

STATEMENT DD802

**THE DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY  
HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY  
DEBATE**

**By James R. White & George Bryson  
(Parts One and Two)**

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**Part One**

**Soli Deo Gloria  
by James R. White**

*Soli Deo Gloria*—"to God alone be the glory." This was one of the "solas" of the Reformation. Like *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, this credo of the Reformation has fallen on hard times. Today many who benefit from the work of the Reformers stand firmly against what the Reformers believed about the sovereignty and glory of God as they pertain to salvation and the spiritual deadness of sinful man. While the Reformers openly proclaimed a God-glorifying *monergism* (the belief that God's grace alone is able to raise dead, rebellious sinners to spiritual life without their cooperation), many now take the position of the Reformers' opponents by preaching *synergism*, the concept that God's grace is incapable of accomplishing salvation without the assistance and cooperation of man.

As a Reformed Baptist, I firmly believe in God's absolute sovereignty over all things,<sup>1</sup> man's slavery to sin (including our inability to please God, as well as our spiritual deadness in sin),<sup>2</sup> and the inevitable result of these truths, which is the *unconditional* electing grace of God. In light of God's timeless sovereignty over all creation and man's corruption in sin, God's election of a people unto salvation *must* result, as Scripture says, in election finding its basis not in the creature but in the merciful purpose of God *alone*. I am very thankful to the JOURNAL for this opportunity to briefly explain, and defend, this vital truth.

I will divide this point-counterpoint discussion into two sections. This first installment (this issue) will address the "God-ward" aspect of this crucial subject. The second installment (next issue) will discuss issues that relate to man's deadness in sin, the nature of faith, and its relationship to regeneration.

**UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION DEFINED**

The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith<sup>3</sup> states:

*God's decree is not based upon His foreknowledge that, under certain conditions, certain happenings will take place, but is independent of all such foreknowledge.*

*By His decree, and for the manifestation of His glory, God has predestinated (or foreordained) certain men and angels to eternal life through Jesus Christ, thus revealing His grace. Others, whom He has left to perish in their sins, show the terror of His justice.*

*The angels and men who are the subjects of God's predestination are clearly and irreversibly designated, and their number is unalterably fixed.*

*Before the world was made, God's eternal, immutable purpose, which originated in the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, moved Him to choose (or to elect), in Christ, certain of mankind to everlasting glory. Out of His mere free grace and love He predestined these chosen ones to life, although there was nothing in them to cause Him to choose them.*

*Not only has God appointed the elect to glory in accordance with the eternal and free purpose of His will, but He has also foreordained the means by which His purpose will be effected. Since His elect are children of Adam and therefore among those ruined by Adam's fall into sin, He willed that they should be redeemed by Christ, and effectually called to faith in Christ. Furthermore, by the working of His Spirit in due season they are justified, adopted, sanctified, and "kept by His power through faith unto salvation." None but the elect partake of any of these great benefits.*

#### **A BIBLICAL DEFENSE**

The art and science of biblical interpretation firmly establish unconditional election and the correlative truth of monergism. The Reformed position's strength is exegesis — the interpretation of the text in light of its grammar, syntax, and context. The doctrine is proved by (1) the direct statements of Scripture; (2) the teaching of the Bible concerning the *incapacity* of man to do *anything* that is pleasing to God without God's first freeing the sinner from the bonds of death; and (3) the teaching of those passages that combine these two truths into an undeniable whole.

Unconditional election is a truth stated directly in Scripture. Paul said, God "chose<sup>4</sup> us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, *according to* [or, "on the basis of"] the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:4–6, NASB, emphasis added).

First, the divine acts of *choosing* and *predestining* are placed in the time-frame of eternity itself. This election to salvation (not merely to an opportunity to believe, but to the fullness of salvation, as seen in the use of such terms as "holy," "blameless," "sonship," etc.) occurs prior to any human action. Second, this is a personal action: the direct object of "chose" and "predestined" is a personal pronoun, "us." Individual persons, not classes or groups, are chosen to holiness and adoption. Third, God's will, not man's, determines His act of saving a sinner. Never is any other basis of this divine choice presented in Scripture. The phrase "according to" or "on the basis of" ushers us directly into the only biblical answer to the question: "Why one and not another?" The answer given is that it is based on the "kind intention of His will." The Greek term used by Paul refers to a choice that is to someone's benefit. It is God's gracious choice, based on His own will, that brings salvation to any person at any time. This fact further proves that this is to the praise of His glorious grace. If anything human were mixed in, this could not be said.

The same truths come out in Paul's tremendous "Golden Chain of Redemption" in Romans 8:29–30, where we are presented with an unbreakable chain of divine actions: God foreknows<sup>5</sup> a certain people

(identified later as “God’s elect”). All those whom He foreknows He predestines; everyone He predestines He calls; everyone He calls He justifies; and everyone He justifies He glorifies. Every action is divine; every action is certain—so certain, in fact, that the past tense is used to emphasize this certainty. We again see the unconditional aspect of God’s work of salvation: nowhere can the chain be broken, and never is a link of human sufficiency inserted. Everyone who is predestined is glorified. All who are glorified were chosen by God in eternity past. Paul’s teaching is clear and compelling.

So universal is this belief in the sovereignty of God in election that Luke made mention of it in Acts 13:48. There we read: “Upon hearing this, the Gentiles rejoiced and glorified the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed<sup>6</sup> to eternal life believed.” The belief of the Gentiles was the *result of*, surely not the *cause of*, the appointment to eternal life by God Himself. Our faith is the result of God’s election, not the other way around. This is so much a part of NT thinking that, without a moment’s hesitation, Paul said, “It is by His doing you are in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:30). It is not by *our* doing, or by a *combination* of our actions and God’s grace, but by *His* doing that we are in Christ Jesus, so that we can boast only in Him (1 Cor. 1:31).

Some are surprised that one of the strongest affirmations of this divine truth is found in Jesus’ words in John 6:37–45. Here, in explaining the unbelief of the Jews, Jesus taught unconditional election in the most monergistic tones possible. We will look at His testimony to man’s inability (6:45, 65) in our next installment. For now, His teaching in these words is our focus: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will never cast out.” Again no room for human autonomy is allowed: the action of the giving of the Father to the Son<sup>7</sup> *precedes* and therefore *determines* the identity and number of those who come to Him. The Father lovingly gives an elect people to the Son (John 17:9). As a result, infallibly, invariably, without possibility of failure (John 6:38–39, 44, 65) *every single one* of those so given will come to the Son.

How can such a statement be made if salvation is a matter of a synergistic cooperation of God’s grace that *tries* to save while man’s will *allows it to succeed*? Verses 38–39 tell us that it is the Father’s will for the Son that the Son lose *none* of those who have been (past tense, completed action) given to Him. We know Christ cannot fail to do the will of the Father; hence, the Son must be able to save, perfectly, every single one of those given to Him by the Father. This is consistent *only* with unconditional election and monergism, *not* with conditional election and synergism.

