle wrote: “**Therefore, the promise** [of salvation] **comes by** [God’s gift of saving] **faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s** [elect] **offspring** (Rom 4:16; Rom 9:6-9). It would seem that if our salvation were ultimately dependent on our works or decision, it would not be “**by grace**” and could not be “**guaranteed**” to anyone.

If we truly believe that we were ultimately saved because of something we did, why don’t we boast of the decision we made instead of praising God for the decision He made (cf. Rom 11:5-6, 1 Cor 1:26-30, Eph 1:3-14, Rev 17:8)? It is because we believe our salvation ultimately depends on God, not us.

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While the Apostle could hardly be clearer in Ephesian 2:8-9, some wish to claim that he meant to intentionally *exclude* saving “**faith**” from those requirements of salvation that are “**not of yourselves,**” and that he was only generally referring to salvation as that which is a “**gift of God.**”<sup>6</sup> This seems unlikely. If the Apostle is teaching that being “**saved**” is “**not from yourselves . . . is the gift of God**” and “**not by works**” then he certainly meant that the “**faith**” through which we are saved is also “**not from yourselves . . . is the gift of God**” and “**not by [our] works.**”

The Apostle made it clear elsewhere that saving faith is a gift given by God when he wrote: “**It has been granted [by God] to you . . . to believe on Him**” (Phil 1:29) for salvation. Paul described his own salvation experience as: “**The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the [saving] faith that are in Christ Jesus**” (1 Tim 1:14). Not only the “**grace**” to be saved was “**poured out on**” Paul by the “**Lord,**” but “**the faith**” as well. Likewise, Luke describes “**those who by [God’s] grace had believed**” (Acts 18:27).

When the Apostle says our salvation “**is the gift of God**” (Eph 2:8) he does not mean it is merely a gift *offered* by God. Our salvation “**is the gift of God**” because He *gives it*, along with the saving faith necessary to receive it. Otherwise, because of the inability of spiritually dead, deaf, and blind humans we would never receive the gift. We won’t even want or recognize the gift.

The spiritual gift of salvation is just like other spiritual gifts of God’s grace. Do those gifted in teaching or serving choose their gift? Do they have to do something to receive it? Are not spiritual gifts simply *given* solely according to the unconditional choice, work, and grace of God? Of course, like the gift of salvation, we need to develop our spiritual gifts. But their actual possession is completely the choice and work of God. So it is with the spiritual gift of *saving faith*.

The fact that the gift of saving faith works through us (not from us) does not change the fact that its only source is God, not us. He is the “**author**” of it, not us (Heb. 12:2). Accordingly, the NT scholar John Stott interprets Ephesians 2:8-9 to be saying:

We must never think of salvation as a kind of transaction between God and us in which he contributes grace and we contribute faith. For we were dead, and had to be quickened [regenerated] before we could believe. No, Christ’s apostles clearly teach elsewhere that saving faith is also God’s gracious gift (Phil 1:29; Acts 18:27).<sup>7</sup>

For example, what did God intend to teach us about salvation through grace in the life of Noah? Out of an estimated 10 *billion* people living at the time of the Flood,<sup>8</sup> God had favor on only *one* person and saved *eight*. Do we really think God had favor on Noah, and saved his family because he *did something* of his own choice and ability that everyone else was also able to do? If one person in 10 *billion* “**found favor in the eyes of the Lord . . . was a righteous man [and] walked with God**” (Gen 6:8-9) should we not conclude that God uniquely initiated a relationship with this one man and supernaturally worked in him, resulting in his faith and righteousness? Isn’t the fact that we uniquely have a relationship with God the only reason that

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we are “**righteous**” and “**walk with God**”? Otherwise we would not be that way, and neither would have Noah. The sheer mathematics of Noah’s story proclaims that salvation is completely and only a result of God’s choice and work and not because of anything we do of ourselves to earn, trigger, or cause God’s grace.

## **Response to the following article (Part II)**

Some claim that God intended Scripture to seem contradictory on these issues and the acceptance of apparent contradictions in Scripture is some kind of virtue, and we should caution those who would seek to harmonize God’s word. But I do not believe that God intended the truth or the Bible to be that way. This embrace of contradiction in the name of “faith” (i.e. *fideism*) has been denounced throughout Church history. The Apostle did the same when he wrote: “**O Timothy, guard the deposit [of truth] entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions [Gr. *antitheseis*] of what is falsely called “knowledge,” for by professing it some have swerved from the faith**” (1 Tim 6:20 ESV). Evidently, the Apostle Paul didn’t believe in apparent “**contradictions**” in God’s word either, and any such conclusions would be “**falsely called knowledge**” of anything, including God.

In what other realm would God expect us to accept two contradictory statements as both being true? None.<sup>9</sup> Why would we apply a different rule to the word of God? God made us with logic, and to claim that we must abandon it in order to really understand God and His word makes it impossible to confidently interpret Scripture. How can we tell if an interpretation is true or not if we claim they can contradict one another? While it can seem humble to admit there are apparent contradictions in Scripture, we would suggest a better and at least equally humble approach. If two portions of Scripture seem to us to be contradictory, then we should refrain from speaking authoritatively on what either one of those portions of Scripture says.

Nevertheless, the most respected and influential Bible teachers in the history of the Church *have* reconciled, in the minds of a multitude of other thinking people, the verses that *fideists* claim are irreconcilable. Others may not agree with how Christians have historically reconciled Scripture, but striving to do so is surely a better approach to the Bible than abandoning the historical definition of what truth is. Paul made clear statements regarding saving faith including: we were not “**saved . . . because of anything we have done**” (2 Tim 1:8-9), our salvation “**does not depend on man’s desire or effort**” (Rom 9:16), and our saving “**faith**” is “**not from yourselves**” (Eph 2:8-9). Therefore, if we interpret other Scriptures to contradict these, then it would seem we are not properly interpreting Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

I realize that many good and godly men might disagree, and not intend any of the concerns I have about a contrary view. But I am concerned that if we believe saving faith and all it requires is ultimately a result of our “**desire or effort**” (Rom 9:16), instead of God’s choice and work, then that view is accurately described by Jonathan Edwards when he wrote:

The adverse scheme . . . takes away Christ out of the place of the bottom stone, and puts in men's own virtue [because of the biblical ingredients of saving faith]. . . . I leave it to everyone to judge whether the difference between the two consists only of small

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consequence. . . . I am sensible that side disclaims the doctrine of merit; and speak of our utter unworthiness . . . but after all [in their view], it is our virtue, imperfect as it is, that recommends men to God, by which [they] come to have a saving benefit in Christ, rather than others.<sup>11</sup>

Why am I saved and another person is not? I believe my salvation was completely God's work in me, and gift to me, and not because of anything I did. This is what Christians have historically meant by salvation by God's grace alone, through the gift of faith alone, to God's glory alone. As one of my favorite songs says, referring to salvation: "It's all because of Jesus I'm alive." Or As B. B. Warfield put it: "We confess that it was God who made us men; let us confess with equal heartiness that it is God who makes us Christians."<sup>12</sup> Does our theology honestly enable us to do that?<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Regarding the history of this debate in the Church, and quotes from those listed here, see book 6, *Biblical Believing*, chapter 6.4 at [www.TrainingTimothys.org](http://www.TrainingTimothys.org).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Sinclair Ferguson, *In Christ Alone* (Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007), 42.

<sup>3</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "Effects of Sound Doctrine,"; <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols4-6/vols4-6.htm> ), # 324.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Baker, 1957), 78.

<sup>5</sup> The NIV translation of God "drawing" someone to Christ means much more than inviting or coaxing. The word is *elkusē* which the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature (BAGD)* defines as: "To move an object . . . with implication that the object being moved is incapable of propelling itself or in the case of persons is unwilling to do so voluntarily." Accordingly, see its use in John 21:6, 11; Acts 16:19; 21:30; and James 2:6. The insertion of "drag by God's power" is warranted in this text, and the context is salvation.

<sup>6</sup> Normally a different view of Ephesians 2:8-9 is supported by claiming that the differing genders of the Greek words make it impossible for "this [*touto*]" to refer to "faith [*pisteōs*]." According to a personal conversation I had with the foremost Romans scholar Douglas Moo, Professor of NT at Wheaton College, this is not true. The genders of Greek words can differ, and often do in the NT, when referring to ideas, which is a very legitimate view of this text. Accordingly, Abraham Kuyper wrote regarding Ephesians 2:8-9: "Nearly all the church fathers and almost all the theologians eminent for Greek scholarship judged that the words 'it is the gift of God' refer to faith." (*The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Eerdmans, 1946, 407). For further comment on the Greek text of Ephesians 2:8-9 see the Book: *Biblical Believing*, chapter 6.3 at [www.TrainingTimothys.org](http://www.TrainingTimothys.org).

<sup>7</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Intervarsity, 1986), 83.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Morris, the recognized founder of modern creation science, calculated that in the estimated 1700 years between Adam and Noah, with people having multiple children until very old age, that around 10 billion people were on the Earth at the time of the flood. See calculations online at [www.redeemerfw.org/resources/prefloodpop.html](http://www.redeemerfw.org/resources/prefloodpop.html).

<sup>9</sup> Some have claimed that current scientific theories regarding the nature of light demonstrate that two apparently contradictory facts can be true. However, we read in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*:  
[T]heoretical scientists have never made the claim, as the theologians of paradox seem to with respect to Biblical truths, that two incompatible propositions can in fact be simultaneously true. Physicists, for example, have never claimed that light is in fact simultaneously both wholly particle and wholly wave, where "wave" and "particle" are defined in such a way that the terms are contradictory. The claim of the scientist, rather, is only that there is at times no good basis for considering either of two seemingly incompatible propositions false. [i.e. it's difficult to always say whether light is in particle or wave form]. (David Basinger, "Biblical Paradox: Does Revelation Challenge Logic?," *JETS* 30:2 (June 1987), 208-9).

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For further critique of the idea that truth or Scripture is intended by God to appear contradictory, see the Book: *Biblical Philosophy*, chapter 2.4 “Biblical Reasoning,” and 2.10 “A Critique of Fideism,” at [www.TrainingTimothys.org](http://www.TrainingTimothys.org).

<sup>10</sup> Some have claimed that J. I. Packer holds this view. However, for both a clarification and critique of Dr. Packer’s view on “antinomies” see John Piper’s article at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/a-response-to-ji-packer-on-the-so-called-antinomy-between-the-sovereignty-of-god-and-human-responsibility>.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone” from *The Great Awakening*, (Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 8-13.

<sup>12</sup> Reference unavailable.

<sup>13</sup> On the spiritual inabilities of spiritually dead humans and the psychological aspects of conversion see Book 4: *Biblical Psychology*, chapters 4.12-4.16 at [www.TrainingTimothys.org](http://www.TrainingTimothys.org). On the biblical nature of saving faith see Book 6: *Biblical Believing*, chapters 6.2-6.5.

## Part II: Finding God’s Sovereignty in Man’s Free Will

### *What I see in the light of Biblical truth*

**By John Meyer**

Jesus had just fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. It was an astonishing sign and the crowds were in awe. He was becoming their hope, but not in the way he intended. Instead he had become their idol, their guru, the one they would make responsible for solving all their problems. Determined to get the help they wanted, they decided they would make him king by force (Jn 6:15). Jesus left them and withdrew across the lake. But they followed, still intent on using him to get a better life.

Though it is presumptuous to guess at Jesus’ thoughts, at the human level he might have been experiencing a maddening frustration. He was being “followed” by people who would not follow him; he was to be proclaimed king by people who had no king but their own desires. The more people saw his divine attributes the more they clamored to use him for their selfish ends. How could he reach people with the true result of drawing them to God? Even someone genuinely seeking would be led astray by the driven mob.

Seemingly in response to the crowd’s wrong view of him and what they had seen, Jesus speaks to the crowd about the sovereign role of God in calling his followers. “All that the Father gives me will come to me... No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:37,44). Jesus’ confidence was not in people responding to His power and love, but in the final sovereignty of God over who would be His people. Jesus’ statements seem intended to give us a clear understanding that God is the sole determiner of who comes to know God. Ultimately, our salvation comes by God’s initiative and whatever God initiates He also brings to completion.

Other verses also communicate this idea and the most straightforward reading of scripture seems to present it as a Biblical truth:

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- “all who were appointed for eternal life believed.” (Acts 13:48)
  - “God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.” (Rom 9:16, see also 11-15)
  - “One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.” (Acts 16:14)

There are many other verses that can be interpreted, and some most simply interpreted, to communicate the truth of God’s sovereign election of those who are saved (and lost).

Since Scripture clearly states this truth of God’s sovereignty in election, and since this understanding of God’s sovereignty fits well with the gospel of salvation by God’s grace alone, many wonder why anyone believes anything else regarding the work of salvation. The truth of God’s ultimate sovereignty over everything, including our salvation, gives God the glorious position He must have as Creator and Ruler of all things. The knowledge of God’s ultimate sovereignty is the foundation for our security in trusting God and why we should fear and obey Him. It is an essential part of our Christian faith.

The young man was filled with a tension inside. He was rich, respected, religiously perfect – and sensing a disconnection from God that frightened him. He knew enough about Jesus to know that Jesus had the answer he was looking for. Jesus could either put his fears to rest or tell him what he needed to do. Falling on his knees, he asked, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus interacted with him on points of the law, and then the text tells us this: “Jesus looked at him and loved him. ‘One thing you lack,’ he said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me’” (Mk 10:21).

When Jesus looked at this rich, religious man, His response was love. The love of God on a personal, one to one, basis is the heart of our Christian faith. And here we see that love extended. But what, in love, did Jesus want for the man? Are we not intended to see here the love of God, reaching for the heart of a son of Adam, offering in hope a salvation that waits on a choice which is not God’s to make? For if it is God’s to make, and if God loves the man, then God will do the loving thing. We know from 1 John 3, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” We know that love always gives to another what is necessary to bring good. And so we know, if Jesus loved the man he would give whatever was in his power to give to bring the man good. But Jesus had no more to give this seeking rich man that what he did give. From this passage we see a living example of the Biblical truth stated elsewhere, God “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). The message of this account is that God’s desire is to save us and He has sent us a Savior, but we must respond; we must choose to repent and return to God.

It was the week before His crucifixion. The leaders and the nation that God had prepared for 2000 years would corporately reject their messiah and reject their God. God had humbly sought them and called them for three years, through signs and wonders, fulfilled prophesy and

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selfless compassion. But they would not come. And recognizing that the offer was now past, Jesus deeply grieved over the choice their hearts had made. He yearned for them to choose differently. And Jesus' words are intended to make us understand that a different choice was possible and also what God had deeply hoped for. "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.' 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing'" (Lu 19:41-42, Mt 22:37). When it tells us that Jesus wept, we know they were not crocodile tears. We are not intended to conclude that Jesus' tears were a simply a show put on for himself because he knew that he had already hardened their hearts having decided he wanted to reject and judge them. Rather, we understand that Jesus wept because he earnestly loved the people of Jerusalem and Israel and had done everything possible to humbly draw the nation to himself. Jesus wept because he had not been able to be gracious to the ones he loved. "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). That is the heart of our God. The life of Jesus and the words of Scripture lead us to this Biblical truth – God is seeking us, God has come for us and we must respond to Him. Our Father eagerly waits for the prodigal sons to come home.

Since this yearning heart of God, this clear love offered to every person through Christ is such an obvious theme in the Bible, many wonder how anyone can deny such a profound aspect of God's character. The gracious, never-exhausted love of God captures our heart and draws us to love God deeply. Even as He hung on the cross, our Savior said about all of us who had put Him there through our sin, rebellion and selfishness, "'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'" (Lu 23:34). God's gracious, saving love is extended to everyone.

But can we fully embrace these two, apparently contradictory, Biblical truths? The Bible is written in such a way that we are to understand that God infinitely loves every person and "desires all men to be saved". The only factor remaining is choice of the human heart to repent and return to a loving Father who has already provided a Redeemer. But the Bible is also written in a way that clearly communicates God's ultimate sovereignty over all that happens. He is the final determiner of salvation and of everything else.

These two truths certainly seem to be mutually exclusive. To embrace one seems to be to deny the other can be true. But I believe trying to resolve this paradox by defining one perspective or the other as the "real" truth requires us to de-emphasize and ultimately deny critical aspects of the true nature of God. The Bible presents us with this obvious paradox, but, interestingly, the Bible never acknowledges it as a paradox and – unlike many theologians – never tries to resolve it for us. Considering the centuries of questions and conflict in Christian camps over the free will-sovereignty issue, the Bible's complete lack of acknowledgement of this apparent contradiction must be seen as something remarkable. Indeed, Bible passages often go back and forth between the two perspectives without any sense of conflict or need for resolution. The passage in Romans 9 – 11 is one example.

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Romans 9 begins with Paul yearning for his Jewish brothers' salvation. "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (9:1-4). Paul has such a burden for the salvation of his fellow Jews that he would give up his own place with Christ for their sake! But if Paul loves them so much, Paul must have thought this was in accord with the heart of God. After all, love comes from God (I John 4:7). Paul certainly could not love them more than God who made them! The heart of care communicated here must accompany a belief that their loss grieved the heart and will of God.

But just a few verses later Paul resolves this tension of the heart by invoking God's sovereignty. The response reaches its climax with these words: "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (9:18). This is followed by a passage beginning with "What if..." and then describing God's right to make people as vessels prepared for destruction. It is not clear that Paul is saying God did this, but just that He has the right and ability to do so and we could not object. In all this we are just the clay formed by the potter into whatever pleases him. The rest of the chapter cites Old Testament verses about God's sovereignty over the condition of His people.

But beginning with Rom 9:30 and into chapter 10 the focus shifts again. "...the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone" (9:30-32). The passage explains their lack of salvation with an obstinate confusion about the foundation of righteousness. We are to understand the point at issue is in their heart, which they themselves need to change. "But concerning Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people'" (10:21). Clearly, God's hands are held out in love, hoping for a response that does not come. We are told that "the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (10:12-13). This is followed by a charge regarding the need to preach, implying that God wants all to have the opportunity to call on Him and so be saved, but the critical factor is that they must hear. "How can they call on one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (10:14-15).

The beginning of chapter 11 returns to the theme of God's sovereignty, saying that God is responsible for the current state of the nation of Israel, and that their rejection is a part of a greater plan.

But in verse 13 Paul speaks as one who believes individuals can choose salvation, even from wrong motives: "I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them" (11:13-14). A few verses later Paul describes our state with God as

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something that depends on our own choices of faith: "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again" (11:22-23). Here, it is our choices of continuing in His kindness or not persisting in unbelief, that determines our place with God.

Yet in verses 25-31 of chapter 11, Paul again returns to a strong theme of God's sovereignty over our state before Him. "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved," (11:25-26), "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (11:32).

As I review these chapters in Romans, and many, many other passages as well, it seems indisputable to me that an honest reading of Biblical text at times calls us to look at men as responsible and able, and, in other places, God as ultimately responsible and sovereign. We can, with some success, reinterpret texts to see only one perspective or the other, attempting to make our theology systematically consistent. But I think doing so denies the clearly recognizable intent of the author. It also obscures and perhaps even ultimately denies an essential aspect of Biblical truth that God has given us about Himself.

I think it is also noteworthy that most believers can read the Bible without ever sensing a contradiction between these two perspectives. Somehow we intuitively recognize the propriety of each perspective in its context as it reveals the infinite love and infinite power of God. Indeed, I think it can be clearly shown that Jesus himself walked in both perspectives, seeing each situation through that which would most correctly reveal the heart and mind of God. I have tried to show that in the opening gospel references.

No doubt such ambiguity and apparent contradiction is difficult and even unacceptable for some. After all, isn't it necessary for God's truth to be logically consistent? Perhaps in the ultimate sense it must be, even as we understand logic and consistency. But God has a track record of calling things that are not as though they were. And of asking people to believe the logically impossible. The perspective of what is possible and logical will no doubt be very different in eternity. If God clearly states the paradox perhaps we should be content with it.

A different, physical work of God that helps me in this regard is light. In God's library of word pictures, light is something good. God even says He is light. But close inspection reveals light is a logically inconsistent thing. Light is a particle; it has mass and velocity. But it is also a wave, with wavelength and frequency. But it is logically impossible for something to be both a particle and a wave. So what do we do with the data that tells us light can be either?

If physicists were like theologians they might break up into camps, each with their data and equations proving their "wave" or "particle" theology. But, being willing to let reality be wilder than their notions of logic, they just take light as it presents itself, in the impossibility of being one thing in one situation and something different in another.

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Could God be even “wilder” than His creation? He tells us in many places that He is sovereign. But Scripture also makes clear that God desires every man to return to Him, commands them to repent, and sincerely yearns for them to do so. I fully believe both of those great truths – because, as far as I can tell, Scripture clearly intends to teach them both. It is in the light of that paradox – and only in the light of that paradox – that I see God most gloriously. And for that reason I will let go of neither truth. When I see Christ face to face, it will be impossible for Him to be any more glorious. He will be shining with a love that could not have given any more. And He will be wrapped in a sovereignty that could not have reached any farther. And I will rejoice to the uttermost in the greatness and glory of my God.

*Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Rom 9:18-20*

*Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live! Ez. 18:31-32*

### **Part III: Conclusion** **By Rick Whitney**

Brothers-on-the-wall,

As you men know, John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield were all in the same, small, Oxford University Bible study. Along with a few others.

Although the study was small, the men were not. Over time they proved to become great lions for God. God used these young men to shake the world.

The following are a few excerpts from Arnold Dallimore’s biography of George Whitefield, [George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival](#).

Dallimore writes about the relationship, friendship, future difficulties and restoration of a friendship between John Wesley and George Whitefield. Specifically how their friendship was strained because of their different Biblical convictions on this important area that we are discussing in this GCLI paper.

Recently I pulled the Dallimore book off my shelf, because I remembered there was quite a bit in this biography about how and why these two great men separated - and how they came back together again.

I believe Dallimore writes with grace and kindness and respect - towards both John Wesley and George Whitefield.

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The tensions between the two, the cause of their separation, as well as their renewed friendship - are all clearly laid out.

There are some things from these pages, that can help us and help us guard our own hearts and attitudes.

*“John Wesley and George Whitefield, often with an ocean between them, each grew to believe in different aspects of the ‘mystery of the ages,’ that is, divine sovereignty and human responsibility. While both are true, if irreconcilable by finite reason, undue emphasis on either has always divided good men. ...*

*“While as each began to emphasize different aspects of this mystery, the beginning of their public separation was when Whitefield published a criticism of a sermon by John Wesley called ‘Free Grace.’ ...*

*“Wesley’s sermon was widely circulated in England and had severe arguments and strong words that had influenced many to accept Wesley’s doctrines. It had also left others confused and had aroused others to vigorously oppose Wesley. ...*

So Whitefield wrote a response to Mr. Wesley’s sermon.

*“Many there were who clamored for some explicit statement from George Whitefield. Would he continue silent or would he declare his stand? Whitefield had returned to England from America and was known for a more Calvinistic view on this question. ...*

*“Accordingly, despite George Whitefield’s utter dislike of bringing the differences between himself and Wesley before the public, Whitefield felt he had no other course to follow, and therefore he now published in England the document he had previously published in America entitled, ‘A Letter to Reverend John Wesley in answer to his sermon entitled “Free Grace.”’ ...*

Whitefield was conflicted. He loved John Wesley, but he also felt he needed to write out his thoughts.

*“Whitefield wrote ‘Ten thousand times would I rather have died than part from my old friends.’”<sup>1</sup>*

Never the less, Whitefield did write out his doctrinal position. John read it and was offended.

*“Wesley was irritated, offended. So Whitefield wrote Wesley seeking forgiveness and restitution of their relationship and friendship. ...*

*“Mostly it was Whitefield who reached out to Wesley. But Wesley seemed to rebuff Mr. Whitefield, again and again. ...*

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*“George Whitefield continued to reach out to Wesley. And was, at times, ignored. Whitefield wrote Wesley letters and John Wesley did not respond. ...*

*“But Whitefield persisted.”<sup>2</sup>*

And not only persisted, but George defended his old friend John Wesley. At one time, an American accused John Wesley of ill-behavior during Wesley’s time in the Colonies. George Whitefield defended John Wesley’s character at every turn.

Finally Wesley responded.

Since phones and our modern ease of travel did not exist, these two great churchmen communicated with the only means available – pen and ink. It took time.

Although some of Wesley and Whitefield’s correspondence and letter are lost, John Wesley eventually responded to George’s overtures.

John must have been still somewhat accusative in his reply towards Whitefield.

But George seemed to take the high road and wrote the following to John:

*“Whitefield wrote back to John, ‘I was not in the least offended. The more open you are with me, the better. If nature and pride arise in my heart, I will go to Jesus, abhor myself and pray for my dear reprovers.*

George Whitefield continued with these thoughts to John:

*I thank you for your kind reproof. Henceforward I will beg of God to keep the door of my lips, that I offend no more with my tongue. I would not willingly have one unprofitable word proceed out of my mouth. ...*

*“I am often with persons that commend me; I take it as a cross. I love you the more for reproving me.”<sup>3</sup>*

So John wrote to George again. The letter is lost.

But George replies – again:

*“Blessed be our Lord. There is a greater prospect of union than ever. It is what my soul longs after and labours for. It is a great pity that poor Pilgrims should fall out in their way to heaven. ...*

*“As Whitefield continued to seek out peace with his old friend John, Whitefield began to receive criticism that he was softening his theological views. ...*

*“Whitefield wrote one of his critics, speaking about John and Charles Wesley;*

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*'I dare not look on them as willful deceivers, but as persons who hazard their lives for the sake of the Gospel. Mr. Wesley is gone in some things, yet I believe that he, as well as others, with whom I do not agree in all things, will shine bright in glory.'* ...

Some of the principle parties and their leading men all decided to get together for a face to face, to pray and discuss and seek understanding.

*"Men from the Calvinistic Methodist Branch, the Arminian Methodist Branch and the Moravian Branch of that Great Revival suggested a conference with the hope of removing discord and if possible achieving union. Wesley agreed. ...*

*"There would be three points to the conference: 1. Unconditional election, 2. Irresistible grace, and 3. Final perseverance. ...*

*"Wesley wrote on these three topics and expressed a large measure of acceptance of these doctrines and indicated a sincere effort to find some basis of agreement.*

*"Their differences continued. And Whitefield continued to support John Wesley.*

George Whitefield continued to not only support his friend John Wesley with pen and ink, but also with word and deed:

*"When John was attacked by a mob and dragged from one end of the town (Staffordshire) to the other and his life threatened – Whitefield came to his rescue.*

*"When some of Wesley followers were attacked and their homes were burned and their property stolen, Whitefield raised an equivalent of \$40,000 to help those Wesleyans in that town. ...*

*"Some months later Wesley wrote about his relations with Whitefield, 'Disputings are no more. We join hand in hand.'* ...

*"There was indeed a much larger measure of fellowship. But the idea that an entire harmony was achieved is by no means correct. ...*

*"Charles Wesley, John's brother, remained aloof and somewhat critical of Whitefield. And years passed before Charles's attitude changed.*

*But once again Charles came to regard Whitefield with deep affection and the two men shared an enriching friendship, which was severed only by death."*<sup>4</sup>

Remember that these men were young men together in the same college and in the same Bible study. They began their spiritual lives at the same time. Their history together was a special thing. As all early relationships are between young Christians in any church. And these

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men each passionately loved their Savior. And vigorously studied His Word, concerning all manner of life and faith. And reading God's Word, they recognized that pursuing unity is of critical importance with their same Savior.

*"The relationship between John and George was strained, but their love and respect for each other was never quenched.*

*It was John Wesley, (who was to outlive George Whitefield by twenty-one years), who upon hearing of his old friend's death, gave Whitefield the most generous tribute as he gently chided another friend who asked, 'Do you think we shall see Mr. Whitefield in Heaven?' ...*

*"Wesley replied, 'No, sir, I fear not. Mr. Whitefield will be so near the Throne and we at such a distance we shall hardly get sight of him.'"*<sup>5</sup>

The example of these two men, how there were differences between them. Strong differences. But how there was also a measure of reconciliation and understanding and their support for each other in the Gospel, financial and other wise – their example, hopefully, can instruct us and help us guard our own hearts.

Keep pressing, Rick

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<sup>1-3</sup> Taken from Volume 2, ‘Chapter 2: Whitefield Meets the Supreme Trial of His Life’  
and ‘Chapter 3: Whitefield’s Reply to Wesley’s Sermon’

<sup>4</sup> ibed

<sup>5</sup> ibed