

SECTION 1

**RESPONSES TO *WHOSOEVER WILL*: A
BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF
*FIVE-POINT CALVINISM***

“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, THAT HE
GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON, THAT
WHOSOEVER BELIEVETH IN HIM SHOULD NOT
PERISH, BUT HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE.”

JOHN 3:16

WHOSOEVER WILL: A REVIEW ESSAY

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Calvinism has grown in popularity among Southern Baptists in the past generation, just as it has among evangelicals broadly. Most Southern Baptist ministers and laypersons however do not consider themselves Calvinists. It is unsurprising then that as Calvinism grows in popularity in the denomination, it should meet with some opposition. Non-Calvinist Southern Baptists believe that Calvinism is in error in some of its core beliefs, and many fear that it undermines commitment to evangelism and missions.

In 2008 a number of non-Calvinist Southern Baptist leaders decided that the time had come to offer a public response to Calvinism. They organized the “John 3:16” conference and designed it to offer an alternative to five-point Calvinism. This book derives from that conference. The first six chapters were presented at the conference. The final five chapters were added subsequently.²

Five-point Calvinism refers to the five positions affirmed by the Synod of Dort in 1619 in response to the objections of the new Arminian movement against the confession of faith of the Dutch church. In the twentieth century these five points have been conveniently remembered in English by the acronym TULIP, standing for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.

In the interest of full disclosure, I believe that Calvinism represents a generally correct interpretation of the Bible. Many of my heroes in the gospel ministry have been Calvinists—such men as George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, John Leland, Adoniram Judson, Jesse Mercer, Basil Manly, James Boyce, James Gambrell, and Charles Spurgeon. Although I care little for TULIPs and find the name Calvinist rather distasteful, these are the commonly accepted terms and I generally will employ them.

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²This book continues a public discussion concerning Southern Baptist Calvinism that began when a number of Southern Baptist leaders and pastors convened the “Building Bridges” conference in 2007. See Brad J. Waggoner and E. Ray Clendenen, eds., *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008).

Southern Baptists, Calvinism, and the Sandy Creek Tradition

Southern Baptist discussions regarding Calvinism usually involve some discussion of how much Calvinism existed in the Southern Baptist past. History does not establish truth, but historical precedent lends credibility to claims of legitimacy. Calvinists and non-Calvinists both have claimed that the denomination's theological heritage endorses their position. In this volume, Richard Land and David Allen for example suggest that the prevailing theology of Southern Baptists has been the "neither Calvinist nor Arminian" beliefs of the Separate Baptists, sometimes called the Sandy Creek tradition (46-51, 104-5). "The Separate Baptist Sandy Creek tradition has been the melody for Southern Baptists," Land wrote. "Southern Baptists are immersed in Sandy Creek" (50, 105).

The Separate Baptists, who originated in New England's Great Awakening, zealously preached the gospel in the South from the 1750s to the 1790s and established a movement that shaped Southern Baptists deeply. With a few exceptions, however, Separate Baptists were Calvinists.³ Land cites Yale historian Sydney Ahlstrom to support his claim that the Separates were not Calvinists, despite Ahlstrom's assertion that the "Baptist tradition was distinctly Reformed" and that the Separate Baptists generally agreed with the Calvinistic Philadelphia Confession.⁴ John Taylor, one of the most celebrated of the Separate Baptist preachers, recalled that the church covenants of Separate Baptist churches were "truly Calvinistic."⁵ The first Baptist church in Georgia, for example, was planted by Sandy Creek evangelist Daniel Marshall and adopted a covenant that committed members to support "the great doctrines of election, effectual calling [now called irresistible grace], particular redemption [now called limited atonement]," among others, while explicitly "denying the Arian, Socinian, and Arminian errors, and every other principle contrary to the word of God."⁶

James Ireland, another celebrated Separate Baptist preacher, said that both Separate and Regular Baptists "were Calvinistic in their sentiments."⁷ The Dover Baptist Association,

³E. Brooks Holifield, in the most recent scholarly discussion of early Baptist theology, concluded that "Calvinism became the predominant Baptist dialect." See E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 273-90 [quote on 279].

⁴See Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 320-1.

⁵John Taylor, *A History of Ten Baptist Churches*, 2nd ed. (Bloomfield, KY: Wm. H. Holmes, 1827), 10.

