

THE GRACE OF GOD
A Study of God's Sovereignty and Man's Freedom

For the Grace of God that brings Salvation has appeared to all men. Titus 2:11

Ever since the time of the Protestant Reformation there has been a controversy among Bible believing Christians as to the place man's choice and God's determination plays in salvation. In this paper I intend to present my view on God's sovereignty, which I believe to be the scriptural view.

Unlike many others who have written on this subject, I don't pretend to have all the answers to the questions that might be raised, but I do believe that there are some general principles of interpretation that can be set down, which when followed, will shed light on this subject.

My hermeneutic will be the literal-historical-grammatical method.

A distorted view of either man's or God's part in salvation can lead to an imbalance in doctrine that can be confusing, if not disastrous.

If a person holds to the view that God has predetermined all events including salvation, that person may begin to reason that they do not need to proclaim the news of Christ's death. The result is that the person stops sharing their faith and ends up in spiritual imbalance.

On the other extreme, if a person believes that man's will is sovereign in salvation and that salvation is a thing which can be lost, they may never truly trust Christ. They may trust partly in themselves as they try to "keep saved" rather than to trust Christ completely for salvation. Again, there is an imbalance, this time to the point of a person actually being lost because of a misguided view of human will.

There is a Biblical position between these two that presents God as sovereign and yet gives man's choice its rightful place in salvation. That is the position that I hold and hope to develop in this paper.

My approach will be to examine the five points of Calvinism and show why they are fall short of biblical teaching and then also to examine some of the corresponding points of Arminianism which are also unscriptural and show them to be so.

By giving the extremes on either side and then giving the clear biblical statements of God's sovereignty and man's freedom, I believe there can be a clear understanding of this often misunderstood subject.

Webster defines sovereignty as, "supreme power especially over a body politic; dominion; freedom from external control." When we say that God is sovereign, we are acknowledging the fact that God has complete control over His creation and that there is no one higher in rank to which He must answer for His actions.

Of course, if God is truly in control, He has the authority to give humanity a choice when it comes to salvation. In doing this He in no way limit His sovereignty.

God has given human beings this choice but there are some who do not agree. Those of this persuasion generally follow a religious system known as Calvinism, after John Calvin, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation. There are five main points in Calvinism that are as follows:

1. Total depravity
2. Unconditional election
3. Limited atonement
4. Irresistible grace
5. Perseverance of the saints

This view is held by many Bible students and any thing that is not in agreement is usually labeled as Arminianism.

The first of the "Five Points," and the one on which the whole system of Calvinism is built, is the total depravity of man. According to the Westminster Confession of 1643 "... man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good ... when God converts a sinner ... He freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; and by His grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good ..."

Likewise, Jacobus Arminius, in the first of his five articles states, "... man has not saving grace in himself ... and can for himself ... think nothing that is good ... such as saving faith is ... but that it is necessary that by God ... he be born again and renewed in understanding."

Both of these systems say that man cannot believe to be saved but that he must be regenerated first by God before he can even take the first step towards God.

The Bible speaks to man's depravity. That man would never come to God of his own is a biblical truth. The Bible speaks of man's nature as being corrupt and sinful from the sole of the foot to the head, Isaiah 1. Isaiah 48:4 says, *their forehead is as a brow of brass*; Proverbs 30:13, *eyelids are haughty*; Psalm 58:4, *their ears are as deaf as adders*; Proverbs 29:1, *their neck is as hard as iron*; Philippians 3:19, *whose god is their belly*; Job 21:16, *their good is not in their hand*; Romans 3:15, *their feet are swift to shed blood*.

Man is dead in sin according to Ephesians 2:1, and defiled by sin in imagination, thought, heart and will. He is truly totally depraved, and yet we can thank God that God draws men to Himself and doesn't leave us to our own demise.

John 16:8-11 is a classic passage on God's actions towards man. *And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.* God, the Holy Spirit, convinces the world of sin, righteousness

and judgment. Humanity truly doesn't seek God but the scriptures plainly portray God seeking after man.

Man is spiritually dead, but death is separation, not annihilation. In physical death the human spirit is separated from the body. In spiritual death the human spirit is separated from God. And although man is separated from God, it is God who bridged the gap back to Himself and calls us to come to Him. Both Calvin and Arminius said man needs to be regenerated by God before he has the ability to believe, but John wrote in his Gospel, *but to as many as received Him to them gave he the privilege to become sons of God, even to them which believe on His name.* (John 1:12)

This is the key to the question of whether a man believes to be born again or whether he is born again so he can believe. Clearly this scripture states that one becomes a son by believing. It is true that *the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God,* (I Corinthians 2:14), but in context this statement refers to the deep things of God, verse 10, which the Spirit reveals to the saved. According to the passage in John 16, the Holy Spirit's work with the unsaved deals only with salvation from sin. No person can come to Christ unless they are drawn by the Holy Spirit and Christ gives enough light to every man *that they are without excuse* (Romans 1:20). Jesus was *the true light that lights every man who comes into the world* (John 1:9).