We see that the Scriptures are replete with testimony to the sovereignty of God and the freedom of His electing grace. His choice *cannot* be determined on the basis of human actions. Christians should safeguard and proclaim God’s freedom, not human autonomy. Only when we understand this vital truth do we understand how our entire salvation is to the “praise of His glorious grace.” When we truly understand this, we will proclaim the gospel to all without fear, knowing that God will not fail to bring salvation to His chosen — all to His own praise, honor, and glory.

## **Is Faith Really a Condition of Salvation?** **By George Bryson**

*By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which He determined with Himself whatever He wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of those ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or death.<sup>1</sup> — John Calvin*

*God elects a specific people unto Himself without reference to anything they do. This means the basis of God's choice of the elect is solely within Himself. His grace, His mercy, His will. It is not man's actions, works, or even foreseen faith, that "draws" God's choice. God's election is unconditional and final.*<sup>2</sup> — James White

James White, my counterpart in this debate, embraces the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election, sometimes referred to as the second point of Calvinism. I do not. Because the election to which unconditional election refers is *election unto salvation*, I will "cut to the theological chase" and answer the more practical (and I believe the more biblical) question: Does God require that a lost person believe in Jesus Christ as a *condition of salvation*? The reason is simple. With all due respect to many devout Christian believers, I not only reject the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election, but also I believe it to be nothing more than a theological invention of Calvinism based on the unscriptural *Calvinistically defined* doctrine of sovereignty and predestination. This does not mean that I do not believe God is sovereign or that He has not predestined all that was, is, or will be. I do (see Ps. 115:3; Eph. 1:11). I believe also, however, that Scripture teaches that God *sovereignly ordained* that faith in Christ be a real *condition* for salvation and not (as Calvinists teach) a mere *consequence* of election (see Acts 16:31).

How would you answer the following two questions? Is God sovereign? Are everyone and everything (acts, words, thoughts, intentions, motives, events, etc.) predestined according to God's Sovereign will?

### **GOD REALLY IS SOVEREIGN**

If you say *yes* to the first question (as I do), you must also (logically) say *yes* to the second question, as I know my Calvinist friends would agree. To be more specific, I would say if God is truly sovereign, then everyone and everything must be predestined according to God's sovereign will. I believe when something predestined (which is everything comes to pass, it is simply the outworking of sovereignty (or sovereign control) from all eternity to all eternity. I believe if something could come to pass that God did not predestine, then that something would happen, by definition, independently of God. If something could or did happen independently of God, then God would not be sovereign or be in sovereign control of everything that happens.

To surrender sovereignty is logically impossible. If an eternal God could ever not be absolutely sovereign, it would mean He never *was* absolutely sovereign. That would mean we are not talking about the God of the Bible. It would be like saying God surrendered His absolute holiness (even if just for a moment). If an eternal God is absolutely holy, holiness must be an eternal constant. A corollary to my view of divine sovereignty is that God has ordained everything. From all eternity He ordained everything that was, is or will be. I believe (in accordance with what I am convinced is taught in Scripture) God's sovereignty is *absolute* and predestination is *all encompassing* (Dan. 4:34–35).

### **SALVATION IS SOLELY THE ACT OF GOD**

I believe God can and does save a lost human being and only God can and does accomplish anything that can rightly be considered a work of salvation. I believe the saving work (i.e., redemption, atonement, forgiveness, etc.; Eph. 1:7; 1 John 2:2) accomplished through the cross of Christ was *all and only* a work of God. I believe only God can and does *savingly regenerate* or give new and eternal life to the *spiritually dead* (John 1:13). I believe only God can and does *savingly justify* the ungodly Rom. 8:33). The reverse of this is that I do not believe man can or does accomplish anything of a saving nature. He does not, cannot, and need not pay any of the price of redemption. Christ paid it all on the cross (John 19:30). Man cannot, does not, and need not forgive himself of his sins (Luke 22:20; Heb. 9:2). He cannot, does not, and need not regenerate or justify himself. Salvation is, therefore, all from God and not in any way from man. Nevertheless, Calvinists refer to the view I have just articulated by the theological pejorative, *synergism*.

## MAN (NOT GOD) MUST REALLY BELIEVE TO BE SAVED

Why? Because I also believe, in accordance with what I am convinced is taught in Scripture, that God requires that a lost human being believe in Jesus Christ as a condition of salvation (John 3:14–18; 6:33–40; 20:24–31). I believe:

- Only those who put their trust in Jesus Christ can enjoy the saving benefits available because of the work of God.
- All who put their trust in Jesus Christ become recipients of the saving benefits of the work of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:16–17).

From the human side of the salvation issue, I believe it is faith alone in Christ that results in the salvation of the lost (Eph. 2:8–9). In effect, Calvinists have confused the biblical truth that God requires a lost person to believe in Jesus Christ (as a *condition* of salvation) in order for him or her to be *saved by God* with the unbiblical error that a person can or does make a *contribution* to his or her salvation and thereby becomes a cosavior with God. It would seem that to avoid the *latter error*, Calvinists have needlessly denied the *former truth*. Just because the candidate for salvation has some presalvation responsibility (i.e., to believe in Jesus Christ), does not make him or her even partially a Savior. Most mainstream Calvinists would agree with me that in some sense:

- All people *should* believe in Christ and become saved (John 10:39, see also John Calvin's Commentary on John 3:16).

Calvinists disagree with me that:

- All people are *enabled* (i.e., enlightened, drawn) to believe in Christ.

Calvinists agree with me that:

- All who are enabled to believe (and, in fact, do believe) are not enabled to believe because they should believe in Him but because the Holy Spirit enables them to do so (John 1:9; 6:44; 12:32).

Calvinists disagree with me that:

- A person who is enabled to believe in Jesus Christ in *not thereby made a believer*; that is, a person must also choose to come to Christ in faith after he or she is enabled to do so (Matt. 22:3; John 5:35–40).
- A person becomes a believer only by choosing to do so, though he or she can only choose to do so because God enables him or her to believe (John 6:44; 12:32; Acts 16:31).
- Faith in Christ is only possible because of what God does, but it is not inevitable because of what God does. God's enabling work is not designed to make us believe but to make it possible for us to believe (2 Cor. 5:18–21).

In stark theological contrast:

- Calvinists believe some of the people who *ought* to believe in Jesus Christ are *unable* to believe in Jesus Christ and will never be *enabled* to believe in Jesus Christ (see *Calvin's commentaries* on John 3:16).
- Calvinists believe only some people (a transitional class they call the elect) are enabled to believe in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (see *Calvin's Commentaries* on John 3:16).

- Calvinists believe these same people that are *enabled* to believe are, at the same time, *unable not* to believe in Jesus Christ.
- Calvinists believe that the Holy Spirit, when He regenerates human beings, also makes these people believers or makes these people believe.

### MONERGISM OF THE CALVINIST KIND

The type of *monergism* that Calvinists embrace, in effect:

- Makes God both the *object of faith* and the *subject of faith*.
- Makes God both *the giver of the gift* of new and eternal life and *the one who accepts that gift* on behalf of the recipient.

Calvinists say if you *receive* (preregeneration) the gift of eternal life, you are thereby the *giver* or *cogiver* of that gift. The logic of this escapes me. Nevertheless, as Calvinists see it, there can be only *one will* involved in the saving of a human being. If you make a choice to be saved (i.e., you must believe as a condition of salvation), then you are, according to Calvinism, helping to regenerate yourself, paying part of the price of redemption, and so on. What makes a theological conviction or commitment monergistic, however, is not about how many wills are involved in the saving of a person but how many saviors actually save the person. If man (along with God) was able to (or did) accomplish something of a saving, redemptive, or atoning nature, that would constitute *synergism*.

### RECEIVING IS NOT GIVING

Suppose a man works extremely hard to earn enough money to buy his mother a home. Having earned enough money, suppose he takes that money and actually buys a home for his mother. He does all the work to earn the money and pays the entire price of the home. All the mother must do to have and enjoy that home is accept it from her son. Would that acceptance make his mother a coworker of the son or a cobuyer of the home? I do not think so; yet, this is what Calvinists say about those of us who believe we must *accept* the gift of God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ and what He has done for us.

While Calvinists give *theological lip service* to the place and importance of faith, Calvinists do not see faith as a *condition of salvation*, but instead they reduce it to a mere *consequence of election*, irresistible grace, and regeneration; that is, if you are among a transitional class of people called the elect, you will believe and cannot do otherwise, because you irresistibly will be drawn to God and regenerated, at which time you will be made a believer. If a person is not among that class, it is just too bad for that person. Is this really the message and meaning of John 3:16?

## James White's Rebuttal

In seeking to understand George Bryson's position, I confess experiencing great confusion as to how his view is consistent with itself. He asserts that God is sovereign over all things and that God has decreed all that comes to pass. If this is so, as I surely agree, then it follows that the specific number and the identity of the elect is a part of that decree; yet, there does not seem to be a fixed number of elect people in Bryson's position.

Next, there seems to be a problem in the use of the term *regeneration*. If regeneration is the giving of spiritual life to one who is spiritually dead, how does it follow that Bryson can place the exercise of saving faith *prior to* regeneration so that God simply *enables* belief but does not *grant faith*? Are we to

believe God *enables* all people to believe in this fashion, but only some act upon the enablement, thus resulting in only those people being born again?

We will see in part two that this is contrary to the biblical teaching of John 6:44, Romans 8:7–8, and so on. Furthermore, how then does God know the number of the elect before time itself, as we noted in Ephesians 1? Is this mere passive “foreknowledge” or a part of the decree? If a part of the decree, why decree the enabling of those not chosen? Why would this take place? We are not told.

Bryson’s presentation of what “Calvinists” believe is particularly troubling. A number of statements are made that are simply incorrect. For example, he says Calvinistic monergism “makes God both the *object of faith* and the *subject of faith*.” This is untrue. God does not *believe* in place of the elect person. The gift of faith is an *ability tied directly to the new nature*. A person who has received a heart of flesh and has gone from being a God-hater to a God-lover in the miracle of regenerating grace *naturally* looks to Christ and believes in Him. God is not believing *through* that person. The Scriptures say love and hope are gifts of God’s Spirit as well, but no one would say God is doing the loving or hoping in our place. Furthermore, he asserts that Calvinism “makes God both *the giver of the gift* of new and eternal life and *the one who accepts that gift* on behalf of the recipient.” This is also untrue. God does not accept the gift in the place of the elect.

Both of these assertions are in error because they do not take seriously a major aspect of biblical theology: the spiritual deadness of man in sin. Regeneration is resurrection to spiritual life: the necessity (and wonder!) of God’s saving His elect people perfectly is realized when we consider *the desperation and the plight of man in sin*. Faith *must* be a gift because of the radical depravity of man and his spiritual deadness in sin. Bryson misses this point, for he says, “Calvinists say that if you *receive* (preregeneration) the gift of eternal life, you are thereby the *giver* or *cogiver* of that gift. The logic of this escapes me. Nevertheless, as Calvinists see it, there can be only *one will* involved in the saving of a man.” The issue, instead, is man’s *inability* to believe (John 6:44, 65; etc.) and his need for regeneration in order to please God (Rom. 8:7–8). The fact that man is radically corrupt, together with God’s eternal decree of election so plainly witnessed in Scripture, is powerful evidence of the biblical support for the Reformed position.

Bryson wrote, “What makes a theological conviction or commitment monergistic, however, is not about how many wills are involved in the saving of a man, but how many saviors actually save a man.” In reality, monergism, by its very definition, speaks to whether it is a *sovereign act wholly of God* or whether it is a matter of *cooperation between God and man*. It is a redefinition of the historical use of the word (let alone its basic meaning) to say it refers to how many “saviors” there are; but the question should be pressed: Can the one Savior save dead rebel sinners without asking for their assistance? Is it Bryson’s position that Jesus had to ask Lazarus’s permission prior to raising him from the dead? Was there a “condition” Lazarus had to fulfill *before* new life could be granted to him?

Is not a Savior, by definition, free to save by the sole exercise of his own power (i.e., *monergistically*)? Bryson’s position is difficult to understand, for while saying God alone saves, he then adds, “All men are *enabled* (i.e., enlightened, drawn) to believe in Jesus Christ.” No reference is given, and as we will see in the next presentation, Jesus’ teaching on what it means to be “drawn by the Father” does *not* allow us to make a universal application, unless we wish to promote the idea of universalism itself (i.e., that all people will be saved). Jesus taught that the ones the Father draws to the Son are the very ones the Father gave *to* the Son for salvation (John 6:37–39) — the elect, and *all* who are drawn are likewise raised to eternal life (John 6:44). If all people are drawn, then all will be raised up, which is not Bryson’s position. The evidence for the unconditional election of men and women unto salvation throughout Scripture leaves us with no doubt as to its teaching.

## George Bryson's Rebuttal

In the 950 words allowed for rebuttal, it is impossible to address every issue raised by James White in his essay affirming the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election that *effectively* denies (or at least undermines) the biblical truth that salvation is *through* faith. I will therefore restrict my comments to the implications of what White says about monergism, synergism, and the golden chain of salvation.

### THE MONERGISM OF CALVINISM

If White is right in his first definition of monergism, then I am a monergist, and White should concede as much; for I believe God's grace alone can and does "raise dead, rebellious sinners to spiritual life without the need of the cooperation of man." If that is all White means by monergism, however, then he is not a Calvinist; for the monergism of Calvinism does not merely say God's grace alone is *able* to raise the spiritually dead or that God *does not need the cooperation of man* to regenerate a human being. I cannot imagine that any thinking evangelical would blatantly deny the *ability* and *self-sufficiency* of God and His grace.

The question is not about what God is *able* to do. He could turn the moon to cheese if He decreed. Nor is it about what God needs. He needs nothing. He is, has always been, and will always be sufficient in Himself. The question is: What has God required, if anything, of a human being, relative to his or her salvation? Fortunately, Paul and Silas give an unambiguous answer to the question: "What must I do to be saved?" They say, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30–31). If we are to take what White says in his essay seriously, we could easily conclude that he believes God can't raise the spiritually dead to life through faith or on the condition of faith in Christ. This is probably because he really does not mean to say what he says. At least I hope not.

### SYNERGISM

White also defines "the concept of *synergism*, [as] the idea that God's grace, without the assistance and cooperation of man, is incapable of accomplishing salvation."

If White's definition of synergism is correct, then I cannot be a synergist, for I believe God is certainly able to save with or without man's cooperation or with or without man's believing in Christ. The question is not or should not be: Can God accomplish salvation with or without man's believing in Christ? The question is: How does He accomplish salvation? The answer is that He has chosen, in accordance with His own sovereign will, to save by grace *through* faith. To say, however, that God cannot save without cooperation (i.e., believe in Christ as the condition of salvation) is no less insulting to the omnipotence of God than it is insulting to the sovereignty of God when we say He must save without faith (i.e., cooperation). Moreover, He not only *can* save through faith, but He also declares that He *does* save through faith in Christ. Faith in Christ is the sole, sufficient, and necessary condition of salvation.

Commenting on the apostle Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:8–10, Calvin said:

*The salvation of the Ephesians was entirely the work, the free work, of God but they had obtained this grace by faith. On one side, we must look at God; and on the other, at men. God declares that He owes us nothing; so that salvation is not a reward or recompense, but mere grace. Now it may be asked how men receive the salvation offered to them by the hand of God? I reply by faith. Hence he concludes that there is nothing of our own, if on the part of God, it is grace alone, and if we bring nothing but faith, which strips of all praise, it follows that salvation is not of us. <sup>1</sup>*



If faith is the means to receive the gift of eternal life and salvation, it should not be confused with that gift, as it is in Calvinism.

### **A GOLDEN CHAIN OF SALVATION WITHOUT FAITH?**

If faith is not mentioned in Romans 8:29–30, does that mean that it is not a factor in the salvation to which these links belong? If faith is not a factor, it means that the *foreknown* are not believers. Does God know, in the Calvinist sense of knowing, nonbelievers? It would also mean that those *predestined* to conformity to Christ are not believers. Does God predestine believers or nonbelievers to conformity to Christ? It would mean that the *justified* are justified without faith. Can a person be justified and not a believer? It would mean that the *glorified* are not believers. Will nonbelievers be glorified, or is glorification reserved for the believer? Actually, the message of Romans 8:28–30 and beyond is that “all’s well that ends well” for the *believer*.

In their zeal to protect the truth of salvation by grace, Calvinists unnecessarily deny the truth of salvation by grace *through* faith. In effect, they have replaced *sola fide* (faith as the sole condition) with *nola fide* (i.e., faith as a mere consequence).

Nevertheless, Jesus said that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that *everyone believing in Him* should not perish but have everlasting life....*The one believing in Him* is not condemned, but *the one not believing* is condemned already, because he has *not believed* in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:16, 18; emphases added).

## **Part Two**

### **“Doomed from the Womb”?**

### **Calvinist vs. Biblical Views of Election, Regeneration, and Faith**

**by George Bryson**

In James White’s first essay in which he explained and defended the second point of Calvinism (i.e., unconditional election), he said he would “discuss the issues relating to man’s deadness in sin, the nature of faith, and its relationship to regeneration” in his second essay.

#### **“MAN’S DEADNESS IN SIN”**

According to the doctrine of unconditional election and other matters related to the Calvinist doctrine of salvation, many, if not most, preregenerate men not only are spiritually dead but must also remain so for all eternity with no remedy for their spiritual deadness. God never has, nor ever will have, any redemptive interest in them. That is why they say Christ did not die for much, if not most, of the world.

Calvin believed God “arranges all things by his sovereign counsel, in such a way that individuals are born, who are doomed from the womb to certain death.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Calvinism, those who will be doomed *for* all eternity were really doomed *from* all eternity. The damnation of the nonelect is just as much God’s doing as is the salvation of the elect in the Calvinist scheme of things. Calvin wrote: “By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which He determined with Himself whatever He wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of those ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or death.”<sup>2</sup>

Calvin speaks of the logical contradiction of affirming an unconditional election to salvation without also admitting an unconditional election to damnation: “Many professing a desire to defend the Deity from an invidious charge admit the doctrine of election, but deny that any one is reprobated....This they do ignorantly and childishly, since there could be no election without its opposite reprobation....Those therefore whom God passes by He reprobates, and that for no other cause than he is pleased to exclude them....”<sup>3</sup> Allister MacGrath explains that “for Calvin, logical rigor demands that God actively chooses to redeem or to damn. God cannot be thought of as doing something by default. He is active and sovereign in His actions. Therefore God actively wills the salvation of those who will be saved and the damnation of those who will not be saved.”<sup>4</sup>

#### “THE NATURE OF FAITH”

What about the Calvinist doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone in Christ alone)? In Calvinism, faith is not a factor in the salvation of the saved and unbelief is not a factor in the damnation of the damned. Calvin makes these doctrinal assertions without explanation why some are saved and others are damned except that this is what God wants. Calvin reasoned, “If we cannot assign any reason for [God] bestowing mercy on his people, but just that it so pleases him, neither can we have any reason for his reprobating others but his will. When God is said to visit in mercy or harden whom he will, men are reminded that they are not to seek for any cause beyond his will.”<sup>5</sup> We see, therefore, that no matter how important a Calvinist may say faith in Christ is, Calvinism has reduced it to nothing more than a theological mantra, which makes no real difference.

When the theological fog lifts, it becomes clear that Calvinism affirms that from all eternity to all eternity you belong to an eternally condemned group called “the reprobate” or to an eternally saved group called “the elect.” Whatever caste or class of people you begin in, you will always be in. There is no escape from condemnation for the reprobate as there can be no one ultimately lost who was elected from all eternity to be saved for all eternity.

Calvinists nevertheless say they accept the must-believe passages relative to salvation. For example, a Calvinist would not consciously or deliberately contradict the Apostle Paul and his ministry companion, Silas, when they answered the Philippian jailor’s question, “What must I do to be saved?” Without hesitation they answered him, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” (Acts. 16:31). On the other hand, Calvinists insist that election is unconditional and that election is directed to salvation. Nevertheless, an election that is to salvation cannot be unconditional if the salvation to which one is elected is conditioned on faith. It would appear that there is (in their minds) a disconnect between election and the salvation to which one is elected; but this can be only in their minds.

Allow me to explain: If I were to ask you for some red, you would be justified by responding some red what? Red, of course, could be descriptive of many things (apples, cars, tomatoes etc.), but it always has

to be descriptive of something. So it is with election. You cannot simply be elect. You must be elect to something. Since it is to salvation that the Calvinist says a person is elected, whatever is required for election is required for salvation. If a person is required to believe to be saved, therefore, the election to that salvation cannot be unconditional.

The Calvinist then says, if you do not believe in an unconditional election to salvation, you must believe in a conditional election to salvation. Such a view assumes (and I believe wrongly) that there is an election to salvation, unconditional or conditional. There is an election in salvation because there is an election in Christ. There is, however, no biblical basis for an election to salvation, at least nothing even remotely related to the Calvinist doctrine of salvation. The whole notion is simply foreign to Scripture. According to Scripture, salvation is graciously provided (i.e., the cross of Christ, 1 John 2:2) and graciously offered (the gospel of Christ, Eph. 1:13) to all without distinction. Also, according to Scripture, salvation, which is graciously provided and graciously offered, is graciously applied to those (and only those) who believe in Christ (John 3:16–17; Rom. 1:16). Faith is therefore the sole, sufficient, and necessary condition for salvation.

In Calvinism, the news, which is unconditionally good for some, is unconditionally bad for others. How it could be considered a gospel proclamation to the nonelect is difficult for me to imagine. Nevertheless, like Mr. White and all Calvinists, I believe all men, except our Lord Jesus Christ, are born spiritually dead. Like Mr. White and all Calvinists, I do not believe they are born partially dead; rather they are entirely dead. Like Mr. White and all Calvinists, I believe Scripture teaches that the only remedy for spiritual deadness is a spiritual resurrection. Along with Mr. White and all Calvinists, I believe regeneration or spiritual birth is a spiritual resurrection. Unless and until a spiritually dead person is born of the Spirit, he or she remains spiritually dead. Once again, however, Calvinism teaches that not even God has a remedy for the plight of many, if not most, of the people who have lived or will populate this planet. As R. C. Sproul, a contemporary champion of Calvinism, admits, it is “the non-elect that are the problem. If some people are not elected unto salvation then it would seem that God is not all that loving toward them. For them it seems that it would have been more loving of God not to have allowed them to be born. That may indeed be the case.”<sup>6</sup>

“Not all that loving” is an attempt to sugar-coat a very bitter pill that the Calvinist is asking people to swallow. Calvin evidently saw no need to help this awful “truth” go down easier. He simply said:

*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?...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....God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also at His own pleasure arranged it.*<sup>7</sup>

#### **THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAITH TO REGENERATION**

Unlike Mr. White and all Calvinists, I believe the spiritual life offered in a proclamation of the gospel to all spiritually dead people is available to, and provided for, all people on the condition of faith alone in Christ alone (John 3:16–17). Although Mr. White (and most Calvinists) give lip service to the biblical truth that the offer of eternal life is a bona fide, valid (i.e., sincere, meaningful, and legitimate) offer requiring nothing more than faith in Christ on the part of the receiver, the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election and other related Calvinist doctrines say otherwise. The Apostle John said the signs (miracles) performed by Jesus were recorded “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31, NASB). John also tells us that “as many as

received [Jesus], to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13, NASB).

The Calvinist seems to fear that if he allows faith to be first (i.e., before regeneration), then he is making faith foremost. Just because a man must believe in Christ to be born again, however, does not suggest that there is regenerating power in a man's faith, not even in a man's faith in Christ. Only God can and does regenerate the spiritually dead, but He does so only (and always) for those who first put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The choice is between John Calvin and the Apostle John. What is true of regeneration in particular is true of salvation in general; thus, Paul could say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

Faith in Christ is not incidental, as Calvinists claim; it is essential, as Scripture everywhere affirms. Believing is not a consequence of an unconditional election as Calvinism insists, but is rather the sole, sufficient, and necessary condition for receiving the salvation so freely offered to all without distinction as Scripture so clearly teaches. A person is not made a believer in regeneration as Calvinism contends, but a believer is made a child of God by regeneration as Scripture says.

## **What It Means to be Spiritually Dead** **by James R. White**

Today the gospel is not politically correct. We are told that if we wish to "convince" people of our views, we must address them in such a way as to promote a "positive image" and "positive energy." Seemingly, the Holy Spirit of God was utterly unaware of these necessities, for one thing is certain: the picture painted of man outside of Christ is anything but positive. Instead, it is downright depressing, and necessarily so. Without the "bad news" of man's sinfulness, there is no need for the "good news" of what God has done in Christ. Until man closes his mouth and stops making excuses (Rom. 3:19) and instead stands in silent admission of his guilt and need, there is no place for the glorious gospel in his heart.

Man-made religions are centered on *human performance*. Man performs, God rewards. God provides a framework in which man works to gain something from His hand. In the final analysis, though, it is always up to man to "work the system." God may try really hard, but without man's cooperation, He simply can't overturn the decision of the almighty will of the creature, man.

On the other hand, the Christian Scriptures know nothing of a God who is controlled by His creatures. As we saw in the previous discussion, God is sovereign over all things, and man, the creature, is dependent on the free grace of God not only for a *plan* of salvation but also for the perfect *accomplishment thereof*. This primary truth is reenforced by the consistent testimony of the Bible to man's spiritual *inabilities* that flow from his fallen state. A rebel sinner, man is dead in sin, active only in his rebellion and hatred toward God. Because of this, salvation must involve the exercise of God's power in order to bring His elect people to spiritual life (regeneration). Flowing from this is the clear biblical teaching that faith — true, saving faith — is an ability graciously given by the Spirit to the elect. Although it flies directly in the face of the traditions of many evangelicals today, the biblical teaching is that man believes *because* he is born again, not in order to *become* born again. Regeneration precedes and gives rise to faith, not the reverse.

### **DEAD IN SIN**

The theme of man's deadness in sin finds expression especially in Paul's letters:

*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins...[and] even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:1, 5, NASB).*

*When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions... (Col. 2:13, NASB).*

In both instances, God's action, not man's, reversed the deadness of man. This only makes sense: how can dead men reverse their state of death? God must give life. What does it mean that men are dead in sin outside of the regen-erating work of God? It does not mean that men cease to exist, or are not active in the spiritual realm. Instead, it means they are dead to good, to righteousness, and to godly activity. As a result, dead men *cannot do* certain things. For example, dead men are not able to seek God: "As it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God'" (Rom. 3:10-11, NASB).

There is no "God-seeker" outside of God's first changing the heart. This *inability* is brought out with force by the Lord Jesus, so much so that it offended would-be disciples, who then turned back from following Him: "'No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.'...And He was saying, 'For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father.' As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him any more" (John 6:44, 65-66, NASB). Man's *inabilities* may offend would-be followers, but Christ seeks His own sheep, knowing that they will hear His voice.

One of the strongest expressions of man's inability comes from the pen of Paul: "The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the Law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7-8, NASB).

Note the phrase: "for it is not even able to do so." Outside of Christ, no matter what man's religious inclinations or character, he is hostile toward God and unable to be subject to God's law; hence, those who have not received that wondrous gift of grace known as regeneration *cannot please God*. We simply have to ask, Is saving faith something that would be "pleasing" to God? If natural man cannot do what is pleasing to God, how can we say that dead sinners must *believe* so as to be born again, especially when the Scripture reverses this order in 1 John 5:1 (NASB)? "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him."

Many read this passage to mean, "Believe that Jesus is the Christ *in order to become* born of God"; but the Greek verb tenses do not communicate this idea.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the idea is that the one *who is right now believing* is one who has *already been born of God*. That this is surely John's meaning is borne out by comparing a parallel passage, 1 John 2:29 (NASB): "If you know that He is righteous, you know that every one also who practices righteousness is born of Him."

The phrase "is born" here is identical to 1 John 5:1, and the form used in "practices righteousness" is likewise parallel to "whoever believes" in 5:1. No Protestant would say that someone practices righteousness so that they can be born of God, and so it is likewise an error to see 1 John 5:1 as teaching we believe *in order to be* born of God. Instead, God begets us to spiritual life, opens our hearts to hear the gospel (Acts 16:14), and grants us the gift of faith.

#### FAITH IS A GIFT

God grants the ability to believe in Christ to the elect so that their salvation is both certain and solely for His own glory. The biblical witness to this truth is wide indeed, but for our purposes I shall look only at a

few representative examples and simply list some of the other verses testifying to this position. One of the most striking comes from Paul: "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake..." (Phil. 1:29, NASB).

The term "granted" renders a Greek term that means "given as a gift." Two things have been "granted" to the Philippian believers: to suffer for Christ (a gift of grace!), but first, and almost in passing, so well known was it to all Christians, "to believe in Him." If faith in Christ is not a gift but is within the capacity of every man or woman, why is there this description of obviously *saving* faith as something given *for the sake of Christ*? Peter likewise referred to faith directly as something "received" when he wrote, "Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ..." (2 Pet. 1:1, NASB).

Surely the most commonly cited passage relating to faith as a gift comes from Paul's definition of salvation by grace: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9, NASB).

Some have attempted to escape the weight of this passage by insisting that faith *cannot* be the gift described here since faith is a feminine noun, and "that" in "that not of yourselves" is neuter. This argument contains two errors: It assumes that *only* faith is the gift in view (it is not), and it ignores the fact that there is *nothing* in the preceding phrase that matches the gender of "that." Instead, "that" is summing up the entirety of the preceding phrase, which then *includes* faith as *part* of the graciously given gift of perfect and complete salvation.

There are many other such passages: Examples include Acts 3:16, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 6:23-24, Colossians 1:3-4, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 1 Timothy 1:14, Hebrews 12:1-2 (who is the author and finisher of faith?), and 1 Peter 1:21.

#### **A COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING**

A very common error made by evangelicals is the citation of John 3:16 (NASB) and the insertion of a concept of man's ability into the term "whoever." We read: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

It is commonly believed "whoever" (or "whosoever" in the KJV) means "whoever chooses to believe," but this is not the plain meaning of the text at all. In fact, the literal reading of the text in question is "so that *all the ones believing* may have eternal life." There is no word "whosoever." Instead, the passage is saying the Son of God was given by the Father so that every person who believes in Christ will have, as a result, eternal life. The passage does not even touch on the idea of man's abilities or inabilities (that is covered elsewhere, in John 6:37-45; 8:34-36, 43-47; 10:25-28). It simply says eternal life is guaranteed to *all* believers, not that *all* have the capacity to exercise saving faith.

#### **GLORY TO GOD ALONE**

God's absolute freedom, the sole dignity and honor of His grace, and man's utter ruin in sin and his inability to do what is spiritually pleasing in God's sight are humbling truths. They do not appeal to a culture determined to exalt man at all costs; but they are first and foremost *consistently biblical teachings*, and as such demand the faithful acceptance of those who love His Word. The Reformation simply stripped away the accretions of time and again proclaimed the pure, apostolic truth: God saves, perfectly, wholly, and solely to the praise of His own mercy and grace. May He be glorified yet again by the bold proclamation, *Soli Deo Gloria!*

## George Bryson's Rebuttal

In my rebuttal to James White's second article, I will focus much of my attention on the nature and implication of the Calvinist gospel. Be assured, however, that I could not care less about how *politically correct* it is or is not. My problem with the gospel of Calvinism is that it is not *scripturally correct*. According to the gospel of Calvinism:

- The "news" for the nonelect or reprobate can only be bad. They cannot go to heaven; they can go only to hell. If the gospel is *good* news, there is no gospel for anyone but the elect. For if the *good* in the news is that a person who *was* headed for hell has been rescued, turned around, and is now headed for heaven, then there really is no gospel at all, not even for the elect. If an unconditional election from all eternity ensures that the elect are headed *only* for heaven, from what were they saved? A gospel in which no one is really saved is not a gospel at all, and, in effect, that is the gospel of Calvinism.
- The only way the Calvinist can speak of good news *versus* bad news is in contrast to what they say God intends for the elect (which is only good) and what they say He intends for the nonelect (which is only bad). Upon believing in Christ, nothing really changes for the elect. Upon rejecting Christ in unbelief, nothing really changes for the nonelect. They merely go where God always wanted them to go; the place where He determined that they would go by either giving them the "gift of faith" or withholding it from them. Everyone ultimately goes where they were always destined or doomed to go.
- Is the gospel about Jesus Christ and what He has done and accomplished for us on His cross and in His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1–3) or it is about what we have, should, or will do for Him? If the former, then Mr. White and all Calvinists must admit that there never was, never is, and never will be a gospel for much, if not most, of humanity. If God rejects or chooses not to elect a lost person for salvation, and if Christ did not die for a sinner and instead decrees the sinner doomed from the womb (even for all eternity), then we have no gospel to proclaim to that person. That sinner cannot reject the gospel, since what is a gospel to the elect for whom Christ died is not and cannot be a gospel to the nonelect for whom Christ did not die.

The problem with Calvinism is not that it recognizes that we are all born spiritually dead. The problem is that it says much, if not most, of humankind must *remain* spiritually dead because God never has had or will have any saving or redemptive interest in them. This is, after all, why Calvinists teach and believe Christ did not die for most of the world. Consistent Calvinists say there is no reason for Christ to die for a person in whom He has no saving interest; therefore, while some very well meaning but misguided Christians have said things such as, "Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else,"<sup>1</sup> the distinctive features of the Calvinist system actually deny what the gospel affirms.

Calvinists are right to affirm the inabilities of man. They are also right to recognize the spiritual deadness of unregenerate man. Nevertheless, they are wrong to place (in their thinking and theology) unnecessary and unscriptural restrictions on God and His sovereignty. God, who can and does save *by* grace can and does save *through* faith. This is to say God can and does raise the spiritually dead by grace and through faith (Eph. 2:8–10). By unscripturally placing faith after regeneration and before justification, the Calvinist makes it appear that a person can believe election is unconditional and that a person must be saved to believe (Acts 16:30–31). The Calvinist must manufacture this truncated doctrine of salvation in order to reconcile the biblical doctrine of salvation, which is conditioned on faith in Christ (John 3:16–19), with an

election to salvation, which is unconditional. This attempt fails, however for the logical and scriptural reasons discussed in my first article. In his letter to the church in Rome, the apostle Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..." (Rom. 1:16; NASB).

In the Calvinist version of the gospel, all that matters is election to salvation. If you are elect to salvation. If you are elect to salvation, you will be made a believer. If you are not among the elect (or if you are in the reprobate caste), there is no power of God to save you. Paul kept it simple when he spoke to the believers in Ephesus: "You also trusted [Christ], after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13). If the sealing of the Spirit comes after faith, it is difficult to imagine that regeneration comes before faith.

The apostle Paul further declared, "Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13). He then asked several very important questions that speak to the heart of this issue: "How shall they call on Him in whom they have not *believed*? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not *heard*? And how shall they hear without a *preacher*? And how shall they preach unless they are *sent*?" (Rom. 10:14–15).

Paul answered these questions with the words: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!" (Rom. 10:15). In answering the most important "how" question with regard to our present concern, Paul said, "So then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God." (Rom. 10:17).

If Calvinism is true, Paul should have said, "How shall we believe unless we are born again?" Although Calvinist says that faith comes by regeneration, Paul said that:

- Faith comes by hearing.
- Hearing comes by the Word of God.
- The Word of God comes when someone proclaims it.
- Someone proclaims the Word of God when they are sent to do so.

It follows that those who call upon the name of the Lord (and are thereby saved) call upon Him *in faith*. To call upon Him in faith is to believe the gospel that has been preached. In short, believing the gospel is calling upon the name of Lord. It is that simple. Not so according to Calvin and Calvinism. They teach that for many, if not most, people getting saved not only is not simple, it is impossible. When White defends the Calvinist doctrine of salvation, therefore, he is also defending an eternally rigged system. Pay close attention to what John Calvin said:

*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?*

*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...God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also at his own pleasure arranged it.<sup>2</sup>*

Calvin also said:

*The will of God lays a necessity on all things and that everything He wills necessarily comes to pass...God not only foresaw that Adam would fall, but also ordained that he should...he sinned because God so ordained....*



*Man brought death upon himself...by the ordination of God...God...determined what he wished the condition of the chief of his creatures to be...the will of God is necessity, and...everything which He has willed...will certainly happen....<sup>3</sup>*

Calvin explained:

*There is no random power, or agency, or motion in the creatures, who are so governed by the secret counsel of God, that nothing happens but what he has knowingly and willingly decreed...the counsels and wills of men are so governed as to move exactly in the course which he has destined.<sup>4</sup>*

Calvin further reasoned:

*Since the arrangement of all things is in the hand of God, since to him belongs the disposal of life and death, he arranges all things by his sovereign counsel, in such a way that individuals are born, who are doomed from the womb to certain death, and are to glorify him by their destruction....If God merely foresaw human events, and did not also arrange and dispose of them at his pleasure, there might be room for agitating the question, how far his foreknowledge amounts to necessity; but since he foresees the things which are to happen, simply because he has decreed that they are so to happen, it is vain to debate about prescience, while it is clear that all events take place by his sovereign appointment.<sup>5</sup>*

All five points of Calvin, including the points around which this debate revolves, are simply the theological and logical flushing out of what you have just read. You can talk about the gospel of Calvinism in glowing terms, as most Calvinists do. I would suggest, however, that some of the glow of Calvinism comes from the flames of hell, where, if Calvin is to be believed, much, if not most, of the world will burn forever by God's design and according to His desire and pleasure. How this can be to the glory of God is simply beyond comprehension.

## **James White's Rebuttal**

I shall seek to respond to Mr. Bryson's presentation in two parts. First, I would like to focus upon some misunderstandings present in his words, and respond with some general considerations that are very important, and hopefully useful to the reader of this exchange. Then I shall respond in a more point-by-point manner on the specific subject of the will of man and the nature of saving faith.

The most frequent problem that arises in discussing the doctrines of grace and "Calvinism" focuses upon traditional misunderstandings of the system being addressed. Mr. Bryson's presentation contains a number of statements that indicate a lack of understanding of what the real issues are. For example, he writes, "According to...the Calvinist doctrine of salvation, many, if not most, pre-regenerate men not only are spiritually dead but must also remain so for all eternity with no remedy for their spiritual deadness." Actually, according to both the Bible and Calvinist doctrine, *all men*, prior to regeneration, are spiritually dead. This is foundational to the entire position being espoused, and surely there is no understanding of the Reformed position without first recognizing the universality of sin and the universal inability of man to do what is good outside of the miracle of God's work in the heart. All men who are in Adam receive what their natural father can give them: death (Romans 5:17); all who are in Christ receive from Him life eternal. The only "remedy" for spiritual deadness is the new birth, and as it

is God who must cause us to be born again, He does so sovereignly, freely, in His own mercy, for He does not owe this act of grace to anyone.

A second example coming close on the heels of this first misunderstanding is found in these words, "The damnation of the non-elect is just as much God's doing as is the salvation of the elect in the Calvinist scheme of things." Surely this is untrue. Such a statement confuses the over-arching truth that God works all things after the council of His will (Eph. 1:11) with the equally true statement that God's work of salvation is one of mercy and grace undeserved, while the damnation of the rebel sinner is a work of justice. Every person condemned is condemned justly: they reveled in their sin, indulged their lusts, suppressed the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18-20), and never once sought a remedy for their sin in repentance toward the true God. Surely, many may have sought refuge from their conscience in the false religions of men, even professing a form of "Christianity" that denies the essentials of the gospel. But outside of a work of grace in the heart, no person will *ever* seek the one true and holy God; none will *ever* seek to submit themselves to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and follow Him in the true obedience that marks real discipleship. It must be emphasized very strongly: no person could *possibly* call upon Christ for salvation and *not* be saved. *Everyone* who believes—truly repents and believes—will be saved. The point of the debate really is, who will do this? The Bible says that God has sovereignly chosen to show grace and mercy to undeserving, sinful rebels. In showing them mercy and grace, God enables them to do what they could not do in the slavery of their sin: repent and believe. Mr. Bryson seemingly objects strongly to the idea that faith is a gift, but offers no biblical response to the many passages that teach that very thing. The miracle of grace is that God condescends to free the rebel sinner (who continues to spit in His face right up to the point of that divine operation wherein the heart of stone is removed, and a heart of flesh is given—Ezekiel 36:26) who is *so* depraved, *so* unable, that God must *do it all*. This is why all the glory goes to Him alone, and it is also the basis of the certainty and perfection of the gospel itself.

Now returning to the topic of this section, man in sin, Mr. Bryson errs when he writes, "In Calvinism, faith is not a factor in the salvation of the saved and unbelief is not a factor in the damnation of the damned." Mr. Bryson assumes "factor" to mean "autonomous action by man determining final outcomes outside of the decree of God." In other passages, he uses "condition" in the same way. Throughout Mr. Bryson's presentation, the implicit (and unproven) assumption is that unless an action is outside of God's eternal decree, it cannot possibly be "real"; for a "factor" or "condition" to exist, it must be the result of autonomous human action. If it is an ability graciously granted by God in accordance with His decree, it is not "real"; but this begs the entire issue and requires us to reject the unanimous teaching of Scripture summed up in my first installment concerning Ephesians 1:11, where God is identified as "the one working all things after the counsel of *His* will." The Bible nowhere knows of a God who works all things after the council of the will of the creature. It is often said such a high view of God's sovereignty makes man a puppet. The truth of the matter is, the Bible presents one sovereign and free will, and it belongs to God. Man's freedom is the freedom of a *creature*. Since the will of man is, by nature, finite and limited, would it not of necessity follow that "free will" would likewise have to be limited by the state of the will, both as to its creation and its servitude to sin? Surely, and yet, we find so many today who wish to place man's will above God's even in the matter of whether Christ's work on the cross will succeed in its intention! Do we truly wish to turn God into the puppet controlled by the almighty creature by sacrificing His eternal decree upon the altar of man's free will?

"No matter how important a Calvinist may say faith in Christ is, Calvinism has reduced it to nothing more than a theological mantra, which makes no real difference," Bryson says. Given this reasoning, since it is certain and not the result of man's autonomous will that all Christians *will be* conformed to the image of Christ (sanctification), this too must be "nothing more than a theological mantra." Obviously, this is

errant logic. Saving faith flows from the “heart of flesh” the Spirit gives the undeserving sinner in regeneration. That’s not a mantra, that’s a miracle!

“Nevertheless, an election that is to salvation cannot be unconditional if the salvation to which one is elected is conditioned on faith.” Here again, Mr. Bryson posits a meaning for “condition” that assumes human autonomy. Without this assumption, his entire position is left without basis. Where does the Bible teach this assumption in light of its testimony to God’s utter sovereignty and man’s creatureliness?

“There is an *election in salvation* because there is an *election in Christ*. There is, however, no biblical basis for an *election to salvation*, at least nothing even remotely related to the Calvinist doctrine of salvation. The whole notion is simply foreign to Scripture (emphasis added).” This assertion runs directly against the teaching of Ephesians 1, where the direct object of the verbal actions of God is not a *plan* but a *people*. God saves *personally*, and it was *people* who were predestined, elected, called, chosen, and so on (Rom. 8:29–30). Rather than foreign, it is explicitly stated, as has already been noted.

Bryson falls into the common pitfall of the inconsistent Arminian, who attempts to affirm the plain teaching of Scripture regarding God’s sovereignty and man’s deadness in sin. He writes, “Along with Mr. White and all Calvinists, I believe regeneration or spiritual birth is a spiritual resurrection. Unless and until a spiritually dead person is born of the Spirit, he or she remains spiritually dead.” He then turns around and contradicts this statement by saying, “Only God can and does regenerate the spiritually dead, but He does so only (and always) for those who first put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The choice is between John Calvin and the Apostle John.”

These two statements can be fit together only by redefining spiritual death and ignoring what the Apostle John *directly stated* regarding the *inability* of man outside of the supernatural work of God to do what Mr. Bryson’s position assumes: engage in the act of saving faith. John says this cannot happen unless the person is divinely empowered to do so (see John 6:65), and we have already seen this empowerment is *not* given universally. Further, such a position runs directly against the plain testimony of Romans 8:7–8, making it clear that Calvin was merely repeating what the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul had taught long ago.

“A person is not *made a believer in regeneration* as Calvinism contends, but *a believer is made a child of God by regeneration* as Scripture says” (emphasis added). As we read in 1 John 5:1, the Scripture reverses the order here *assumed* by Mr. Bryson. All those *born of God* believe: God’s action of causing divine birth *precedes* and determines the human act of faith. The fact that the Bible presents faith as a gift, given by God to His elect out of grace, is ignored by Mr. Bryson. As common as these assertions are, their repetition does not grant them theological weight nor the status of exegetical certainty. The Reformed position has always started from the conviction of *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura*: Scripture is sufficient, and we must obey *all* of Scripture. Our theology must flow *out of* the text. This means we must test even the most commonly held views (also known as “traditions”) in the light of the Word. When we do so, we discover that God freely elects a specific people unto salvation who are totally undeserving of that election. That is the essence of grace: it is free, unmerited, and powerful. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

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Notes (Part One) Soli Deo Gloria

- 1 Job 14:5; Ps. 135:6; Prov. 16:9; Dan. 4:34–35; Isa. 45:5–7; 46:9–10; Eph. 1:11; Acts 4:27–28. Bible citations are from the New American Standard Bible.
- 2 John 8:34; Rom. 8:7–8; Eph. 2:1–3.

- 3 [www.prbc.org/Confession.htm](http://www.prbc.org/Confession.htm)
- 4 The direct object of the verb “to choose” is not a class, but “us,” and is clearly personal in that it is unto adoption and forgiveness, which *persons*, not *classes*, experience.
- 5 This term does not mean “to know actions before they take place” when God is the one “foreknowing.” When God is the subject, in the New Testament, the object is invariably *persons* not *actions* (Rom. 8:29; 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:20). In light of the Old Testament meaning of “to know,” the word in this passage means to choose to enter into loving and intimate relationship with someone beforehand. See my discussion in *The Potter’s Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2000), 198–200.
- 6 A common attempt to avoid the force of this phrase is to say the middle voice should be used. This ignores the fact that the paraphrastic construction used here is to be translated as a pluperfect. See *The Potter’s Freedom*, 187–89.
- 7 Using the present tense here, but the perfect tense in verse 39.

#### Notes (Part One) Is Faith Really a Condition of Salvation?

- 1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, iii, xxi, sec. 5, 206.
- 2 James R. White, *The Potter’s Freedom*, (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2000), 39.

#### Notes (Part One) George Bryson’s Rebuttal

- 1 John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 144.

#### Notes (Part Two) “Doomed from the Womb”? Calvinist vs. Biblical Views of Election, Regeneration, and Faith

- 1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 reprint), 206.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 231.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Allister MacGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 125.
- 5 Calvin, 224.
- 6 R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 51.
- 7 Calvin, 232.

#### Notes (Part Two) What It Means to Be Spiritually Dead

- 1 See the fuller discussion of this passage in James R. White, *The Potter’s Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2000), 287–88, 324–25.

#### