

Is Calvinism “Good News”

by David Schonberg



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PREFACE

There is a tendency in the theological wars to perceive our opponents as enemies. We read their works and in our minds we build them up as adversaries. It always surprises me when I meet them in person and discover how delightful and godly they are. The Calvinists I know personally are no exception. The doctrine grieves me, but not the people who teach it. I offer my perspective on Calvinism because I feel strongly. Yet even as I add fuel to the fire, so to speak, my heart is not in battle, but in love for God and love for one another. Anticipating the day when we will all see more clearly and undoubtedly be embarrassed by some of the things we have said, let us do our sparring with humility, goodwill and even a bit of humor.

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INTRODUCTION

Dear..,

The purpose of this study is not to persuade you to change your mind, but to help you understand my difficulties with Calvinism. I learned Calvinism first from you. I started with your notes and added *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* by Loraine Boettner, *The Pleasures of God* by John Piper, *The Potter's Freedom* by James R. White and *The Five Points of Calvinism, Defined, Defended and Documented* by David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas. I also read some of Luther's *Bondage of the Will* plus a number of little articles and excerpts. I glanced at Calvin's *Institutes*, but it was large, and since my main concern is with the present-day expression of Calvinism, for the most part, I let others speak for him. I drew upon *The Pilgrim Church* by E.H. Broadbent and *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* by Leonard Verduin for some historical background. My response to Calvinism is almost entirely original. I am sure someone has a label for my views, but at least I did not copy anyone.

Your friendship is precious to me. I do not want to antagonize you or anyone else. I know how it feels when someone makes dogmatic statements I do not agree with and have no wish to create that feeling in others. My repeated use of the expressions "I believe..." and "In my opinion..." are not to be taken as tentativeness, but as a courtesy. If I have failed in any place, please insert one of those expressions for me.

Finally, let me say this: When I hear you pray, I would never guess you are a Calvinist. I do not know how you put it all together in your own mind, but your heart is not Calvinist. Please accept this as a compliment.

May God bless you.

David

Chapter 1

Behold, I Bring You Good Tidings of Great Joy

The greatest story ever told unfolds with the words, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”¹ Within a few years, early Christians captured this announcement and the events that followed in biographies and histories. Letters carrying the message criss-crossed the Roman world. New Testament writers regarded the message so special and so wonderful that seventy-six times they refer to it as “good news”!

Unfortunately, most English translations package this good news in a brown paper bag. The word “gospel” means “good news,” but who would know without being told? I choose to take the message out of the bag and refer to it simply as “Good News!” When I repeat to myself “good news” every time I see the word “gospel,” I get the distinct impression that the New Testament is about good news. It raises my expectations and makes me want to join the shepherds as they go to investigate.

The Bible advertises good news. I look for it. And I find it: God loves the world. He does not want anyone to perish. So He sent His Son, born of a woman, to redeem those under the curse of the law so that they might receive the full rights of sons. God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting men’s sins against them. This is, indeed, good news. It fills me with joy. I return to my fields rejoicing.

¹ Luke 2:10-11

I was told that if I wanted an especially good view of this wonderful message, I should look at it through the eyes of Calvinism. So I did. But I am puzzled. Where is the good news? Good news, as defined by standard usage and conventional journalism, is news that makes people happy and excited. It’s news that rejoices the heart. That is not what Calvinism does for me. Calvinism makes me depressed and embarrassed.

Here is a summary of Calvinism, first from Calvinistic sources and then in my own words. Have I missed something? Do I understand Calvinism?

A Summary Sketch of Calvinism from Quotations by Calvinists

Regarding God’s Sovereignty

There Is No Such Thing as “Luck” or “Chance.” All things come to pass by God’s wise providence. ... Nothing “just happens.”¹

From a human perspective, the casting of lots (or its modern equivalent, the rolling of dice or flipping of a coin) is the most typical of random events that occur in the universe. But Scripture affirms that the outcome of such an event is from God: “the lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the LORD”²

The divine cause of each event works as an invisible, behind-the-scenes, directing cause and therefore could be called the “primary cause” that plans and initiates everything that happens.³

There is not one errant molecule in the universe.⁴

Regarding the Fall of Man

Adam’s children were not sinners simply because they sinned. Rather, they sinned because they were sinners. They came into the world as sinners, and what made them sinners was the guilt they inherited from their father Adam.⁵

¹ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 337.

² Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 318.

³ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 319.

⁴ Darryl Knappen, from my own notes taken during presentations of Calvinism.

⁵ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message Of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 33.

...Adam acted as the perfect representative of the entire human race. The test that God set before Adam and Eve was a test for all mankind. When Adam sinned he sinned for all of us. The fall was the fall of the entire race. The punishment and consequences of the fall are thus applied to the whole human race and the whole of creation (Romans 8:20-22; Romans 5:12-19). ... Our first parents, by this sin, fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and we in them, whereby death came upon all (Romans 3:23), all becoming dead in sin (Romans 5:12), and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body (Titus 1:15; Genesis 6:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:10-19).¹

The doctrine of original sin postulates that the first sin of the first man, Adam, which was the occasion of the fall, is in a certain sense the sin of all mankind, and that accordingly human nature is infected by the corruption of that sin and the human race as a whole bears its guilt.²

They [Adam and Eve] being the root, and by God’s appointment standing in the place of all mankind, the guilt of the sin was imputed, and corrupted nature conveyed, to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation...³

Regarding Seeking God

The unregenerate person must be regenerated before he has any desire for God.⁴

We frequently hear evangelical Christians say that their non-Christian friends are “seeking God” or “searching for God.” Why do we say this when Scripture so clearly teaches that no unregenerate person seeks after God? ... no one seeks after God while unregenerate... ... The search for God does not end in conversion; it begins at conversion.⁵

We confess that human beings are born spiritually dead and are incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace.⁶

¹ The Doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity, Lecture Notes, Darryl Knappen.

² Ryken, Philip G., *The Message Of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 32.

³ The Baptist Confession of Faith, 1689, taken from “The Doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity”, Lecture Notes, Darryl Knappen.

⁴ Sproul, R.C., *What Is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 136.

⁵ Sproul, R.C., *What Is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 125.

⁶ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message Of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 54, quoting from the Cambridge Declaration.

Regarding Doing Good

In Man’s total rebellion everything man does is sin. ... even the “good” man does because he is made in God’s image is sin (Romans 14:23) ... man in his natural state apart from the work of the Holy Spirit can produce nothing good (Romans 7:18) ... These “good” acts – not actually killing anyone or being kind – are evil because they are not done out of reliance on God or for His glory. ¹

The indictment against us is more radical: in our corrupt humanity we never do a single good thing. ²

...the unrenewed sinner cannot do any act, however insignificant, which fundamentally meets with God’s approval and answers to the demands of God’s holy laws; and (2) ...he cannot change his fundamental preference for sin and self to love for God, nor even make an approach to such a change. In a word, he is unable to do any spiritual good. ³

Regarding Unconditional Election (Predestination)

The doctrine of election declares that God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals from among the fallen members of Adam’s race to be objects of His undeserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to save. ⁴

Predestination is one special part of God’s cosmic plan. It is his sovereign decision, made in eternity past, regarding the final destiny of individual sinners. ⁵

When we make the choice to come to God, it is only because he has already done the choosing. J.I. Packer writes, “The biblical doctrine of election is that before Creation God selected out of the human race, foreseen as fallen, those whom he would redeem, bring to faith, justify, and glorify in and through Jesus Christ.” ⁶

...if God has made an advance decision about which people he will save from their sins, he has also made an advance decision about which people he will leave in their sins. The theological term for this is

¹ The Doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity, Lecture Notes.

² Sproul, R.C., *What Is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 120.

³ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message Of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 54, quoting Louis Berkof, italics in original.

⁴ Steele, David N., Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 30.

⁵ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 66.

⁶ *Ibid.* pg. 67.

“reprobation.” It means that when God established his plan of salvation, he decided to pass some sinners by, leaving them to continue in their sins and thus finally to be damned for them. ¹

Regarding Limited Atonement

The question which we are to discuss under the subject of “Limited Atonement” is, Did Christ offer up Himself a sacrifice for the whole human race, for every individual without distinction or exception; or did His death have special reference to the elect? In other words, was the sacrifice of Christ merely intended to make the salvation of all men possible, or was it intended to render certain the salvation of those who had been given to Him by the Father? ... Calvinists hold that in the intention and secret plan of God Christ died for the elect only, and that His death had only an incidental reference to others in so far as they are partakers of common grace. ²

All Calvinists agree that Christ’s obedience and suffering were of infinite value, and that if God had so willed, the satisfaction rendered by Christ would have saved every member of the human race. ... Thus Christ’s saving work was limited in that it was designed to save some and not others... ³

Regarding Irresistible Grace

Man cannot come to Christ because man is bound by Satan. Man will not come because he finds Satan irresistible and Jehovah despicable. Man does not have a “free will,” he has a devil-bound will. Man does not have the “power” to resist God should God “will” to save him. ⁴

The Scriptures pointedly teach that the pre-requisite for entrance into the kingdom of God is a radical transformation wrought by the Spirit of God Himself. And since this work on the soul is sovereign and supernatural it may be granted or withheld according to the good pleasure of God. Consequently, salvation, to whomsoever it may be granted, is entirely of grace. ... If any person believes, it is because God has quickened him; and if any person fails to believe, it is because God has withheld that grace which He is under no obligation to bestow. ⁵

¹ Ibid. pg. 67.

² Boettner, Lorraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, pg. 150, bold type in the original.

³ Steele, David N. *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 39.

⁴ Sproul, R.C., *What Is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 60.

⁵ Boettner, Lorraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 166.

Regarding the Perseverance of the Saints

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is stated in the Westminster Confession in the following words: “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.” Or in other words we believe that those who once become true Christians cannot totally fall away and be lost, – that while they may fall into sin temporarily, they will eventually return and be saved. ¹

If God has chosen men absolutely and unconditionally to eternal life, and if His Spirit effectively applies to them the benefits of redemption, the inescapable conclusion is that these persons shall be saved. ²

Summary Sketch in My Own Words

God created everything and controls everything down to the smallest event and the tiniest molecule. There is no such thing as chance. There is no such thing as “free will.” He foresaw before the world was created that mankind would sin and decided at that time, before anyone had done anything right or wrong, whom He would save and whom He would allow to perish. Being condemned because of Adam’s sin and totally dead in our own sins, we have no ability in ourselves to seek God, to repent or to do anything that might move God to save us. Any seeming response to the message of salvation is really His, not ours. We simply play out His choices for us.

It follows that, though God may track the lives of all men with a kind of professional interest, He does not love all men. He loves only those people whom He decided to save for Himself. Hence, He made payment for their sins, and theirs alone. Those whom He has chosen are safe, even if they are not yet saved. They will eventually make their way into His presence with joy. They will make it because God chose to save them before the foundation of the world. The rest will discover at death that they had not been chosen.

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine Of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 182.

² *Ibid.* pg. 182.

* * *

What if the lottery announced a new game – \$100 million guaranteed to fifty percent of the participants, losers to be executed? How many people would rush to buy tickets? “Hey, kids, good news! There’s a terrific chance of winning a hundred million dollars! Mom and Dad are going to buy tickets for everyone in the family!” To me, that is what Calvinism resembles. Before the foundation of the world, God placed everyone’s name in a hat and drew out the winning slips. Winners go to heaven. Losers go to hell. Good luck!

Is that “good news”? Even if I were a guaranteed winner, it would not be good news. What if a precious child or grandchild were among the losers? It is one thing to willingly take a chance for one’s self. But in this lottery, just being born puts your name in the hat. That makes being born a huge risk. Getting married and having a family becomes a huge gamble. What if one of my children were unlucky? What if any child was unlucky? How can anyone who loves his neighbor call this “good news”?

Most painful to me is what this lottery says about the One who dreamed it up. Even if God assured me that I and all my descendants were winners, the thought that He would actually design the world around such a plan takes away my delight in Him. How can I love Him? How can He expect me to love Him?

Almost as painful as being true is the possibility that Calvinism is false. What if there really is good news and this is what took its place? I feel sad for those who expected good news and found this instead. I feel sad for those who want to love God, who would gladly bow their knee in loving service but cannot shake the idea that God might actually be this way. I feel sad for God. What if He really did announce good news of great joy for all people? What if God really does love the world and really did send His Son into the world not to condemn it but to save it? What if His heart is in reconciling the world to Himself because He is not willing that any perish, and it comes out instead that He loves only some and sent His Son to die only for some? What a grief that must be to Him.

So I embark upon this study already convinced that someone has made a huge mistake. Either I have failed to understand something or the early Christians had a warped sense of “good news” or Calvinism has missed it altogether.

Chapter 2

Clues from History

Calvinism started long before Calvin came on the scene. Loraine Boettner, a staunch Calvinist, provides some historical background:

The Reformation was essentially a revival of Augustinianism... It is to be remembered that Luther, the first leader in the Reformation, was an Augustinian monk.... To a great extent Calvin built upon the foundation which Luther laid.¹

It was Calvin who wrought out this system of theological thought with such logical clearness and emphasis that it has ever since borne his name. He did not, of course, originate the system but only set forth what appeared to him to shine forth so clearly from the pages of Holy Scripture. Augustine had taught the essentials of the system a thousand years before Calvin was born, and the whole body of the leaders of the Reformation movement taught the same.²

It may occasion some surprise to discover that the doctrine of Predestination was not a matter of special study until near the end of the fourth century. ... They of course taught that salvation was through Christ; yet they assumed that man had full power to accept or reject the gospel. Some of their writings contain passages in which the sovereignty of God is recognized; yet along side of those are others which teach the absolute freedom of the human will. Since they could not reconcile the two they would have denied the doctrine of Predestination and perhaps also that of God's absolute Foreknowledge. They taught a kind of

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 367-368.

² *Ibid.*, pgs. 3, 4.

synergism in which there was a co-operation between grace and free will. ... But at last, as a result of a long, slow process, he came to the great truth that salvation is a sovereign gift which has been bestowed irrespective of merit; that it was fixed in eternity; and that God is the author in all its stages. This cardinal truth of Christianity was first clearly seen by Augustine...¹

The Persecuted Church Knew Nothing of Calvinism

David Otis Fuller in his book *Which Bible*, makes an interesting statement: “A powerful chain of churches, few in number compared with the manifold congregations of an apostate Christianity, but enriched with the eternal conviction of truth and with able scholars, stretched from Palestine to Scotland.”² This non-Catholic line of churches existed prior to Constantine and continued to exist in spite of intense persecution by the Catholic church all the way up through the time of the Reformation.

Leonard Verduin, in his scholarly book *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, documents the history and the persecution of this non-Catholic Christian presence in Europe throughout the centuries. It met the Reformers when they came out of the Catholic church. It invited the Reformers to join them. It entertained the idea of joining the Reformers. But in the end it vigorously opposed the Reformers because, though the Reformers had left the Catholic church, too much of the Catholic church was left in them.

Another historian, E. H. Broadbent, refers to these believers as the “pilgrim church.” Notwithstanding their flaws and their many expressions, the pilgrim church presented a purer form of Christianity than did the Roman Catholic church which bitterly persecuted it. According to Broadbent, the pilgrim church, at the time of Luther and the Reformation, did not teach the doctrine of Unconditional Election. It was introduced to them by the Reformers. Broadbent records one of the historical moments when this occurred.

¹ Ibid. pg. 365.

² Fuller, David Otis, *Which Bible*, Grand Rapids International Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 1975, pg. 214.

The Reformation was a movement outside the sphere of the Waldenses and unconnected with them, but they had retained their old and widespread connections with the numerous brethren and churches that had existed before the Reformation.

These churches, though sympathetically interested in the Reformation, had by no means been absorbed into it. So there were present at this gathering elders of churches in Italy, reaching even to the extreme south; from many parts of France, from the German lands and especially from Bohemia. Among the numerous peasants and laborers were also some Italian noblemen, as the lords of Rive Noble, Mirandola and Solaro. Under the shade of chestnut trees and surrounded by the mountain wall of the Alps the meetings were opened “in the name of God” on September, 12, 1532.

...Many matters of practice were considered, but the question which excited the greatest discussion was one of doctrine. Farel taught that “God has elected before the foundation of the world all those who have been or will be saved. It is impossible for those who have been ordained to salvation not to be saved. Whosoever upholds free will, absolutely denies the grace of God.”

Jean of Molines and Daniel of Valence laid stress both on the capacity of man and also his responsibility to receive the grace of God. In this they were supported by the nobles present and by many others, who urged that the changes advocated were not necessary and also that they would imply a condemnation of those who had so long and faithfully guided these churches. Farel’s eloquence and sympathetic earnestness strongly commended his arguments to his hearers and the majority accepted his teaching. A confession of faith was drawn up in accordance with this, which was signed by most present, though declined by some.

Farel and Saunier mounted their horses and rode back from their eventful visit to continue the work in French Switzerland, having Geneva especially in view. Jean of Molines and Daniel of Valence went to Bohemia, and after conference among the churches there, the Brethren in Bohemia wrote to those in the valleys begging them not to adopt any of the important changes of doctrine and practice recommended by the foreign brethren without the most careful consideration.¹

¹ Broadbent, E.H., *The Pilgrim Church*, Gospel Folio Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 1931, present edition 1999, pgs. 231-233.

It is important to remember that the Reformers who started the Reformation were children of the Catholic church. They were “Protestant” because they protested certain teachings and practices of the Catholic church. They were “reformers” because they tried to reform the Catholic church. In spite of their opposition to the Catholic church and their break with the Catholic church, however, they could not avoid the influence of their Catholic heritage. Luther had been an Augustinian monk. And Calvin, at the age of 26, completed the first edition of his *Institutes* just one year after terminating employment with the Catholic church. The Reformers were men of faith and courage. We can honor them and thank God for them. But like us and all men and women of faith, they were clay pots shaped by the times and institutions around them.

I am not going to elaborate on the doctrines and practices of either the Catholic church or of the Reformers who came out of the Catholic church. More than enough has been recorded by Verduin and Broadbent for those who want to know. Suffice it to say that my readings of this time in history greatly encourage me to take the advice of Jean of Molines and Daniel of Valence “not to adopt any of the important changes of doctrine and practice recommended by the foreign brethren without the most careful consideration.”

I, myself, am a distant descendant of both the Reformation and the Catholic church. Nevertheless, the Christianity that I most admire from that period of time was part of neither. My admiration goes out to the persecuted pilgrim church. This body of Christian faith, persecuted by both Catholics and Reformers alike, knew nothing of Reformed Augustinian Theology, what we call Calvinism.

The early church did not make the doctrine of Predestination a matter of special study until near the end of the fourth century. The Pilgrim church in Europe was unfamiliar with it. In addition, the expression of Christian faith that moved eastward rejected it. “Eastern Orthodoxy rejects every doctrine of divine grace that seems to it to limit the freedom of human choice; ... The grace of God invites everyone, Eastern Orthodoxy holds, but it compels no one.”¹

¹ Piepkorn, Arthur C., *Profiles In Belief*, Volume I, Harper & Row Publishers, 1977, pg. 41.

History doesn't prove or disprove doctrines. But in this matter, history is very enlightening. The historical roots of Calvinism should be carefully weighed. “Calvinism” is not really Calvinism because it didn't originate with Calvin. It is not Reformed Theology because it did not start with the Reformation. It was not a doctrine of record for the first three hundred years of Christianity. It was not taught by the persecuted church. And it was rejected by the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Calvinism is Augustinian because it started with Augustine. It is Roman Catholic because Augustine was Roman Catholic. From a historical perspective, Calvinism is a small stream dumping into a much larger river. And some would argue that the stream from which Calvinism originated is very polluted.

* * *

Up to this point I have used “Calvinism” and “Reformed Theology” interchangeably to refer to a certain set of doctrines developed by Augustine and popularized by Calvin. They are familiar terms and easy to use because everyone acquainted with the topic knows what I am talking about. From here on, however, I leave them in favor of another word.

“Calvinism” is historically misleading because Calvinism did not originate with Calvin. Furthermore, after repeated use, I feel like I am attacking a dead man who cannot defend himself. “Reformed Theology” is less personal, but it also fails to convey the historical connection with the Catholic church. I experimented with the expression, “Reformed Catholic Theology,” but that is cumbersome and can be used only so many times before it begins to sound taunting, too in-your-face. Having no desire to drag highly charged terms of endearment in the dirt and wishing to keep the historical setting carefully in mind, I decided to look for a suitable acronym.

TULIP is the popular acronym for Calvinism, but it fails to convey the historical setting. But another beautiful, early spring flower will serve. By adding “us” to “**C**alvin's **R**eformed **O**ld **C**atholic,” I get

“CROCUS” – hopefully neither too misleading nor too offensive. Just remember, the first “C” stands for Calvin; the “R” stands for Reformed; the “OC” stands for Old Catholic and the “US” – well, let that stand for each of us. Does the Bible really compel us to believe in Calvinism? Let’s examine the topic.

Chapter 3

The Case of the Missing Sofa

Have you ever walked into your house and gotten the strange feeling that something is different? Your eyes make a visual inspection. Every item, every knickknack, every piece of furniture you see is exactly as you remember it. The paint, the wallpaper, the curtains, the pictures. They’re all the same. But the feeling persists. Two days later, it dawns on you. The sofa is missing! The point is this: When you see a familiar object, it is easy to tell whether it has been changed or not, but to notice what *isn’t* there, that is a different story.

If you are a staunch, old-time CROCUS, you will not notice what is missing because it was never there in the first place. And if you are not a staunch CROCUS, you may not be familiar enough with CROCUS theology to realize that the sofa is gone.

Man’s Created Greatness, the Missing Sofa

Many years ago I asked my father, “Why does God love our race more than He loves horses and cows?” My father thought for a minute and then said, “I guess He loves us because He loves us.” For a young high school student wrestling with the big questions, that was not a satisfying answer.

Several years later, Dr. Francis Schaeffer pointed something out that

answered my question. It was an answer I should have known without asking. It was an answer that should have been familiar to every Sunday School student: God loves us more than He loves horses and cows because He made us in His own image.¹ We are His children by creation. We are His offspring.²

Every human being is descended from God. Adam was not our first father. God is. That part of the genealogy of Jesus which we all share ascends in direct line to God: “the son of Seth, the son of Adam, *the son of God.*”³ The reason we are not to curse people is because all people are made in the likeness of God.⁴ The reason a murderer was to be executed is because the victim bore the image of God.⁵ All people are image bearers. All people are children of God through creation. All people are God’s offspring.⁶

I am not an expert in church history, but it seems to me that until Dr. Schaeffer called it to our attention, this idea was foreign to us. I remember trying it out on a small group of mature Christians from the CROCUS tradition and getting puzzled responses. The notion that man could be both great and fallen at the same time was new to them. They had not so much as heard about the sofa.

The wonderful truth of man’s created greatness is not native to CROCUS soil. It came as no surprise to read that Luther and other reformers neither recognized nor emphasized the image of God in fallen mankind, only in regenerated individuals.⁷ The omission of man’s created greatness is one of the tragedies of CROCUS theology. An old version of Isaac Watts’ hymn, “At the Cross,” reflects the thinking that still prevails: “Alas, and did my Savior bleed? And did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for such a *worm* as I?”

Sometimes the awareness of our sin makes us feel so miserable that we revile ourselves and call ourselves contemptible names. But one thing no human being can ever be is a worm or any other crawly creature. We have been made in the image of God and remain God’s offspring even though we are fallen. No amount of sin and depravity can unmake us.

I remember visiting with a young man in jail. He said, “My mother

¹ Genesis 1:26

² Acts 17:29

³ Luke 3:38

⁴ James 3:9

⁵ Genesis 9:6

⁶ Acts 17:29

⁷ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 20.

told me that she would always love me, but that my behavior has separated us.” How true! Sin alienates. It is death to a relationship. But the young man remained her son. And the love of a mother for her son was still there even though the relationship was broken.

What kind of attitude do you suppose the Heavenly Father has toward His human offspring? Jesus said, “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”¹ Jesus compares the heavenly Father to human parents and says the Heavenly Father treats His offspring better than human parents do. He loves His human children more than the mother loved her incarcerated, alienated son.

If that mother had the power to recover her alienated son, do you suppose she would do it? How many of us sinful parents, if the house were on fire, would save one child and deliberately, willingly let the others perish? That’s murder! How much worse than murder if we had the power to give our children eternal salvation and we withheld it, consigning them instead to eternal damnation?

Whenever CROCUS theology says something like, “...if any person fails to believe, it is because God has withheld that grace which He is under no obligation to bestow,” remember two things: (1) In spite of the fall and the fact that we are separated from God by our behavior, we are all God’s offspring by creation and, (2) The Heavenly Father treats His offspring better than human parents treat their children.

Whenever CROCUS theology introduces unconditional election, limited atonement, selective love, and discriminating grace, remember two things: (1) In spite of the fall and the fact that we are separated from God by our behavior, we are all God’s offspring by creation and, (2) The Heavenly Father treats His offspring better than human parents treat their children.

Whenever the overlapping, crisscrossing, cohesive layers of CROCUS theology threatened to suffocate the mind, remember two things. What are they? (1) *In spite of the fall and the fact that we are separated from God by our behavior, we are all God’s offspring by*

¹ Matthew 7:11

creation and, (2) The Heavenly Father treats His offspring better than human parents treat their children.

If we who are evil would never consciously, willfully, knowingly, deliberately withhold the grace that would save our children from eternal damnation, then why would God do such a thing? And why would anyone attempt to explain away the passages in Scripture which clearly suggest that God really does not do that?

The “glorious gospel” of Jesus Christ is addressed to estranged children of God, not to worms. Even though we are lost, dead in our sins and enemies of God, we are still His offspring by creation. We bear His image. We are important to Him. Until CROCUS theology leaves the worm idea and celebrates man’s created greatness, I believe it will never understand the good news.

Chapter 4

Unwinding the Ball of String

My Grandfather, Adolph, kept pieces of string that he wound into a ball. Every time he acquired a new piece of string, the ball would get bigger. When he needed some string, he would find a loose end and unwind a piece. It was important to pull on the correct end. Pulling on the wrong end or the wrong string would create an impossible tangle. Done properly, however, the entire ball could be unwound with little difficulty.

CROCUS theology is like a ball of string comprised of many overlapping, crisscrossing layers, each supported and held in place by the others.

One of the frustrations opponents experience with CROCUS theology is that it is hard to pick apart. There is always an answer. Individual doctrines within the package stick up for each other. Reformed theology forms a tight, cohesive unit, something its advocates are quick to point out:

...these are not isolated and independent doctrines but are so inter-related that they form a simple, harmonious, self-consistent system; ... Prove any one of them true and all the others will follow as logical and necessary parts of the system. Prove any one of them false and the whole system must be abandoned. ¹

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948, pg. 59.

The meaning of God’s Sovereignty demands unconditional election. ¹

If the doctrine of Total Inability or Original Sin be admitted, the doctrine of unconditional Election follows by the most inescapable logic.²

...if what they hold concerning the doctrine of Election is proven true, then what they hold concerning the doctrine of Reprobation will follow of logical necessity. ³

It will be seen at once that this doctrine [Limited Atonement] necessarily follows from the doctrine of election. ... These two doctrines must stand or fall together. ⁴

This doctrine [The Perseverance of the Saints] does not stand alone but is a necessary part of the Calvinistic system of theology. ⁵

All of its doctrines “stand or fall together.” That is its strength but that is also its potential weakness: “Prove any one of them false and the whole system must be abandoned.” Does CROCUS theology have any loose ends? I believe it does. I believe that when the strings are pulled in the right order, the ball unwinds easily, quickly and totally.

“Unconditional Election” or “Predestination” is the high profile teaching of CROCUS theology. This doctrine teaches that God decided before the creation of the world which individuals He would save from their sins and which ones He would allow to perish even though He has the ability to save everyone if He wanted to. It is tempting to jump right in and start pulling on this string, but I know what will happen. It happens every time unsuspecting people try to unwind the ball. A horrible tangle results. That is because the doctrine of Unconditional Election is at the center of the ball, carefully protected by other strings.

Tempting though it may be to start unwinding the doctrine of Unconditional Election, it is important to take the strings in order. The Sovereignty of God and the Fall of Man do not attract attention because – well, don’t we all believe God is sovereign and man is fallen? Nevertheless, they are crucial to the discussion, and it is precisely because

¹ Knappen, Darryl, *Doctrine of Election*, pg. 4.

² Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948, pg. 95.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 151.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 182.

they do not call attention to themselves that we must pat them down carefully. If we wave them in, as defined by CROCUS theology, these two doctrines will immediately form a protective layer around Unconditional Election. There are other strings also that must be unwound. Let's take them in order. The first string is the doctrine of sovereignty.

Chapter 5

Is God a Micro-Manager or a Macro-Manager?

Everyone who believes that the world was created by a Supreme Being agrees that the Creator has the undisputed right to make decisions and to act accordingly. That is the definition of sovereignty. That is what makes a Supreme Being supreme. All Christians believe in the sovereignty of God.

But how does God express His sovereignty? CROCUS theology represents God as an autocratic sovereign who controls everything down to the smallest event and the tiniest molecule. His government is totalitarian. There is no such thing as a true accident. There is no such thing as chance. There is no free-will. Absolutely everything is determined by God.

There Is No Such Thing as “Luck” or “Chance.” All things come to pass by God’s wise providence. ... Nothing “just happens” ...¹

From a human perspective, the casting of lots (or its modern equivalent, the rolling of dice or flipping of a coin) is the most typical of random events that occur in the universe. But Scripture affirms that the outcome of such an event is from God: “the lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the LORD” (Proverbs 16:33).²

¹ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 337.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 318

The divine cause of each event works as an invisible, behind-the-scenes, directing cause and therefore could be called the “primary cause” that plans and initiates everything that happens.¹

CROCUS theology affirms the cause-and-effect laws of nature, yet at the same time insists that an “invisible, behind-the-scenes, directing cause” determines everything that happens. God does not just cause it to rain, each raindrop lands exactly where God directs it. He does not just make snow, each snowflake lands exactly where God directs it. Nothing is left to chance or randomness. Every flip of the coin is determined by God. Every slot machine and every bullet is divinely directed. God is the “primary” cause that “plans and initiates everything that happens.” At the same time, people are responsible for their choices. How does CROCUS theology explain all this? Judging by the numerous variations, clarifications, disclaimers and razor-thin technical terms, with much difficulty.

The subtitle of Chapter 16 in a CROCUS textbook reads, “If God controls all things, how can our actions have real meaning?”² Sixteen pages of complicated explanation later, the student comes to this heading: “In Spite of All of the Foregoing Statements, We Have to Come to the Point Where We Confess That We Do Not Understand How It Is That God Can Ordain That We Carry Out Evil Deeds and Yet Hold Us Accountable for Them and Not be Blamed Himself.”³ Another author hitting the same wall simply says, “some problems arise here which we in our present state of knowledge are not capable of solving.”⁴ I think there is a better explanation.

A sovereign God who controls everything down to the smallest event and the tiniest molecule is a micro-manager. A sovereign God who assigns responsibility and delegates authority is a macro-manager. A macro-manager is ultimately responsible for the business, but he is not directly responsible for everything that happens in the business. The purpose of this chapter is to show from nature, Scripture and the life of Jesus that God is a macro-manager.

¹ Ibid., pg. 319.

² Ibid., pg. 315.

³ Ibid., pg. 330.

⁴ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 30.

Argument from Nature

There are three Divinely inspired “books”: The Book of God’s works, the Book of God’s words and the Book of God’s incarnate Son: Nature, the Bible and Jesus Christ. Each is a true revelation of God. The book of nature is a first-grade primer that testifies to the existence and greatness of our Creator. The second book – the Bible – is a written history of the plan of redemption. The third “book” is the incarnate Word, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Who revealed the true nature of God. Each of these revelations provides its own unique information. Each builds on the other. And, when rightly understood, none contradicts the others.

The book of nature reveals God’s creative power and genius. If we had no further information to go on, we would certainly conclude from nature that: (1) There truly is an intelligent Designer and, (2) He made the world like a great machine that runs according to marvelously designed “laws of nature.” The laws of nature sustain and maintain what has been created. They minimize the effects of unfavorable accidents while, at the same time, incorporate pure chance to its advantage. These laws are so amazing, they constitute part of the witness of nature that testifies to the existence of an intelligent Designer. Nature introduces its Creator as a macro-manager. The physical universe reflects macro-management on the highest level.

Through concepts of “preservation” and “concurrence,” CROCUS theology attempts to explain how God can control every molecule without rendering natural law superfluous and redundant, but nature by itself gives no hint of this – something CROCUS theology concedes: “[concurrence] is hidden from our eyes unless we read it in Scripture.”¹ Nature, by itself, loudly proclaims that God rules His creation through natural law, a lesson that becomes increasingly evident with our growing knowledge of things great and small.

And so, while “no event in creation falls outside of his providence,”² not every event in creation is directly caused by Providence. God holds the entire universe in His hand. Not a single molecule can escape. But

¹ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 317.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 317.

that is not the same as saying every molecule is directly controlled by God.

Argument from the Bible

The Bible introduces information about God which we do not learn from nature. We learn from the Bible, for instance, that God did not put the universe on auto-pilot and then walk away from it, never to look back. We learn that God not only cares about His creation but that He has plans for His creation and is actively involved in bringing about those plans. Does the Bible give any indication how our sovereign God manages His world?

The opening chapters of Genesis are full of clues. God placed Adam in the garden and told him to work it and take care of it. ¹ Our first parents were told to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue it, and to rule over the creatures. ² Here we see instruction and delegation. God brought the creatures He made to Adam to see what Adam would call them. Whatever Adam called them, that was the name that was given to them. ³ Not only was the sovereign God curious to see what Adam would do, but He accepted Adam’s decisions.

God commanded the man not to eat the fruit of a certain tree and told him the consequence for disobedience. ⁴ Implicit in the command and the stated consequence is the possibility that man could and might disobey. In other words, God gave our first parents freedom to choose. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were held accountable for their actions, as if they really had the knowledge and the freedom to do things differently. ⁵

On freely choosing to disobey, God responded to their disobedience. ⁶ In other words, some of God’s actions were contingent upon human choices. Later on, God told Cain that the choice of right and wrong lay before him, as if Cain really did have the freedom to go either way. ⁷

The opening chapters of the Bible are filled with reasons to believe that God is not a micro-manager. Instructions with information,

¹ Genesis 2:15

² Genesis 1:28

³ Genesis 2:19

⁴ Genesis 2:17

⁵ Genesis 3:14-19

⁶ Genesis 3:22-24

⁷ Genesis 4:7

commands with consequences, delegation of authority, divine curiosity, God permitting man to choose and then abiding by his choices, a courtroom scene with judge and defendants, a clear lesson on right and wrong with an appeal by God to do what is right – all these things clearly indicate that though God is in control, He does not control everything. A natural reading of the opening chapters of the Bible provide strong evidence that micro-management is not God’s method of operation.

We turn to other parts of the Bible. Scripture repeatedly represents God as a pleading God; pleading with people to choose right and renounce evil; pleading with people to repent of their wicked ways. In Leviticus, chapter 26, for instance, not only does God urge the nation of Israel to obey but He sets before the nation of Israel five levels of consequences if they do not obey, implying that He wanted them to obey and would apply increasing pressure to get them to obey.

How could such a warning be regarded as genuine if God were a micro-manager who determined everything ahead of time and who controls everything down to the smallest event and the tiniest molecule? It would be like posting caution signs along a five-mile stretch of highway knowing full-well that motorists had no power to heed the warnings. Imagine a series of warnings that look like this: “Take warning, if you do not obey [though I have ordained that you won’t], this will happen. If you still will not obey [even though I have made sure you won’t], then such and such will happen. If that does not get you to obey [and it won’t because I have determined ahead of time that it won’t], then this will happen. If that still does not get you to obey [which it won’t because I am not going to let you obey], then this will happen. And if even that does not get you to obey [which will not happen because I have made sure of it], then this will happen to you.”

The Bible reveals a God who warns, who pleads for obedience and grieves over disobedience. He even stacks the warnings and the consequences in order to provide greater motivation to comply. This kind of information is difficult to reconcile with the idea that God has determined every event in the history of the world down to the smallest detail. If everything is determined, why does the Bible make it look like

our own choices make a difference? Why does the Bible make it look like God can be really angry or disappointed when we do wrong?

The Bible also introduces the concept of contingency in which God says in essence, “If you do such and such, then I will do thus and so.” God told Jeroboam: “If you do whatever I command you... I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you.”¹ In other words, “The choice is yours. I’ll make My move depending upon how you make yours.”

Mordecai, the godly Jew, told Esther to consider the possibility that she had been placed in a position of power for the purpose of delivering the Jews.² If she failed to do what had been given her to do, deliverance, he assured her, would come from another source, but she would perish. Without mentioning God, Mordecai clearly implied that God had set her in place for this moment and that the next move was hers and that depending on how she moved, Providence would move. Micro-management cannot accept the possibility that any part of history is contingent upon our choices, but that seems to be what Mordecai believed.

Not only does the Bible present contingencies, but it also contains hypothetical contingencies: “If you *would have done* such and such, then I *would have done* thus and so.” God told King Saul through the prophet Samuel, “You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure ...”³ “You chose a course, Saul, and it is too late for you to do things over, but just for your information, if you had done things differently, I would have done things differently.”

By insisting that God is a micro-manager, the above passage requires an impossible explanation that goes something like this: “Saul, I knew you were a bad apple from the beginning because I determined you to be like this. That is why I chose you because I wanted history to go a certain way. You disobeyed Me exactly as I planned, but I made it look like I gave you a true choice so that it would look like it was really your fault. And then, after you had messed up, I could tell you how it really

¹ 1 Kings 11:38

² Esther 4:14

³ 1 Samuel 13:13-14

was possible for you to have done things differently and what a shame you didn't because if you had, then I would have done things differently myself.”

The Bible introduces a pleading, warning God Who genuinely wants people to obey, Who genuinely grieves when they don't and Who genuinely rejoices when they do. The Bible introduces a God of contingency in which the course that God takes sometimes hangs upon our choices. The Bible introduces a God of hypothetical contingency in which God, speaking after the fact, declares what He would have done differently if we had chosen differently.

There is another feature about God that the Bible introduces: God can be persuaded to change His mind. He told good King Hezekiah to put his house in order because he would not recover from his sickness but would die.¹ Hezekiah pleaded with God and God changed His mind.² God healed him after solemnly telling him he would not recover. In the end God more than doubled the time Hezekiah reigned over Judah.

The Bible is filled with passages which teach or imply that God is not a micro-manager. What we see in nature and feel in ourselves finds strong confirmation in the Bible. God may involve Himself directly in critical details when the situation calls for it, but that is not His usual method of operation. The Bible not only permits us to believe that God is a macro-manager, it encourages us to believe that He is.

Argument from the Life of Jesus

Jesus said, when a person “looks at me, he sees the one who sent me.”³ He said, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. ... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”⁴ The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the exact representation of the Father.⁵ What do the life and teachings of Jesus tell us about God's management style?

The life and teachings of Jesus clearly indicate that a sovereign God is working behind the scenes to accomplish His purposes. The question

¹ 2 Kings 20:1

² 2 Kings 20:2-5

³ John 12:45

⁴ John 14:7, 9

⁵ Hebrews 1:1-3

is not whether God is involved but whether His involvement is so complete that it effectively eliminates free-will.

Jesus repeatedly gives the impression that our choices and the consequences of our choices belong to us. He grieved over Jerusalem. “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!”¹ God was at work to bring His ancient plans to completion, but if His style of management prevented the people of Jerusalem from responding any other way, then Jesus’ words and emotions lose their sincerity.

When tempted in the wilderness, Jesus ordered Satan to worship and serve God, implying that Satan was responsible for his actions and could choose. The same impression is given when Jesus preached to the multitudes. Jesus preached repentance, implying that people could repent and would be held accountable if they didn’t. By appealing to people to change their minds,² He implied that they actually could change their minds and that He hoped they would. Such an appeal would be empty and deceptive if repentance was not an option. Why urge people to do something that is humanly impossible to do?

Not only did Jesus act as if people could make their own choices according to their own wishes, but He sometimes deferred to their wishes. The story of the demon-possessed man who lived among the tombs opens a fascinating window. Jesus was appealed to by the demon-possessed man while the man was still in bondage to demons.³ He was appealed to by the demons themselves.⁴ He was appealed to by the local residents.⁵ And He was appealed to by the restored man.⁶ Jesus listened to each appeal and deferred to three of them. Only the last appeal was denied.

Jesus came to serve.⁷ Under the umbrella of His Father’s will, Jesus was constantly responding to the wishes of people. Jesus teaches us that God is a servant. The Sovereign of the universe even listens to the devil himself.⁸ Though God is in control, the life and teachings of Jesus clearly teach that God does not control everything but is sensitive and even submissive to the wishes of His subjects.

¹ Luke 13:34

² Matthew 4:17

³ Luke 8:28

⁴ Luke 8:32

⁵ Luke 8:37

⁶ Luke 8:38

⁷ Matthew 20:26-28

⁸ Luke 4:5, 9; Job 1:11-12; 2:5-6

The Tension of Micro-management

If God determines every event down to the smallest detail, how can He be honestly angry at sinful behavior or hold moral beings responsible for their evil choices? How can prayer be significant? How can God find pleasure in righteousness or offer honest praise for those who do good? If He causes it all, then all credit or blame belongs to Him. The following statements from CROCUS theology illustrate this tension.

It seems better to affirm that God causes all things that happen, but that he does so in such a way that he somehow upholds our ability to make *willing, responsible choices*, choices that have *real and eternal results*, and for which we are *held responsible*. Exactly how God combines his providential control with our willing and significant choices, Scripture does not explain to us. But rather than deny one aspect or the other (simply because we cannot explain how both can be true), we should accept both in an attempt to be faithful to the teaching of all of Scripture.¹

Scripture repeatedly gives examples where God in a mysterious, hidden way somehow ordains that people do wrong, but continually places the blame for that wrong on the individual human who does wrong and never on God himself.²

This is the tension of micro-management. It creates such tension in my own mind that, rather than accepting “both in an attempt to be faithful to the teaching of all of Scripture,” it motivates me to look for a better way to understand the Scriptures.

The first tension it creates has to do with God’s sincerity. If “God in a mysterious, hidden way somehow ordains that people do wrong,” then one has to question the sincerity of His warnings and the genuineness of His grief, His anger and His joy. If God ordains all events of rebellion and repentance why does Scripture make Him out to be really grieved over sin and really joyful when there is repentance?

There are many who willingly discredit the Bible for just this sort of

¹ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 321.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 343.

thinking. Hobart Mowrer, for instance, lumped Freud and Calvin together and dismissed them both – Freud because he taught psychological determinism and Calvin because he taught divine determinism. For my part, I love the Bible. I do not want to let it go or see it dishonored. To me, a teaching that places God directly behind every choice and every event in the universe is painful, embarrassing and frightening.

Not only is God’s sincerity brought into question, so is His integrity. According to CROCUS theology, “The divine cause of each event works as an invisible, behind-the-scenes, directing cause and therefore could be called the ‘primary cause’ that plans and initiates everything that happens.”¹ But, according to Scripture, primary causes are the accountable causes.

God held David accountable for Uriah’s death because David was the primary cause. Joab put Uriah in the front line, and the men of Rabbah actually killed him, but they were not responsible because they were only secondary causes. If God is the primary cause who plans and initiates everything that happens, why is God not responsible for Uriah’s death? And if God escapes responsibility because only secondary causes can be held responsible, then why not hold Joab guilty instead of David?

We would all agree that if God created everything, then God is *ultimately* responsible for everything. He is *ultimately* responsible for the first sin and every sin since then. He is *ultimately* responsible for damnation and the devil. He is *ultimately* responsible for every flood, earthquake, automobile accident, murder, divorce, abortion, heart attack and suicide. If He had not created, none of this would have happened.

I do not have a problem with God being *ultimately* responsible as long as He is not directly responsible. The big question to me is similar to the one that our country asked during the Watergate break-in: “Did Mr. Nixon personally order it or didn’t he?” It makes all the difference whether Mr. Nixon personally endorsed the break-in or whether it was planned and carried out totally by those under him. It makes all the difference whether coach Clem Haskins of the Minnesota Gophers was personally involved in the cheating scandal or whether he personally was

¹ Ibid., pg. 319.

clean. It makes all the difference whether Joab arranged Uriah’s death or whether he had orders. So it is with God. Did he micro-manage the Fall or was he responsible only because He owned the company?

When God made Adam, Adam was everything God wanted him to be. Adam did not have a fallen, devil-bound will. When he sinned, he sinned as a perfect being. Therefore, one of two things seems to be true: Either God did not want Adam to sin and he did anyway (so much for God controlling everything) or God willed Adam to sin and Adam could not help it (farewell to personal accountability).

To their credit, CROCUS proponents go to great lengths to show that God did not order Adam’s sin. That is because they do not want to believe that God is directly responsible for evil. But if God is a micro-manager who “plans and initiates everything that happens,” how can it be denied? If He plans and initiates everything that happens, Eve could not help it. Adam could not help it. And the devil merely played the role that Joab played in the murder of Uriah.

Is There a Better Explanation?

The Bible teaches some kind of fore-knowing and predetermining. History is going someplace, and God knows where because He has determined to bring it to pass. The Bible also teaches that God will someday judge the world and that moral beings will be held responsible for their choices. The Bible portrays a God of compassion who is easily entreated. The Bible presents a God of deference, submission, pity, capitulation, regret and contingency. God implores, appeals, relents, grieves and rejoices. This does not sound like the micro-managing God of CROCUS theology who has everything planned out to the smallest event and the tiniest detail.

A more satisfying answer to me is that God can and sometimes does get involved in the details, but that His usual method of operation is that of macro-management. He influences and shapes the course of history without determining every event. Following the laws of nature, the sun

shines, the rain waters the earth, and the plants and animals do what they were made to do. God gave man a will and a moral nature, and so man does his thing. When God wants to accomplish something, He orchestrates man, nature and spirit beings to bring about the results He desires.

Evil individuals and evil nations, acting out their own sinful desires, play into the hand of God and are often used by God to accomplish His purposes. An example of this is found in 1 Kings 22. The entire host of heaven was standing around the throne of God. God asks, “Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?” (vs. 20) After several suggestions, a certain spirit offers to go and become a lying spirit in the mouths of all Ahab’s false prophets. God told him to do it and that he would succeed. (vs. 22)

God had determined to bring wicked king Ahab to his death. He gave permission to an evil spirit to deceive the evil prophets who in turn would encourage the evil king to do exactly what that evil king wanted to do. After the king made his own choice, God made sure he got in the path of an arrow shot at “random”. (vs. 34) God did not create the evil. He did not order the evil. All the evil was done willingly and freely. He merely permitted, coordinated and channeled the evil that was already there. The same is true for Pharaoh in Egypt. God took the evil that was already there, raised it up (isolated it and put it into position) and then hardened it (tempered it, reinforced it) to the perfect delight and will of the evil king.

It is not beyond the power and genius of God to run the business and accomplish His goals without filling in all the details. Much of human history is left for us to write. We can pray, act, obey, defy, love, hate, forgive, press charges, repent or persist in rebellion and thus fill in the pages with our own small but meaningful choices.

It is exciting to think that I can bring true joy or sorrow to God. It is exciting to think that my little life, by lining up with God, can actually change history in a positive way. It is exciting to think that my fervent prayers are heard and sometimes answered, thus making a difference for someone, somewhere. It is exciting to think that the Great Mind is

bending His creative and redemptive energies to conform willing participants into the character likeness of His special Son. It is comforting to realize that He has the power and the genius to utilize all things that come into our lives, whether good or bad, intentional or accidental, to accomplish this goal. It touches my heart to think that God in heaven sings and laughs, weeps and hopes, warns and relents, and even prays to us (appeals to us) to do our part even as He invites us to pray to Him to do His part. This is macro-management on a grand scale. It by no means excludes divine intervention in crucial details, but it certainly does not demand divine intervention for all details.

Scriptures Used by CROCUS Theology to Support Micro-Management

Scriptures that teach the upholding or sustaining work of God in the physical universe are not the exclusive property of CROCUS theology. They are equally true for macro-management. Micro-management says God upholds and sustains the universe by personally managing every detail. Macro-management says He does it by delegating authority to natural laws, thus eliminating the need to personally manage every detail.

Scripture teaches that God directs or causes natural phenomena such as fire, hail, snow, frost and storms. He causes the grass to grow. He directs the stars in the heavens. He makes His sun to rise each morning. These scriptures work as well for macro-management as they do for micro-management. It's just a matter of how much God attends to every detail and how much He delegates to natural law. Many references having to do with God directing or causing natural phenomena occur in poetic form. It is typical of poetry even today to cut to the core through metaphor and imagery.

Scripture teaches that God feeds the wild animals. But God also feeds domestic animals. Farmer Brown raises the hay and drops it in the manger but ultimately everything gets fed by God, including Farmer Brown. These Scriptures fit macro-management just as easily as micro-management.

Using Jesus’ words about not one sparrow “will fall to the ground without your father’s will,”¹ CROCUS theology teaches that God’s will is specifically carried out every time a sparrow dies.² The context, however, suggests that Jesus was not referring to God’s will but to His knowledge and His love. In fact, the word “will” does not occur in some versions.

Macro-management would explain the text by saying that God knows how many hairs are on each head, He also knows when something so small and insignificant as a sparrow falls, so trust Him and fear Him. Trust Him because you are worth more to him than many sparrows.³ Fear Him because He knows what you do in secret.⁴

Using Proverbs 16:33, CROCUS theology teaches that there is no such thing as chance or random events.⁵ Every flipped coin, every toss of dice has a divinely determined outcome. Macro-management theology counters by saying that God is bigger than that. God has the ability to direct the toss of a coin⁶ or a chance arrow⁷ when He wants to, but He does not bother Himself with every toss of dice in a game of Yahtzee, neither is He in bondage to the mathematical laws of probability.

One toss is not predictable, but many tosses follow a mathematically predictable pattern. If on one occasion God makes the dice fall one way, then somewhere down the line He is obligated to make them fall a different way just to maintain the pattern. In the end, if God controls every toss of dice, the laws of probability control God. By denying any chance or randomness in the universe, CROCUS theology ultimately reduces God to a slave of His own system. Granted, only a very competent slave could determine every detail and at the same time maintain the appearance of true chance, but bondage and servitude are written all across this balancing act. Macro-management, on the other hand, acknowledges the existence of chance and a God who has no difficulty using it and overruling it when He wants to.

CROCUS theology asserts that God controls all governmental affairs. Kings, boundaries, and courses of nations are all micro-managed by God. Every ballot and every word of every debate are determined by God. The argument for macro-management responds by saying that

¹ Matthew 10:29 RSV

² Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 318.

³ Matthew 10:31

⁴ Matthew 10:26, 28

⁵ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 318.

⁶ Acts 1:26

⁷ 1 Kings 22:34

nothing in human affairs will ever escape His Sovereign will, but that He does not control everything that happens. God has a plan for human history, and He will bring His plan to completion. If it takes a Pharaoh or a Cyrus or a Pilate at certain critical moments to keep His plan moving along, He can arrange it, and He can arrange it as far into the future as He wants.

Depending upon the circumstances and His own sovereign plan, God can rule with a light hand, a heavy hand or no hand at all. He can destroy Sodom with fire, the Spanish Armada with a storm and Napoleon with a Russian winter. He can direct a storm, or He can simply allow natural cause and effect to take its course until the land vomits out its inhabitants. ¹ The Bible makes it clear that God is always in charge and that He can do what He wants in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, ² but this does not automatically mean micro-management. The fact that He personally directs some of the details does not mean that He personally directs *all* of the details.

Eventually we come to the Bible passages which raise the question: How much does God know? And how does He know? Paul was set apart by God for a special purpose from birth. ³ Jeremiah was known and set apart before birth: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart: I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” ⁴ An angel of the Lord not only predicted the birth of John the Baptist, but explained to Zechariah what kind of a person John would become. ⁵ God made a prediction about Jacob and Esau before the twins were born. ⁶ Before Ishmael was born, the angel of the Lord told Hagar what kind of person he would become. ⁷

How does God know these things? Micro-management says that God knows everything because He has determined everything. Macro-management responds by saying that God knows what He has determined, but He hasn’t determined everything. In the case of special servants, strategic moments and sensitive details He knows a lot because He has determined a lot. What He has not determined He either does not know or else He knows by somehow seeing into the future.

¹ Leviticus 18:28

² Daniel 4:35

³ Galatians 1:15

⁴ Jeremiah 1:5

⁵ Luke 1:11-17

⁶ Genesis 25:23

⁷ Genesis 16:10-12

Does the Bible teach that God knows the smallest details of our lives from birth to death? Sometimes Job 14:5 is used to support this idea: “Man’s days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed.” The context, however, places this text with Psalm 90:10 in which the writer simply declares that our life span is limited. We are mortal. It has nothing to do with God knowing everything about us before we were born.

Psalm 139:16 says, “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” On the surface this statement puts macro-management into tension. So I take a closer look. Perhaps the Psalmist, in extolling the wonderful wisdom and knowledge of God, uses poetic techniques to sweep us along in his admiration for God. The previous verse refers to the secret place where his body was *woven* together as “the depths of the earth.” Obviously that is not to be taken literally. Babies do not originate at the bottom of the ocean or in some crevice in the crust of the earth. Neither are their bodies woven together. This is poetry and has to be read as poetry.

Perhaps more significant, however, is the fact that verse 16 – “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” – comes out differently in different translations. The King James Version says, “Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.” It is one thing to say that all David’s days were known by God before any of them came to pass. It is another thing to hear David praising God for the wonderful way his body was made. He marveled at the blueprint that determined his body parts before any of them had taken shape. He rejoiced in a God who could watch his unborn body developing in the womb. That makes verse 16 a natural extension of verse 14: “I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.” I suspect that the writer of Psalm 139 would agree that God is a wonderful macro-manager.

* * *

We raise chickens on our farm. I provide the feed, the water, the heat lamps, the barn, the fence and the pasture. I determine when to buy them and when to butcher them. I determine their times and their boundaries. I am in control. But I do not control everything they do. I am their sovereign but I am not an autocrat. They have their own pecking order and I have nothing to do with it. I don't even care. They can run under whatever heat lamp they choose. They can eat out of whichever feeder they want. They can drink their water inside the barn or outside the barn. Some love to spend their days indoors. Others are ready to run out to pasture the moment I open the door. Some test my patience by squeezing under the fence or flying over it. Under my sovereign control there is a whole kingdom of chickens doing what they choose to do.

“Sovereignty” does *not* mean that God controls everything down to the smallest event and the tiniest molecule. The word for that is “autocracy.” Sovereignty simply means “having undisputed right to make decisions and act accordingly.”

God does not have to control everything to be sovereign. If God made a world and left it, He would still be sovereign. That is because He could return at any time and do what He wants with it. He could leave His world in the hands of rebels for a thousand years and still be sovereign. That is because He always retains the undisputed right to do what He wants.

God has a plan for His creation. To bring this plan to completion, God rules with authority and purpose, but also with deference and even submission. God decrees, but He also delegates. God declares, but He also listens. Because God loves what He has created, He is easily entreated. His sovereignty is softened by a personal attentiveness to the righteous, to widows and orphans, to the poor and the stranger. There are times when He even honors the wishes of the devil and his demons. Under certain conditions and for certain individuals, God may change His mind, His plans and, to a limited degree, the very course of history. Even rebellion is tolerated up to a point. So, too, are pure chance and true accidents.

If nature, Scripture and the life of Jesus clearly showed that God controls everything down to the smallest event and the tiniest molecule, the discussion would be over. God does all choosing. Man does none. But nature, Scripture and the life of Jesus indicate just the opposite. There may be other reasons to believe that God determines our eternal destinies, but this is not one of them. There is at least enough evidence to continue the discussion.

Chapter 6

Fallen Man – Dead But Not Unconscious

If God controls everything down to the smallest event and the tiniest molecule, the discussion is over. Our destinies are determined. We continue the discussion because the evidence from nature, Scripture and the life of Jesus indicates that God is not a micro-manager who controls everything, but a macro-manager. God has a plan that may require getting involved in some of the details but, for the most part, God delegates power and authority to natural laws, to human government, to parents and to the choices of every individual. Even accidents and chance play a part. Nothing lies outside of God’s sovereign rule, but He does not determine every little detail in His realm.

But now we encounter a doctrine which says that, whatever else God may or may not control, at least our eternal destinies are determined. That is because man by nature is so totally dead in trespasses and sins, he can do nothing about it. Even if God threw him a rope, it wouldn’t do any good because unregenerate man lies motionless on the bottom. He has absolutely no ability to seek God, to repent or to make any kind of positive response to God. He will remain in that condition unless God regenerates him.

...asking a sinner to save himself is like asking a corpse to climb out of his own coffin. ¹

We confess that human beings are born spiritually dead and are incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace. ²

¹ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 51.

² Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 54, quoting from the Cambridge Declaration.

The unregenerate person must be regenerated before he has any desire for God. ¹

We frequently hear evangelical Christians say that their non-Christian friends are “seeking God” or “searching for God.” Why do we say this when Scripture so clearly teaches that no unregenerate person seeks after God? ... no one seeks after God while unregenerate ... The search for God does not end in conversion; it begins at conversion. ²

...in our corrupt humanity we never do a single good thing. ³

In Man’s total rebellion everything man does is sin. ... even the “good” man does because he is made in God’s image is sin (Romans 14:23) ... man in his natural state apart from the work of the Holy Spirit can produce nothing good (Romans 7:18) ... These “good” acts – not actually killing anyone or being kind – are evil because they are not done out of reliance on God or for His glory. ⁴

... the unrenewed sinner cannot do any act, however insignificant, which *fundamentally* meets with God’s approval and answers to the demands of God’s holy laws; and ... he cannot change his fundamental preference for sin and self to love for God, nor even make an approach to such a change. In a word, he is unable to do any spiritual good. ⁵

Is unregenerate man *dead* dead or relationally dead but still conscious and responsive? If unregenerate man is *dead* dead, then, of course, he must be made alive (regenerated) before repentance and faith is even possible, ergo – CROCUS theology. On the other hand, if some ember, some spark, some remnant of created potential still remains in unregenerate man, then God’s Spirit has something to work with. So the question is this: Does the Bible permit us to believe that God works in the hearts of unregenerate men and women before they are regenerated, or do people have to be regenerated before that work can even begin?

¹ Sproul, R.C., *What Is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 136.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 125.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 120.

⁴ Knappen, Darryl, *The Doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity*, Lecture Notes.

⁵ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 54, quoting Louis Berkof, italics in original.

How Total Is “Total Depravity”?

It may come as a surprise even to those who believe in CROCUS theology that Total Depravity does not mean total depravity. An advocate of CROCUS theology writes:

Total depravity is the first of Calvinism’s famous five points. It is somewhat unfortunate that the doctrine is called “Total Depravity” because this name can be misleading. ... The term is misleading because it suggests a moral condition of utter depravity. Utter depravity means that a person is as wicked as he can possibly be. ... The doctrine of total depravity, however, does not teach that man is as wicked as he could possibly be.¹

The same writer suggests using the expression “radical corruption.” “To say that mankind is radically corrupt is to say that sin penetrates to the root or core of our being. Sin is not tangential or peripheral, but arises from the center of our being.”²

There is a major difference between total depravity and radical corruption. We all come on board with the second definition. Who is going to argue that sin does not go to the very core of our being? Even secular minds concede that something is dreadfully wrong with us.

Unregenerate man is very bad but, according to CROCUS theology, not as bad as he could be. That explains a mother’s love for her children? That explains acts of kindness to a stranded motorist or to hurricane victims? CROCUS theology cautiously admits that it is possible for an unregenerate person to mix in a little goodness with his not-so-total depravity. It labels these good deeds “civil virtues.” Civil virtues, according to CROCUS theology, refer to “deeds that conform outwardly to the law of God.” It adds that “a deed that outwardly conforms to God’s law but proceeds from a heart alienated from God is not deemed by God a good deed.”³ Thus, only spiritually regenerate people can be truly good. The good that everyone else does is downgraded to civil virtue.

¹ Sproul, R.C., *What Is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 117.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 118.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 120.

Many good deeds of unregenerate people resemble the good deeds of the regenerate. Likewise, pride, selfishness and lust look the same whether they issue from a regenerate heart or an unregenerate heart. Consequently, if the good and the evil appear identical regardless of who does them, why distinguish between “civil virtue” and good deeds? Is this really a biblical distinction or is it contrived to dodge a bullet? Before we examine the Scriptures, consider why CROCUS theology must make a distinction between good deeds and civil virtue.

The Need for a Distinction Between Righteousness and Civil Virtue

In order for CROCUS theology to sustain itself, unregenerate man must be so completely dead that not one spark of true goodness, not one twitch of conscience, not one pinch of interest in God or truth exists. Otherwise, God’s Spirit might find that spark, work on that conscience and stir up that interest to draw an unregenerate person to repentance and rebirth. Any positive response from an unregenerate heart opens the door to the possibility that fallen, unregenerate man, under the influence of God’s Spirit, might (gasp) repent and surrender to God. This door has to remain shut or CROCUS theology is finished.

The simplest way to keep the door shut would be to insist that fallen man is totally (completely, entirely, utterly) depraved, but that argument has to be abandoned because it is obviously false. By retreating to the idea of “civil virtue,” CROCUS theology momentarily saves itself, but what a precarious position to be in! Another inch would be an outright admission that unregenerate man retains enough created goodness to respond positively to God’s Spirit after all.

Does the Bible that Paul Read Distinguish Between Civil Virtue and Righteousness?

The Bible that Paul read clearly teaches that everyone has sinned:

“For there is not a just man upon the earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.”¹ In that sense, no one is righteous. Yet, long before anyone knew about regeneration and a transferred righteousness, Old Testament writers repeatedly referred to “righteousness” and to people who are “righteous.” Who are these people and how was righteousness understood prior to the coming of Jesus?

When the Old Testament was written, Jewish people lived under the law of Moses. The law of Moses was a set of rules given by God for governing the nation of Israel. There were moral laws, hygiene laws, dietary laws, marriage laws, property laws, justice laws, welfare laws and worship laws. There were laws for just about everything a society at that time would need. The laws were not designed to provide eternal salvation but to govern a nation. For the intended purpose, the rules were good, practical and doable:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. ...I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live...²

In those days a “righteous” man was a God-fearing citizen who obeyed the laws, tried to do what was right, offered sacrifices for his sins and made restitution when necessary. Everyone understood that righteousness was a choice. God talked like it was a choice. Moses talked like it was a choice. And all the Old Testament prophets talked like it was a choice. Furthermore, by urging people to choose righteousness and by condemning people who chose to disobey, they all gave the impression that righteousness was attainable.

The book of Proverbs encourages young and old to pursue a life of discipline, prudence, knowledge, wisdom and righteousness. Through

¹ Ecclesiastes 7:20 KJV

² Deuteronomy 30:11-14, 19

the prophet Ezekiel, God talked about the wicked turning from their wickedness and becoming righteous and also about the righteous turning away from righteousness and becoming wicked.¹ A natural reading of the Old Testament gives the impression that wickedness and righteousness is a choice that everyone must make.

If unregenerate people are incapable of righteousness, why urge them to be righteous and imply that they can turn from their wickedness and become righteous? And why would God talk about righteous people becoming wicked? Within the CROCUS framework, only regenerated people can turn from their wickedness and become righteous. And never, once a person is regenerated, can he return to the former condition of wickedness.

The thrust and language of the Old Testament do not cooperate with CROCUS theology. There is no distinction between civil virtue and true righteousness. More importantly, when you bring that distinction with you, the Old Testament won't accept it. In my opinion, the Bible that Paul read does not teach it and cannot accommodate it.

The Bible that Paul Read Urges Sinful People to Seek God

The Bible that Paul read gives the impression that Adam's fallen offspring are capable of choosing right as well as wrong. What about seeking God? Can fallen, unregenerate man seek God? Or does the Bible that Paul read teach that “...no one seeks after God while unregenerate ... The search for God does not end in conversion; it begins at conversion.”?²

Many passages in the Old Testament mention seeking God. Some are admonitions to seek God and some are examples of people who did or did not seek God. Here is a sampling.

Seeking God should be done:

...let the hearts of those *who seek* the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; *seek his face* always.³

¹ Ezekiel 18:24, 26

² Sproul, R.C., *What Is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 125.

³ Psalm 105:3-4. The italics here and in other Scripture quotations are my emphasis. They do not occur in the quotation itself.

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.¹

Now devote your heart and soul *to seeking the Lord* your God.²

This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: “*Seek me and live; ... Seek the Lord and live ...*”³

Seeking God is something that can be done:

The Lord will scatter you among the peoples ... There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell. But if from there you *seek the Lord* your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.⁴

You will seek me and find me when you *seek me* with all your heart.⁵

...the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. *If you seek him*, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever.⁶

The Lord is with you when you are with him. *If you seek him*, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you.⁷

You will *seek me* and find me when you *seek me* with all your heart.⁸

In those days, at that time, declares the Lord, the people of Israel and the people of Judah together will go in tears *to seek the Lord* their God.⁹

The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one *who seeks him ...*¹⁰

¹ Isaiah 55:6, 7

² 1 Chronicles 22:19

³ Amos 5:4, 6

⁴ Deuteronomy 4:27-29

⁵ Jeremiah 29:13

⁶ 1 Chronicles 28:9

⁷ 2 Chronicles 15:2

⁸ Jeremiah 29:13

⁹ Jeremiah 50:4

¹⁰ Lamentations 3:25

Some people chose to seek God:

Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts *on seeking the Lord, the God of Israel*, followed the Levites to Jerusalem...¹

So the Israelites who had returned from exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order *to seek the Lord*, the God of Israel.²

They entered into a covenant *to seek the Lord*, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and soul. *All who would not seek the Lord*, the God of Israel, were to be put to death ... *They sought the Lord eagerly*, and he was found by them.³

Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, “Let us go at once to entreat the Lord *and seek the Lord Almighty*.” ... And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem *to seek the Lord Almighty* and to entreat him.⁴

Some people chose not to seek God:

He did evil because he *had not set his heart on seeking the Lord*.⁵

Some people sought the Lord God for awhile but then ceased seeking Him:

Then all the people of Judah took Uzziah ... and made him king ... He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord ... *He sought God* during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. *As long as he sought the Lord*, God gave him success. ... But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God ...⁶

The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because in his early years he walked in the ways his father David had followed. He did not consult the Baals *but sought the God of his father* ...⁷

¹ 2 Chronicles 11:16

² Ezra 6:21

³ 2 Chronicles 15:12-15

⁴ Zechariah 8:20-22

⁵ 2 Chronicles 12:14

⁶ 2 Chronicles 26:1,4-6, 16

⁷ 2 Chronicles 17:3, 4

When Jehoshaphat king of Judah returned safely to his palace in Jerusalem, Jehu the seer, the son of Hanani, went out to meet him and said to the king, “Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Because of this, the wrath of the Lord is upon you. There is, however, some good in you, for you have rid the land of the Asherah poles and have *set your heart on seeking God.*”¹

Trouble and affliction sometimes help people seek God:

When I was in distress, *I sought* the Lord;²

But in their distress they turned to the Lord, the God of Israel, and *sought him*, and he was found by them.³

The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah *to seek him.*⁴

Then I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And *they will seek my face*; in their misery *they will earnestly seek me.*⁵

There is no reluctance in the Old Testament about encouraging people to seek God. There is no suspicion that it is impossible until after regeneration. To the contrary, the Old Testament is full of examples of people who did seek God. Some did it for awhile and then quit. Others refused to do it at first and then changed their minds and started seeking God at the end of their lives. Some passages indicate that seeking God comes *before* God bestows His favor.

The Old Testament makes no distinction between civil virtue and righteousness. Old Testament writers give no hint whatsoever that people are powerless to respond positively to God. It would take a really clear and direct teaching from the New Testament to even make a discussion out of this. What does the New Testament say about civil virtue, total inability and total depravity?

¹ 2 Chronicles 19:1-3

² Psalm 77:2

³ 2 Chronicles 15:4

⁴ 2 Chronicles 20:4

⁵ Hosea 5:15

Total Inability and 1 Corinthians 2:14

Paul wrote, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”¹ According to CROCUS theology, “the man without the Spirit” refers to an unregenerate person. Hence the verse would read, “An unregenerate person does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” Is that what Paul meant?

Notice that some English versions use the expression “natural man.” Literally, “animal man.” “The *animal man* does not accept the things that come from God.” This suggests an entirely different meaning.

When God created us, He made us in His image. He also made us male and female.² In other words, He gave us a biological dimension that resembles the animals, and He gave us a personality dimension that resembles our Maker. We are a wonderful combination of two identities. This combination is what sets us apart from the animals. It is what makes us great. What happened to this marvelous combination when sin entered?

When sin came into the world, it made us guilty. It brought death. It alienated us from God. But one thing it did not do was to unmake us. It did not convert us into mere animal beings. We know this because the Bible refers to fallen people as image bearers.³ All people remain image bearers, including fallen people. Even individuals that Peter and Jude compare to unreasoning animals⁴ are still image bearers and not actual beasts but only *like* brute beasts.

The *animal man* in 1 Corinthians 2:14 is simply a reference to the animal nature in every man. We all have an animal nature, sometimes called “the flesh.” People who live according to the animal nature place an emphasis on the flesh, the biological part, the physical part, the here-and-now, the five senses. They play down the spiritual dimension. They are the same ones Paul talks about in Romans 8:5 who mind the things of the flesh. Such people cannot please God or understand God. Whenever

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:14

² Genesis 1:27

³ Genesis 9:6, James 3:9

⁴ 2 Peter 2:12, Jude 10

the focus is on the animal nature – the here-and-now things of the flesh – the things of God become distant, foolish and incomprehensible. Unfortunately, this is true for regenerated believers as well as for unbelievers, which is why Paul says, in the next breath, “Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly [carnal, fleshly]...”¹

Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth because they were not getting it. They didn’t understand. They were having trouble receiving the things of the Spirit. In typical Paul fashion, he begins his letter on a positive note: “I always thank God for you...”² “...you have been enriched in every way...”³ “...you do not lack any spiritual gift...”⁴ “[God] will keep you strong to the end...”⁵ Eventually, however, he gets around to the real purpose of his letter, which is a rebuke. He rebukes them for their divisions, their arrogance, their immorality, their callousness toward sin, their insensitivity to the poor and the weaker brother, their internal fighting and lawsuits, their drunkenness at the love feasts, their impropriety and disorder at church gatherings and their unbalanced, scandalous use of spiritual gifts.

The verse we are looking at is part of a transitional paragraph. Paul talks about the wonderful things God⁶ has revealed to us by His Spirit,⁷ which no one can know except by the Spirit of God. This is why God gave us His Spirit, Paul says, so that we might understand what God has freely given us,⁸ which explains why people who do not have the Spirit of God don’t get it. It’s nonsense to them.⁹ The spiritual man, on the other hand, does understand it. It makes sense to him because he has the mind of Christ.¹⁰ *So why don’t you guys get it? Why don’t you understand? Why aren’t you any further along in your faith? Why are you still such babies¹¹ and so carnal?¹² Is the animal man still alive and well in the church at Corinth?*

Verse 14 is not a statement about unregenerate man’s ability or lack of ability. It simply states that the Spirit and the flesh are in a tug-of-war: the more a person focuses on spiritual things, the less they focus on the flesh and vice versa. First Corinthians 2:14 teaches *incompatibility*, not inability. In no way does this passage rule out the possibility that the Spirit of God can move unregenerate people to shift their focus.

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:1

² 1 Corinthians 1:4

³ 1 Corinthians 1:5

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:7

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:8

⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:9-10

⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:11

⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:12

⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:14

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:15-16

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 3:1

¹² 1 Corinthians 3:1, 3

Total Inability and Ephesians 2:1-2

Another New Testament passage used by CROCUS theology to support the idea of Total Inability is found in Ephesians, chapter two. Speaking to the Ephesian believers, the apostle Paul said, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”¹ The same thought is repeated in Colossians 2:13: “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.”

These passages are used by CROCUS theology to teach that because unregenerate man is dead, he has no ability to repent, to pray, to seek God or do anything that would move him in God’s direction. A dead man can do nothing: “We confess that human beings are born spiritually dead and are incapable even of cooperating with regenerating grace.”² Does being dead in trespasses and sins mean that unregenerate man is incapable of even cooperating with regenerating grace?

When the prodigal’s father welcomed his son back home, he told the older brother, “We had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”³ The prodigal son wasn’t dead in the sense that he could no longer think, weep, remember and decide to return. But as far as the father was concerned, the son was dead because the relationship between father and son did not exist. The relationship was so completely severed, even death and burial could not have made it more complete. Relationally, the prodigal son was dead, but he certainly was not unconscious.

When Adam and Eve sinned, they died. They became dead in trespasses and sins. Relationally, they died the very day they sinned. But they were not unconscious. They felt shame. They heard the Lord God walking in the garden. They hid themselves. And when the Lord God called, they answered. Relationally, they were dead. Judicially, they were condemned. Emotionally, they were ashamed. But they were not unconscious.

¹ Ephesians 2:1-2

² Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 54, quoting from the Cambridge Declaration.

³ Luke 15:32

It is perfectly biblical to say that fallen, unregenerate people are relationally dead but not unconscious. Like Adam, they are separated from fellowship with God. But also like Adam, they can experience shame, can hide, can hear the voice of God and with divine persuasion can respond to that voice. This explanation not only accommodates Ephesians 2:1-2, but it also fits the large number of Scriptures instructing us to repent and seek God.

Total Inability and Romans 3:10-18

The classic Scripture for total inability is Romans 3:10-18. This is the passage that says no one is righteous, no one understands and seeks God, no one does good (not even one). Let's examine it.

The message of the New Testament caught Jewish people by surprise. They were expecting a conquering Messiah who would deliver from Rome, not a suffering Messiah who would deliver from sin. The crucifixion and resurrection were revolutionary. The plan of God turned out to be far bigger than anyone had dreamed. In the emerging big picture, the circumcised owners of the law proved to be just as sinful and just as condemned as the despised Gentiles. Jew and Gentile alike needed a transferred “righteousness” that comes from God to all who believe.

None of this made sense to a Jew who took pride in his own righteousness or who drew assurance from his superiority as one of the chosen people. And so it was that when Paul spoke to Jewish audiences he didn't just tell them about the “righteousness from God [that] comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe,”¹ he endeavored to convince self-righteous Jews that they needed this righteousness.

The book of Romans is the written version of the basic message that Paul preached wherever he went. In Romans 1, Paul explains that pagan Gentiles are dirty, rotten sinners. Every Jew nods his head in agreement. Then Paul starts the surgery on Jews. “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge

¹ Romans 3:22

the other, you are condemning yourself.”¹ Not too deep and not too pointed, but you can see where Paul is headed. Then he talks about people who sin under the law being judged by the law.² He still hasn’t used the word “Jew,” but there is no mistake who he is talking about. But just in case the Jewish ear doesn’t take hints, Paul makes it absolutely clear: “Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God ...”³ The surgery has begun.

Paul’s goal at this point was to prove that “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.”⁴ What is the best way to convince a self-righteous Jew that he also is a dirty, rotten sinner just like everyone else? Use his own Bible! Paul does just that. Verses 10-18 is a collage of Old Testament passages. Without comment, Paul fires off the entire clip:

There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.

Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.

The poison of vipers is on their lips.

Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.

Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.

There is no fear of God before their eyes.⁵

If Romans 3:10-18 were an island in the middle of the ocean with no context, no speaker, no audience, no flow of thought, no Old Testament connection and no relationship to real life, CROCUS theology might have a case for total inability. But Romans 3:10-18 is not an island. It is connected to a speaker, to an audience, to history and to real life. It has context, purpose and flow. Everything about the immediate context, the larger context, the Old Testament context, the writer’s intent, the Jewish mind-set and the flow of the argument suggests that Romans 3:10-18 has nothing to do with total inability and everything to do with universal guilt and a universal need of a transferred righteousness.

There are several reasons to doubt that Paul intended to teach total inability. First of all, the Old Testament is not the place to go in order to

¹ Romans 2:1

² Romans 2:12

³ Romans 2:17

⁴ Romans 3:9

⁵ Romans 3:10-18

convince a Jewish audience that man has no ability to be good. A Jew who knew his Bible would tear that argument apart.

Second, if Paul had intended to prove that no one can be righteous, why would he choose passages that distinguish between wicked people and righteous people? Three out of the six texts quoted by Paul refer to righteous people, one refers to innocent people, one refers to people who shun evil and one refers to the upright in heart:

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. ...for God is present in the company of the *righteous*.¹

Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies – make straight your way before me. Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with destruction. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongue they speak deceit. ...For surely, O Lord, you bless the *righteous* ...²

Rescue me, O Lord, from evil men; protect me from men of violence ... They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s; the poison of vipers is on their lips. ...Surely the *righteous* will praise your name and the *upright* will live before you.³

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? ... In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak ... His mouth is full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue. ...from ambush he murders the *innocent*...⁴

Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know ...*whoever shuns evil becomes a prey*.⁵

An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the

¹ Psalm 14:1-3, 5

² Psalm 5:8-9, 12

³ Psalm 140:1, 3, 13

⁴ Psalm 10:1-2, 7-8

⁵ Isaiah 59:7-8, 15

wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes. ... Continue your love to those who know you, your righteousness to *the upright in heart*.¹

Third, if Paul intended to teach total inability, why would he, himself, refer to people who do good? Paul declares in Romans 2 that God promises glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew and then for the Gentile.² He even acknowledged that some Gentiles who do not have the law actually do by nature the things the law requires.³ He stated that an uncircumcised Gentile who keeps the law condemns the circumcised law breaker.⁴

Fourth, if Paul really believed it impossible for fallen men to seek God or cooperate with regenerating grace, why, on another occasion, would he preach a sermon explaining that God made the world the way He did so that men might seek Him and find Him?⁵

And, fifth, why would Paul say that God commands all people to repent if only regenerated people have the ability to repent? “...now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”⁶

If Paul was not teaching total inability in Romans 3:10-18, what was he saying? Paul very deliberately selected quotations from the Old Testament to prove that, in spite of their Jewishness, their circumcision and their superiority to pagan Gentiles, Jews need mercy and forgiveness as much as anyone else. Every one of the passages Paul quoted recognized the wickedness of Jews. It was part of Paul’s strategy to silence every mouth and bring the whole world to a consciousness of sin.⁷

CROCUS Theology Dishonors God by Discrediting What He Has Done

By insisting that unregenerate man has no ability to seek God, be good or cooperate with regenerating grace, CROCUS theology plays down one of God’s accomplishments. It reminds me of the time many years ago when I was rebuked by a mature Christian for shrugging off a compliment. He told me something like this: “Everything good comes

¹ Psalm 36:1, 10

² Romans 2:10

³ Romans 2:14

⁴ Romans 2:27

⁵ Acts 17:24-27

⁶ Acts 17:30

⁷ Romans 3:19-20

from God. If you did something to deserve a compliment, don't dismiss it or play it down because ultimately it came from God. To shrug off a true compliment discredits Him. Graciously accept the compliment and then acknowledge the Giver.”

Pride is a terrible sin. Not wanting to be a proud person, I was ready to dismiss everything good in myself. I didn't realize that I was actually discrediting God. It was a false modesty. One could even argue that it was built upon the proud assumption that I had the power all in myself to be bad enough not to have any good in me.

In its zeal to not ascribe to our race any virtue apart from God, CROCUS theology shrugs off what God put into our race at creation. The argument that man no longer has the potential for doing good or for making good choices sounds humble, but I believe it is actually a proud and subtle salute to the power of fallen man.

Our race is a fallen race. The human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Yet, there is enough goodness remaining in fallen man to remind us of our high beginning. If we do not acknowledge this goodness and its divine source, but “humbly” play it down and redefine it as civil virtue, have we not then become like the Pharisees of old who assigned the good deeds of Jesus to the power of Beelzebub? If we are truly concerned for the glory of God, then we should be as cautious about disclaiming what God has done as we are about claiming it for ourselves.

If unregenerate man still retains some of his original goodness and we dismiss it, not only do we discredit God, but we ignore the very thing God uses to recover us. No credit to ourselves, the God-consciousness within us often awakens when God stirs around in our lives. That is how God gets our attention and motivates us to seek Him. He moves our hearts to seek Him, seeking us.

Does the Bible permit us to believe that fallen man is relationally dead but not unconscious? Are we permitted to think that unregenerate man retains a created sensitivity to God which God uses in the quickening process, no credit to ourselves? I believe the answer is a resounding “yes.” At the very least, there is enough evidence to continue the discussion.

Transferred Guilt, Inherited Condemnation

According to CROCUS theology, not only are we dead in the water, unable to do anything that would even allow ourselves to be rescued, but we are condemned to hell from the moment of birth. That is because God transferred Adam’s guilt to every one of his descendants. Not only have we inherited Adam’s genes, but we inherited his guilt and eternal condemnation. We are damned from birth, maybe from conception.

Adam’s children were not sinners simply because they sinned. Rather, they sinned because they were sinners. They came into the world as sinners, and what made them sinners was the guilt they inherited from their father Adam.¹

...Adam acted as the perfect representative of the entire human race. The test that God set before Adam and Eve was a test for all mankind. When Adam sinned he sinned for all of us. The fall was the fall of the entire race. The punishment and consequences of the fall are thus applied to the whole human race and the whole of creation (Romans 8:20-22; Romans 5:12-19).²

The doctrine of original sin postulates that the first sin of the first man, Adam, which was the occasion of the fall, is in a certain sense the sin of all mankind, and that accordingly human nature is infected by the corruption of that sin and the human race as a whole bears its guilt.³

They [Adam and Eve] being the root, and by God’s appointment standing in the place of all mankind, the guilt of the sin was imputed, and corrupted nature conveyed, to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation...⁴

Before an infant is old enough to do anything good or bad and before he is old enough to know right from wrong, he is guilty and condemned to eternal death. Calvin said:

¹ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 33.

² The Doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity, Lecture Notes, Darryl Knappen.

³ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 32.

⁴ The Baptist Confession of Faith, 1689, taken from The Doctrines of Original Sin and Total Depravity, Lecture Notes, Darryl Knappen.

I again ask how it is that the fall of Adam involves so many nations with their infant children in eternal death without remedy unless that it so seemed meet to God? Here the most loquacious tongues must be dumb. The decree, I admit, is dreadful; and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before he made him, and foreknew because he had so ordained by his decree.¹

Where do we find the dreadful decree that “the fall of Adam involved so many nations with their infant children in *eternal death* without remedy”? Where do we read that “...the guilt of [Adam and Eve’s] sin was imputed ... to all their posterity...”?²

Generational Guilt in the Old Testament

The Bible that Paul read clearly and repeatedly states that God does not punish the children for the sin of the father:

Fathers shall not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.³

When king Amaziah was firmly established as king over Judah, he executed the officials who had assassinated his father. “Yet he did not put their sons to death, but acted in accordance with what is written in the Law, in the Book of Moses, where the Lord commanded: ‘Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sins.’”⁴

God repeated the same message through the prophet Ezekiel. One entire chapter is dedicated to the principle that “The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son.”⁵

If Adam and Eve had managed to live perfect lives but their son Cain murdered Abel, would God punish Adam and Eve for the sins of their son? If the entire human race had somehow managed to live without

¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. 3, Chapter 23, Section 7.

² To their credit, almost all CROCUS advocates struggle with this teaching. I suspect very few actually believe God will send millions of tiny children to hell. Some quiet their fears by saying that all who die in infancy are chosen by God. Others concede that deceased infants born to pagan parents far away may go to hell, but children born to believing parents are safe, at least until they reach the age of accountability. Many Christians assure their hearts through infant baptism. If a baby can be baptized before it dies, then it will go to heaven.

³ Deuteronomy 24:16

⁴ 2 Chronicles 25:4

⁵ Ezekiel 18:20

committing a single sin, but the last guy messed up, would God punish all the preceding generations for the sins of the last man? The Old Testament makes it clear that God does not punish fathers for the sins of their children or the children for the sins of their fathers.

There is a difference between punishment and consequences. God does not punish children for the sins of the parents, but sin does have consequences that affect children. Through Moses, God told the nation of Israel that He “visits” or “brings home” (New Berkley Version) the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation.¹ In what way does God visit or bring home the sins of the parents upon their children? Several possibilities come to mind.

Because children and grandchildren often follow in the footsteps of their parents, it is quite likely that they will someday invite their own visit from God simply because Dad set a bad example and they followed it. Another possibility revolves around prevention and containment. Sin is a horrible thing, a social cancer. If you let it go, everyone suffers. If you cut it out, some suffer. To prevent a particularly dreadful sin from metastasizing into all of society, God may visit the sight of the cancer and put several generations under the knife in order to get all of it. When that happens, innocent children get hurt. Or, the “visit” might be something as simple as allowing sin and its natural consequences to run its course. We all know that choices parents make, both good and bad, often affect several generations.

Children, grandchildren and even great grandchildren suffer because of the sins of the father, but God made it very clear in the Old Testament that there is no generational guilt. The Bible that Paul read gives me reason to believe that God did not place the guilt of Cain upon Adam and Eve, neither does He punish anyone for Adam’s sin.

¹ Exodus 20:5; 34:7

Generational Guilt in the New Testament

What does the New Testament say about this? One consequence that we all experience because of Adam’s sin is physical death. “...sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin and in this way death came to all men because all have sinned...”¹ Our first father set off a chain reaction that resulted in physical death. Almost everyone since Adam has either died or is on the waiting list.

We all recoil from physical death, but physical death is not a problem. It is actually a blessing in disguise. It ensures that we do not live on permanently in our fallen condition. When the danger of remaining permanently fallen is over, then this temporary protection will be lifted. That a million babies should die before they realize they are alive is not an issue to me. Physical death is not the problem. My concern is with the sentence of eternal damnation that “involves so many nations with their infant children in eternal death without remedy.” Do we inherit the sentence of eternal damnation from Adam? We turn our attention to Romans 5.

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men because all have sinned – ... But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man’s sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. ... Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.²

The thrust of Paul’s argument reassures my heart. Paul is not discoursing on the impact of Adam’s transgression but on the impact of

¹ Romans 5:12

² Romans 5:12-19, excerpts

Christ’s obedience. Paul compared the tragic impact of Adam’s disobedience to the glorious impact of Christ’s obedience. What Adam broke, Jesus fixed. What Adam lost, Jesus restored.

There was nothing new about the idea that sin entered the world through Adam or that death came because of sin or that death came to all men because all have sinned. The new news was what Christ’s death and resurrection accomplished. Adam’s disobedience was big; Christ’s obedience was bigger. Adam’s death was big; Christ’s death and resurrection were bigger.

Adam’s disobedience had consequences. It carried a certain condemnation or “pronounced sentence.” The pronounced sentence for Adam was that if he ate the forbidden fruit he would die: “but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”¹ When Adam and Eve sinned, they died spiritually. Their sin also led to physical death. The condemnation Paul is speaking about is physical death. Notice how this passage keys in on physical death: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men because all sinned...” (v.12). “...death reigned from the time of Adam...” (v.14). “...many died by the trespass of the one man...” (v.15). “...by the trespass of the one man, death reigned...” (v.17).

If the condemnation of Adam’s sin was physical death to all men, Christ’s greater contribution would be a resurrection for all men. This is exactly what Jesus taught. Jesus said: “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out...”² In Adam, all die. In Jesus, all shall come back to life.

Maybe it is a mistake to think that the pronounced sentence in Romans 5 is physical death. Maybe Adam’s sin actually transferred eternal condemnation to all men. It is still reassuring to see that Christ’s obedience more than made up for it. The argument absolutely fizzles if the First Adam lost more than the Second Adam restored. Paul is emphasizing exactly the opposite. If the guilt of Adam’s sin is reckoned to all men, then Christ’s greater contribution could be nothing less than a

¹ Genesis 2:17

² John 5:28-29

removal of that guilt: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”¹

I may not understand what this text means, but understanding what it doesn’t mean fills me with confidence. I see the hopeful possibility that the Old Testament teaching regarding transferred guilt is not contradicted by Romans 5. I see the hopeful possibility that if it is contradicted by the New Testament, the Second Adam more than repaired what the first Adam broke. Most of all, I am elated by what Romans 5 teaches about the heart of God: God is not looking for technicalities to limit His kindness to a chosen few but for excuses to multiply His kindness to all men.

* * *

CROCUS theology teaches that by nature we are so totally dead in sin, no one has any ability whatsoever to respond in a positive manner to God. Both Scripture and experience convince me that this is not true. Immediately following 9/11, for instance, we prayed. So did the Israelites when they were in trouble. The Psalmist observed the same pattern in his own life: “When I was in distress, *I sought the Lord ...*”²

Experience tells us that tragedy and disaster, combined with our created sensitivity to God, have the ability to turn us toward God. From beginning to end, the Bible affirms what we observe from experience. As the Spirit of God allows adversity to come upon fallen humanity, the God-consciousness within us stirs. We start thinking about God. We start praying. And sometimes, all credit to God, a relationally dead but fully conscious prodigal packs his bags and starts his homeward journey.

It is because the fall of man did not completely erase the God-consciousness and moral stirrings placed within us at creation that unregenerate man can cry out to God. That is also what makes unregenerate man accountable for his own choices – his choice to do good or to sin, his choice to seek God or reject Him. How can God be vindicated in judgment unless we have the ability to choose both good and bad? How can He delight in love unless it is freely given? Every individual old enough and knowledgeable enough to be accountable must

¹ John 1:29 KJV

² Psalm 77:2

somehow say “Yea” or “Nay” to the blowing of God’s Spirit. Thus, we have the created potential to walk further from God and become increasingly wicked. We also have the created potential to respond under the redeeming hand of God and become what He wants us to be, no credit or praise to ourselves.

The historical setting of CROCUS theology started the ball unwinding. The ball continued to unwind with the discovery that the created greatness of man is absent in CROCUS theology. It unwound even more with the amended definition of Sovereignty. From that greatly reduced ball, another huge chunk just came off with the discovery that unregenerate man is relationally dead but not unconscious. Next we will pull on the string of Limited Atonement.

Chapter 7

Atonement: Limited or Extravagant?

Historical or mainline Calvinism has consistently maintained that Christ’s redeeming work was definite in *design* and *accomplishment* – that it was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners and that it actually secured salvation for these individuals and for no one else. ¹

The question which we are to discuss under the subject of “Limited Atonement” is, Did Christ offer up Himself a sacrifice for the whole human race, for every individual without distinction or exception; or did His death have special reference to the elect? In other words, was the sacrifice of Christ merely intended to make the salvation of all men possible, or was it intended to render certain the salvation of those who had been given to Him by the Father? ...Calvinists hold that in the intention and secret plan of God Christ died for the **elect only**, and that His death had only an incidental reference to others in so far as they are partakers of common grace. ²

CROCUS theology offers several arguments for Limited Atonement: (1) The atonement of Christ is so great, so infinite it would have automatically, inevitably, undoubtedly saved everyone unless God had chosen to limit its application. Since not everyone is saved, obviously God must have limited its application. (2) If God intended the atonement to be for everyone and only some actually get saved, then His plan failed. God’s plans never fail. Therefore, God must have chosen a limited

¹ Steele, David N., Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 39.

² Boettner, Lorraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 150, bold type in the original.

number of people to begin with and paid only for their sins. (3) God would be unjust to condemn someone whose sins have been paid for. Since some people will be condemned, it follows that some people’s sins are not paid for. (4) It would be foolish for God to make a universal atonement if He knew the results would be far less. Since the results are far from universal, the atonement must have been limited from the beginning. (5) “...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for *many*.”¹ Not *all*. Let’s take a look at these arguments.

(1) The atonement of Christ is so great, so infinite it would have automatically, inevitably, undoubtedly saved everyone unless God had chosen to limit its application. Since not everyone is saved, obviously God must have limited its application.

The atonement...was infinitely meritorious and might have saved every member of the human race had that been God’s plan. It was limited only in the sense that it was intended for, and is applied to, particular persons; namely for those who are actually saved.²

Once Limited Atonement is established, this might be a useful explanation, but it is not proof. In fact, a simple and natural explanation can be offered for just the opposite. Many years ago I offered to forgive a fairly large debt. The farmer’s wife accepted with tears. The daughter and son-in-law were grateful but suspicious. They made me sign a document taking their names off the original note. But the farmer became angry. He absolutely refused to be made an object of mercy. My plan was to release every member of the family, and my offer was sufficiently meritorious to cover their obligation to me. I paid the price to free all four co-signers on the promissory note, but one refused to accept it.

CROCUS theology argues that the atonement was infinitely meritorious and would have saved every member of the human race if

¹ Matthew 20:28

² Boettner, Lorraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 151.

God had wanted it that way. But it can also be argued that the atonement was infinitely meritorious and would save every member of the human race if every member wanted to be saved. The payment that Jesus made on the cross satisfies the justice of God. Furthermore, it effectively deals with “him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14). But it isn’t acceptable to some people. Some sinners are too self-righteous or too proud or too rebellious to accept mercy. Without proof, this argument remains only a possible explanation.

(2) If God intended the atonement to be for everyone and only some actually get saved, then His plan failed. God’s plans never fail. Therefore, God must have chosen a limited number of people to begin with and paid only for their sins.

If [universal atonement] were true it would follow that millions of those for whom Christ died are finally lost, and that salvation is thus never applied to many of those for whom it was earned. ... It would... follow that God’s plans many times have been thwarted and defeated by His creatures...¹

When the atonement is made universal its inherent value is destroyed. If it is applied to all men, and if some are lost, the conclusion is that it makes salvation objectively possible for all but that **it does not actually save anybody.**²

In other words, if we say that the atonement was intended for everyone and at the same time acknowledge that some people will perish, then something went wrong with the plan and it can no longer be trusted to save anyone. Since God’s plans do not fail, we must conclude that God never intended the atonement to include everyone. Therefore, atonement must be limited.

There are two problems with this argument. First of all, the atonement does not actually save anyone. God does the saving. The atonement is merely a mechanism that God used to make salvation possible.

¹ Boettner, Lorraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 154.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 152, bold type in original.

Second, making salvation possible does not make it inevitable. Jesus compared His atoning death on the cross to the bronze snake that was lifted up on a pole in the Israelite camp 1,400 years earlier: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”¹

The Israelites complained against God and Moses, saying: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”² God responded by sending poisonous snakes among the people. When the people repented and asked Moses to pray for them, God told Moses to “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”³

The bronze snake did not heal anyone. God did the healing. The snake was merely the mechanism God chose to use. It was a “universal” remedy, intended for everyone in the entire camp. But people had to look at it. It’s hard to imagine any Israelite refusing to look, but let’s say there was an angry, proud Israelite who refused to look. Are we to conclude because he died that the plan failed or the remedy was not intended for him? Not at all! In the same way, just because some people perish in their sins does not necessarily mean the plan failed or the atonement was limited.

(3) God would be unjust to condemn someone whose sins have been paid for. Since some people will be condemned, it follows that some people’s sins are not paid for.

The nature of a ransom is such that when paid and accepted it automatically frees the persons for whom it was intended. Otherwise it would not be a true ransom. Justice demands that those for whom it is paid shall be freed from any further obligation. If the suffering and death of Christ was a ransom for all men rather than for the elect only,

¹ John 3:14-15 KJV

² Numbers 21:5

³ Numbers 21:8-9

then the merits of His work must be communicated to all alike and the penalty of eternal punishment cannot be justly inflicted on any. God would be unjust if He demanded this extreme penalty twice over, first from the substitute and then from the persons themselves. The conclusion then is that the atonement of Christ does not extend to all men but that it is limited to those for whom He stood surety; that is, to those who compose His true church.”¹

If it is true that some people will eventually be condemned and if it is also true that God cannot condemn anyone whose sin has been paid for, then it follows that some people’s sin has not been paid for. Therefore, atonement must be limited. Bingo! End of discussion! But wait a minute!

If salvation is automatically guaranteed simply because payment has been made, then certain wicked sinners – the chosen ones who have not yet repented and believed – are safe. But where in the Bible is there any hint that wicked sinners are safe? Just the opposite is true. Wicked sinners are warned to flee from the wrath to come. They need to repent and believe in order to be saved. Even if the ability to repent and believe comes from God, and even if God guarantees that ability to chosen sinners, repentance and faith are still part of the equation. Atonement is not the only ingredient. Something else is required. Hence, though the doctrine of Limited Atonement may actually be right, the argument from double jeopardy is useless for proving it simply because the Bible clearly indicates that more is involved in our salvation than the atonement. The argument from double jeopardy might be a useful explanation once the doctrine of Limited Atonement has been established, but it is absolutely useless for proving it. Limited Atonement still waits to be proven.

(4) It would be foolish for God to make a universal atonement if He knew the results would be far less. Since the results are far from universal, the atonement must have been limited from the beginning.

¹ Boettner, Lorraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 155.

No rational being who has the wisdom and power to carry out his plans intends what he never accomplishes or adopts plans for an end which is never attained. Much less would God, whose wisdom and power are infinite, work in this manner. We may rest assured that if some men are lost God never purposed their salvation, and never devised and put into operation means designed to accomplish that end. ¹

Since He knew before hand who they were that would be saved ... He would not have sent Christ intending to save those who he positively foreknew would be lost. ... what is that but to attribute folly to Him whose ways are perfect? To represent God as earnestly striving to do what He knows He will not do is to represent Him as acting foolishly. ²

Limited Atonement may be true, but this argument is not convincing. I see no folly nor inconsistency in an extravagant atonement. God often does things in a big way. He often goes beyond conservative and practical. When Jesus fed five thousand men (not including the women and children), twelve baskets of bread were left over. ³ After He fed four thousand people (not including the women and children), seven baskets of bread were gathered up. ⁴ Following a fruitless night on the Sea of Gennesaret, Jesus told the disciples to go out farther and drop their nets into deep water. They caught so many fish, both boats began to sink. ⁵ Another time after fishing all night, they were told to throw the net over the right side of the boat. It encircled so many fish, they were unable to pull the net into the boat but had to drag it to shore. ⁶ When the wine at the wedding ran out, Jesus converted the equivalent of three 55-gallon barrels of water into wine! ⁷ Jesus once said, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” ⁸ From thirst to *rivers* of water! God told the nation of Israel to test Him by bringing their tithes to the storehouse. “See if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.” ⁹

Fish, bread, wine, blessing. When God does something, He often goes way beyond conservative. “Now unto him that is able to do

¹ Boettner, Lorraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 156.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 160.

³ Matthew 14:13-21

⁴ Matthew 15:32-38

⁵ Luke 5:4-7

⁶ John 21:6-8

⁷ John 2:6

⁸ John 7:37-38

⁹ Malachi 3:10

exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think...”¹ The whole universe is a study in profusion. He delights in extravagance. God may have restricted His atonement to a limited number of people, but given the pattern of how God operates, it would not surprise me if the atonement easily went around many times with baskets and baskets left over.

Would it be foolish for God to make payment for people who refuse it? Not at all. It would actually be a very astute move on God’s part. Who could criticize God for being unfair if He made atonement for everyone? It would certainly shut your mouth on the day of judgment to realize that God had made a payment for you, but your own pride and rebellion caused you to miss out.

Not only would an extravagant atonement be a smart thing to do, it would be a very winsome thing to do. What if God not only intended the atonement to purchase our salvation but also to declare His love for us in order to win our hearts? Then an extravagant atonement would not seem foolish at all. It would fit right in with big diamonds, huge bouquets and expensive banquets. That God should offer any kind of atonement is unthinkable, but now that the unthinkable has happened, an abundant, lavish atonement does not surprise me. Far from foolish, it becomes extremely meaningful.

(5) *“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

Christ is said to have been a **ransom** for his people – ‘The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many,’ Matthew 20:28. Notice, this verse does not say that He gave His life a ransom for **all**, but for **many**.²

Here is the background of this passage: The mother of James and John had just solicited special honor for her two boys.³ The other disciples, perceiving who had put the woman up to this request, “were indignant with the two brothers.”⁴ Jesus responds with a teaching about

¹ Ephesians 3:20 KJV

² Boettner, Lorraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 155, bold type in the original.

³ Matthew 20:20-21

⁴ Matthew 20:24

true greatness. His emphasis is upon service and humility. He uses Himself as an illustration: “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”¹

This is a profound lesson, with a touching purpose and an inspiring example. The question is, how much weight should we put on the very last word, “many”? Is it loaded with meaning? Should we capitalize it and italicize it for emphasis? Why did Paul say, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all”?² Jesus said “*many*.” Paul said “*all*.” Why the difference?

The explanation may simply be that “all” and “many” are sometimes used interchangeably. Matthew 8:16 and Mark 1:34 offer an example. Matthew says, “he ... healed all.” Referring to the exact same incident, Mark says “Jesus healed many.” Sometimes “all” and “many” are not to be taken too literally.

Even if we take them literally, the CROCUS explanation is not the only explanation. CROCUS theology maintains that when Jesus said “many,” He was referring to a large but limited number of people – He gave His life as a ransom for a lot of people, but not for everyone. The explanation goes on to say that when Paul said “all,” he was referring to the total number of these many chosen individuals.

Another explanation is simply that Paul was thinking about intention and scope; Jesus was referring to actual results. Paul said, “This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance..., that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.”³ God is ready and willing to save all, but only those who believe are actually saved. The intention and scope is for all. Actual results are somewhat less – many but not all receive God’s offer of salvation.

John 3:16-17 speaks to the intention and scope of the atonement: “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. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”

¹ Matthew 20:28

² 1 Timothy 2:5-6

³ 1 Timothy 4:9-10

This beloved passage follows our Lord’s comparison between Himself and the brass serpent that was lifted up for everyone in the camp to look at. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”¹ God lifted up His Son so that the entire camp should not perish but have eternal life.

Putting these verses together, the words of Jesus not only suggest the divine payment was made for everyone in the camp, but it clearly indicates this was God’s intention. God’s intention when He sent His Son into the world was to save the world. His intention was to save, not to condemn. I get the impression from John 3:14-17 that God wants to save people from condemnation. He wanted the freedom to forgive people who would otherwise stand condemned, so He made a payment to release both Himself and believing sinners from the unyielding demands of justice. Now “whosoever” believeth shall not perish!

Jesus goes on to say, “He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light ...”² This speaks to the actual results. He bought the right to forgive everyone. He made a payment for all. Jesus hung on the cross for everyone in the camp to look at and be saved. But actual results are less. Some believe. Some do not. Some come to the light. Some do not.

Peter said, “The Lord ... is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9) This wonderful verse speaks to God’s intention. It is not God’s wish that anyone perish, but that all repent. Paul said something very similar:

For Christ’s love compels us because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them

¹ John 3:14-15 KJV

² John 3:18-21

and was raised again. ... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: *that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ*, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.¹

Paul declares that God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ and then begs his audience to be reconciled to God. If one feels compelled to explain away the apparent meaning of this passage, there may be ways to do so, but a natural reading certainly gives the impression that the intention and scope of the atonement is for all. The message of reconciliation is for everyone in the world.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”² The apostle John said, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice [“propitiation” KJV] for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”³ Jesus said, “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”⁴ Intention and scope are reflected in each of these statements.

One of the most thought-provoking and exciting texts is found in Paul’s letter to the Colossian believers. Notice both intention and scope.

He [Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ... God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.⁵

This is an absolutely amazing passage. Paul could hardly be more clear when he says that, through Christ, God created everything. To

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:14-20 excerpts

² John 1:29

³ 1 John 2:1-2

⁴ John 6:51

⁵ Colossians 1:15-20

make sure we understand that everything means absolutely everything, he took pains to explain himself. Everything means “all things...in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.” This would include all people, all angels – including fallen angels – even the wonderful being that turned into the devil. If there are other worlds and other beings we know nothing about, it would include them as well. All things were created by God through Christ.

Then Paul makes it clear that it is God’s pleasure to “reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven ... through his blood, shed on the cross.” Following on the heels of the “all things” just elaborated, the “all things” that God wishes to reconcile to Himself through the blood of Christ would include everything in heaven or earth that needs reconciling! God’s intent is clear and so is the scope of the atonement: God wants to reconcile to Himself everything that needs reconciling. Everything! Everything in all creation. This does not mean that everything will be reconciled, but the intent is clear and the remedy is available: the blood of Christ shed on the cross. It is for all.

The Ability to Explain Away the Seeming All Inclusiveness of Scripture Does Not Prove Limited Atonement

Such phrases as “the world,” “all men,” “all nations,” and “every creature” were used by New Testament writers to ... show that Christ died for all men without distinction (i.e., He died for Jews and Gentiles alike) but they are not intended to indicate that Christ died for all men without exception (i.e., He did not die for the purpose of saving each and every lost sinner).¹

If one is determined to believe in Limited Atonement, I suppose all of these Scriptures could be explained away, but proof is not achieved by explaining away the texts which appear to teach just the opposite. To one who expects good news and looks for good news, these Scriptures

¹ Steele, David N. and Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 46.

deliver good news. I ask myself, “Is my heart deceiving me? Am I so blinded by hope that I read into these precious Scriptures meanings that a normal, natural reading would not permit?” Then I read them again, and they always fill me with joy. Surely this is what the angel meant when he said, “...behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.”¹

In my opinion, the only “proof” CROCUS theology offers for Limited Atonement is the circumstantial evidence provided by the overlapping, crisscrossing doctrines of the CROCUS package, and that is what we are investigating. Until CROCUS theology clearly shuts the door on an extravagant atonement, I rejoice in the all-inclusiveness of the Good News.

Our Understanding of Atonement Matters

So what’s the big deal? Why does it matter whether atonement is unlimited in scope but appropriated only by some, or whether it is limited to some from the start?

To me it matters because it affects the way I think about God. Our understanding of atonement shapes our perception of God. And our perception of God influences our love for Him. It also influences our response to the message and how we feel about sharing it with others. Perception matters!

God is not obligated to show mercy. If justice calls for punishment, it is proper for God to punish. I perceive that a good God is a just God. Consequently, though the thought of justice is unnerving, it is also satisfying. Satisfaction turns to admiration when I perceive that the God who made all things has a merciful disposition. Admiration turns to love when I discover that, at great personal expense, He bought the right to extend mercy to those who would otherwise stand condemned by justice. This perception of God motivates me to serve Him.

But what if I perceive that before He even created our race and before anyone had done anything good or bad, God planned to punish

¹ Luke 2:10 KJV

some people forever because of the sin they would commit someday? And what if I also perceive that He made plans to show mercy to certain condemned sinners in order that He might become famous for His mercy? This changes everything for me.

There is nothing morally wrong about withholding mercy when judgment is deserved, but withholding mercy from anyone, man or beast, caught in a trap that was planned and set before they were created and before anyone had done anything to deserve it, a trap that could not be avoided, a trap intended to grip and torment forever – to me, that is morally wrong. In this case, I would regard mercy as an obligation, not a gift. If God does not show enough mercy to at least let His victims die, but keeps them alive to be tormented forever, how can anyone perceive Him to be either just or merciful? No matter how much mercy He shows to the elect or how much the unfortunate victims deserve to be punished, the fact that He planned it this way, knowing exactly what would happen, reminds me of a horror movie.

Two valleys stretch out before us. Two landscapes catch our attention. We’re standing at the top of a great divide, an enormous watershed. One side displays a God who sacrifices Himself for people. The other displays a God who sacrifices people for Himself. Does it make a difference? For some, it makes all the difference.

We are not in a position to pick and choose our Creator, but if the God who really exists actually sacrifices people for Himself, a heaviness settles upon my heart. When I entertain it as a possibility, I become depressed. I sympathize with people who, perceiving God this way, want nothing to do with Him. If this is indeed the Christian message, then my estimation of the gospel shifts from good news to bad news. Preaching the gospel changes from joyfully proclaiming the most beautiful story in all the world to breaking horrible news.

So I repeat the question: “Does it matter whether the atonement is unlimited in scope but appropriated only by some, or whether it is limited to some from the start?” It makes all the difference in my own heart. If slanderous things were spoken about my wife, I would passionately defend her honor, and only with a broken heart would I

believe the worst. So in this case. My desire is not to win a theological argument. It isn't a matter of pride, of being unwilling to back down. What I want is to be able to love God and hold His name in honor. And how can I do that if I am forced to believe something about Him that to me seems simply horrible?

The doctrine of Limited Atonement makes me depressed. That God might actually be defined by the doctrine of Limited Atonement not only depresses me but embarrasses me. My embarrassment makes me want to conceal this part of the message. If I conceal it, I feel deceptive. If I don't conceal it, I feel apologetic. I even question my honesty for calling it “good news.” Not wishing to feel depressed, embarrassed, deceptive, apologetic and dishonest, I examine the Scriptures for a better explanation.

A Hope-Filled Perspective on Atonement

Sacrifice for sin is as old as the race. The world over, countless traditions remind us that the gods are angry and must be appeased with sacrifice. The Old Testament record is no different. Sin requires sacrifice. “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.”¹ The New Testament confirms the Old Testament: “...and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”² God must be appeased with sacrifice.

Then suddenly this universal idea is challenged by a new revelation: God loves us! To our astonishment and everlasting joy, we discover that we do not need to buy God's favor. He loves us and is already on our side, pulling for us and seeking our welfare. But this raises a question: If He truly loves us, then why do we need to prevail upon Him to be nice to us? If He loves us, what were all the Old Testament sacrifices for? If He loves us, why does He need to be appeased? Why do we need to buy His favor? The answer, according to the New Testament, is that God wanted to forgive us rather than punish us, and He couldn't do it without a payment.

¹ Leviticus 17:11

² Hebrews 9:22

But if God is God and if He truly loves us, why does He need to jump through hoops in order to forgive us. Why not simply declare forgiveness and be done with it? Why place conditions upon Himself? Why place conditions upon us? In fact, why even tell us? Just do it. If His heart is in forgiveness, do it and tell us all about it when we get there. And if He can't or He won't, then God must not be God or else He's holding out His hand for something from us. But that is where we have miscalculated! We fail to grasp the lesson of the centuries if we think that divine forgiveness is a simple matter.

Lesser gods and corrupt judges can be bought off. Even a chicken might do the job. But the Judge of all the earth has a government to run. There are subjects to care for, wrongs to address, accounts to settle and victims to compensate. God does not need to be persuaded to love us, but the constitution of His moral government must be upheld or major problems will occur. What He needed was a judicial mechanism to release Himself from the unyielding claims of His own just government so that He could extend mercy to repentant sinners who would otherwise stand condemned.

Long before anyone had any idea what God was up to, the Psalmist wrote: “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”¹ In a fallen world such as ours, in order for mercy and truth to meet together or for righteousness and peace to kiss each other without creating an enormous social joke, some kind of judicial mechanism must be put into place that is big enough to satisfy (propitiate) numerous concerns. This mechanism must be big enough to overrule the constitution of God's moral government, which insists that “the soul that sinneth, it shall die”² It must be big enough to satisfy the victims who cry out for justice. It must be big enough to deter future law breakers by demonstrating that God does not treat sin lightly. It must be big enough to instill trust in His ability to govern. It must be big enough to silence the critics. It must be big enough to regain possession of forfeited property. It must be big enough to convince us that His professed love is real, drawing us to love Him in return and motivating us to honor and obey from the heart. There is only one thing that will

¹ Psalm 85:10 KJV

² Ezekiel 18:4 KJV

satisfy everything and that is for God, the Law-giver and Chief Justice, to make the payment Himself.

Atonement is the means by which a compassionate Governor released Himself from the unyielding demands of justice in order that He might pardon penitent criminals. Atonement is the judicial maneuver devised by God to forgive guilty people without compromising His own integrity. Atonement is the judicial mechanism that allows a loving God to forgive sinners without forgiving (overlooking) their sin. Atonement is God’s way of bringing justice and mercy together without violating the conditions of His own moral government.

“Atonement,” “Propitiation,” “Ransom” and “Redemption” are payment words. “Atonement” refers to a payment that expiates or covers an offense. “Propitiation” refers to a payment that satisfies or appeases. “Ransom” is a payment that releases a hostage. “Redemption” is a payment that buys back something that was forfeited. All these words explore the grand payment that God made on our behalf when Jesus died on the cross.

Will everyone actually be reconciled to God someday? It would be nice to plug in the argument from double jeopardy and insist that if Christ’s death actually paid for the sins of every person who ever lived, then there is no penalty left for anyone to pay; thus, everyone will be saved without exception. But I do not think that argument holds up any better for Universalists than it does for CROCUSES. Nevertheless, Scripture convinces me that God *desires* to reconcile all things to Himself and has made atonement for all.

If God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save it, and if it is God’s wish that none perish, and if it is God’s pleasure to reconcile all things to Himself through the blood of Christ shed on the cross, and if Christ is the lamb of God who made propitiation for our sins and not for ours only but also for the sins of the world, then the door is open for all. If somebody does not go through that door, it is not God’s fault!

Reconciliation is like shaking hands. Through the atonement, God has cleared the way. Now He holds out His hand for any individual in

heaven or earth, visible or invisible to step up and shake. If someone turns down the offer, reconciliation will not occur, but the responsibility is upon them, not God.

Chapter 8

Irresistible Grace

Simply stated, this doctrine asserts that the Holy Spirit never fails to bring to salvation those sinners whom He personally calls to Christ. He inevitably applies salvation to every sinner whom He intends to save, and it is His intention to save all the elect.¹

The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. God’s grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.²

The gospel invitation extends a general call to salvation to all who hear the message. In addition to this general call, the Holy Spirit extends a special inward call to the elect only. The general call of the gospel can be, and often is, rejected, but the special call of the Spirit cannot be rejected; it always results in the conversion of those to whom it is made.³

Man *cannot* come to Christ because man is bound by Satan. Man *will not* come because he finds Satan *irresistible* and Jehovah despicable. Man does not have a “free will,” he has a devil-bound will. Man does not have the “power” to resist God should God “will” to save him.⁴

The Scriptures pointedly teach that the pre-requisite for entrance into the Kingdom of God is a radical transformation wrought by the Spirit of God Himself. And since this work on the soul is sovereign and

¹ Steele, David N. and Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 48.

² *Ibid.* pg. 18.

³ *Ibid.* pg. 53-54

⁴ Sproul, R.C., *What Is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 60.

supernatural it may be granted or withheld according to the good pleasure of God. Consequently, salvation, to whomsoever it may be granted, is entirely of grace. ... If any person believes, it is because God has quickened him; and if any person fails to believe, it is because God has withheld that grace which He is under no obligation to bestow. ¹

If God purposed that all men should be saved He most certainly could bring all to salvation. ²

If we assert that after God has done all His work it is still left for man to “accept” or “not resist,” we give man veto power over the work of Almighty God and salvation rests ultimately in the hand of man. ³

Irresistible Grace = Irresistible Will of God

The expression “irresistible grace” contains a noun and an adjective. “Grace” is the noun. “Irresistible” is the adjective that tells us something about grace. Hence, in standard English usage, “irresistible grace” means undeserved favor or goodwill that is too wonderful, tempting, charming, etc. to be resisted. It conveys the idea that God’s kindness is so powerful, so beautiful, so disarming and so compelling that it unflinchingly wins the hearts of unregenerate rebels, drawing them inevitably to repentance. But, alas, it means no such thing.

As music to a deaf person, so is God’s grace to an unregenerate person. According to CROCUS theology, unregenerate man is totally oblivious to grace. “The sinner is dead, blind, and deaf to the things of God ...” ⁴ God’s grace doesn’t make any impression at all. It cannot be recognized, comprehended, appreciated or received. That’s as far from “irresistible grace” as anything can be!

What turns out to be irresistible is the will of God. It is God’s will that irresistibly brings certain unregenerate people to the water and causes them to drink. Grace is simply what they swallow. The doctrine of Irresistible Grace is merely a restatement of micro-management

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 166.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 169

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 175

⁴ Steele, David N. and Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 16.

theology with a stern reminder that we have absolutely no say in the matter.

Irresistible Grace and Inexorable Damnation

Irresistible Grace declares that “If any person believes, it is because God has quickened him; and if any person fails to believe, it is because God has withheld that grace which He is under no obligation to bestow.” This takes salvation altogether out of man’s hands. For the lucky few, it also makes salvation inevitable. Hence the term “Irresistible.” But something else becomes equally inevitable and that is the condemnation of those from whom God withholds this grace.

If God decided beforehand whom He would irresistibly draw to Himself and whom He would inevitably allow to perish, then “Irresistible Grace” becomes the twin sister of “Inexorable Damnation.” In the end, the celebrated grace of God shares the spotlight with an unspeakable cruelty. God becomes just as notorious for dispensing damnation as salvation. Let me illustrate with a parable:

Many moons ago, when the fish and the animals first came to be, the Farmer told his son, “Son, I want you to make a great cornfield. And I want you to put enough raccoons into it to tend it and care for it.” And so the son made a great cornfield and filled it with raccoons. “Tend it and care for it, but don’t eat any of the corn whereof I commanded you not to eat thereof,” he said.

Of course, we all know what happened. Instead of caring for the corn, the raccoons broke down the stalks, ate much of the corn and what they did not eat they set about to destroy, such was their delight in ruining the crop.

Now the farmer knew all along that this would happen because he knew all things in advance. He also knew before putting the raccoons into the cornfield that, unless their appetites were miraculously altered, they really had no choice but to eat his corn. Notwithstanding all this,

the farmer became very angry with the raccoons and with all their descendants to the end of the world. Not only did he hunt them and trap them relentlessly, but he preserved all the deceased raccoons – boars, sows and tiny kits – so that he could revive them at the end of the world in order to continue punishing them forever with eternal punishment.

But the farmer had a big heart. Moreover, he also had a deep longing within himself to be praised for his lovingkindness. So he miraculously altered the nature of some of the raccoons. Instead of eating corn, they now ate weeds. They came to love the farmer because of his lovingkindness to them. And he loved them because from the beginning he had chosen them from among all the others to be his very own pets.

The altered raccoons were instructed to persuade the rest of the raccoons to renounce their evil ways and surrender to the plan of the farmer and to eat grass, even as they did. Nevertheless, since only the farmer had the power to alter a raccoon’s make-up, and since the farmer had already decided from the beginning which of the raccoons he was going to alter, and since the raccoon heralds knew all this, they delivered the message as instructed, but without passion and not without some embarrassment. Resigned to the belief that the unaltered raccoons could not respond unless they were chosen from the beginning, the raccoon heralds dutifully broke the news but felt no motivation to persuade. Only after new converts were firmly established in their faith did the raccoon preachers reveal that they could no more help being altered raccoons than the rest could help eating corn. Everything depended upon the irresistible will of the farmer. All apparent willing and choosing down to the smallest kernel was nothing more than the will of the farmer, may his name be praised.

“Irresistible Grace” has a beautiful ring to it, but closer inspection erases all joy. I perceive that Irresistible Grace and Inexorable Damnation are but two sides of the same coin. Even if the coin should flip in my favor, I find it hard to rejoice simply because of what it says about the God I love. The fact that God chooses to show grace to some people does not make Him any more gracious than Saddam Hussein.

Any wicked despot can show kindness to a chosen few. It’s the big picture that defines one’s character.

The irresistible, inexorable, inevitable and unfailing conclusion to Irresistible Grace is that everything is divinely fated. As far as we are concerned, salvation is merely the luck of the draw, a cosmic version of Russian Roulette. God is the One who pulls the trigger and there are more bullets than blanks.

Salvation by Grace Is Not the Sole Property of CROCUS Theology

To the Reformers, the crucial question was not simply, whether God justifies believers without works of law. It was the broader question, whether sinners are wholly helpless in their sin, and whether God is to be thought of as saving them by free, unconditional, invincible grace, not only justifying them for Christ’s sake when they come to faith, but also raising them from the death of sin by His quickening Spirit in order to bring them to faith. Here was the crucial issue: whether God is the author, not merely of justification, but also of faith; whether, in the last analysis, Christianity is a religion of utter reliance on God for salvation and all things necessary to it, or of self-reliance and self-effort.¹

The “irresistible” part of Irresistible Grace is the absolute, autocratic will of God. According to CROCUS theology, God’s will is irresistible. What about the “grace” part of Irresistible Grace? How does CROCUS theology explain the grace of God?

The explanation goes something like this: Unregenerate man can do absolutely nothing to be saved. He cannot atone for his own sin. He cannot be sorry about his sin. He cannot repent. He cannot ask for forgiveness. He cannot believe. He cannot even call out for help. He can do nothing whatsoever to save himself or to participate in his own salvation. He is like a man lying motionless under the water with no ability to even grab the rope. God does everything. That is the grace of God.

To tell such a person to repent and believe would not only place on him an impossible demand, it would also, according to CROCUS

¹ Packer, J.I. and Johnston, O.R., *Historical and Theological Introduction to Bondage of the Will*, by Martin Luther, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957, pg. 58-59.

theology, attach conditions of “self-reliance and self-effort” which conflict with the biblical teaching that we are saved entirely by grace. The “one point” that CROCUS theology wishes to establish is this: “namely, that sinners do not save themselves in any sense at all, but that salvation, first and last, whole and entire, past present and future, is of the Lord...”¹ Hence, repentance and faith, far from being conditions for salvation, are actually by-products of salvation. “God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result, not the cause of God’s choice.”² Repentance and faith must, therefore, occur after regeneration takes place because not even one quiver of faith is possible until God makes us alive in Christ.

This argument makes two assumptions: (1) It assumes unregenerate man cannot repent and believe; and (2) It assumes that good works, namely repentance and faith, originate with ourselves; that it would somehow be *our* good works to repent and believe. I believe both assumptions are invalid.

We have already unwound the doctrine of Total Depravity. Unregenerate people are not totally depraved. They are not totally blind to God or deaf to His voice. Even CROCUS theology admits that man is not totally depraved. If Adam and Eve had enough of the grace of God to feel shame, to hear the voice of God and to answer when He called, why deny it in their fallen descendants? There is good reason from Scripture to believe that when conditions are right, unregenerate people do have the ability to repent and believe. That is why God can reasonably command all men everywhere to repent.³

The second assumption is based upon the idea that spiritual life must precede repentance and faith; otherwise, salvation picks up a human element and ceases to be entirely by grace. It assumes that if an unregenerate person repented and believed it would somehow be *his own* good work. But no good thing ever originates with us. James tells us that every good thing ultimately comes from God.⁴ If all good things originate with God, then the ability to repent and believe comes from Him. What difference does it make *when* God gives the grace to repent and believe as long as it originates with God and not from ourselves?

¹ Steele, David N. and Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 23.

² *Ibid.* pg. 17.

³ Acts 17:30

⁴ James 1:17

There is no human merit in being made by God, for God, with a created sensitivity to God. Can a trailer take pride in its trailer hitch? Does it merit anything because it was made that way? If God made us to be pulled, and He does the pulling, what human merit is that?

It is God who makes us thirsty. And it is God who provides the water. If God did not draw us, we would not come. If He did not make us thirsty, we would not stoop. And if He did not provide the water, there would be nothing for us to drink. It is grace all the way. Why should the God-given ability to respond to God’s grace be regarded as human merit?

Is God’s grace any less because we have the power to turn it down? How can refusing to accept a pure gift turn the gift into anything but what it is? One man dying from thirst may refuse life-giving water because of the hand that offers it, but why should one man’s foolish refusal define another man’s grateful acceptance as merit? Reaching out desperate hands to receive grace does not constitute an act of merit. Neither is the grace he receives any less grace because he took it and someone else refused.

It is probably true that some who reject the doctrine of Irresistible Grace attach human merit to our salvation, but that is not true for everyone. And it need not be true. There is a way to reject Irresistible Grace that does not invoke human merit or diminish the grace of God. This is important. It is important because if there is a way to perceive salvation by grace apart from the CROCUS explanation, then the discussion is not over.

I rejoice that the Bible allows me to believe that salvation is by the grace of God from beginning to end. The beginning grace is that God created us with the ability to respond to him in a positive way, and this ability did not perish with the Fall. The ending grace is God’s continuing work in our lives to bring prodigals to their senses so that they will turn towards home in true repentance and faith. This brings us to the high-profile string of Unconditional Election.

Chapter 9

Unconditional Election

Unconditional Election (or Predestination) means that before God created the world, He picked some individuals to be saved and consigned the rest to eternal damnation.

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestined to everlasting life, and others are foreordained to everlasting death. ...
... Those of mankind that are predestined unto life, God...hath chosen in Christ...out of His mere grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto; and all to the praise of His glorious grace. ¹

Predestination is one special part of God’s cosmic plan. It is his sovereign decision, made in eternity past, regarding the final destiny of individual sinners. ²

Before the foundation of the world, God chose particular individuals unto salvation. His selection was *not based upon any foreseen response or act* performed by those chosen. ³

When we make the choice to come to God, it is only because he has already done the choosing. J.I. Packer writes, “The biblical doctrine of election is that before Creation God selected out of the human race,

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 84.

² Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 66.

³ Steele, David N. and Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, p. 33, italics in the original.

foreseen as fallen, those whom he would redeem, bring to faith, justify, and glorify in and through Jesus Christ.”¹

...If God has made an advance decision about which people he will save from their sins, he has also made an advance decision about which people he will leave in their sins. The theological term for this is “reprobation.” It means that when God established his plan of salvation, he decided to pass some sinners by, leaving them to continue in their sins and thus finally to be damned for them.²

The God of Scripture is able to save perfectly and completely all He desires to save: the fact that not all are saved leads inexorably to the truth of divine election.³

For me personally, there is no joy in the doctrine of Unconditional Election. If this is the way God operates, there isn’t much we can do about it, but my own heart is broken. Even if I should be one of the favored few, my hope in a just and loving God is dashed, and all biblical claim to “good news” becomes an empty assertion.

It is painful for me to think that God “selected out of the human race, foreseen as fallen, those whom he would redeem,” and in the process passed “some sinners by, leaving them to continue in their sins and thus finally to be damned for them” – all before creation, all before anyone had been born, all before anyone had done anything good or bad. I cannot see how such a message could advertise itself as “good news” or how anyone hearing it would regard it as good news.

If God had not created, I would have no problem. If He had created some for eternal bliss and simply allowed the rest to die, I would have no major complaint – a few got lucky and no one got seriously hurt! Or if God had given us the choice, who could complain? But for God to create with the intention of condemning certain individuals to “everlasting death”⁴ when He “is able to save perfectly and completely all He desires to save” that is dreadful to me. It is His privilege to do what He wants, but if the devil had done it, we would say that the devil was acting out his nature. Why is it different when God does it? I repeat what Calvin said:

¹ Ryken, Philip G., *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, 2001, pg. 67.

² Ibid.

³ White, James R., *The Potter’s Freedom*, Calvary Press Publishing, 2000, pg. 99.

⁴ Almost all Christian traditions equate everlasting death to eternal torment in the lake of fire. The discussion would change considerably, however, if everlasting death does not mean a process of punishment that goes on forever but a progression of death that ultimately ends in a permanent, everlasting cessation of life. I use the more common understanding in this study, though my heart hopes for the latter.

I again ask how it is that the fall of Adam involves so many nations with their infant children in eternal death without remedy unless that it so seemed meet to God? Here the most loquacious tongues must be dumb. The decree, I admit, is, dreadful; and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before he made him, and foreknew because he had so ordained by his decree. ... Thus, if there is any just or plausible complaint, it must be directed against predestination.¹

Calvin resolved his dilemma by concluding that if God does it, then it must be good. My heart tells me to look for a just and plausible complaint against Predestination. Somewhere there must be a mistake!

Mistakes are plentiful. We have all made our share of them and we have all been influenced by them. Calvin is no exception. It encourages me to discover that what we call “Calvinism” really originated in a notoriously error-riddled system long before Calvin was born.

“Calvinism” started with Augustine, sometimes called the father of the Roman Catholic church. From that tradition came the crusades, the inquisition, Mary worship and the veneration of saints. Calvinism came from the same system that outlawed the Scriptures for the common man, that forbade marriage for its leaders, that turned the leadership of elders into a professional clergy, and that denied the precious truth of one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. Calvinism began in a religious system which taught that the bread and wine turn into the actual flesh and blood of our Savior, that the highest-ranking official in the church can forgive sin and that we can buy forgiveness for a dead loved one if we say enough prayers or pay enough money.

The Christianity that produced Calvinism persecuted the pilgrim church. It combined Church and State, turning the Christian faith into a matter of politics and geography rather than individual conviction. This led to compulsory Christianity, forced baptisms and the elimination of dissenters.

¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Vol. 3, Part 28, Chapter 23, Section 7.

I honor Calvin for his faith and courage, but at the same time I am cautious. As paint splatters a painter and as the smell of smoke lingers on a person narrowly escaped from the fire, so a history of error clings to the best of men. Calvin’s heritage cannot fail to leave its mark. How can anyone sympathetic to the Reformation or to the pilgrim church allow Calvin’s baggage to go through unsearched?

A Lesson from the Parable of the Banquet

When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”

Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

“But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’

“Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’

“Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

“‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’

“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”¹

The master communicator tells a story that everyone can relate to. A great event is planned with high hopes for perfect weather and good attendance. Many people are invited. The much-awaited day finally comes. The long-anticipated guests start arriving. The gathering grows. But the eyes of the host keep turning to the door. Will his joy be complete, or will it be mixed with disappointment? Yes, this is a good story.

¹ Luke 14:15-24

Our Lord’s audience took two things for granted: First, the invitations were genuine. Second, the response to the invitations was entirely up to the people who received them. Imagine how the audience would react if they were to discover that the aggrieved host had rigged the whole thing. The story would be ruined. The story-teller would be banished. And any lesson intended by the story would be lost.

Imagine the confusion of the servant within the story if, after all his urgency and effort, he were to discover that he had misinterpreted the master’s intentions. Imagine his chagrin if, after witnessing his master’s anger and disappointment at being snubbed, he were to discover the master had really planned it that way. Imagine his moral dilemma if he had to pretend that the invitations were sincerely intended for all when, in fact, he knew otherwise. How is a message like that to be handled? How do you suppose our Lord’s disciples felt? Did they struggle with the same confusion and chagrin? Did they feel deceitful and morally compromised when they preached the “good news”?

And what is a modern day herald supposed to do with this message? “God instructed me to give all of you an invitation to the banquet, but He probably does not want all of you to come. It is possible that he does not want any of you to come. In fact, it is possible that I care more about you than God does. If God hasn’t chosen you, then He does not love you. Jesus did not die for your sins. You were consigned to eternal damnation before you were born, and there is nothing you can do about it. However, it is also possible that from the beginning God chose some of you to belong to Him, in which case God loves you, Christ died for you, and you are safe, even if you are not yet saved because someday God will make sure you respond to the invitation and come.”

By using a simple story to illustrate the kingdom of God, Jesus invited his audience to think of the kingdom of God in a simple, ordinary way. “You guys know how banquets work down here. Well, that’s sort of the way they work in the kingdom of God.” That could not be said if Unconditional Election were true. A banquet conducted along the lines of Unconditional Election would seem as crazy as the Hatter’s Mad Tea Party in *Alice In Wonderland*.

We must be careful not to squeeze a parable too tightly. Neither must we shape or dismiss major teachings on the basis of parables. Parables were not meant for that. This parable is no different. It neither proves nor disproves the doctrine of Unconditional Election. But it does perform a useful service. It labels Unconditional Election as bizarre.

Being bizarre does not mean Unconditional Election is wrong, only that the burden of proof falls upon those who teach it. The resurrection of Christ is bizarre, but we believe it is true because “he showed himself ... and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.”¹ That is what Unconditional Election must do. The more difficult something is to believe, the more convincing must be the proofs. It is up to Unconditional Election to prove itself.

Surrounded by a small view of man, an autocratic view of Sovereignty, man’s Total Inability to do good or to seek God, Limited Atonement and the Irresistible will of God, the doctrine of Unconditional Election is ushered in without even appealing to the Scriptures. But all this has changed. The ball is unwound.

Sovereignty does not mean absolute control but absolute *right* to control. Total Depravity is neither total depravity nor total inability. Unregenerate man is relationally dead but not unconscious. His created identity survived the fall and so did much of his created ability. The strength of Limited Atonement is in the doctrine under question. And Irresistible Grace is merely a focused restatement of autocratic sovereignty.

I purposely unwound the CROCUS ball anticipating this moment. I did not want Unconditional Election to dodge behind questionable reinforcements or to escape under another string. The result is that now, instead of encountering a heavily fortified doctrine securely surrounded by a powerful theology, we find a bizarre and lonely doctrine of dubious origin, having no allies and no place to hide.

Deprived of its support, stripped of its pedigree and exposed as bizarre, the doctrine of Unconditional Election loses home-field advantage. Instead of sitting on top of the wall looking down from a position of strength, it becomes the challenger trying to break in.

¹ Acts 1:3

Unconditional Election must prove to be the *clear, compelling, unambiguous* and *exclusive* teaching of Scripture. It is not enough to argue that Scripture *permits* the doctrine of Unconditional Election. Unconditional Election must absolutely and totally rule out the plain and simple alternative.

The Plain and Simple Alternative

To me, CROCUS theology is bizarre, esoteric and depressing. It is not simple. It is not plain. And it is not “good news.” It was not a formulated teaching in the early church. It was rejected by the Eastern Orthodox church and unknown to the pilgrim church. Without help from an insider, the average reader would not discover it.

What would an average reader of the Bible discover on his own? He would discover the simple, plain, good news of Scripture. Here it is again:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. 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. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. ¹

The Lord ... is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. ²

...God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men... ³

This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. ⁴

¹ John 3:14-17 KJV

² 2 Peter 3:9 KJV

³ 1 Timothy 2:3-6

⁴ John 6:51

Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. ¹

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. ²

And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. ³

This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance ... that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe. ⁴

He [Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ... God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. ⁵

For Christ's love compels us because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ⁶

A superficial, natural reading of these passages suggests that God's heart is in saving people from condemnation. He wanted the freedom to forgive people who would otherwise stand condemned, so He made a payment releasing both Himself and believing sinners from the

¹ John 1:29 KJV

² 1 John 2:1-2 KJV

³ 1 John 4:14 KJV

⁴ 1 Timothy 4:9-10

⁵ Colossians 1:15-20

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 18-20

unyielding demands of justice. Now “whosoever believeth” shall not perish! God’s motive is love. His gift is universal. Everyone is welcome. And the choice is ours. I call this the plain and simple message of the Bible.

Unconditional Election may ultimately rule out this plain and simple message, but one thing is certain: These passages deny Unconditional Election its early bid to be the uncontested, exclusive teaching of Scripture. As long as a plain and simple option – “the simple message” – keeps peeking out through the pages of Scripture, the bizarre doctrine of Unconditional Election is just a hopeful challenger.

To be taken seriously, the bizarre message must ultimately silence the simple message. Can it do that? The simple message, on the other hand, need not silence Unconditional Election. All it need do is remain standing when the discussion is over. That is the privilege of being plain and simple. Can it stand? Let us look at some of the passages that CROCUS theology uses in an attempt to silence the simple message.

“All That the Father Gives Me Will Come To Me” (John 6:37)

Three chapters after the wonderful, wide-open “whosoever” of John 3:16, Jesus said, “All that the Father gives me will come to me,” and “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...”

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. ...No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. ...

Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. ¹

One CROCUS advocate has stated that “John 6:37-45 is the clearest

¹ John 6:37-40, 44-45

exposition of [Calvinism] in the Bible. ... There is no meaningful non-Reformed exegesis of the passage available. ...not even a plausible solution has been offered that does not require the complete dismantling of the text, redefinition of words, or the insertion of utterly foreign concepts.”¹ Is this, then, the end of the line? Is the discussion over? Has the simple message which held such promise a mere three chapters earlier been ruled out?

How did the early Christian teachers explain this text before Augustine came along? When a teenage boy raised his hand and asked what Jesus meant, did they say, “That’s a good question, but we don’t have a clue”? How did the pilgrim church explain these words before Farel and Saunier introduced Calvinism to the assembled believers under the shade of the chestnut trees on September 12, 1532?

To those who come with CROCUS expectations, “All that the Father gives me will come to me” has only one explanation: Every individual chosen before the foundation of the world will come to Jesus. Looking at this passage through the simple message, however, one sees an entirely different explanation.

When Jesus spoke these words, there was a godly remnant in Israel just as there was a godly remnant during Elijah’s lifetime. They were the faithful believers like Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon, Anna and thousands more. They waited in faith for the Messiah. They belonged to the Father. These were the people that the Father gave to His Son. The book of Acts tells us how they came by the thousands. Everyone who was listening to the Father eventually came to Jesus and Jesus did not drive any of them away. He fully shared His Father’s will that none of them should be lost but that He should raise them up at the last day.

Does this explanation dismantle the text or introduce foreign concepts? To me it is a beautiful and natural explanation that fits the context. If I had to choose a bride for my son, how would I go about it? I would do exactly what the Heavenly Father did. I would look around for someone who respects me, who delights in the family’s values, who looks at my son with adoring eyes and is the very one my son really

¹ White, James R., *The Potter’s Freedom*, Calvary Press Publishing, Amityville, NY, 2000, pg. 153, 154.

wants. That’s the one I would choose for my son. On seeing the one I picked for him, my son would joyfully exclaim, “All That the Father Gives Me Will Come To Me.”

**“No One Can Come to Me Unless the Father Draws Him”
(John 6:44)**

Sometimes here in Minnesota we get “snowed in.” Following a real blizzard, nobody goes anywhere until the highways are plowed out. Even if Walmart were holding the sale of the century, no one would come. Something like this is very true in a spiritual sense as well. Our hearts are so drifted over with sin that no one can respond to God until God shovels us out.

If you read John 6:37-45 with CROCUS expectations, you may assume that God shovels out only those individuals who were chosen before the foundation of the world and that everyone God shovels out will come to Jesus. But Jesus did not say that. He said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...” and “...no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.”

What good is a sale if everybody is snowed in? What good is salvation if nobody can come? So a loving God who does not want anyone to perish does a very practical and sensible thing: He enables people to come. One of the precious teachings of the Bible is that God works to bring people to Himself. A beautiful hymn says:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Savior true;
No, I was found of thee.

Thou didst reach forth Thy hand and mine enfold;
I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea;
Twas not so much that I on Thee took hold,
As Thou, dear Lord, on me.

I find, I walk, I love; but O the whole
 Of love is but my answer, Lord, to Thee!
 For Thou were long before-hand with my soul;
 Always Thou lovedst me.

This song-writer speaks for both Unconditional Election and the simple message. According to Unconditional Election, an autocratic God enables and irresistibly draws only those individuals whom He chose before the foundation of the world. There is no question He will get what He wants because He determined everything down to the smallest event and the tiniest molecule. The simple message, on the other hand, introduces a patient, courteous Suitor who enables and draws all men but compels no one. What He wants, is a loving response that is won, not dictated. Once again, there is no question that He will get what He wants. The only question is whether you and I will be among those who willingly come.

John 6:37-45 may be “the clearest exposition of [Calvinism] in the Bible,” but it does not threaten or embarrass the simple message. The simple message actually rejoices in these words, the more so when we consider how God accomplishes His quest.

How Does God Draw Unregenerate Rebels?

If God is looking for freely given love rather than a dictated love, then we might expect Him to do what any of us would do. First He must introduce Himself. Surely He has done this through the marvelous beauty and order of nature. Scripture is very affirmative on this point.

Following the introduction, He might show off a little – not silly stunts to wow the crowd but a purposeful display of power and genius to get our attention and convince us that among all the so-called gods He alone is the true God.¹ Once again, Scripture is very affirmative. That is what the Old Testament is about. That is what the history of the ancient

Israelites is about. That is what the glory of God is all about.² Think of the times God miraculously stepped into human history to introduce Himself (burning bush) and to show up the competition (plagues in Egypt, Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel). That is what the miracles of Jesus were all about.³

Once God has our attention and has convinced us that He alone is God without rival, then the job of winning unregenerate hearts begins. Unfortunately, sin-loving people whose lives are driven by selfishness and pride and whose minds have been dazzled by the competition may not want a virtuous Lover even if He can part the Red Sea. But this is where the determined Suitor option gets interesting. It is here that God’s love and genius really shine.

We are born with a propensity to be selfish. Very early in life this selfishness expresses itself. We grow up selfish. Selfishness is our native language. How do you get selfish, fallen people to look away from themselves? You have to tug on their selfishness! Conspiring, determined Lover that He is, God does not hesitate to do just that. In the genius of His love, He often uses pain along with our selfish desire to escape pain to bring us to Himself. “How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father...”⁴ We know where to turn when we get into trouble. In spite of the fact that we are a race of rebels, consciously or unconsciously, everything in us is poised to call out to God when we hurt. Witness 9/11.

Pain is universal. There is the pain of thorns, thistles and wearisome labor. There is the pain of childbirth. There is the pain of poverty, rejection, loneliness and bereavement. There is the pain of aging. There is the pain of crippled bodies, shattered dreams and shameful memories. There is the pain caused by racial prejudice, religious intolerance and social hatreds. There is the pain produced by crime, injustice, war, natural disasters and divorce. It is painful just being too short, too tall, too heavy or too thin.

Some people doubt the existence of a loving God because of all this pain, but I see something quite the opposite. I see a determined Lover

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4

² Isaiah 43:1, 5-13

³ Hebrews 2:3-4

⁴ Luke 15:17-18

motivating selfish people to think and pray. Pain does not make us less selfish but it has a way of pointing us in the right direction. When the pain becomes great enough, people who might otherwise never think about God start thinking and praying.

God knew that in our fallen condition the garden of Eden would not accomplish His purpose. So He took us out of the playground and put us into a world that is designed to help men “seek Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.” Can we take credit for seeking God? Not when we realize “He moved my heart to seek Him, seeking me.”

Two very distinct pictures emerge. One picture depicts a multitude of morally despicable creatures coming out of the chute already branded and separated, some marked for eternal damnation, some for eternal salvation. It was all determined before the foundation of the world. Our role is to make sure people keep coming. Giving birth is the ultimate gamble. Being born is the ultimate lottery.

The other picture portrays a race of beloved prodigals, each one bearing a created likeness to the Heavenly Father. The resemblance includes, among other things, a free-will. This free-will enables image-bearers to leave home against Father’s wishes. It also prevents Father from retrieving them like lost sheep or lost coins. They have to want to return. So the Heavenly Father patiently uses His influence and His contacts in the far country to help His relationally dead but fully conscious prodigals come to their senses and to set out for home.

The rich and mighty are hard to convince. As long as the money and the power hold out, they have too much fun to think about God. But among the poor, the sick and the hurting, many come to their senses. The pain gets them moving. The welcome when they arrive wins their hearts.

A freely given love won in fair contest over the competition is risky but satisfying. Whereas CROCUS theology tells us that God isn’t taking any chances, the simple message declares that the Lover of our souls is going for the highest love. It comes as no surprise then that Scripture pulses with longing and joy, with elation and disappointment. God did

not rig the banquet. His invitation is genuine. His emotions are real.

Many Are Called, But Few Are Chosen

The expression “many are called, but few are chosen” occurs at the end of the following parable, reminiscent of one we already looked at.

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

“Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’

“But they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless.

“Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

*“For many are invited [called, KJV], but few are chosen.”*¹

Unconditional Election maintains that before the world was created God decided, without any predisposing conditions, which individuals He would choose to save and which ones He would allow to perish. Hence,

¹ Matthew 22:1-14

according to CROCUS theology, the expression “many are called, but few are chosen” means that God sent out a general invitation to all, but causes only those individuals whom He had chosen from before the foundation of the world to respond.

The gospel invitation extends a general outward call to salvation to all who hear the message. In addition to this external call, the Holy Spirit extends a special inward call to the elect only. The general call of the gospel can be, and often is rejected, but the special call of the Spirit cannot be rejected; it always results in the conversion of those to whom it is made. ¹

...the sense is, Many receive the invitations of the Gospel whom God has never “chosen to salvation ...” ²

The simple message offers a different explanation. According to the simple message, the certain, sure choosing before the foundation of the world was the decision to someday have a large family of sons and daughters. It was a decision to have a family, not the choosing of individuals within the family. Looking backward, individual believers in Jesus can say, “He chose us. We are the children He had in mind from before the foundation of the world.”

Nothing in this story suggests that the guests were decided beforehand. With no bizarre doctrine to influence their thinking, our Lord’s audience would assume, rightly or wrongly, that the chosen ones were simply the ones who had received an invitation, who decided to come and who came in the proper manner.

This parable certainly does not rule out the simple message. If anything, it favors the idea that long ago when everything was still in the planning stage God made a decision to someday have a house full of people. He didn’t choose individual people, He chose a group. The chosen ones are the individuals who decide to join this group.

¹ Steele, David N. and Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 53, 54.

² Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, *A Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1935, pg. 52 of the New Testament section.

He Hath Chosen Us in Him Before the Foundation of the World (Ephesians 1:4)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself ...¹

When God made the world, He put into motion a plan to have a large family of many sons and daughters. But the plan called for a very special family. Our race is a fallen race. It is not the family that God adopted for Himself. From among His fallen offspring, however, God is putting together a very special group of people. It is this group of people he had in mind before the foundation of the world. He chose them collectively and predestined everyone in this collective group to be holy and blameless in His sight.

“You Did Not Choose Me, But I Chose You” (John 15:16)

If you receive a letter saying that you have been chosen, the first thing you want to know is “chosen for what?” Jury duty? A tax audit? The draft? A low interest home loan? Disaster relief benefits? “Finish the sentence, my dear, and find out what we have been chosen for.” When the Bible says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you...” (John 15:16), it is important to finish the sentence.

John 15:16 is very similar to other statements. The first part of Ephesians 1:4 says, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world...” But the completed sentence adds: “to be holy and blameless in his sight.” The first part of Romans 8:29 says, “For those God foreknew he also predestined...” The rest of the verse adds “to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn

¹ Ephesians 1:3-5 KJV

among many brothers.” The first part of 2 Thessalonians 2:13 says, “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord because from the beginning God chose you to be saved...” The rest of the verse adds “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” When the sentence is completed, every one of these verses speaks either to God’s purpose in saving people or the means by which people are saved, not His choice of individuals.

When Jesus said “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last,” He was talking about purpose. Jesus was speaking to an optimistic group of men who thought Jesus would soon be king and that they would soon be sitting next to Him, so He wanted to clarify some things. “Men, you think you chose me and that your good choice will land you at the top. Listen carefully. First of all, it was I who chose you and appointed you, remember?¹ And what I chose and appointed you for is something altogether different from what you think. I chose you to bear fruit.”

According to CROCUS theology, Unconditional Election is the divine choosing of individual people for salvation “without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance... or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto.”² John 15:16 does not fit that description at all. First of all, the choosing had nothing to do with salvation. Judas was chosen but never saved, and at least some of the others were already as saved as Moses and Abraham by the time they were chosen. They were part of the godly remnant who waited in faith for their Messiah. They had been with John the Baptist.³ They were looking for the One Moses and the Prophets predicted.⁴ One was even affirmed by Jesus to be a true Israelite in whom was nothing false.⁵

Second, Jesus chose these particular men not “without foresight” but with much foresight. He knew what He needed, and He knew what He had to work with, so He spent the night talking it over with His Father. “When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.”⁶

We do not know for sure what He was looking for, but we can make some reasonable guesses. Judas Iscariot was chosen because he

¹ Luke 6:12-13

² Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 84.

³ John 1:35-37

⁴ John 1:45

⁵ John 1:47

⁶ Luke 6:12-13

possessed the qualifications needed for betrayal.¹ As to the rest, it was probably important that He choose ignorant and unlearned men whose only credential was that they had been with Jesus.² That way, in days to come, when they became famous and important, it would be evident to all that their power and authority came from God and not from themselves. Perhaps they were chosen with a view to their differences so as to demonstrate how God can unite all men under one roof. Levi collected taxes for the Roman empire and, if his name means anything, Simon the Zealot was a Jewish patriot who hated Rome and agitated for revolution. Something as simple as mobility might have been an issue. Jesus needed men who would be willing and able to travel.

Most importantly, and with only one exception, each of these men revealed a wisp of faith and a desire for God. Behind all their differences and unlikely résumés, Jesus foresaw that these particular men had what He wanted. Looking at the men His Father had given Him, Jesus knew that they were well chosen. They were the kind of men He could teach. They would do what He wanted. Yes, they would eventually bear much fruit.

Does God still give people to His beloved Son? Yes, all the time. “Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him” comes to Jesus.³ Are men and women still being chosen to bear fruit? Absolutely! Does God still choose people to be saved “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth”?⁴ Indeed! There is no other way. Does He still predestine those people to be conformed to the image of His Son, so that Jesus might be the firstborn among many brothers? Are they still chosen to be holy and blameless in his sight”? Is it in Christ that they are chosen? Yes, Yes, and Yes. The ancient plan is very much alive and very much in line with the simple message.

¹ John 6:64, 70-71; 13:11

² Acts 4:13

³ John 6:45

⁴ 2 Thessalonians 2:13

“As Many As Were *Ordained* to Eternal Life Believed” (Acts 13:48)

And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. ... And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were *ordained* to eternal life believed.²

Multiple choice (choose the best answer):

- a. All who were divinely decreed, appointed, established, fated to eternal life from before the foundation of the world believed.
- b. All who were divinely arranged, ordered, prepared to eternal life believed.
- c. All who arranged, ordered, prepared themselves to eternal life believed.

Those who know Greek say that the original word broadly means *to order or arrange*. Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible tells us that the word “ordain” as found in this verse comes from the Greek word *tasso* meaning to arrange, set in array. Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words explains that *tasso* means to place in order, arrange, signifies to appoint.

If you enter Acts 13:48 already convinced of Unconditional Election, you will assume that *tasso* means to determine. You will also assume that God did the determining, and you will further assume that the determining was done before the foundation of the world. This verse does not say any of that. *Tasso* does not mean “to determine” but “to arrange, to place in order.” God is not identified as the One who does the arranging, and this verse certainly does not state that the arranging was

¹ Acts 13:44-46, 48, KJV

done before the foundation of the world.

The word *tasso* in this verse occurs in the middle voice permitting the reflexive or reciprocal in which the action of the verb is done by oneself. For example: “You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted [*tasso-ed*] *themselves* to the service of the saints.”¹ This would fit the context in Acts 13. One side, filled with jealousy,² set themselves against Paul and eternal life. The other side were glad and honored the word of God;³ thus, they ordered and arranged [*tasso-ed*] themselves for eternal life by believing.

The interpretation of this passage has been vigorously disputed by theologians. The KJV translation seems to support the dogma of divine decrees as determining the ultimate destinies of men. However, the Greek does not require such a translation. The form of the verb here may be understood reflexively as well as passively, so that it may mean “appointed themselves,” or “set themselves.” ...

Such an interpretation is in harmony with the context here, for according to v. 46 the Jews had proved themselves unworthy of eternal life, and the words of this verse are meant to describe the opposite of that experience.⁴

But let’s just say for the sake of discussion that the ordering and arranging is not reflexive and that the action of ordering and arranging is done by God. The verse still does not indicate how or when God does the ordering and arranging. The simple message teaches that beginning before creation, and continuing all the way up to the present time, God has been ordering and arranging on many fronts in order to acquire a very special family. This ordering and arranging is past, present and future. It is also personal and cultural, individual and collective.

God *tasso-ed* the world and set it up the way He did so that we would inhabit an environment that encourages men to seek Him and find Him. He *tasso-ed* the ancient nation of Israel to be guardians of the moral law and the written revelation. He *tasso-ed* the Jewish culture for the coming Savior. He *tasso-ed* people and circumstances in Palestine for the crucifixion in order to provide atonement for the sins of the

¹ 1 Corinthians 16:15

² Acts 13:45

³ Acts 13:48

⁴ *The Seventh Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957, vol. 6, pg. 292-293.

world. He *tasso-ed* the Roman empire with its official language and its extensive roads for rapid communication of the message. To this very day He continues *tasso-ing* human affairs so that men might call upon Him. His *tasso-ing* becomes personal as He prepares the soil of individual lives for the gospel message. And He will continue to *tasso* until his house is full.

I am happy to think that being *ordained* to eternal life simply means that God arranges, orders, prepares, softens up and disposes people to eternal life – past, present and future. I am excited to think that my own wishes, prayers and efforts (the result of God’s ordering and arranging in me) can become a small but meaningful contribution to the great work of God. And I am pleased that the simple message with its genuine invitation to all men still remains very much alive.

Names Written in the Book of Life Before the Foundation of the World (Revelation 13:8)

And all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose *name* has not been *written before the foundation of the world* in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain. ¹

...and the dwellers on earth whose *names* have not been *written* in the book of life *from the foundation of the world*, will marvel to behold the beast because it was and is not and is to come. ²

With these two verses, Steele and Thomas in *The Five Points of Calvinism* prove that “God chose particular individuals unto salvation – their names were written in the book of life before the foundation of the world.” ³ If their argument is valid, the discussion is over.

So why did they write a whole book? And why wait till the book was one third finished to mention it? Why did it take Loraine Boettner 108 pages before mentioning the book of life in his book *The Reformed*

¹ Revelation 13:8 RSV

² Revelation 17:8 RSV

³ Steele, David N. and Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 33.

Doctrine of Predestination? And why did he give it only passing mention? Why not bring a big gun like this to the front line and get right down to business? There is a reason.

To a casual reader, the “book of life” argument looks formidable and imposing, but closer inspection reveals that it is tricky to use and even shoots backward. First of all, commentaries, footnotes and numerous versions of the Bible suggest that what originated before the foundation of the world was the *sacrifice*, not a book filled with names. Notice how Revelation 13:8 comes across in some other versions.

And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. (King James Version)

All the inhabitants of the earth will worship it – all those whose names have not been written in the book of life which belongs to the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. (Phillips)

All those who live on earth, whose names are not recorded in the Book of Life of the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world, will worship him. (New Berkeley Version)

All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. (New International Version)

Everybody who lives on earth will worship him – everybody whose name isn’t written in the book of life of the Lamb that was sacrificed since the world was made. (Beck)

Second, even if it really was the book that originated from before the foundation of the world, and even if the names of all the elect were written in it, the book of life is still not CROCUS friendly. That is because almost half of the references to the book of life speak about blotting names out!

“But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” The Lord replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book”¹

He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life,²

...do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.³

If you are going to use two verses, you have to use them all, and CROCUS theology cannot make room for any blotting out. If, before the foundation of the world, God irresistibly determined who’s in and who’s not, and if His choosing was not influenced by anything He foresaw in us, then names cannot be deleted: “Simply stated, ... the Holy Spirit never fails to bring to salvation those sinners whom He personally calls to Christ. He inevitably applies salvation to every sinner whom He intends to save, and it is His intention to save all the elect.”⁴

A simple option is to acknowledge that the sacrifice and the book were part of the divine plan before the world was created. Even though neither were known to our early ancestors, both were in service from the time of Adam. In the same way that sin crouched at Cain’s door, so also did the Lamb. And a book was open. Cain could have repented, thus ensuring that his name not be blotted out (if it had already been written down), or written down (if it had not yet been entered).

I do not know for sure what the book of life means, but knowing what it cannot mean is very heartening. It cannot mean that God wrote down the names of the elect in a book before the creation of the world. There would be no mention of blotting out if that were the case. It makes me sad to think of anyone’s name being blotted out, but the concept is encouraging. If there is a literal book with names, far better that God should reluctantly erase a name than that He should cold-bloodedly leave it out from the beginning.

¹ Exodus 32:32-33

² Revelation 3:5

³ Psalm 69:27-28

⁴ Steele, David N. and Thomas, Curtis C., *The Five Points of Calvinism*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, pg. 48.

“The Son Gives Life to Whom He Is Pleased to Give It” (John 5:21)

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. ¹

...no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²

As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. ³

To whom is the Son pleased to give life? To whom does the Son reveal the Father? Who does the Son choose out of the world? CROCUS theology would suggest that the Son and the Father are working together to bring salvation to all the individuals on a predetermined list.

The simple message suggests that the Father and the Son are working together to bring salvation to the entire world. There is no predetermined list. The soil is worked. The seed is scattered. Some seed falls upon good soil. The good soil represents people who listen to the Father and learn from Him. They come to the Son, and the Son is pleased to give them eternal life and to further reveal the Father to them. Out of all the people in the world, they become the chosen ones. Even though they continue to live on in this world, they are no longer part of this world.

Romans 9, the Heart and Soul of Unconditional Election

Romans 9 is the heart and soul of Unconditional Election. This chapter talks about Jacob and Esau: “...before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls – she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”⁴

¹ John 5:21

² Matthew 11:27

³ John 15:19

⁴ Romans 9:11-13

This is the chapter that talks about Pharaoh. “It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.”¹ Romans 9 is where the doctrine of Unconditional Election (Predestination) either delivers a knockout punch or cleans out its locker and goes home. If this were a presidential election, Romans 9 would be a “must win” state.

For centuries the doctrine of Unconditional Election has generated discussion and controversy. Why didn’t Paul settle the question like he did other controversial issues? A little clarification, a paragraph of explanation, and he could have put it to rest. The fact that Paul almost nonchalantly threw the Christian world into turmoil tells me that he didn’t see it coming. I believe we can conclude that either Paul took the doctrine of Unconditional Election for granted, never dreaming that anyone would question it, or else the doctrine never entered his mind. Loraine Boettner, a staunch Calvinist, provides some interesting information. In his classic book on Calvinism, he tells us that the Predestination of CROCUS theology was not a defined teaching in the early church until near the end of the fourth century.

It may occasion some surprise to discover that the doctrine of Predestination was not made a matter of special study until near the end of the fourth century. The earlier church fathers placed chief emphasis on good works such as faith, repentance, almsgiving, prayers, submission to baptism, etc., as the basis of salvation. They of course taught that salvation was through Christ; yet they assumed that man had full power to accept or reject the gospel. Some of their writings contain passages in which the sovereignty of God is recognized; yet along side of those are others which teach the absolute freedom of the human will. Since they could not reconcile the two they would have denied the doctrine of predestination and perhaps also that of God’s absolute Foreknowledge. They taught a kind of synergism in which there was a co-operation between grace and free will. It was hard for man to give up

¹ Romans 9:16-18

the idea that he could work out his own salvation. But at last, as a result of a long slow process, he came to the great truth that salvation is a sovereign gift which was fixed in eternity; and that God is the author in all its stages. This cardinal truth of Christianity was first clearly seen by Augustine, the great Spirit-filled theologian of the West.¹

One has to wonder why it took three hundred years for the Christian church to discover a cardinal doctrine of the faith? But more to the point, what did the early Church do with Romans 9 for three hundred years before it discovered Predestination? What did the persecuted pilgrim church do with this chapter for 1,400 years? We today cannot read Romans 9 without being distracted by the controversy, but what did people do with this chapter before it got all riled up? I believe they put it right beside John 3:14-17, 2 Peter 3:9 and all the other passages which appear to teach that God loves everyone, that He made atonement for all and that man has the freedom to choose. I believe they saw Romans 9 as an extension of the simple message. I believe Paul wrote Romans 9 totally within the context of the simple message.

Scripture clearly teaches that God has a plan and that He is at work bringing that plan to completion. Amidst all the islands of division and controversy, one great ocean unites all Christians. We all agree that human history is going someplace. It has a divinely appointed destination, a *pre-destination*.

The controversy surrounding Romans 9 is not about pre-destination in this large sense. We all agree on that. The controversy is not about God tapping certain individuals or nations for specific purposes in order to facilitate His plan. It is not that some people or nations might be shown more favor than others or that some individuals might even perish in their sins. The problem lies with God deciding before the foundation of the world, before anyone was born or had done anything good or bad, which individuals He was going to save and which ones He was going to consign to eternal damnation, especially if He has the ability to save everyone if He wants to.

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 365.

Romans 9 opens a three-chapter discussion about God’s earthly people Israel. If one enters with CROCUS expectations, he will likely exit that way and wonder why everyone does not agree with him. But if a student of Scripture enters without the CROCUS controversy already churning in his mind, I don’t think the CROCUS version of Unconditional Election would be obvious. Three hundred years is a good indication.

A quick review of these chapters satisfies my mind that they contain no single statement insisting that God selected certain individuals before the creation of the world for eternal salvation and knowingly, willingly consigned the rest to eternal damnation. God may do that, but these chapters do not say so in plain words. So we are permitted a more careful examination.

The Riddle of Paul’s Love

Paul tells us in 9:1-3 that he is heartbroken. Great sorrow and unceasing anguish filled his heart because many of his own people were missing out on the wonderful blessings from God. His grief weighed so heavily upon him that he would be willing, he said, to be cursed and cut off from Christ if it would somehow bring salvation to his beloved countrymen.

I can hardly conceive of a love that would be willing to trade heaven for hell, but the closer I come, the more it hurts. Maybe the damned don’t care, but it’s tough on those who care about the damned. What makes it especially tough is the thought that maybe God doesn’t care about the damned either. It tears me up thinking that I love some people more than God does. It tears me up thinking that God might have consigned some of my precious children or grandchildren to eternal damnation when He had the power to save them if He wanted to. I would like to know what caused Paul to love people who were unloved by God and why he didn’t seem to be bothered by the things that distress me.

Where did Paul’s heartbreaking love come from? It couldn’t be

connected to God’s love because, from a CROCUS perspective, God has that kind of love only for the individuals whom He has chosen before the foundation of the world. But where else does unselfish love come from? It has to come from God.¹ There is no other source for love like that. We love because He first loved us.²

I am convinced that Paul would not have loved if God had not first put that love in him. So why would God torment a faithful servant with a love that He, Himself, did not share? The riddle of Paul’s love encourages me. Unconditional Election makes Paul’s love inexplicable, but the simple message explains it perfectly. Paul loved his countrymen because God loved Paul’s countrymen. Paul’s love was merely an extension of God’s love. Paul’s anguish was an extension of his Lord’s anguish – “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ...”³

I am further encouraged by Paul’s conclusion. The way Paul wraps up these chapters makes me excited to find out what filled Paul with praise to God: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”⁴ Something between the lament and the anthem made Paul very happy. What was it? That is what I would like to know. If it made Paul happy, why wouldn’t it make me happy?

Unconditional Election – The Jewish Controversy

After declaring his love and the wonderful advantages of being Jewish, Paul touches a sore spot. Romans 9-11 is the written version of a well-rehearsed and oft-repeated message that aroused the wrath of many Jews. Paul was beaten, stoned and imprisoned because of it. What was it that triggered such hostility among his countrymen? It was Paul’s teaching regarding the Jewish version of *unconditional election*.

For centuries Jewish people looked upon themselves as the chosen people. They passionately, condescendingly believed that the circumcised descendants of Abraham were unconditionally chosen to be

¹ 1 John 4:7

² 1 John 4:19

³ Matthew 23:37

⁴ Romans 11:33, 36

God’s favorite people, the recipients of God’s promised blessings. Along came Paul. He taught that anyone who had the faith of Abraham was a descendant of Abraham even if he were (*gasp*) an uncircumcised Gentile. He further taught that, without true faith, a Jew failed to rise to the distinction of being a descendant of Abraham even if he had all the external credentials.

“It is not the natural children who are God’s children,” he said, “but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring”¹ “The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham.”² In other words, the promise belongs to people who share Abraham’s faith, not his genes.

One can almost feel the anger and the eagerness with which his adversaries closed in on this teaching. “What’s the advantage in being chosen if everybody in the whole world can be chosen? Paul, you traitor! You have renounced your religion, betrayed your race, twisted the Scriptures and trashed two thousand years of Jewish history.” How many times had Paul heard those accusations, I wonder?

As one would guess, Paul turns to the Jewish Scriptures and very quickly addresses God’s purpose for choosing the nation of Israel. Before the twins were born, Rebekah was told that the older would serve the younger “in order that God’s *purpose in election* might stand.”³ What was God’s purpose in election?

The Jewish version of unconditional election declared that God’s purpose in election was to richly bless the chosen people – the circumcised descendants of Abraham. Purpose and blessing were both tucked into a national, temporal, geographical and hereditary box.⁴ Paul got into trouble because he unpacked that box. He pulled up the stakes that defined the field of Jewish expectations and drove them in elsewhere.

The CROCUS version of Unconditional Election proposes a similar purpose. It declares that God’s purpose in election is to richly bless the chosen people – those individuals whom He chose before the foundation

¹ Romans 9:8

² Romans 4:16

³ Romans 9:11

⁴ See Leviticus 26:3-13

of the world. He chose to bless the elect so that they in turn would praise Him for His grace: “God elects, predestines, and secures for one great ultimate purpose – that the glory of his grace might be praised forever and ever with white-hot affection.”¹

God’s Purpose in Election According to the Simple Message

Romans 9-11 is the story of the plan of redemption and how God used the nation of Israel to accomplish His plan. It’s the story of God fulfilling his promise to bless all peoples on earth through Abraham.² It’s the echo of Joseph’s words spoken to the original sons of Israel, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”³

History is not the tale of wars and civilizations; it’s the wonderful story of God arranging circumstances, events, people and nations in order to save many lives. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”⁴ When you read Romans 9-11, pretend you never heard about CROCUS theology. Then consider the possibility that election is not about unconditionally choosing individuals for heaven, but unconditionally choosing individuals and nations for use here on earth in order to open heaven for all men.

God’s plan before the foundation of the world was to fill His house with many sons and daughters all resembling our Lord Jesus. To accomplish this plan, certain things had to happen. Jobs needed doing. Diverse and seemingly unrelated projects needed to be coordinated and completed. It became necessary for God to roll up His sleeves, pick up some tools and go to work. According to the simple message, God’s purpose in election was to get a job done. He unconditionally chose the descendants of Jacob to be one of His most important tools.

¹ Piper, John, *The Pleasures of God*, Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2000, pg. 138.

² Genesis 12:2-3

³ Genesis 50:20

⁴ John 3:17

“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Romans 9:13)

For 20 years Isaac and Rebekah had been trying to have children. Finally it happened. First there was the hopeful suspicion. Then there were the awful weeks of morning sickness sustained by the wonder of pregnancy and the small flutters of life within. Time went by. Rebekah started to show. The flutters became uncomfortable kicks and jabs. Finally the endless last month. Huge, tired and uncomfortable, Rebekah observed that one kick always seemed to trigger a full-scale war. She talked to other women. They remembered being kicked and punched, but they could not remember what Rebekah described. Finally Rebekah inquired of the Lord. The Lord said to her,

Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger.¹

What a wonderful revelation! Imagine how Rebekah felt. From being barren for 20 years, to being a mother of twins who would become founding fathers of two nations. Happy Mother’s Day! And so it came to pass. The older boy, named Esau, became the father of the Edomites. Jacob became the father of the nation of Israel. The Edomites maintained their national identity for 15 centuries. The nation that came from the younger son, true to prediction, proved stronger, continuing to this very day. Also true to prediction, by selling his birthright, the older served the younger. To which Paul adds, “Just as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”²

But wait a minute! How does loving Jacob and hating Esau have anything to do with the prediction? That is not what God told Rebekah. God told Rebekah that she had two nations within her. Two distinct peoples would issue from her. One would be stronger than the other and the older would serve the younger. Paul, where do you come up with the line about God loving Jacob and hating Esau?

¹ Genesis 25:23

² Romans 9:13

Today, 2,000 years removed from the original debate, distracted and edgy by a controversy that the early Christians knew nothing about, Paul’s words are like a huge billboard announcing our arrival into CROCUS country: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” But what did those words mean to the early Christians who knew nothing about CROCUS country?

Countless debates and years of opposition had trained Paul to be thorough and cautious. He knew that when you challenge the Jewish version of unconditional election, you’d better cite your references. “Just as it is written” is Paul’s invitation to check it out. Loving Jacob and hating Esau was the reference. (Remember, the Jewish Bible was not divided into chapters and verses at that time.) Today we would say, “If you want to look it up and see for yourselves how Scripture and history confirmed the prediction given to Rebekah, read Malachi 1:2-3.”

A Gentile reader, ignorant of the Jewish Scriptures, might miss all this. He might even assume that God spoke those words to Rebekah herself. But anyone looking it up would discover that those words were spoken by God through the prophet Malachi 1,400 years after the babies were born and then metaphorically of their descendants. The early Christians recognized that quote right away because the Old Testament was their Bible. They knew that God was referring to the Edomites, the wicked descendants of Esau. Esau and his descendants despised God, disdained their birthright and did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God in their thinking. In a sense, they invited God to hate them.

But how much more deserving were Jacob’s descendants? For the most part, Jacob’s descendants were just as evil as Esau’s. They also despised their birthright. They worshipped idols. They sacrificed their children to the gods. Every detestable thing imaginable they did. Through the mouths of prophets, God said things like: “Your older sister was Samaria ... and your younger sister ... was Sodom. You not only walked in their ways and copied their detestable practices, but in all your ways you soon became more depraved than they.”¹ Truly, God’s love for one and hatred for the other was not triggered by any merit or “works”!

¹ Ezekiel 16:46-47

So if both lines of descendants were evil, why love one more than the other? CROCUS theology would exclaim, “Exactly! That’s the point. God loves some and hates others, and it has nothing to do with us. Some people go to heaven and some go to hell, and it was all decided before the world began.” But there is another explanation for this “loving and hating.”

“Hate” does not always mean hostile aversion. More than one passage in the Bible comes clear when hate is understood to mean relative disregard. For instance, Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.”¹ In this context, “love” and “hate” communicate relative preference for one and relative disregard for the other.

Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple”² He did not mean that we should express hostile aversion toward family members. Rather, He meant that we cannot be His disciples unless we put Him first on our list of priorities. That means having a relative preference for Him and a relative disregard for all others.

God did not tell Rebekah that He had hostile feelings for baby Esau. God told Rebekah that two nations were in her womb, that two separate peoples would come from her, that one would be stronger than the other, and the older would serve the younger. This was God’s way of telling Rebekah that He was going to pay attention to one line of descendants and disregard the other. And so it came to pass, Jacob I loved [preferred] but Esau I hated [disregarded]. Did Rebekah have a problem with the idea that God would pay special attention to one offspring and disregard the other? Can any of us fault God because He unconditionally conscripted one sinful nation rather than another to advance His plan for blessing the entire world?³

¹ Matthew 6:24

² Luke 14:26

³ Romans 11:32

“What Then Shall We Say, Is God Unjust?” (Romans 9:14)

Justice is a notion about right and wrong as it pertains to injury. The world over, injured people cry out for justice. It was because Abraham had a notion about right and wrong regarding a proposed injury that he challenged God with the words, “Far be it from you to do such a thing ... Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”¹

Human society pulses with notions of justice. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Accidental injury is different from deliberate injury. Injury caused by young children and mentally retarded people is different from injury caused by adults and normal people.

When Paul asks, “What then shall we say? Is God unjust?” he is inviting us to do something bold and daring. He is inviting us to discover any injustice in God. To give God the benefit of the doubt, let’s use His own standard and see if He practices what He preaches.

This is what He taught us: Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great.² Do not be influenced by the crowd.³ No one is to be convicted on the testimony of a single witness.⁴ If a witness does not come forward to testify when he knows a case is being judged, then he will be held responsible if justice is not done.⁵ If a witness proves to be a liar, then do to him what he intended to do to his fellowman.⁶ Punishment must fit the crime.⁷ A son is not to be punished for the sins of the father.⁸ Those with knowledge will be punished more severely than those who are ignorant.⁹ And no one shall be above the law, not even the king.¹⁰

He taught us that to be just, laws must be right and reasonable. The law requiring Israelite midwives to kill all the male babies was not right.¹¹ The law requiring the Hebrew slaves in Egypt to find their own straw and yet produce the same quantity of bricks was unreasonable.¹² Justice argues that the primary cause of injury is responsible for the injury, not the secondary cause. In other words, hit men are responsible only to the extent that they are free. Herod’s soldiers, for instance, were not responsible for the slaughter of the innocents because they were acting under orders.¹³ Herod did not actually kill the babies, but he was

¹ Genesis 18:25

² Leviticus 19:15

³ Exodus 23:2

⁴ Deuteronomy 19:15

⁵ Leviticus 5:1

⁶ Deuteronomy 19:18-19

⁷ Deuteronomy 25:2

⁸ Deuteronomy 24:16

⁹ Luke 12:47-48; Matthew 11:20-24

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 17:18-20

¹¹ Exodus 1:15-21

¹² Exodus 5:6-16

¹³ Matthew 2:16

the primary cause of injury; therefore, he was responsible. David was guilty of murdering Uriah because, though he didn't actually commit the act, he was the king and he commanded it. ¹

God's standard for justice is frightening but reassuring. Justice cannot be bribed. It has no favorites. The rich and powerful have no advantage. Justice takes into account ignorance, competency, freedom to act, primary cause vs. secondary cause and whether the injury was intended or accidental. Justice examines the laws to see if they are doable, reasonable and honorable. It reviews the penalties to see if the consequences fit the injury.

In addition to all the principles of justice, there is the reason for justice. God demands justice because He is loving. Justice is a function of government because God cares about people. He wants innocent people to live in peace without fear. The reason He cares about people is because He made them in His own likeness. Scripture is very clear about that – “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; *for in the image of God has God made man.*” ²

In our sad world, justice is often lacking. Often, there is little concern for justice. And even when justice is a concern, no one can restore the lives of students killed in a school shooting. No one can bring to justice someone who, after killing others, turns the gun on himself. But a judgment day is coming when the God who cares will sort out all the injuries caused by wrongdoing and make things right. He will pay back trouble to those who troubled others and give relief to those who were troubled. ³ Farm laborers who were defrauded out of their hard-earned money will get their pay. ⁴ Every tear caused by sin, every unjust lash of the whip will be reversed – truly reversed!

On that day, justice will come full circle. Woe to you who are rich and well-fed now for you will be hungry. ⁵ “...weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. ... You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.” ⁶ “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” ⁷ The

¹ 2 Samuel 11:14-17

² Genesis 9:6

³ 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7

⁴ James 5:1-8

⁵ Luke 6:24-25

⁶ James 5:1, 5-6

⁷ Luke 6:20-21

justice of God is a great leveler. It is based upon His love for the race that bears His image.

When Paul invites us to pass judgment on the justice of God, basically he is telling us to plug in all the notions of justice that God, Himself, has taught us and then declare whether we think God practices what He preaches. I am encouraged that Paul felt comfortable doing this. Obviously, he didn't see any injustice in God's purpose, plan or methods. The words, “Not at all!” came out quickly and easily.

The fact that CROCUS theology goes through so much paper to prove the justice of God tells me that somebody is having difficulty with those words. Even Calvin and Luther had to breathe deeply when they thought about Unconditional Election. Calvin called it a “dreadful decree” and Luther said, “This mightily offends our rational nature...”¹

Unconditional Election mightily offends my sense of justice. It violates both the purpose for justice and several principles of justice. Where is God's loving concern for the image bearers if He sacrifices one group of sinners so that another equally undeserving group of sinners might be induced to praise Him forever and ever with white-hot affection, especially if He has the ability to save all if He wanted to? And since none of us were given a choice about being born and since our destiny was supposedly decided before the foundation of the world “without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto,” then God has denied us true choice in which case He fails both the primary cause test and the freedom-to-act test. Furthermore, if God consigns infant children, incompetent adults and ignorant people to eternal death without remedy, then He fails both the ignorance test and the competency test.

I am confident that God will vindicate Himself on the day of judgment, but that does not mean He will vindicate our ideas about Him. I think the doctrine of Unconditional Election will turn out to be one of those horrendous mistakes we have made about God. The red flag for me is that it makes God out to be seriously unjust. So, I ask, why should I embrace a bizarre idea that was not a doctrine of record for the first

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 105.

three hundred years, that originated in a heritage of error, that requires mental gymnastics, that clashes with the simple message of Scripture, that mightily offends my sense of justice, that robs me of my delight in God and that requires some future revelation for it to make sense? It's one thing to admit that we do not see some things very clearly; it's another thing to see clearly that something doesn't make sense and believe it anyway. That is not faith in God; that's faith in our ideas about God. Use all the paper you want!

CROCUS literature is filled with internal tension: “We do not know how this is so.” “This brings us to a dead end in our human reasoning.”¹ Let those speed bumps slow us down long enough to ask, “Does the doctrine in question gracefully fade into the inscrutable distance, or does it create a pounding headache before it disappears from view?” The doctrine of Unconditional Election gives me a pounding headache. Is there a way to understand Romans 9 and the gospel of our salvation without getting a headache? Indeed there is! Let's return to Paul's argument and see where he takes us.

“I Will Have Mercy on Whom I Have Mercy” (Romans 9:15)

After explaining God's purpose in election using Jacob and Esau to illustrate, Paul takes his well-versed Jewish audience on a trip to Egypt. He begins the journey in verse 15 with the words, “For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’” Then he adds, “It does not, therefore, depend upon man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.”²

Here is the background: God is angry with the nation of Israel. Moses is distressed. Moses pleads with God not to take away His presence from them. He begs God to teach him His ways so that he might know God and find favor with God. And then he says, in essence, “Who are you, God? I hear your voice, but I never see you. Show me your glory.”³ To which the Lord replies, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your

¹ Knappen, Darryl, *Doctrine of Election*, 2001, pg. 10.

² Romans 9:16

³ See Exodus 33:7-18

presence. *I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*”¹

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, each in their own lives, had become aware of the unseen Presence. That same unseen Presence had more recently “appeared” to Moses at the burning bush and then with signs and wonders in Egypt. He delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, parting the Red Sea and swallowing Pharaoh’s army. He made water come from a rock. He defeated the Amalekites in battle. And every day He fed two million people with bread from heaven. Now this unseen Presence is angry. That is not a comfortable situation to be in. What if He should decide to stop sending food? What if He abandoned them in the desert? No wonder Moses wanted to find favor with God.

“You want to see my glory? Then chisel out two stone tablets similar to the ones that you broke and meet me tomorrow morning on the top of Mount Sinai.” That is basically what God told Moses to do. So, very early in the morning, Moses took the two blank tablets and climbed the mountain.²

And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.³

This is what I hear God saying: “Moses, you and your people must take me seriously. Be careful to obey my instructions because if you disobey, the results will be disastrous, haunting (visiting) you and your children for three and four generations to come. But I want you to know something else. I am a merciful God. Mercy is my trademark, my defining attribute, my supreme glory.”

We must remember that all this took place before the unthinkable expression of love at Calvary. It happened before Jesus taught us to be

¹ Exodus 33:19

² See Exodus 34:1-4

³ Exodus 34:5-7 KJV

merciful as His Father in heaven is merciful so that we might be called the sons of God. ¹ It happened before God showed mercy to the wicked city of Nineveh, much to Jonah’s displeasure. ² It happened before the Psalms were written, containing multiple references to God’s mercy and loving kindness. We’ve learned a lot about God since the time of Moses, but Moses and the children of Israel were just getting started. They were hardly past the handshake.

If a person enters Romans 9 with CROCUS theology already planted in the mind, the expression “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy” confirms the idea that mercy is a commodity that God gives to some and withholds from others. But when one traces those words back to their source, another possibility emerges. Mercy is not something nice that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob pulls out of His pocket. Mercy, love, compassion, loving kindness, grace and forgiveness are His defining glory. He delights in mercy. That’s who He is. That’s how He acts. That’s what He teaches. That’s what He wants us to be and what He intends to form in us.

Jesus taught that mercy and forgiveness are so close to the heart of God that if we forgive, we will be forgiven. If we show mercy, we will be shown mercy. Mercy is not a commodity. It is the personality of God. This brings us to the question about Pharaoh. If God is merciful, why didn’t God show mercy to Pharaoh?

“God Has Mercy On Whom He Wants to Have Mercy, and He Hardens Whom He Wants to Harden” (Romans 9:18)

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ 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**

¹ Luke 6:35-36

² Jonah 3:10-4:2

me like this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory...¹

Before jumping into a discussion about hardening and Pharaoh and objects of wrath prepared for destruction, notice the bold type. Right in the middle of a paragraph that swirls with questions and controversy, Paul inserts a reminder: God is God. He can do what He wants.

We are not in a position to choose our Maker. If He turns out to be absolutely horrid, He is still God. He may tease or torture. He may be arbitrary, capricious, sadistic or doting. He may be racist, sexist or chauvinist. He may be just or unjust; merciful or severe. Whether we get things figured out or not, whether we like the conclusion or not, God is God. He has the “undisputed right to make decisions and act accordingly.” So shut up and quit fussing – “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God.” CROCUS theology has done well to keep this truth in front of us. It’s a truth that we may need to fall back on if our roving minds come up against a wall. But let’s not lick and seal the envelope just yet.

I know my place as a creature. I accept His right to rule. I bow to His sovereignty. But this God has also asked me to love Him. How can I do that unless I delight in Him? If I do not respect and admire Him, how can I give Him my affection and devotion? The doctrine of Unconditional Election makes it difficult for me to love God. Luther speaks for many when he says:

Now the highest degree of faith is to believe that He is merciful, though He saves so few and damns so many; to believe that He is just, though of His own will He makes us perforce proper subjects for damnation, and seems (in Erasmus’ words) “*to delight in the torments of poor wretches and to be a fitter object for hate than for love ...*”²

¹ Romans 9:17-23

² Luther, Martin, *The Bondage of the Will*, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957, pg. 101.

Doubtless it gives the greatest possible offence to common sense or reason, that God, Who is proclaimed as being full of mercy and goodness, and so on, should of His own mere will abandon, harden and damn men, as though He delighted in the sins and great eternal torments of such poor wretches. It seems an iniquitous, cruel, intolerable thought to think of God; and it is this that has been a stumbling block to so many great men down the ages. And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man.¹

Good men, sensitive men, not wanting to ascribe cruelty and injustice to God, labor hard and long to avoid “iniquitous, cruel, intolerable” thoughts of God. Volumes have been written in an effort to get around this stumbling block. Is the only option one that creates mental anguish and quenches love?

It is one thing for Paul to insist that God is sovereign, so don’t argue with God. It is another thing to say that God is sovereign, so don’t argue with Augustine or Calvin. I believe one can argue with Augustine and Calvin without arguing with God.

Picture a triangle with three sides – mercy, justice and sovereignty. Together, they make up the divine boundaries. All Christians believe that God stays within those boundaries. The question is, “Does our explanation of God also stay within those boundaries?”

If there were no world, there would be no Pharaoh and no dilemma. Obviously, the whole messy business came about because God created. That makes God *ultimately* responsible for everything, including evil. But that is not a problem for me as long as God is not *directly* responsible for evil and treats His creation with consideration. But my cautious love suffers a setback if out of the corner of my eye I see God fattening Pharaoh for slaughter.

A sovereign God can do what He wants, but that does not hold true for a just God. A just God has to do what is right. Sovereignty says, “Who are you to talk back to God?” But justice says, “Speak up. Present your case. ‘Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?’”² Sovereignty requires that God be God, but justice demands that God

¹ Ibid., pg. 217.

² John 8:46

abide by the rules and not pull rank.

The clay has nothing to say when it comes to sovereignty. But in order for the clay to love, it has to believe that God is just. The question for me, then, is this: How much did God determine Pharaoh’s response, and how much did Pharaoh decide for himself?

The difficulty with CROCUS theology and its autocratic view of sovereignty is that the rope is too short. God decides everything. Pharaoh decided only what God already determined, which is another way of saying that Pharaoh really decided nothing. If Pharaoh did not really decide anything but was controlled by God, then Pharaoh’s rebellion was God’s fault, and it would be unjust for God to hold Pharaoh responsible.

No Christian believes that God is unjust. Even CROCUS advocates believe that God treated Pharaoh justly. Clinging to oxymorons and parallel opposites, by switching the blame from primary cause to secondary cause, by strong admonitions to be faithful to Scripture even when reason takes a beating, and by taking huge gulps of “We cannot understand this in our natural mind,” they cross over to a just God.

How do the rest of us arrive at a just God? We arrive at a just God by believing that Pharaoh did what he did of his own free will. The “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart was not something God imposed on a reluctant Pharaoh. It was something God did to a willing Pharaoh. God accommodated Pharaoh, and when the going got tough, He simply encouraged, reinforced, strengthened and fortified Pharaoh’s own resolves.

Pharaoh was ideally qualified for a particular job. So God “bore with great patience” an absolute jerk and, to Pharaoh’s delight and satisfaction, arranged his ascension to power and then steadied him and held him on course, enabling Pharaoh to do and become everything he ever wanted. On the day of judgment, Pharaoh will have nothing to say. He did it on his own. All God did was to clear the way so that Pharaoh could be totally true to himself.

There are four reasons to believe this explanation. First, the Hebrew words in the Old Testament narrative make it clear.¹ Second, it does not invoke “iniquitous, cruel, intolerable” thoughts about God. God did not

¹ When God hardened (“chazaq”) Pharaoh’s heart, God fortified, encouraged and strengthened what was already in Pharaoh’s heart. When God hardened (“qashah”) Pharaoh’s heart, He stiffened Pharaoh’s resolves. When Pharaoh hardened (“kabed”) his own heart, he puffed himself up with pride. He made himself heavy with self-importance. He glorified himself. By using one English word (“harden”) for three different Hebrew words, the Old Testament English translators failed to convey some important distinctions. God did not want Pharaoh to give in until all of the plagues had come upon Egypt. So when the going got tough and Pharaoh’s evil heart faltered, God steadied, strengthened, encouraged and fortified him. This held Pharaoh on Pharaoh’s own sinful course.

create a monster: He put up with one. Third, it lines up with Paul’s remark about God bearing with great patience the objects of His wrath. (vs. 22) If Pharaoh were on a short string, why would his behavior offend and exasperate the One pulling that string? Can you hear God talking to Himself as He moved Pharaoh this way and that, “I am extremely angry with you, Pharaoh. Every time you do that, you test my patience!”?

The fourth reason for believing that God did not cause Pharaoh to sin, but merely concentrated and channeled the sin that was already in him, is not obvious from the King James Version or the New International Version. The end of verse 22 says, “*fitted* to destruction.” (KJV). The NIV says, “*prepared for destruction.*” “What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – *prepared for destruction?*”² “Prepared for destruction” gives the impression that God worked on Pharaoh until Pharaoh was finally ready for destruction.

Vine’s Expository Dictionary gives it a different slant. It explains that the word translated “prepared” or “fitted” in Romans 9:22 indicates that Pharaoh did it to himself. “...here the Middle Voice signifies that those referred to fitted themselves for destruction...” This thought comes out in many translations.

THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE:

...endured with much patience vessels fit for wrath, ready to be destroyed...

THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE

...tolerated very patiently those vessels which were objects of retribution due for destruction,...

THE BIBLE, AN AMERICAN TRANSLATION

...has shown great patience toward the objects of his anger, already ripe for destruction,...

¹ Romans 9:22

THE NEW TESTAMENT (A Revision of the Challoner-Rheims Version)

...endured with much patience vessels of wrath, ready for destruction,...

THE NEW TESTAMENT IN MODERN ENGLISH (J.B. Phillips)

...has yet most patiently endured the presence in his world of things that cry out to be destroyed?

THE AMPLIFIED NEW TESTAMENT

...has tolerated with much patience the vessels (objects) of [His] anger which are ripe for destruction?

BECK – IN THE LANGUAGE OF TODAY

...but He waited very patiently before He would *punish those who deserved it* and had prepared themselves *for destruction*,... (italics in the original)

The scary thing about wanting something very badly is that God often obliges. In the opening chapter of Romans, Paul said that because evil men did not want to glorify God, give thanks to Him or retain Him in their thinking, God accommodated them. He turned them over to all that was in their evil hearts. In the end, He gave them everything they really wanted, to their own destruction.

This is the dark side of the seek-and-you-shall-find coin. The demons who begged to go into the pigs got what they wanted, to their own loss. ¹ The Israelites in the wilderness pestered God until they got what they wanted, to their own hurt. ² And Pharaoh got what he wanted, to his own destruction.

The evil in this world is an endless stench. It is a grief to God. It tests His patience. Yet, there are times when it comes in useful. If God wants to use evil to accomplish His own merciful purposes, it is not hard for Him to find some willing sinner who would thank his lucky stars for the chance to do exactly what God needs doing. Without any personal

¹ Luke 8:32-33

² Psalm 106:13-15

responsibility for the evil, God is able to coordinate, focus and reinforce existing evil until a perfectly willing, totally responsible sinner has done exactly what God intended.

That is what God did with Pharaoh. He took a self-centered, proud-hearted, bull-headed, power-hungry, money-loving, idol-worshipping, truth-rejecting rebel and gave him a chance to be and to do what he really wanted. Then, with one stroke of judgment, God accomplished His purposes: (1) He brought long-overdue judgment on a wicked king. (2) He sent a message of power and justice to the whole world. And (3) He filled the objects of His mercy with hope by demonstrating that a really powerful God had come to their aid. He also did something else: He advanced the plan of salvation one more step.

Bringing judgment on a wicked king and the emancipation of some miserable slaves were issues of the moment, but ever present in God’s mind was the big project. From the beginning of time, a step at a time, a tool at a time, always thinking, always working, God was fulfilling the plan of redemption. At this particular moment, God wanted to introduce Himself to some Hebrew slaves because He had a job for them to do.

So how do you get the attention of miserable, discouraged, beaten down, overworked slaves? What would convince them that a real God was actually working on their behalf? Answer: A category 5 demonstration of justice and power. So God laid a glorious display of justice and power on the land of Egypt, and it worked. Former taskmasters loaded their Hebrew slaves down with jewelry and urged them to leave. For the time being, the objects of God’s mercy gave the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob their undivided attention.

“Objects of Mercy Prepared in Advance for Glory” (Romans 9:23)

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? *What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even*

*us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?*¹

Those who enter Romans 9 with CROCUS expectations hear Paul saying that God planned to give the Egyptians something terrible, and He planned to give the Israelites something wonderful. This idea is expressed in the following quotation:

Two kinds of vessels are here: “The vessels of wrath fitted to destruction” (9:22). ... “The vessels of mercy, which he afore prepared unto glory” (9:23). The conclusion of the matter is that hell (destruction) is the deserved destination of the sinful man, while *heaven* (glory) is the undeserved destination of the saved man.²

Pharaoh got wrath. The Israelites got mercy. But the text does not say that. Neither does the text actually say that the objects of God’s mercy actually *got* anything at all. They were *prepared* for something. Nothing is said about *receiving* the riches of His glory, only that God was going to make it known to them and that He was going to prepare them in advance for it.

We have already observed that the objects of wrath prepared (adapted, fitted) themselves for destruction. God didn’t do it. They did it to themselves. A different verb explains what happened with the Israelites. God prepared (made ready) the Israelites ahead of time for something. He prepared them ahead of time for the riches of His glory.

Glory is the manifestation of greatness. God is rich in glory because He is very great. His greatest glory is His mercy and grace. But the storehouse of His greatness includes many other dazzling treasures, each one reflecting a different facet of His greatness. God wanted to bring to public attention one of those treasures. He wanted to show it to Pharaoh. He wanted to show it to the objects of His mercy. And He wanted to show it to the entire world. What was it? It was the glory of His wrath and power. So He took someone who was ripe for judgment and put on a real show. But before the show began, He prepared the objects of His mercy.

¹ Romans 9:22-24

² Willmington, H.L., *Willmington’s Guide to the Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1981, pg. 460.

Why did God prepare the objects of His mercy in advance? He prepared them in advance because He was planning to unveil the glory of His judgment. The destroying angel was about to visit. If they weren't prepared, they, too, would be destroyed. God did not want to destroy the objects of His mercy, so He prepared them in advance for that fearful moment.

There are several reasons to believe this is what Paul had in mind. First of all, the immediate context is talking about God's "wrath" and "power." Second, the awesome judgment of God is a recurring theme in the Exodus narrative: "I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with *all the wonders* that I will perform among them."¹ "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with *mighty acts of judgment*."² "...though I *multiply my miraculous signs and wonders*..."³ "...with *mighty acts of judgment* I will bring out my divisions"⁴ "I will send the *full force of my plagues* against you..."⁵

Third, the advance preparation mentioned in Exodus was a preparation for the night of judgment. Every Jew in Paul's audience knew the story by heart. God prepared the objects of His mercy in advance by giving them detailed instructions for the Passover. Each household was instructed to select a lamb. They were told what to look for in this lamb, how and when to kill it, how to cook it, how to eat it and how to sprinkle its blood just so around each doorway. The instructions were given in advance so that the Israelites would be prepared for the glory of God's wrath and power. When the whole terrifying event was over, God truly had made known to everybody in Egypt the riches of His glory. God made it known to the objects of wrath who experienced it to their destruction. He also made it known to the objects of mercy who were spared because they were prepared ahead of time.

Fourth, as the waves of the Red Sea washed the dead bodies of Pharaoh's army up on shore, the objects of mercy sang a song extolling, not the riches of God's mercy and grace, but the riches of God's glorious judgment: "for he hath triumphed *gloriously*: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea."⁶ "Thy right hand, O Lord, is become *glorious* in power: thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy."¹

¹ Exodus 3:20

² Exodus 6:6

³ Exodus 7:3

⁴ Exodus 7:4

⁵ Exodus 9:14

⁶ Exodus 15:1, KJV

“Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in *glory*, working wonders?”²

Fifth, the Old Testament Scriptures that Paul draws upon to support and conclude this part of his argument clearly refer to judgment: “For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.”³ “...just as Isaiah said previously: ‘Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.’”⁴ These verses are head-scratchers if the “riches of his glory” refers to the riches of God’s glorious grace. But everything makes sense if the riches of God’s glory is a reference to judgment.

Not only do they make sense, they become very practical. What if God demonstrated the riches of His glorious wrath and power in order to prepare us in advance for those same riches of glory “even us, whom he also called [invited], not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?”⁵ In other words, what if He put on this awesome display of judgment not merely to benefit some long-deceased Hebrew slaves, but to motivate all who hear the invitation for salvation to take warning and be prepared? So follow directions. Do what you need to do in order to be ready. And do not harden your hearts. God delights in mercy, but He is also a righteous God who hates sin and will some day bring judgment upon the whole earth – “For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.”⁶

Objects of Mercy, Objects of Wrath

Are you an object of mercy? Am I an object of mercy? And who are the objects of wrath? CROCUS theology has conditioned us to think in terms of the elect and the non-elect. The objects of God’s mercy are the elect whom God chose before the foundation of the world, and the objects of God’s wrath are the unlucky ones who were not chosen. But there is another explanation that has nothing to do with Unconditional Election.

¹ Exodus 15:6 KJV

² Exodus 15:11

³ Romans 9:28

⁴ Romans 9:29

⁵ Romans 9:23-24

⁶ Romans 9:28

In the ordinary sense, an object of mercy is any person or animal we show kindness to because our hearts are stirred with compassion. An object of wrath is any person or animal that makes us disgusted and angry. I propose this ordinary sense for Romans 9. The objects of God’s mercy are the people God shows kindness to because His heart is stirred with compassion. The objects of His wrath are those people who make Him angry.

So what makes God angry and what makes Him feel like being merciful? *Exactly the same things that make most of us feel angry or merciful.* People who have spent time meditating on God’s Word can easily make a list. We know, for instance, that widows and orphans are objects of mercy. We also know that those who “devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers” are objects of wrath.¹ Here is a partial list.

Objects of Mercy

Humble sinners who call out to God for mercy:

Luke 18:9-14; Isaiah 55:7; thief on the cross, Luke 23:39-43

The poor and those who are kind to the poor: James 2:5, Luke 6:20, Proverbs 19:17

Widows and orphans and those who care for widows and orphans:

Deuteronomy 10:18, Deuteronomy 14:28, 29, James 1:27

Those who confess and renounce their sin: Proverbs 28:13, Isaiah 55:7

The merciful: Matthew 5:7

Those who forgive others: Matthew 6:14

Those who love God with all their heart: Matthew 22:37-38

Those who practice their religious devotion from the heart without show:

Matthew 6:3-4, 6, 17-18; John 4:24

Those who persist in doing good, who seek glory, honor and immortality: Romans 2:7

Those who do good to the least of His brothers: Matthew 25:34-40

¹ Luke 20:47

Objects of Wrath

Self-righteous people who think they are better than others: Luke 18:9-14

The rich who hoard their wealth and oppress the poor: James 5:1, Luke 6:24

Those who oppress the widow or the orphan: Exodus 22:22-24

Those who love their sin: Romans 1:29-31, 2 Timothy 3:2-4

The unmerciful: James 2:13, Matthew 18:23-35

Those who do not forgive others: Matthew 6:15

Religious hypocrites who honor God with their lips but whose hearts are far from Him: Matthew 15:8

Religious hypocrites who do everything to be seen by men: Matthew 23:5

Those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil: Romans 2:8

Those who fail to do good to the least of His brothers: Matthew 25:41-45

Objects of mercy and objects of wrath were not determined before the foundation of the world. The fact is, objects of mercy can become objects of wrath and vice versa. The Hebrew slaves in Egypt were objects of God’s mercy. When they cried out to God for help, God said: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.”¹ But a short time later, many of these same objects of mercy died in the wilderness because they hardened their hearts and became objects of wrath. The same thing happened to the unmerciful servant. He was an object of mercy until he refused to show mercy. Then he became an object of wrath.²

The switch can go the other direction as well. Scripture is full of examples in which objects of wrath repented of their evil ways and became objects of mercy. No wonder God repeatedly urges us to humble

¹ Exodus 3:7

² Matthew 18:23-35

ourselves, repent of our sin and seek Him. He loves to be merciful and takes no pleasure in objects of wrath.

Mercy and wrath are never far from Paul’s mind. As he moves through his discussion about the future of Israel, he explains that the Jewish people were not unconditionally elected for salvation. In fact, “Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.”¹ And those Gentiles who find mercy must not assume they were unconditionally chosen to be objects of mercy: “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.”²

Paul never had the privilege of reading John 3:14-18, but if he had, I think he would have loved it. When I read John 3:14-18 with Paul’s thoughts about the Passover, and preparing objects of mercy ahead of time for the glorious display of God’s judgment and about enduring with great patience the objects of wrath who prepared themselves for destruction and about carrying out His sentence on the earth with speed and finality, this is what I hear: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Lamb of God be lifted up: that anyone in the camp who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Passover Lamb that whoever applies the blood to his own door will not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Lamb into the world to condemn the world but to save it. He who looks to the Lamb will not perish, but he who hardens his heart and refuses to look prepares himself for the wrath of God because he has refused the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.”

* * *

As Paul traveled from town to town, it was his custom to go first to the Jewish synagogues and preach the good news to his own people.³ If you want to know what he said to a Jewish audience, read the book of Romans. I suggest that Romans is the written version of the basic message that he preached in every synagogue.

¹ Romans 9:27

² Romans 11:22

³ Acts 17:2-3

Inevitably, the question would come up regarding the nation of Israel. If there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, what is to become of God’s chosen people, the Jews? Is Israel finished? Chapters 9-11 is Paul’s response to that question. It’s the part of the message that comes just before certain Jews begin rounding up bad characters to start a riot. It’s the part where Paul challenges the Jewish doctrine of unconditional election. It’s the part where he explains that God chose the nation of Israel, not because Jews were his favorites or because He wanted to bless Jewish people exclusively, but because He wanted a tool to bring blessing to the entire world.

The reason certain Jews became so angry was because they knew exactly what Paul was saying, and they disagreed with him. Ironically, today it is just the opposite. “We agree with you, Paul, but what are you saying? Somewhere between Paul and Calvin, the debate shifted. It shifted from the *truth* of what Paul was saying to the *meaning* of what Paul was saying. What made the difference? What caused the shift? Answer: A different audience and fifteen hundred years! Fifteen hundred years to forget the initial controversy. Fifteen hundred years to drift into a totally different culture. Fifteen hundred years of undreamed changes within the church.

When Calvin popularized Augustine’s doctrine of Unconditional Election, most people knew nothing about the initial controversy and very little more about the Word of God. The Bible was a forbidden book. A corrupted Christianity had replaced a corrupted Judaism. The Holy Roman Empire was God’s kingdom on earth. Europe was the sacred state and Rome was the city of God. Baptized Catholics were the chosen people. And the doctrine of Unconditional Election had migrated from the circumcised people to the baptized people. Everything Paul argued against in his day had come full circle under a new name. And what about Paul’s initial audience, the Jews? Well, they were now regarded almost exactly as they once regarded everyone else: despised outsiders, a people rejected by God.

The Jews in Paul’s day, the Roman Catholic church and the Reformers who came out of it all shared several things in common. They

all believed in a sacred state run jointly by priest and magistrate. They all believed that a person was admitted to that sacred state at infancy through an initiation rite – circumcision or baptism. They all embraced a version of Unconditional Election. And they all fiercely opposed any who dared to suggest otherwise.

If you want to believe in the CROCUS version of Unconditional Election, you can ignore these things, pull a few verses out of Romans 9 and become quite comfortable. But for one who loves the simple message, I find this all very enlightening. I propose that the book of Romans is basically the simple message explained to those who believed in a sacred state and a sacred rite of entry. I further propose that Romans 9-11 is Paul’s answer to those who say, “Hey, wait a minute! God may have a professional interest in the whole world, but we are the elect. We are the ones He loves.” And finally I propose that Romans 9, instead of supporting the doctrine of Unconditional Election, is actually Paul’s rebuttal to it – the Jewish version as well as Calvin’s version. The only unconditional election in Romans 9 is God’s unconditional choice of tools to bless the entire world.

Romans 9 does not rule out the simple message. It *is* the simple message. It is the simple message opened up to an inquiring Jewish mind. It is the simple message explained to people who had grown up with the Jewish version of Unconditional Election. It is the wonderful message of a God who loves the entire world and wants everyone to come to repentance and salvation. It fills me with joy. Paul’s conclusion inspires my own paraphrase:

Here, then, is where things stand at present: When it comes to the wonderful message of salvation that I have been explaining to you, the Jews for the most part are still your enemies. But do not forget that they continue to be loved by God and have a special place in God’s plans because of the promises given to their ancestors. His promised blessings and plans do not change. He has not given up on His people. Just as you Gentiles were disobedient to God in the past and have now received mercy, so the Jews are now disobedient in order that someday they, too, will know what it is like to experience mercy. God has consigned all

men to disobedience that all may come in under His mercy.

Oh, the depth of God’s wisdom and knowledge! Who can guess what He is thinking? Who can trace His paths? Who understands the mind of God or who can offer Him counsel? To whom has God ever been obligated or indebted? All things start with Him. All things exist by Him. And all things flow to Him at the end. To Him be honor and praise forever! Yes, may it be so! ¹

Does any Christian actually *want* to believe in Unconditional Election? I understand personal conviction. I understand the power of tradition. I understand a reluctance to reverse one’s position after a lifetime of teaching it. I can even understand the perverse gratification of wielding an esoteric theology. But I cannot understand anyone actually delighting in Unconditional Election.

Whether some Christians actually delight in Unconditional Election or not, I do not know, but I do know that many struggle with the doctrine. For some, Unconditional Election is like having a bad heart. They try not to think about it, but every once in awhile there is a flutter, a little pain in the chest, and the shadow returns. Nothing serious, just enough to take the edge off their joy in the Lord. For others, Unconditional Election is very depressing. Bless their hearts, they still believe, but there is no exuberance, no excitement, no bear hug for God. These dear men and women of faith, tormented day by day, patiently hold on to the only faith they know in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others are so offended by the God of CROCUS theology that they leave. Some go out with noise and fanfare. Others simply shut down. They still occupy the same pew, but their hearts are dead. They have left without leaving.

For my part, there is no shadow. There is no flutter, no pain in the chest. My heart soars with joy. Not only has the simple message stood the test but, under cross examination, many CROCUS texts actually defect to the side of John 3:16-17. God loves the world so much that He sent His Son, not to condemn it but to save it. It is His pleasure to reconcile all things to Himself through the blood of Christ. He is not willing that any perish, but that all come to repentance.

¹ Paraphrase of Romans 11:28-36

Chapter 10

Perseverance of the Saints

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is stated in the Westminster Confession in the following words: “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.” Or in other words we believe that those who once become true Christians cannot totally fall away and be lost, – that while they may fall into sin temporarily, they will eventually return and be saved.¹

With this paragraph, Lorraine Boettner opens his chapter on the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. The chapter closes by reproaching the person who rejects it:

It seems that man, poor, wretched and impotent as he is, would welcome a doctrine which secures for him the possessions of eternal happiness despite all attacks from without and all evil tendencies from within. But it is not so. He refuses it, and argues against it. And the causes are not far to seek. In the first place he has more confidence in himself than he has any right to have. Secondly, the scheme is so contrary to what he is used to in the natural world that he persuades himself that it cannot be true. Thirdly, he perceives that if this doctrine be admitted, the other doctrines of free grace will logically follow. Hence he twists and explains away the Scripture passages which teach it, and clings to some which appear on the surface to favor his preconceived views. In fact, a system of salvation by *grace* is so utterly

¹ Boettner, Lorraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., sixth edition, 1948, pg. 182.

at variance with his every-day experience, in which he sees everything and person treated according to *works* and *merits*, that he has great difficulty in bringing himself to believe that it can be true. He wishes to earn his own salvation, though certainly he expects very high wages for very sorry work.¹

I have no desire to cling to works and merits. I have no wish to earn my own salvation. And I would love a doctrine which secures for me the possessions of eternal happiness. Boettner’s offer is very attractive, but does it live up to its billing? Boettner fills twenty pages with explanation, clarification, disclaimers and criticism, but not a word on securing anything for anyone! That’s because the doctrine has nothing to do with *securing*, only with *assuring*. The most it can offer is *assurance* of eternal happiness for the chosen ones: “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.”

Imagine a poor, wretched, impotent sinner eagerly sending away for information on how to secure the possessions of eternal happiness. The package arrives. With trembling fingers and pounding heart he opens it up and reads, “Put your heart at rest. You are assured eternal happiness if you are one of the chosen ones.” What!? Is that what I ordered? Is that what was advertised? A hundred miles of billboards, and I turned in to see this? I don’t need to be told that I will win the lottery if I hold a winning ticket. What I want to know is how to *secure* a winning ticket.

There is a huge difference between securing and assuring. Securing has to do with getting and having. Assuring has to do with knowing. Eternal happiness is the prize that we long to secure. Assurance is the confidence that I have it. Notwithstanding Boettner’s claim, the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints deals only with assurance.

Once we get over our disappointment, however, it is easy to see that assurance would be nice to have. If I am one of the elect and if assurance is available, why not enjoy it? It isn’t the feast that was advertised, but it is better than nothing. So, let’s savor what we can.

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., sixth edition, 1948, pg. 201.

It Takes Assurance to Get Assurance

I grew up in a home where Jesus was part of the family before I was born. My father and mother taught me to love Him. I was one of those little ones Jesus referred to who believed from earliest memories, and my parents never did anything to cause me to stumble. As a result, I have no recollection of a conversion experience.

No one needed to convince me that I was a sinner. I knew I was a sinner. But my parents taught me what to do when I sinned. Repent, confess and thank God for the Savior. So I basically lived with a clear conscience before God and man. In my childish way, I loved God and believed in Jesus.

During those years, I often attended Bible camp. I enjoyed Bible camp. But it also brought an ache to my heart. Even when I became a counselor, the ache did not go away. There was the inevitable Friday night “testimony” time. Campers would gather around the bonfire to sing and tell how they “got saved.” I wanted to share a story, but I could never do it because I had no recollection of a conversion experience. I remember searching my memory. On one occasion I even stood up and related a time when I thought it might have happened.

I was still in grade school when a well-meaning friend of the family told me with deep concern that he doubted my salvation because I couldn’t remember anything about it. Conversion to Christ, he said, is a memorable experience. If one can’t remember it, it probably never happened. That made me wonder. I wanted assurance, but there was no way the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints could satisfy my heart because the assurance it offered hinged upon being one of the elect – the very thing I was not sure about.

In my late teen years there were moments of introspection and conviction of sin that caused me to question my relationship with God. Once again the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints would have been useful, but little doubts lurking in the corners of my mind prevented me from using it. Without absolute assurance that I was one of the chosen ones, I could not get the doctrine of assurance started. So again I

had to wrestle with the issue. I remember telling God that all along I had *thought* I was a true Christian, but now I wondered if I had only been fooling myself.

Many poor, wretched sinners have wrestled with uncertainty. We read the story about Jesus forgiving people and long to hear Jesus say to us, “Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven.” Or to hear Him say, “You do not need the whole bath because you are already clean. All you need is to have your feet washed.” Or, “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you. Rejoice, instead, that your name is written in heaven.” What a comfort it would be at the close of our last earthly struggle to hear Him say, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” In His absence, yes, it would be nice to have a doctrine that assures us of forgiveness and salvation. But using Boettner’s doctrine is difficult.

Boettner inadvertently highlights the difficulty: “Only the [one] who knows himself to be absolutely safe in the hands of God can have that inward sense of peace and security, knowing that ... he has been chosen...”¹ How useful is that? Those who wonder and worry are ineligible because they do not know that they are absolutely safe in the hands of God. Only those who know that they are absolutely safe in the hands of God can have assurance. That’s like giving food stamps to the rich. Those who need it can’t have it. Those who do not need it can have all they want.

Many true believers in Jesus have doubted at one time or another. Sometimes a besetting sin gnaws at the mind, and doubt enters. Or maybe we do something like Peter and are out in the darkness weeping bitterly? The invitation comes to meet with the Lord and we wonder if He could still mean me. No, not likely. Not after what I did.

Peter, you were lucky. He invited you by name.² He made breakfast and spoke reassuring words to you,³ but all I hear is the roar of shame and guilt. The memory of any conversion experience is drowned out. Even those wonderful moments of joy and fellowship with the Lord seem distant and unreal.

At times like this we would give anything for assurance. Unfortunately, it takes assurance to get assurance. Boettner criticizes

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 195.

² Mark 16:7

³ John 21:15-19

people for rejecting the doctrine, yet he, himself, puts it nearly out of reach:

...it is to be admitted that often times the common operations of the Spirit on the enlightened conscience lead to reformation and to an externally religious life. ... These experiences often precede or accompany genuine salvation; but in many cases they are not followed by a real change of heart. ... Often times it is impossible for an observer *or even the person himself* to distinguish these experiences from those of the truly regenerated. “By their fruits ye shall know them,” is the test given by the Lord. Only when these experiences issue in a consistently holy life can their distinctive character be known. ¹

Both Scripture and experience teach us that we are often mistaken in our judgment of our fellow men, that sometimes it is practically impossible for us to know for certain that they are true Christians. ²

Some persons make a great profession of religion although they know nothing of the Lord Jesus in sincerity and in truth. These persons may outstrip many a humble follower in head-knowledge, and for a season may quite deceive the very elect; yet all the time their hearts have never been touched. In the judgment day many ... will say, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works?” And then He will reply to them, “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity,” Matthew 7:22, 23... ³

If it is sometimes impossible to distinguish a pre-conversion experience from true conversion, how do you know you were really saved when you thought you were? And if a true Christian is known by his fruit and his fruit is temporarily bad, how does he know to disregard the fruit test and to plug in the doctrine of assurance? And if Scripture and experience teach us that we are often mistaken in our judgment of our fellow men so that sometimes it is practically impossible for us to know for certain that others are true Christians, how can we be more sure about ourselves? Boettner advertised a feast, but, while we were

¹ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 192-193, italics added.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 189-190.

³ Boettner, Loraine, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, pg. 191.

drawing up to the table, it shrank to a mouthful. Now even that mouthful is uncertain.

From a practical standpoint, how useful is this doctrine? How does it help the person who is living in happy fellowship with the Lord? How does it help the timid, fearful Christian who truly loves the Lord, but every sin or failure sets him off on a new round of doubt and uncertainty? How does it help a person like me who loves the Lord, yet has no recollection of a conversion experience? How does it help the wayward believer who is truly a child of God, but whose life gives little indication of that fact? And how does it help the professing Christian who thinks he is a true Christian, but really isn't? Let's look at each of these.

How does the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints help the person who enjoys happy fellowship with the Lord?

This person may have a memory of a conversion experience, but he doesn't need a birth certificate to assure himself that he is alive. His present walk with the Lord is as real as any experience in the past. Moments of sin and failure distress him greatly, but he confesses his sin and then worships the One Who forgives that sin as well.

Sin and failure remind him that if salvation depended upon his own strength or merit, he would fail miserably. But this thought does not paralyze him or plunge him into despair. At moments like this he does the only sensible thing. He confesses his sin and crowds a little closer to the Good Shepherd. He doesn't worry about renouncing the Shepherd any more than he worries that some day he will rob a bank. Both are possible, but neither one is a major concern.

For this person, the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is mostly academic. He may think about it and agree with it. He may even draw some comfort from it, but the real assurance and comfort in his life does not come from a doctrine. It comes from knowing and loving the Good Shepherd. If there were no doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, it wouldn't make much difference to him. His joy and comfort do not depend on it.

How does the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints help the timid, fearful Christian who truly loves the Lord but is very introspective and every sin and failure sets him off on a new round of fear – fear that he never was a child of God or that he has ceased being a child of God or that one day he will cease to be a child of God?

I have known Christians like this. It is almost impossible to quiet their fears with theology and intellectual persuasion. The ghosts are under the bed, and no amount of reasoning will make them go away. For those plagued with doubt and fear, even the memory of a dramatic conversion experience will be questioned, and without an unquestioned conversion experience, the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints has nothing to fasten to. For those who dive into bed with quaking hearts, the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is useless.

How does the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints help the person who loves the Lord, who has occasional moments of doubt and who has no recollection of a conversion experience?

We have already examined the difficulty associated with this one. Occasional doubts in the present and lacking altogether any memory of a conversion experience in the past, this person cannot use the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. It sounds good, but there is no handle.

How does the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints help the Christian who is truly a child of God, but whose life shows little evidence of such at present?

If this person is truly one of the elect then, according to the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, he “can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.” That is wonderful news, but can he enjoy it?

He remembers a life-changing conversion experience, but he also remembers being told that “often times the common operations of the

Spirit on the enlightened conscience... are not followed by a real change of heart.” So he doubts. He also remembers hearing that “By their fruits ye shall know them” and is painfully aware what the fruit in his life presently points to. More doubts. Then he recalls that “only the [one] who knows himself to be absolutely safe in the hands of God can have that inward sense of peace and security, knowing that in the eternal counsels of God he has been chosen...” What rotten luck! Just when the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints would come in handy, he can’t use it. It does him no good.

How does the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints help the professing Christian who thinks he is a true Christian but who is not really a child of God at all?

It sounds awful to say, but if CROCUS theology is true, this man probably stands to gain the most. The person who lives in happy fellowship with the Lord doesn’t need the doctrine. The one who wonders can’t use it. But the man who plugs in the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints – mistakenly thinking he is one of the chosen ones – feels safe and secure. He isn’t, but for the moment he is happy. He is like a 4-H steer, blissfully ignorant of its fate. The only reason for alerting this person would be to save him from damnation, but since God decided long ago who’s in and who’s not, what’s the point? The destination is bad enough, why ruin the journey as well?

Preachers who assure everyone of eternal salvation are probably setting some people up for a horrible surprise, but is that really so awful? When the minister at a funeral tells us that the deceased is in heaven, we may suspect it isn’t true, but who does he hurt? That’s his gift to the grieving family, a harmless courtesy, a placebo that helps everyone through their time of loss.

If CROCUS theology is true, preach repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus, and then back off. If the message takes hold, it was meant to be. If the message does not take hold, that also was meant

to be. But don't scare people. Since nothing can be done to change what God has decided, hope for the best and don't spend a lot of time thinking about it.

Boettner tugged on all our hearts by offering a doctrine which secures the possessions of eternal happiness, but I see little reason for enthusiasm. First of all, the doctrine has nothing to do with securing eternal happiness, only with assurance of eternal happiness for the elect. Secondly, since it takes assurance to get assurance, the very ones who want it most are ineligible. Only the confident qualify. The confident elect don't need it. The confident damned are mercifully spared the knowledge of their inescapable damnation. What an endorsement! Shouldn't this tell us something?

Self-deception and Anguish – the Legacy of the Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints

Believing that destinies were determined before the world began and desperately wanting to feel safe, many poor, wretched sinners beat themselves up, trying to put their souls at rest. They search their lives for hopeful signs. But the investigation is never satisfying. Is the sin I discover a true indication of my relationship with God? Was my conversion experience the real thing? Little doubts breed bigger doubts. The thing snowballs.

If the true and the false look so much alike, how can I trust my indicators? Ultimately I just have to hope – hope that my conversion experience was the real thing and not a convincing look-alike; hope that the sin in my life is an aberration and not a true reflection of my relationship with God; hope that my baptism, my confirmation, my good deeds, my saying a prayer to accept Jesus as my Savior or whatever else I rely on to assure me that I am one of the chosen ones is, indeed, reliable.

I find myself tempted to generate hopeful signs so that I will feel

better about my chances. Maybe I can sin less. Maybe I can do more good works. Maybe if I go forward again or read my Bible more or pray more or force myself to speak in tongues, then I will be securely in. But how stupid is that! Messing with the gauges doesn't change a thing. I can set the odometer all the way back to zero, but it won't give me a new car. God knows the truth.

The proof of election is perseverance in faith. I know I am one of the chosen ones if I persevere in faith to the end. But since I haven't yet come to the end, how can I be certain? As long as the possibility exists that I might believe for a while but in time of testing fall away,¹ I cannot be absolutely sure. For me personally, the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints never did offer any assurance. But can anyone actually make it work? In view of the fact that the proof of election is perseverance to the end, who that is yet on the journey can use it? Historically, the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints has brought distress and anguish to a lot of people.

I am relieved by the fact that the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is an extension of Unconditional Election and Irresistible Grace. Unconditional Election says that God chose certain individuals for salvation. Irresistible Grace adds that those whom God has chosen shall certainly come to salvation. The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints merely affirms that those who come “shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.” It is all one and the same, and it has all been unwound.

Whereas the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints offers security to the elect but assurance to no one, the simple message offers both security and assurance: a Savior and a Shepherd. Do not worry about whether you were chosen before the foundation of the world. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.”² Are you concerned about forgiveness and eternal salvation? Come to the Savior. It doesn't matter if you have been a deacon of the church or taught Sunday school for fifty years. Let God decide what you need – a foot washing or the whole bath.

Has sin struck with a deadly bite? Look to Jesus and live. “Just as

¹ Luke 8:13

² Acts 16:31 KJV

Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”¹ Confess your sins and rest in the promise that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”² You do not need to know whether you were a child of God yesterday. Yesterday is gone. Today is a new day; a day of opportunity and grace. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”³

Take the warnings in Scripture seriously. Make it your goal to persevere in faith. “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.”⁴ At the same time, rejoice that the Good Shepherd wants the same thing for you that you do. He loves you. He laid down His life for you. It’s His business to shepherd the sheep, and He is capable and dedicated. That is the assurance of the simple message. When doubts and fear arise, draw close to Him. Ask Him to comfort you with His rod and staff. You trusted Him once, now trust Him some more.

¹ John 3:14-15

² 1 John 1:9 KJV

³ Hebrews 4:7

⁴ Hebrews 3:12

Chapter 11

For Love or Glory

Why did God create? Perhaps we are too bold to ask, but since He gave us minds that wonder and a world that makes us curious, I think we have His permission. Let us take off our sandals and do some exploring.

We can be almost certain God didn't create for man's happiness. Whoever heard of someone making something for the sake of the thing being made? Reason tells us that He created for His own sake. He created because He wanted to. He created because it gave Him pleasure or it promised Him pleasure. What pleasure does God get or expect to get from His creation? What pleasure does He hope to get from us? CROCUS theology answers the question this way:

It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible...¹

I like the sound of this explanation. It resonates with majesty. It exposes the foolish notion that everything revolves around man's happiness. But when I reduce it to simple English, it sounds less majestic: God created to show off His greatness. In a chapter entitled “The Pleasure of God in His Fame,”² we are told that God's ultimate goal is to glorify Himself. The reason God created the world, the reason He sent His Son to die, the reason He made man, electing some to salvation and damning others, the ultimate reason behind everything is a

¹ Westminster Confession.

² Piper, John, *The Pleasures of God*, Multnomah Publishers, 2000, pg. 97.

desire to make a name for Himself, to glorify His name, to be famous. That thought is repeated elsewhere:

God’s ultimate goal therefore is to preserve and display His infinite and awesome greatness and worth, that is His glory.

God has many other goals in what He does. But none of them is more ultimate than this. ... It is clearly the uppermost reality in His affections. He loves His glory infinitely. ¹

...God’s own glory is uppermost in His own affections. In everything He does, His purpose is to preserve and display that glory.

... He puts a greater value on it than on anything else. He delights in His glory above all things. ²

Greatness on Display

Glory is greatness on display. The greatness of God is on display for anyone who wants to see it. Our first-grade teacher is nature. Nature showcases God’s creative power and genius. The Psalmist tells us that the heavens above and everything in the earth below declare God’s greatness. There isn’t a nation or language on earth that doesn’t hear the voice of God in nature. ³

Our second-grade teacher is the nation of Israel. God created Israel for his glory, ⁴ “that they may proclaim my praise.” ⁵ The history of Israel showcases God’s holy laws, God’s patience, God’s anger over sin and God’s mercy.

Our third-grade teacher is Jesus. Nothing could have prepared even the angels for the display of God’s greatness revealed in Jesus. At the birth of Jesus, heaven announced His arrival. ⁶ At His baptism, heaven declared Him to be the Son of God. ⁷ At His death, heaven cloaked the scene in darkness. At the empty tomb, heaven teasingly asked, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” ⁸ In a brief period of thirty-three years, the God who long ago commanded light to shine out of darkness made His light to shine in our hearts by giving us a revelation

¹ Piper, John *Desiring God*, Multnomah Books, 2003, pg. 42.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 41-42.

³ Psalm 19:1-3

⁴ Isaiah 43:7

⁵ Isaiah 43:21

⁶ Luke 2:9-14

⁷ Matthew 3:16-17

⁸ Luke 24:4-6

of the glory of God in the face of His Son. ¹

Truly the greatness of God is on display, and there is no question He wants it that way. But why? A quest for glory might explain the wonders of creation. A desire for renown might explain why He destroyed Pharaoh and fed two million Israelites in the desert for forty years. But what father would sacrifice a precious son merely to be famous? We can all appreciate a great sacrifice for a great cause, but my heart tells me to look for a bigger explanation.

Glory of God: Goal or Tool?

I have no difficulty believing that God created for His own pleasure. I do have difficulty believing that He gets His greatest pleasure by showing off His greatness. Jesus criticized the Pharisees because that's what they did. They did everything to be seen by men. ² God tells us that He hates pride and resists the proud. Even though God has reason for pride, it disturbs me to think He is motivated by it. I love a good performance. I enjoy watching great players. But it disgusts me when great performers and great players showboat their greatness. The idea that God made the stadium and filled the bleachers just to show off His greatness makes me feel the same way.

There is no performance like creation. There is no drama like the story of redemption. There is no victory like resurrection. There is no god like Jehovah. He alone is worthy of praise. His praise should continually be in my mouth. It is proper for men and angels to urge us in Scripture to praise Him. But what I want to know is this: Does God Himself urge us to praise Him? Are we to imagine Him pumping up the crowd to get more praise for Himself? Do we ever hear Him say things like, “Let everything that hath breath praise me”? Or, “Thou shalt praise the Lord thy God”?

The writer of Hebrews provides information that leads to another possibility. He tells us that “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...” ³ In other words, if you want to

¹ 2 Corinthians 4:6

² Matthew 23:5

³ Hebrews 1:3

know what God is like, look at His Son because Jesus is exactly like His Father. Jesus told His disciples, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”¹ He said, “When a man . . . looks at me, he sees the one who sent me.”² These statements make me question the idea that God does everything for His own glory. That is because Jesus does not impress me as a person who did things for His own glory. When I look at Jesus, I see just the opposite.

Many things bring pleasure to God, but I am attracted to the possibility that love, not glory, is at the top of His list. John tells us that “God is love”.³ If God is love and if love is the ultimate motivation behind all that God does, then everything else answers to love. Love validates. Love defines. Love explains. If God created for love, then the ultimate explanation for His wonderful creation is love. All expressions of His power and sovereign authority would ultimately be explained by love. Love would be the foundation for all rule, for all righteousness, justice and mercy. Love would be the reason behind atonement, correction and discipline. Love would explain all the commandments. Love would also explain God’s concern for His glory. It is easy for me to recognize love behind everything God does, including God’s concern for glory.

If Jehovah loves us and desires our love in return, then He has to let us know that He is in the room and that He wants to make our acquaintance. What pleasure would He get if the people He loved gave their devotion to a false god simply because they never knew about the real God? God is concerned about His glory because He is practical. The glory of God gets our attention and clears up any misunderstanding about who the real God is. The glory of God is love’s tool. When the tool does its job, people start praising Jehovah. This is important, not because God wants praise, but because He wants our attention in order to show His love and to win our love in return.

¹ John 14:9

² John 12:44-45

³ 1 John 4:8

Love the Lord Your God with All Your Heart

The Apostle Paul told the pagan crowd in Athens:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. *God did this so that men would seek him...and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*¹

According to Paul, God set up the world the way He did and filled it with people so that we would seek Him and find Him! But whatever for? He is too big to need much help, and we are too small to be much use. The very air we breathe comes from Him. So why does He want us to seek him and find Him? The answer comes down to us through the ages: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”²

Fourteen hundred years later, Jesus, identified this as the greatest commandment: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”³ Is it unreasonable to suppose that the greatest command might have something to do with God’s greatest pleasure?

“For the Father Seeketh Such to Worship Him”

Does God want me to seek Him and find Him because He loves me or because He wants me to praise Him for His greatness? There is a big difference between the two, and it makes a big difference in how I feel about God. Think about how we respond to these things in ordinary life.

¹ Acts 17:24, 26-27

² Deuteronomy 6:4-5

³ Matthew 22:37-38

Nothing is more exciting than the feeling that someone loves me and wants my love in return. Conversely, is anything more disgusting than the feeling that someone wants my praise and is milking me for all they can get?

Jesus said something to the Samaritan woman that makes me excited. Her normally uneventful trip to the well turned into quite an adventure. She met a man who challenged her thinking about water and worship. When she began to suspect that the man was a prophet, she asked a familiar question: “What church do you go to? My people say that we are to worship on mount Gerizim. Your people say that we should worship at Jerusalem. What do you say?” Jesus answered:

Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: *for the Father seeketh such to worship him.*¹

For many years, I read those words, thinking that God was seeking worship. Then one day it occurred to me that Jesus didn’t say that at all. Jesus said the Father was seeking worshippers. Seeking worship and seeking *worshippers* are two very different things. One is people; the other is what people give. He specifies true worshippers because He can’t stand the other kind.² True worshippers are important to Him, not because He is hungry for worship, but because when He finds true worshippers He has what He wants – *people*, people who really do love and enjoy Him. I understand that sentiment exactly. In English we call it friendship, companionship, mutual love.

God repeatedly forbids the worship of false gods. He often expresses indignation that the worship which belongs to Him should be offered to idols. He frequently reminds us that He is the one who is worthy of praise. Yet for all the times praise and worship is mentioned in Scripture and for all the times men and angels properly extol us to praise

¹ John 4:21-23, KJV

² Matthew 15:7-9

and worship God, God Himself seems shy about commanding us to praise Him or to worship Him. He leaves no doubt about who is worthy, but He stops short of saying, “Thou shalt worship me” or “Thou shalt praise me.” How fascinating! How beautiful! He does not cross the line that would turn love into loathing or that would make praising Him a chore.

When Love and Glory Come Together

God is great, but who would know if there were no spectators. So He created an audience. Then He put on a show and got our attention. While we were cheering, He pulled out a ring. We could hardly believe it, but we said, “Yes,” and He brought us into His family. Every day we learn more about His greatness. Our reverence and love grow with each discovery.

Then one day someone tells us that God did all this to become famous. A shadow crosses the stadium. For a moment, the praise falters, but the crowd is quickly rallied and soon the praise is flowing again. But a chilling thought remains: What if the love of God has a string attached to it?

Jesus prayed, “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.”¹ Maybe it is true after all. Even Jesus wants recognition and glory. The humble Son of God wants to bring us to heaven so we can see how great He is and praise Him forever. I am disappointed. Could there be another explanation for His prayer?

If I were falsely accused and publicly shamed, it would hurt. But much of the pain would come from knowing how much it hurts those who love me. Insult by insult, blow by blow, accusation by accusation, everything that hurts me, hurts them. Just thinking about their grief would break my heart. “Be brave, dear family, it will all come right in the end. Please, God, I want those who love me to escape this awful

¹ John 17:24

scene and to be with me some day and to see my name cleared.”

I see love written all across our Lord’s prayer. The opening line sets the tone: “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, *that your Son may glorify you.*”¹ As it grieved Jesus thinking about how His disciples would suffer because of Him, so it had to be a grief thinking about what His heavenly Father would soon go through. Imagine the agony and humiliation that any parent would experience if a precious son or daughter were sent to the gallows or to the electric chair. In my mind, I hear Jesus saying, “Father, you shouldn’t have to go through this. I grieve for you. Turn it around some day, my Father, and glorify me so that I can glorify you.”

It was because Jesus loved His heavenly Father that He asked to be glorified. It was because Jesus loved His followers that He wanted them to see His glory. It was because the Father loved His Son before the foundation of the world that He glorified His Son² and will glorify Him again.³ Do you know that God will even glorify those who love His Son? In a vision of the future, the apostle John saw the bride of Christ descending out of heaven “having the glory of God.”⁴ Paul said, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”⁵ “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”⁶

On the day when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus is Lord, it will be the Father’s delight to honor His Son. It will be our delight to see the Son honored. And it will be the Son’s delight to see how happy it makes us when His glory is revealed. I can’t imagine anyone within that loving circle seeking glory for self. Love looks toward others. God will glorify His Son. The Son will glorify His Father. We will glorify the Son. We will glorify the Father. Father and Son will glorify us. Initially, the glory of God is a tool to get our attention in order that we might seek Him and find Him. In the end, the glory of God becomes the joy of heaven that each delights to see in others.

¹ John 17:1

² John 17:24

³ Philippians 2:9-11

⁴ Revelation 21:9-11 KJV

⁵ Romans 8:18

⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:17

Love or Glory – What Difference Does It Make?

Whereas CROCUS theology tells us that God’s supreme pleasure is in His own glory, the simple message declares that God’s supreme pleasure is in love. But what if love is His greatest glory? Maybe it is just two ways of saying the same thing: God delights in His own glory. God’s greatest glory is His love. Therefore, God delights in love. But that will never work. Someone who lives to glorify himself is looking toward self. He who loves is looking toward others.

Love, we are told, is not proud, does not boast and is not self-seeking.¹ The more someone cares about others, the less room there is for self. The more someone seeks to glorify self, the less room there is for others. They are mutually exclusive. Both motives might be present, but they cannot both be number 1. Even God cannot be supremely loving and supremely selfish. In the end, one serves the other. Either love serves glory or glory serves love.

Astronomers tell us that the universe is expanding. The circle is getting bigger. When God created Adam and Eve, He told them to be fruitful and multiply. That circle has also been getting bigger. Whatever pleasure God had in mind, He set in motion something that was designed to give Him a lot of it. It is a perfect system for fame and renown. It is also a perfect system for love. If God gets His greatest pleasure from love, He certainly created the ideal situation. Look how big the circle has grown. Countless men and angels now join together in a loving relationship with Him and because of Him, with one another. How exciting to be loved by your children and to be the father of a family where everyone loves each other dearly.

Fame is exciting, but nothing brings pleasure like loving relationships. I would rather be a nobody surrounded by a loving family and friends than a famous actor or athlete who goes home to a lonely mansion and watches himself on television. The more my own little circle expands, the more I understand why God wants a big circle. What joy and pleasure must fill His heart.

The fact that the whole world is full of God’s glory does not mean

He does everything for the sake of His glory. Should the One who sensitized us to the sin of pride and self-glory live to glorify Himself? Why would anyone who has been trained by God’s Word draw that conclusion? I think it’s because we painted ourselves into a corner. We got boxed in. There’s no place to go. CROCUS theology funnels us into a bottle.

Love is a strong and beautiful contender for the “Why did God create?” contest, but it is death to CROCUS theology. If God offers a love that can be rejected seeking a love that can be withheld, CROCUS theology is finished. CROCUS theology cannot tolerate an option that gives the image bearers so much freedom. If we choose to keep CROCUS theology, we eliminate the love option. What we are left with is not particularly attractive, but what else is there?

Anyone who has worked Sudoku puzzles knows what it is like to see row after row, column after column come together, only to discover at the very end that you made a mistake. Eighty-one squares and almost all of them are perfect. You can proudly show everyone how well you did or you can look up the answer in the back of the book and discover that the whole thing is wrong, wrong from start to finish.

I think CROCUS theology comes to the same dead-end. You can announce that, except for a few irregularities, a few protesting texts, a few oxymorons and irreconcilable differences which have to be accepted by faith, CROCUS theology is actually quite a neat package or you can scrap it and start over. One thing you cannot do is tweak the conclusion. Once CROCUS theology reaches this point, the game is over. You either got it right or you didn’t.

To me, the conclusion to CROCUS theology is as depressing as the many steps along the way. Yet I find it comforting as well. As the gap widens and the differences between CROCUS theology and the simple message become more pronounced, my heart rejoices. To my mind, the simple message not only survived, it crossed the finish line going away.

Chapter 12

Twenty-Four Red Flags – A Summary

The following list summarizes my own difficulties with Calvinism, but it is also a test for you. If you are a comfortable Calvinist, you should be able to dismiss each red flag quickly and easily with a simple explanation that truly leaves your mind at ease. You may become angry at how I represented Calvinism, but you will not react defensively to the reasons themselves. If you find yourself reacting with irritation and defensiveness, add another red flag to the list.

1. The Bible advertises “good news.” What is the good news in Calvinism? To me, Calvinism is painful, depressing and embarrassing? That is the first red flag.
 2. The origin of Calvinism throws up another red flag. Calvinism was not a defined Christian teaching until the fourth century. It started with Augustine, the father of the Catholic church and was popularized by the Reformers, who were all one-time Catholics. The expression “CROCUS theology” reminds us that what we call “Calvinism” is really Calvin’s **R**eformed **O**ld **C**atholic teaching.
 3. The next red flag is that Calvinism is difficult to understand. Even those who know it best often confess that “the natural mind cannot understand this,” or “this takes a spiritual mind to comprehend,” or “we do not know how this can be, but we accept it by faith.” By contrast, the simple message of the early church is easy to understand.
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4. Another red flag goes up because Calvinism totally overlooks the created greatness of man. One of the fundamental teachings of the Bible is that man was created in the image of God. We are God’s offspring, made just a little lower than the angels. This important key to understanding the Bible is either played down or altogether missing in traditional Calvinism.
 5. Several red flags go up regarding the fall of man. Calvinism teaches that when Adam sinned, God condemned the entire race to eternal damnation. Yet, the Bible clearly teaches that, though God may visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, He does not transfer guilt from one generation to another. Offspring may suffer because of their parents’ sinful choices, but they are not under the condemnation of eternal judgment because of it. Each person is condemned for his own sin.
 6. Calvinism teaches that fallen, unregenerate people are too dead to respond to God, to seek God or to do anything truly good unless God first regenerates them. Observation and Scripture, however, affirm that unregenerate man is not *dead* dead. When Adam sinned, he died relationally, but he still heard God calling and was able to respond.
 7. The distinction between “righteousness” and “civil virtue” seems artificial and contrived. Civil virtue is not taught in either the Old Testament or the New Testament.
 8. A red flag goes up with Calvinism’s definition of sovereignty. According to Calvinism, sovereignty means that God controls everything. That is not what sovereignty means. Sovereignty simply means “right to rule.” The fact that God has the right to rule and the power to act accordingly does not mean He controls everything. There is a huge difference between God having everything under control and God controlling everything. The Bible presents God as a macro-manager who delegates authority to natural law and human agency. God can intervene and often does, even down to small details when necessary, but He prefers to govern rational beings through commands, instructions, warnings, appeals and persuasion, leaving considerable room for our own choices.
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9. Scripture teaches that primary guilt falls on primary causes – kings and masters are more accountable than soldiers and servants. By insisting that God is the primary cause who controls everything down to the smallest event and the tiniest particle, Calvinism unwittingly implicates God for all the evil in the world. This is a huge red flag.
 10. Another red flag goes up when Calvinism attempts to dodge this bullet by shifting responsibility for sin to the alleged secondary causes. Either God controls everything and is, therefore, directly responsible for everything, or God is not responsible because He does not control everything. Either way, Calvinism gets caught.
 11. The doctrine of Limited Atonement raises several red flags. First of all, it conflicts with the heart of God: “God is love,” “for God so loved the world...”
 12. It conflicts with the expressed intention of God: “God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it.”
 13. It conflicts with the expressed pleasure of God: For God was pleased to...reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”
 14. It conflicts with the expressed will of God: “He is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”
 15. More red flags pop up as Calvinism attempts to explain why these Scriptures do not mean what they appear to mean. To me, the explanation seems forced and contrived, a reactionary move to defend a position rather than a natural explanation.
 16. Several red flags go up with the doctrine of Irresistible Grace. Though the doctrine has an inviting title, it has nothing to do with irresistible grace. It is the autocratic will of God that becomes irresistible. And the “grace” of this autocratic God shares the spotlight with an unspeakable cruelty.
 17. Calvinism argues that a person has to be regenerated before he can repent and believe; otherwise, an element of human effort slips in and salvation is no longer totally by grace. But why should it be
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regarded as human merit if God does the tugging? Even Calvinism admits that unregenerate man is not totally depraved. If something good still lingers in unregenerate people and if God uses that something to pull us to Himself, it still remains grace, no credit to unregenerate man.

18. Irresistible Grace insists that no one can resist God’s will. If God tugs, they will come. But if this is true, why is the Bible filled from cover to cover with appeals and warnings urging people not to resist God’s will? Why would the Bible make it look like the will of God can be resisted if, in fact, it can’t? To me, this is another red flag.
 19. Several red flags go up with the doctrine of Unconditional Election. Calvinism is forced to attach a very bizarre explanation to the parable of the great banquet which Jesus used to illustrate the expression “many are called, but few are chosen.”
 20. A natural reading of John 3:14-17, 2 Peter 3:9, 1 Timothy 2:4, 1 Timothy 4:10, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 and Colossians 1:19-20 is incompatible with the doctrine of Unconditional Election. In order to survive these passages, Calvinism turns from a straightforward, natural explanation to a very esoteric explanation.
 21. Romans 9, one of the main passages used to support Unconditional Election, is actually Paul’s argument against Unconditional Election – the Jewish version and any other version.
 22. Unconditional Election makes God out to be unjust. Calvin, Luther and others noticed this red flag but argued that since everything God does is just, it follows that Unconditional Election must be just. I see the same red flag and conclude that, since everything God does is just, the doctrine of Unconditional Election must not be true.
 23. Calvinism offers security for the elect but very little personal assurance and peace for sensitive, introspective believers. This is a red flag. The good news is supposed to bring great peace.
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24. Calvinism teaches that God’s ultimate purpose for everything He does is His glory. He desires praise. He wants to be famous. Why would God be motivated by the very thing He condemns in us? To me, this is a red flag. I am delighted to think that God is concerned about His glory because He loves us. His glory is merely a tool to point us to the one true God.