There are 150 verses in the New Testament that clearly say that salvation is by faith. One would need to completely reverse those clear scriptures to say that faith comes through salvation. A plain reading of the scriptures without the philosophical underpinnings of Calvinism leads to that truth. It's *by grace you have been saved through faith* (Ephesians 2:8) and *we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand* (Romans 5:2).

Coming to the second point in our study, we see the doctrine of unconditional election. Again the Westminster Confession, Section III, God's eternal decree, reads: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His Glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death."

As its title discloses, this is the belief that God chooses some people, through no foresight of their goodness or faith, and gives them eternal life, while others He sends to hell. As always, we must look at the testimony of scripture in order to form our opinions. John 3:16, the best loved verse in the Bible, gives a clear statement of God's purpose when it says, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that who ever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* His love is toward the world, not just toward a special group of His choosing. *But after that the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared,* Titus 3:4. *God is not willing that any should perish, II Peter 3:9 and has no pleasure in the death of the wicked,* Ezekiel 18:23.

Just hours before He was about to be crucified, Jesus stood over Jerusalem and wept saying, *O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stones them which are sent unto you, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings but you would not.* Matthew 23:37.

Can these possibly be just meaningless words or empty phrases coming from the mouth of our Lord? Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, had this to say, *for though I be free from all men, I have I made myself a servant unto all, that I might gain the more*, I Corinthians 9:19. If Paul thought that Christ had determined before the foundations of the world who would be saved and who would not how could he hope gain the more?

Paul suffered and wept for the souls of men because he knew that God was making a genuine offer of eternal life to them, through Him. He made himself *all things to all men, that I might by all means save some*, I Corinthians 9:22.

Much of the confusion over unconditional election has arisen because of a misunderstanding of how the terms “election” and “predestination” are used in scripture. These terms are only used when referring to believers, never to any unregenerate men before they are saved.

The word translated “predestined” is the Greek term *proorizo*, a compound word made up of *pro*, “before” and *horizo*, “to mark off by boundaries” (the English word “horizon” is the boundary of the earth and sky). God has predestinated that all who will believe to 3 things. They will eventually *be conformed to the image of His Son*, Romans 8:29; *receive the adoption of sons*, Ephesians 1:5; and lastly *be to the praise of His glory*, Ephesians 1:11,12. Predestination is our assurance that our salvation is certain and can never be lost. The ones who are predestinated are the ones *who first trusted in Christ*, Ephesians 1:12.

Jesus Christ is elect, or chosen, by God as seen in scripture in a number of places. Luke 9:35, 23:35, I Peter 2:4, 26, Isaiah 42:1. When we believe on Him as our Savior, we are then in Him. Ephesians 1:3, 2:6 shows us blessings in Christ: 1:4 election in Christ, 1:6 grace in Christ, 1:7 forgiveness in Christ, 1:11,13 an inheritance in Christ, 2:13 unity in Christ and 3:12 access to God in Christ. The Bible doesn't say that we are chosen to be put into Christ but that we were chosen in Christ. Our election is not separate from His election. God in His grace placed us in Christ to share in His election because we believed.

Jacobus Arminius did not deny election but based it upon God's foreknowledge of mans merit. He said, "that God ... determined to save ... those who through the grace of the Holy Spirit shall believe on His Son and through the same grace persevere in this same faith and obedience of faith even to the end". In other words the Arminian point of view looks upon the act of election in much the same light as Calvinism does.

Instead of our being partakers of the election of Christ, Arminius saw believers as being chosen by God to be saved. The difference being that Calvinists say God's choice was based on Him alone, while Arminians say God chose men because He foresaw their faith and perseverance.

Rather than the Bible stating that those who would be saved are chosen by God for salvation it promises that just as believers become partakers of Christ's death by faith they also become partakers of His election by faith.

The third doctrine to examine in a study of Calvinism and the subject of God's sovereignty is limited atonement or limited redemption.

Concerning this doctrine, the Westminster Confession, Chapter 3, point 4 says, "wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam, are redeemed in Christ...neither are any other redeemed by Christ...but the elect only." This doctrine naturally follows the Calvinistic view of election. If, from eternity past, God's plan has been to save one group of people out of the world and damn the rest, then it would seem illogical for Christ's work on the cross to have equal reference to all, or that Christ would be sent to die for those whom God had predetermined not to save.

Redemption for all, the Calvinist says, would mean universalism, or the automatic salvation of all people.

The key to understanding this aspect of Christ's work on Calvary is a correct understanding of the word "redemption." According to II Peter 2:1 there will be false prophets, unsaved men, who would deny the Lord who bought them. The word "bought" in that verse is the Greek word *agorazo* which is translated "redeem" in Revelation 5:9, 14:3, and 14:4. According to Arndt and Gingrich Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, this word means, "buy, purchase, acquire as property."

When Christ died, He died for all men, II Corinthians 5:14, and He died to purchase their redemption. II Peter 2:1 would bear out the fact that both saved and unsaved would be included in this transaction. To say that Christ's death applied only to the elect would be to contradict a host of scriptures, which teach otherwise.

Hebrews 2:9 says Christ, *tasted death for every man*; I Timothy 4:10, He is, *the Savior of all men, especially of those that believe*; Titus 2:11, His grace appears, *to all men*; II Corinthians 5:19 He *reconciled the world*; Romans 11:32, *that He might have mercy on all*; I John 2:2, *Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world*; John 1:29, *Christ is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world*; Isaiah 53:6, *The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all*; John 6:51, *Christ offers His flesh for the life of the world* and I John 4:14, *God sent the Son to be the Savior of the world*.

Just because Christ died to purchase men from the bondage of sin doesn't automatically insure that their sins are forgiven. If this were the case then there would be no need of the command to repent and believe the Gospel in order to receive salvation. Those for whom Christ died would be born forgiven. And yet the scriptures testify that all unbelievers are condemned and under the wrath of God until they exercise faith in Christ, John 3:14 - 18, 36; Ephesians 2:3.

Paul summed up the entire issue in the book of II Corinthians Chapter 5 when he said, *For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; or if we are of sound mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.* Verses 13-15.

It was the knowledge that Christ died for all men that drove Paul day and night, through sufferings and persecutions, to preach the good news of Christ's death and resurrection. *He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.* John 3:18. How foolish it would be to assert that God would condemn men to an eternal hell for not accepting something that was never done for them in the first place.

Again, a plain, honest reading of the Bible without the preconceived philosophical support of Calvinism shows that Christ died for all. In my 45 years of Christian experience I have never met a person who explained how they came to the conclusion that Christ only died for some by simply reading the Bible alone. Every one who holds that view was influenced in some way by Calvinistic teachings.

The fourth factor in God's plan for saving men is the working of the Holy Spirit. Arminius wrote, speaking of the Spirit, "grace is not irresistible; for it is written of many that they resisted the Holy Spirit." On this point, he was correct. Since man has been given the freedom of choice, he is able to choose whether he will believe the Gospel or not. The Westminster Confession, on the other hand, reads, "all those whom God has predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased effectually to call to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ. "Man is "thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed by it."

The logical progression continues in the minds of Calvinists as they build one doctrine upon another their reasoning being that if God chose someone to be saved then He must also cause them to believe by the Holy Spirit to assure that salvation. For this reason, all who are predestined to be saved cannot resist the Savior but are certain to be saved.

In Acts Chapter 7, we have the story of Stephen's martyrdom and a clear example of men resisting the Holy Spirit. In Chapter 6, verse 8, Stephen is said to be *full of faith and power*. In Chapter 7, verse 55, he is *full of the Holy Spirit*. Here was a spirit-filled man preaching to the Sanhedrin and Jewish elders saying, *You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.* Verse 51. When they heard Stephen say this they took him out and stoned him being *cut to the heart*, verse 54.

Contrast this with Acts 2 and Peter's sermon at Pentecost and it can be clearly seen how these two groups acted in a completely opposite manner. Those Jews listening to Peter, *were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"* Those listening to Stephen were cut to the heart and rejected his message. The Jews of Acts 2 were cut to the heart and believed.

Another clear example of resisting the Holy Spirit can be found in Hebrews 10:28 and 29 which reads, *Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?*

To reject Christ is to count His blood unholy, it is to insult the Holy Spirit. Those who turn down Christ do it deliberately and their punishment is because of the willfulness of their sin. The fact that Christians are warned against the sin of quenching the Spirit (I Thessalonians 5:19) and grieving the Spirit, (Ephesians 4:30) shows that the Spirit is not irresistible. Man has a free moral choice. Grace offers salvation to all men and those who accept it are saved.

The fifth and final point is the perseverance of the saints. Many Christians who believe that salvation cannot be lost call themselves Calvinists because they feel that the only other alternative is to be an Arminian. They consider the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints to be synonymous with eternal security, but it is not.

Again we look to the Westminster Confession for the statement of the doctrine. "They whom God hath accepted in His beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved."

In the words of Loraine Boettner, "While Christians may fall into sin temporarily, they will eventually return and be saved." (The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination)

According to this view, a Christian only can be sure he is saved if he is persevering in the faith. That is not to say a Calvinist believes that we are kept by our works but that our works show that we are truly saved. This leaves no room for God removing His rebellious children from this earth if they don't respond to His discipline, such as those in the church of Corinth who were profaning the Lord's table, I Corinthians|1:30.

Some Christians do die in sin, never having "returned" to God in the Calvinistic sense. Salvation is by faith and faith alone, Ephesians 2:8, 9; Philippians 1:29; Hebrews 10:39, 11:6, 7, 31; I Peter 2:6, 7 and Jude 5

Salvation should produce a change in life, but sometimes Christians are so wrapped up in the cares of this world that to others it appears they are not saved. James says to those who say they have faith, *Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.* 2:18.

It is impossible to show our faith to others without good works. We can only show our faith by our works. The point is though that *man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.* I Samuel 16:7

Our salvation is in Christ and His righteousness is put to our account, Romans 4:3, 5, 6; II Corinthians 5:21 Philippians 3:9. His righteousness is not imparted to our bodies. We stand righteous before God if we have accepted the "robe of righteousness" He provides in Christ, Isaiah 61:10, and let Jesus be our sanctification, I Corinthians 1:30.

Although it is true that Christ dwells in us through the Spirit, the Spirit can be quenched and

grieved as shown previously.

The scriptures testify that our salvation cannot be lost because of God's perseverance, not ours. It was this question of whether a saved person would ever be lost again that caused Arminius the most problems. He said, "...but for the question whether they (Christians) are not able through sloth or negligence to forsake the beginning of their life in Christ, to embrace again this present world, to depart from the holy doctrine once delivered to them, to lose their good conscience and to neglect grace -- this must be the subject of more exact inquiry in the Holy Scriptures, before we can teach it with full confidence of mind."

Arminius felt that no man could be led away from Christ by Satan but he was not sure whether one could reject Christ on his own after salvation and still retain that salvation. Of course, if the scriptures are to be taken at face value then the only conclusion that can be drawn is that salvation is permanent. If we are born into God's family by faith (I John 3:2) then we will remain there. Each word in the Bible is God-breathed, II Timothy 3:16. That means that each term used was chosen carefully and specifically by God. The term "born" explicitly describes the process of becoming a child of God. A person can not become unborn or stop being their father's son.

God has predestined all who trust Him to reach heaven upon death and His counsel stands, Ephesians 1:11, 12. If a person "stops believing" in Christ after salvation God's promises still hold true. *If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.* Timothy 2:13.

A clear understanding of the method God uses to save, through a substitutionary death payment, and a clear understanding of predestination and election as taught in the Bible can only lead to the belief that salvation cannot be lost because Christians are *kept by the power of God*, I Peter 1:15, whether their lives consistently show out their salvation to others or not.

The Calvinist argues, in true Aristotelian fashion, that God can only be sovereign if He determines all events. Anything less would be to trust His eternal plan to the fickle whims of human beings. Fortunately, we worship a God who is much bigger than anything we could ever imagine.

In Acts 2:23 Peter tells the Jews gathered in Jerusalem less than 2 months after the crucifixion, *Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.* Here we are clearly told that the crucifixion was according to God's sovereign purpose but that those who participated in it did it with *lawless hands*. Clearly, those in Peter's audience acted of their own volition (hence the lawlessness, unless we want to make God the author of sin) but at the same time fulfilled God's plan.

"God is neither threatened by, nor overcome by, human free will and the time and chance he built into his universe, but works within them to bring about a human redemption that is purified in the midst of authentic relationships. He is constantly bringing good out of evil and light out of darkness through his indescribable grace freely demonstrated most supremely in Jesus Christ." (J. Michael Feazell, *Predestination: Does God Choose Our Fate?*)

My hope is that through this short look at God's sovereignty and man's freedom, the subject has been made a little clearer and the need for careful Biblical interpretation has been demonstrated. What is often labeled as the “historic Christian position” does not always have the strongest biblical foundation and often times confuses those who would like to know more about the doctrines taught in scripture. God is sovereign and in complete control of His creation but man has been given a responsibility that can be fulfilled through God’s grace and mercy.

And the Spirit and the bride say come. And let him who hears say come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. Revelation 22:17