⁶Church Book, Kiokee Baptist Church, Columbia Co., Ga., microfilm, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

⁷James Ireland, *The Life of the Rev. James Ireland* (Winchester, VA: J. Foster, 1819), 136. Ireland was convinced of the doctrine of unconditional election from the time of his conversion, and remembered that he concluded then that "there was such a thing as God's electing love in Christ, and of grace being given to such before the world" (*ibid.*, 92-3).

which was the largest of the Separate Baptist associations in Virginia, adopted a statement in 1811 acknowledging that “it is well known that the Baptists of Virginia generally hold the doctrines commonly called Calvinism.”⁸ Early Baptist historians said the same.⁹

Land references the Separate Baptist preacher John Leland as especially significant in establishing the non-Calvinist character of Separate Baptist doctrine, due to his “enormous influence” (46). John Leland was influential, but he was in fact a five-point Calvinist. After preaching the gospel for fifty-seven years, Leland told fellow preacher James Whitsitt that he still believed the doctrines which he had learned in his youth, including election, “that Christ did, before the foundation of the world, predestinate a certain number of the human family for his bride, to bring to grace and glory,” and particular redemption, “that Jesus died for sinners, and for his elect sheep only.”¹⁰

The book’s chief interest however is not history. It seeks rather to establish the unscriptural character of the five points of Calvinism.

Total Depravity

Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, affirms the doctrine of total depravity but explains it in a Wesleyan fashion at some points. He affirms that “humans are totally depraved” and that the depravity is the result of God visiting the sin of Adam upon his posterity (43). He endorses Augustus H. Strong’s view that Adam’s sin passed on to all humans not by virtue of imputation, but by virtue of their “natural” or real union with Adam—all humans were united organically to Adam in seed though not individually (37). The depravity renders all persons, Patterson explains, spiritually blind and deaf, and “unable to do anything to save themselves” (36).

Traditional Wesleyans and Calvinists agree that prevenient or preregenerating grace is necessary to the conversion of any sinner. Without it, because of depravity, no one can turn from their love of sin to receive the gospel. They differ however in the character and extent of that grace. Calvinists believe that the Holy Spirit visits prevenient grace upon the

⁸Dover Baptist Association, *Minutes*, 1811, 7. Separate Baptists and Regular Baptists in Virginia agreed in the 1780s that they believed the same doctrines and practices, announced their full ecclesiastical fellowship with one another, and no longer called themselves Separates and Regulars.

⁹Cf. David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*, vol. 2 (Boston: Lincoln and Edmands, 1813), 61, 237; J. H. Spencer, *A History of Kentucky Baptists*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati: n.p., 1885), 107, 482.

¹⁰John Leland, “Anonymously to Elder James Whitsitt,” in John Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, ed. L. F. Greene (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 625. Leland argued at some length elsewhere in favor of total depravity, limited atonement (“If therefore the atonement is proved to be universal, it follows of course that salvation is universal.”), and effectual calling in opposition to the innovations of New Divinity Calvinism (Appendix, “The First Rise of Sin,” in *ibid.*, 161-70).

elect alone and that it is always effective in turning a sinner from the love of sin to love of Christ and reception of the gospel. It is a grace that brings about conversion. They traditionally refer to it as effectual calling or irresistible grace.

Patterson argues in favor of the Wesleyan view that prevenient grace extends to all persons alike. The Holy Spirit gives to all sinners sufficient grace to turn them from their love of sin to love of Christ, if only they choose to cooperate with rather than resist the Spirit's work. Quoting Arminian scholar Robert Picirilli, Patterson affirms that this preregenerating grace "opens the heart' of the unregenerate" and "enables them to respond positively in faith" (43). He seems to argue that the Spirit has removed the blindness and opened the hearts of all sinners equally.

Calvinists reject this view of prevenient grace. The tenor of scripture seems to run in the opposite direction, inasmuch as so many passages speak of the blindness and hardness of unbelievers. In the Wesleyan view, prevenient grace has removed the blindness, but the Bible says that it is still there because of the heart's corruption. Paul for example asserts that the gospel is veiled to the lost, since Satan has "blinded the minds of the unbelieving" (2 Cor 4:4).¹¹

The strongest argument in favor of the Wesleyan view is philosophical. It is the argument that since God commands all sinners to repent and believe the gospel, therefore all sinners are fully able to respond. Calvinists believe that all sinners have the real *natural ability* to repent of their sins and believe the gospel. They believe that the Bible teaches that sinners however lack the *moral ability* to repent and receive the gospel. They do not want to confess their sins, abandon their autonomy, and submit to their Creator. They have the power to choose and are not coerced in their choice. They choose as freely to reject Christ and his gospel as they do in all other decisions. The problem is not a lack of power but a lack of will. They do not want to repent.

God required Adam to love and obey him. When Adam disobeyed, the cosmic fall was the result, which rendered it impossible for humans to obey God, since part of the punishment of sin was deliverance of Adam and his posterity to a corrupt nature. Adam chose to rebel, so God punished him by giving Adam's heart over to love of rebellion. Moral inability is not unjust—it is rather the just punishment of Adam's sin. Adam chose the path of rebellion. God allowed Adam to give his heart to it. All persons since Adam have endorsed his rebellion by their own voluntary sin.¹²

If the American command had ordered a battleship in World War II to cross the Atlantic to bombard enemy positions, and the sailors decided instead to mutiny and to scuttle the ship, they could not subsequently excuse their disobedience by pleading they were unable to obey the command, since they had no ship. Their inability was a result a voluntary course of disobedience. So it is with human moral inability. The inability to repent and

¹¹See also such passages as Matt 11:20-27; 13:11-15; Jn 3:19; 6:37-39, 44-45, 65; 7:17; 8:43-47; 9:39; 10:25-28; Eph 5:8; 1 Pet 2:9; I Jn 2:9-11.

¹²See for example, Rom 3:9-20, 5:12-21, and 7:13-25.

believe derives from fallen humanity's inveterate love of sin and is the result of Adam's voluntary course of disobedience.

And what if the sailors' mutiny hardened into a hatred of their commander that was so great that they preferred to perish in the North Atlantic rather than to be rescued and returned to naval duty? Though in great peril, the sailors would refuse to cooperate with their intended rescuers. Sinners according to scripture are in a similar condition. They are not clamoring to return to the Lord's service, and prefer suffering and death to submission to God through repentance and faith in Christ. Jesus told the disciples that the world cannot receive the Spirit (Jn 14:17) and that the world hates them because it hated him (Jn 15:18-19), in order that the scripture might be fulfilled: "They hated me without a cause" (Jn 15:25). Their inability resides in their perverted desires.

Unconditional Election

Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, argues for a unique form of conditional election that he calls "congruent election." He argues that God elects those who respond to God's offer of grace, but the election is simultaneous to the human response. When the Bible speaks of election in terms of foreknowledge and predestination, God is using phenomenological language, because human beings experience time—a before and an after. But God, Land argues, does not experience time: "God lives in the Eternal Now." God has therefore always experienced the believer's own acceptance of the gospel as a present experience, and this is the basis of God's election. "God's experience of my response to, and relationship with, Him has always caused Him to deal differently with me than He does with a person with whom God's eternal experience has been rebellion and rejection" (58-9).

This interpretation of biblical election leans heavily on the speculative philosophical notion that God does not experience time. One does not find this notion in scripture. God repeatedly speaks of before and after, not merely in dealing with human history, but in dealing with his own activities. The Holy Spirit reveals at the beginning of the Bible that "In the beginning, God created." There was a *when* with God. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth," God asked Job. Jesus is called the Ancient of Days and the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He appeals to *before* as evidence of his deity, "Before Abraham was, I am." The Holy Spirit testifies that God knows things before they happen, not that he experiences them as always happening in his experience of an eternal now.¹³

¹³The idea is also epistemologically problematic. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for human minds to form a meaningful conception of an eternal now. It is like trying of conceive of a state in which nothing exists—the mind is powerless to conceptualize such a state and rebels against the endeavor. Human experience, consciousness, and thought seem to require the element of time. If God does not experience time, I do not see how humans have the capacity to discover the fact. For a defense of the concept of God's timelessness, however, see Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also the critiques of Alan Padgett, William Lane Craig, and Nicholas Wolterstorff in Gregory E. Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

The appeal of the speculative notion of a divine “eternal now” is that when the Bible speaks of God electing persons to salvation, it would mean that God did not elect persons unconditionally in advance of birth. Instead, his election of individuals would be “simultaneous” and logically “consequent” to a sinner’s choice to receive the gospel. But in the doctrine of conditional election, in which God chooses as a result of a person’s reception of the gospel, it is hard to see how this can be called election in any meaningful sense. It is even harder to see how it is consistent with the New Testament’s use of the concept. Land does not address the New Testament texts except to suggest that Romans 9-11 teaches that national election is unconditional but individual election is conditional (53-55). Romans 9-11 indeed addresses the issue of Israel’s national election, but it does so in order to explain the fact that most Jews individually rejected the gospel and many Gentiles received it. National election did not result in the Jews’ individual acceptance of the gospel, but individual election led to individual faith and salvation. Paul explains that the rejection of Jesus by national Israel does not discredit the gospel, for among national Israel were many who were not individually elected to salvation.¹⁴

But Paul in fact spoke throughout Romans 9-11 of individual election. God’s election of Isaac, Paul says, was “not because of works” (Rom. 9:11). This makes little sense in terms of an eternal now. Paul’s point is that before Isaac or Esau had done anything, God chose Isaac and did not choose Esau, “though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad” (Rom 9:11).

The basic objection against unconditional election and against Calvinism generally, is that it makes God unfair. Calvinism holds that the Bible teaches that God chose some persons before the foundation of world to receive eternal life, not based on foresight of the individual’s faith but on God’s mere mercy in Christ. Many feel that it would be unjust for God to choose to give saving grace to some which he chooses to withhold from others.

God’s justice is impartial. But his grace is particular and discriminating. He shows favor and undeserved kindness to some that he does not show to others. There is no unfairness with God if he deals justly with all persons, and at the same time shows kindness to some more highly than they deserve. J. Newton Brown, a nineteenth-century Baptist leader, reminded the Baptists of his day that non-elect persons had no ground of complaint. “The condition of those not chosen,” Brown wrote, is “no worse than if there had been none chosen.” All persons deserve eternal judgment. God is generous toward some by bestowing grace and is fair to others by rendering justice. “If you are lost,” Brown wrote, “it will not be because you are not elected, nor because others were, but because you preferred your sins to the Savior, and then your eye was evil because God was good.”¹⁵ I concur with Brown, who was also the chief drafter and promoter of the New Hampshire Confession.

¹⁴For a helpful discussion of these issues, see Thomas R. Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election?” in Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds., *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 89-106.

¹⁵J. Newton Brown, *Objections against Election Considered* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, n.d.), 6.

Limited Atonement

David Allen, dean of the school of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, argues against the doctrine of limited atonement principally by construing it as a marginal or extreme position within historical Calvinism. Many Calvinists, Allen argues, rejected limited atonement in favor of universal atonement, among them Calvin, Cranmer, Bunyan, Ursinus, Edwards, Hodge, as well as many of the delegates to the Synod of Dort and to the Westminster Assembly. “All were Calvinists, and all did not teach limited atonement,” Allen asserts. “Such a claim often shocks Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike” (67).

To sustain this claim, Allen defines limited atonement strictly in terms of John Owen’s double-payment argument for it. The key point for Allen is that Owen argued that if Christ died for all persons, it would mean that God unjustly and illogically punished the sins of unbelievers twice, once in Christ’s death, and again in their eternal torment. Owen did indeed argue that the “second payment of a debt . . . is not answerable to the justice which God demonstrated in setting forth Christ to be a propitiation for our sins,” and that is not “probable” that “God calls any to a second payment” for whom Christ made a full satisfaction of their sins.¹⁶ But Owen places little weight on this point.

Owen placed the burden of his argument for limited atonement upon the meaning of such terms as reconciliation, ransom, and satisfaction. He believed that the Bible’s descriptions of the atonement in such terms as ransom, redemption, and propitiation did not refer to its sufficiency but to its efficiency. The Bible, for example, did not teach that the atonement made ransom possible, but that it was an actual ransom. Ransom thus did not mean that a sufficient price was paid, but that the payment was effective in actually securing the ransom of all for whom it was intended.¹⁷ That is why Owen believed that it was a logical absurdity to affirm that the atonement was a ransom for all persons. Under the doctrine of universal redemption, Owen said, “a price is paid for all, yet few delivered; the redemption of all is consummated, yet few of them redeemed; the judge satisfied, the jailor conquered, yet the prisoner enthralled. If there be a universal redemption of all, then all men are redeemed.”¹⁸ Universal redemption, Owen held, was therefore unscriptural.

Arminians replied that lost persons are not pardoned because of their unbelief. Owen answered that unbelief was one of the chief offenses for which Christ died. If he atoned for all the sins of all persons, then unbelief was among the sins for which he made atonement. If Christ made atonement for unbelief, then why should it hinder the release of the captive more than other sins?¹⁹ If Christ atoned for all the sins of all persons, Owen

¹⁶John Owen, *Salus Electorum, Sanguis Jesu, Or, the Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, 3d ed. (Falkirk: T. Johnston, 1799), 194-5.

¹⁷Cf. *Ibid.*, 228-9.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 49.

concluded repeatedly, all persons should be redeemed. Owen's argument relied not so much on the double-payment argument as on the Bible's teaching that Christ's death secured actual ransom, reconciliation, and satisfaction.

Much of the rest of Allen's argument consists in quoting various Calvinists asserting universal aspects of the atonement. Allen has more than two pages of quotes from Calvin in which Calvin affirms that God calls all persons to faith in Christ and offers grace to all persons, and that Christ redeemed all persons by his blood. This is followed by similar quotes from more than a dozen other prominent Calvinists from Ursinus to Dabney.

Allen is right that most Calvinist preachers have held that Christ died for all persons in some sense. Calvin believed this. So did Edwards and Hodge and Boyce and Dabney. His death for all was such that any person, even Judas, if he should repent and believe the gospel, would not be rejected but would receive mercy. Most Calvinists have held that Jesus' sacrificial death was universal in that it made all men salvable, contingent on their repentance and faith in Christ.

But Allen is incorrect to argue that such a position is not limited atonement, for these same theologians affirmed that the atonement was in important respects particular to the elect.

Take Calvin for example. Calvin nowhere affirmed explicitly a limited atonement, and in places affirmed universal characteristics of the atonement. But in a number of places Calvin affirmed that the atonement was particular to the elect. Calvin held that I John 2:2 did not teach that Christ made propitiation for all people without exception but rather that propitiation extended "to the whole Church." Calvin held that propitiation was limited to those who received the gospel. "Under the word all or whole, he [John] does not include the reprobate, but designates those who believe."²⁰ Calvin similarly said that "all men" in Titus 2:11 "does not mean individual men," but rather "classes or various ranks of life." Calvin interprets "ransom for all" in I Tim 2:6 in the same manner: "The universal term *all* must always be referred to classes of men and not to persons, as if he had said, that not only Jews, but Gentiles also, not only persons of humble rank, but princes also, were redeemed by the death of Christ."²¹ This kind of interpretation has little appeal from a general atonement point of view.²² It also reveals a complexity in Calvin that is not always recognized by those wishing to locate him in their camp. Naturally, this cuts in both directions. In this case, Allen does not take notice of such passages in Calvin and does not attempt to square them with Calvin's affirmations of universal aspects of the atonement.

²⁰John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), vol. 22, second part, 173 [I Jn 2:2].

²¹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, second part, 57, 318 [I Tim 2:5, Tit 2:11].

²²For a particularist discussion of Calvin's views, see Roger Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985).

Charles Hodge and Robert Dabney argued that Owen's argument against double punishment was invalid to establish the truth of particular redemption, and they argued for universal aspects of the atonement. Both however taught that particular redemption was scriptural. Dabney appealed to the Bible's teaching on unconditional election as one of several "irrefragable grounds on which we prove that the redemption is particular."²³ He held that certain aspects of the atonement were general, satisfaction and expiation, for example, but that others were particular, redemption and reconciliation. "Christ died for all sinners in some sense," Dabney summarized, but "Christ's redeeming work was limited in intention to the elect."²⁴

Even John Owen, who for Allen represents the most objectionable form of particularism, affirmed universal aspects of the atonement. Owen held that Christ's death was sufficient to save all sinners whatsoever, but that it was efficient for the elect alone, for whom it was intended. Owen asserted that it was God's "purpose and intention" that Christ should "offer a sacrifice of infinite worth, value, and dignity, sufficient in itself for the redeeming of all and every man, if it had pleased the Lord to employ it to that purpose." The atonement was sufficient "for the redemption of the whole world, and for the expiation of all sins, of all and every man in the world."²⁵ The gospel's free proposal to save all who seek mercy, Owen said, is "grounded upon the superabundant sufficiency of the oblation of Christ in itself, for whomsoever (fewer or more) it be intended."²⁶ And it was effective to save all who believe: "Whosoever come to Christ, he will in no ways cast out."²⁷ The atonement was sufficient to save whosoever willed.

What distinguishes Calvinists from Arminians on this point is that Calvinists hold that Christ died in a fundamental sense particularly for the elect. He intended that his propitiatory sacrifice, which was sufficient for the sins of the world, should be effective for the elect alone. The key difference relates to the question of intent, not to the question of its universal sufficiency. Non-Calvinists affirm that God intended that Christ should make an

²³Robert L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing, 1878), 521. Dabney appealed also to the "immutability of God's purposes" (if God ever intended to save any soul in Christ, that soul will certainly be saved); to the fact that Christ's intercession was limited (Jn 17:9, 20); to the fact that the Spirit gave gifts of conviction, regeneration, and faith to some but not to others; to the fact that God made saving faith conditional upon hearing the gospel when he providentially established also that so many would never hear it; and to the power of Christ's love to accomplish the salvation which he purposed in his atonement (Rom. 5:6-10; 8:31-39). See *ibid.*, 521-3.

²⁴Dabney, *Syllabus*, 527-8.

²⁵John Owen, *Salus Electorum, Sanguis Jesu, Or, the Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, 3d ed. (Falkirk: T. Johnston, 1799), 227-8.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 255.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 235.

atonement that secures the possibility of salvation equally for both the elect and the non-elect. Calvinists affirm that God intended that Christ should make an atonement that not only makes salvation possible for anyone who should believe, but that actually secures the salvation of the elect. Allen did not address this fundamental point.

Irresistible Grace

Steve Lemke, provost of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, argues against the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace, which Baptists traditionally called effectual calling. Lemke defines irresistible grace in a way that Calvinists explicitly reject. He describes it as God “forcing one to change one’s mind against one’s will” (114) and as God “forcing people to choose Christ” (114). Indeed, Lemke argues that if the doctrine of irresistible grace is true, then sinners do not need to respond to the gospel, and are saved without any response or commitment. He refutes his version of the doctrine easily enough by quoting scripture passages where a response is demanded in order to be saved (119-22).

Calvinists uniformly have insisted on the necessity of human response to the Spirit’s work in drawing sinners to faith in Christ. John Calvin, for example, held that God did not save sinners against their will, but rather made them willing to be saved. God goes before the unwilling will to make it willing. Calvin taught that God worked in the hearts of men “in wonderful ways” to draw them to Christ, drawing them by giving them a will to come: “not that men believe against their wills, but that the unwilling are made willing.”²⁸

Calvinists agree with non-Calvinists that God deals with humans as moral creatures, and so the gospel invites sinners to choose, to exercise the will, in following Christ or refusing him. God commands all persons everywhere to love him, to trust him, and to obey him. Calvinists believe that everyone resists the will of God. That is why the special work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for conversion. Apart from the Spirit’s special work, none will respond to the gospel. But it is not because they are unable to choose, it is because they do not want to abandon their sins and submit to God. They do not lack the ability, they lack the will. If irresistible grace means that God saves sinners apart from or contrary to their wills, then it is unscriptural. But that is not what Calvinists mean by it. It means that God produces a change in the will, so that the will is made willing.

The difference between Calvinists and non-Calvinists is how much help that Spirit must render to draw sinners to faith. Evangelical non-Calvinists agree with Calvinists that the human heart and will were perverted by the corruption ensuing from the fall of Adam. They agree also that without the aid of the Holy Spirit, none would be saved. They differ with Calvinists however in teaching that the Spirit’s main work in drawing sinners is to remove the damaging effects of that corruption equally for all persons, sufficiently to permit a “free” choice for or against the gospel. The Spirit removed the blindness of corruption and places all sinners on more or less neutral ground.

²⁸John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 1961), 84. For an extended discussion of divine sovereignty and human freedom, see Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.xv.6-I.xviii.4, II.ii.6-II.vi.4.

This view falls under the same criticism however as the Calvinist view. If it is correct, then the Holy Spirit irresistibly placed persons back on this neutral ground without giving them a choice in the matter. God did not seek the consent of the will of any sinner prior to accomplishing this work for each and every sinner. By Lemke's definitions, God compelled them to this higher ground.

Calvinists however believe that the scriptures do not portray unbelievers as standing on more or less neutral ground. They have chosen their ground, and it is the ground of rebellion against God. It is the ground of willing service of Satan's desires. They love sin. While they love sin, they cannot simultaneously hate it, abandon it, and love the Savior. It requires the special work of the Holy Spirit changing the heart and working a new desire, taking away the heart of stone and giving a heart of flesh.

In John 8:31-47 Jesus explained that most Jews could not believe in him because they were corrupt, deaf, and blind. "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear my word." And they could not believe in him because they wanted to serve Satan. "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father." Their hearts loved sin and served Satan's desires, which blinded their eyes and shut their ears so that they could not hear: "He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God."²⁹

Unbelievers cannot acknowledge the truth of the gospel without crucifying their sinful desires. Six different times the New Testament repeats Isaiah's prophecy concerning the rejection of the gospel (Isa. 6:9-10). John cited it to explain why the Jews were unable to believe: "For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, 'He has blinded their eyes and he hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them'" (Jn 12:39-40).³⁰ Their problem was not that they needed a free will, but that they needed a new heart.

Most Christians believe in irresistible grace when they pray. We pray for this very kind of irresistible grace when we ask God to save persons, to convict them of their sins and draw them to faith in Christ. We ask the Spirit to give them willing hearts because of themselves they are unwilling. When we pray this we do so from a belief that the Spirit can make them willing.

Many in the days of the apostles opposed their teaching of election because it included the notion of inability. They complained, as Paul says, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" If the non-Calvinist view were true, Paul could easily have dispensed with this objection by pointing out that all persons have the ability to resist God's will. Instead, Paul replies that God's will is irresistible but he is perfectly just: "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?" (Rom. 9:19-20). God's will in election

²⁹See similarly Jn 5:44, 6:41-45, 10:26-28.

³⁰Cf. Mt 13:13-15; Mk 4:10-12; Lk 8:9-10; Jn 12:39-40; Acts 28:25-27; Rom 11:8.

does prevail in the human heart, but humans are nevertheless responsible for their choices, since when they sin, they do precisely what they will to do.

Perseverance of the Saints

Kenneth Keathley, dean of the faculty at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, does not seek to refute the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, the fifth point affirmed by the Synod of Dort. He agrees with the doctrine. Instead, his chapter addresses the doctrine of assurance. Keathley argues that the doctrines of unconditional election and limited atonement could potentially undermine the scriptural basis of assurance of salvation and invite a theology of salvation by works. The Calvinist insistence on unconditional election, Keathley says, could leave believers without any basis of assurance, since no one could know whether God had elected them or not. He establishes his case largely by arguing that the Puritans, who insisted strenuously on election and predestination, were preoccupied with the problem of assurance, and urged believers to look to their good works and gain assurance by trusting in the evidence of their good works.

This is an incomplete reading of Puritan history. Puritans did discuss assurance at some length. Sometimes believers doubted based on fears that they were not elect. But the more common problem was doubt concerning the genuineness of one's conversion.

The Puritans furthermore believed that the evidence of good works was insufficient to overcome doubts about salvation. They generally argued that since good works always accompanied saving grace, they afforded a kind of presumptive evidence. But good works could do little more than corroborate—they were insufficient to afford true assurance. The Westminster Confession of Faith, the most important statement of Puritan doctrine, did not ground assurance in good works. Assurance of salvation, the confession said, is “an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God.” The basis of genuine assurance was the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit mediated through the gospel promises.

Keathley distinguishes his position on the role of works in assurance from the traditional Calvinist approach, but the difference does not seem particularly great. Keathley rightly rejects the once-saved-always-saved doctrine of the Grace Evangelical Society. He recognizes that true believers must have good works, and even if good works do not produce assurance, they afford warrant of it. “Good works and the evidences of God's grace do not provide assurance,” Keathley concludes. But they can play a subordinate role: “They provide warrant to assurance but not assurance itself” (186). In traditional Calvinism, the Holy Spirit produces assurance by means of the gospel's promises, not by means of good works, but good works necessarily accompany assurance. Works are not the source of assurance, but they cannot be separated from it. The differences are difficult to discern.

Keathley's position on perseverance seems inconsistent with the book's critique of irresistible grace. Keathley holds that those who genuinely repent and believe will not be permitted to reject the gospel and be lost. “God is infinitely more dedicated to our salvation than we are, and He will not fail to finish that which He has begun” (187). If we affirm that

the Holy Spirit has this prevailing power to save persons after conversion, on what basis shall we deny Him this power before conversion? Does not the Spirit have the same power to save before conversion as after? Or do persons have power to reject the gospel before they accept it but not afterward? If we affirm perseverance and at the same time reject irresistible grace, then sinners have more freedom before they receive grace than afterward. Calvinists hold that the Spirit exercises prevailing power both in converting and in keeping those who believe.

Additional Points of Calvinism

The final five chapters criticize various other aspects of Calvinism. Kevin Kennedy, assistant professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, suggests that Calvin was not a Calvinist by arguing that Calvin taught a general atonement.³¹ Like David Allen's similar argument, Kennedy adduces many quotes in which Calvin affirms the general character of the atonement. This is all salutary. Kennedy does not however discuss Calvin's affirmations of particularist aspects of the atonement, and so does not show how they relate to Calvin's affirmations of general aspects. In the final analysis, whether Calvin believed in three, four, or five of the canons of the Synod of Dort can be a helpful discussion, but Calvin was not inspired. Calvinistic Baptists find Calvin helpful in some areas, but judge that he was in error concerning infant baptism, the relationship of the old and new covenants, ecclesiology, and the relationship of church and state.

Malcolm Yarnell, associate professor of systematic theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, argues that it is "impossible" to be both a Baptist and a Calvinist (234). Calvinism, he explains, leads to antinomianism, intolerance, diminished evangelism, and a tendency to abandon scripture alone in favor of speculative doctrine. Since Baptists have always opposed these principles, Yarnell concludes, efforts to combine them with Baptist principles always prove unstable.

Yarnell appeals to James B. Gambrell, an early twentieth-century Texas Baptist leader, as an example of the true Baptist approach and apparently as evidence that "Calvinism is incompatible with the Baptist outlook" (231). Gambrell was however both a Baptist and a five-point Calvinist. He taught that "God hath predestined whatsoever doth come to pass" and that "the number of the elect, their names, persons, the time and means of their conversion are known and fixed in the Divine mind." He believed that Christ made atonement for the elect only: "When offered before the Father it [the atonement] did, or will actually save all for whom it was made. . . . It makes the salvation of all, for whom it is offered, certain." Gambrell even taught that Baptists held to Calvinist theology before Calvin did, since they were "preaching election and predestination ages before Calvin was born."³²

³¹See Kennedy's extended discussion of this matter in his published Southern Seminary dissertation, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

³²James B. Gambrell, "Calvinism and Arminianism, or Predestination and Free Agency," *Baptist Record*, 20 June 1878, 2; Gambrell, "Bro. Everett on the Atonement," *Baptist Record*, 9 Jan. 1879, 2; Gambrell, "Editorial Notes and Comment," *Baptist Standard*, 28 Aug.

Yarnell appeals also to B. H. Carroll, founding president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary as his other example of a true Baptist. Carroll however was also Calvinistic. He held that God decreed to save specific individuals before the foundation of the world, which “could not be according to anything in us” but was “according to the good pleasure of His will.”³³ It is not necessary to be a Calvinist in order to be a true Baptist, but to judge by Yarnell’s examples and by Baptist history, it is at least possible to be both.

Alan Streett, professor of evangelism and pastoral ministry at Criswell College, argues that “most Calvinists oppose the use of a public invitation” (233). He cites Erroll Hulse, an English Reformed Baptist, and Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary and not a Baptist, as evidence of this opposition. But Streett’s argument is largely directed at Hulse and Martin Lloyd-Jones. Streett appeals to such Calvinists as Asahel Nettleton and Charles Spurgeon as examples of Calvinists who used invitations. Some Calvinistic Southern Baptists are critical of public invitations, in particular “altar calls,” but what they criticize are the abuses. Calvinistic Southern Baptists will have little objection to Streett’s position on invitations. Gospel ministers must invite—they must urge, direct, and command sinners to repent and to come to the Savior by faith.

Jeremy Evans, assistant professor of philosophy at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, offers a wide-ranging critique of Calvinist views of the relationship of God’s sovereignty and human freedom. He advances objections similar to those that Steve Lemke raised in his critique of irresistible grace. Neither Evans nor Lemke accepts the Calvinist view that God is sovereign even over the free decisions of his moral creatures. Evans, like Lemke, believes that if God is sovereign over moral decisions, then they are by definition not free decisions. This is a “libertarian” understanding of human freedom. But scripture teaches that God is sovereign over moral decisions and that humans are at the same time responsible for their decisions. This is a “compatibilist” understanding of human freedom. Judas, Pilate, the Sanhedrin, and the people of Jerusalem freely decided to deliver Jesus to be crucified and were all guilty of the most horrid crime in the history of the world. Yet Luke recorded that the apostles praised God for his sovereign rule in their decisions: “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur” (Acts 4:27-28). Peter affirmed that the people of Jerusalem delivered Jesus by their own choice and convicted them of their guilt in the matter: “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:22-23). Peter affirmed both God’s sovereignty and human responsibility in their decisions.

1913, 8. Gambrell thought that Arminianism was “imbecility” (Gambrell, “Predestination in a Storm,” *Baptist Standard*, 3 Oct. 1912, 1).

³³B. H. Carroll, “Election, Foreordination, Adoption, Grace: Salvation Cornerstones,” in B. H. Carroll, *Baptists and Their Doctrines*, ed. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 122.

Evans suggests that Molinism, a philosophy grounded in libertarianism that originated in Jesuit reactions to Augustinian compatibilism, offers a more scriptural explanation than Calvinism. Molinism, in my view, poses some grave theological problems. Explanations can be helpful, but we must reject any explanation that either diminishes human responsibility or diminishes God's sovereignty over all things, even the free decisions of human beings.

Bruce Little, professor of philosophy at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, raises an objection similar to the one Evans raised. He argues that if God is sovereign over human decisions, then when humans decide to sin, they are doing God's will (even if they are held responsible for their part in it). This would mean that God ordained sin and that God was the author of sin. Calvinists reject such a reprehensible conclusion, but Little urges that they cannot legitimately evade it. Little claims that the view of sovereignty involving libertarian freedom resolves these problems. He suggests that God does not in any sense will or ordain the evil that humans suffer. God's compassion and goodness do not permit it. But humans do suffer such evil. If Little's arguments are valid, they prove too much and suggest that God is in some measure powerless in the face of what Little calls elsewhere "gratuitous evil."³⁴ The scriptures show that God permits demons and humans to do evil, and that when they do evil they do it voluntarily and with full responsibility. The scripture in some instances reveals God's purposes in doing so—the selling of Joseph, the evils inflicted upon Job and his household, and above all the crucifixion. God is perfectly just in exercising this sovereignty and is not the author of sin.

Although I disagree with some points in this volume, I also find warm agreement at many points. Above all I agree with its emphasis on *Whosoever Will*. The Calvinists whom I know, love, and respect are whosoever Calvinists. The Calvinist preachers and theologians of generations past whose sermons and books inspire Christians today to sacrifice their lives for their Savior were whosoever Calvinists. The Baptists whose Calvinist preaching spread the Baptist movement in America and in the South were whosoever Calvinists.

May all Baptists, Calvinist and non-Calvinist, preach the whosoever-will gospel with all their hearts. Let us be about the business of urging sinners to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

³⁴Cf. Bruce Little, *A Creation-Order Theodicy: God and Gratuitous Evil* (Lanham, MD: University Press of American, 2005).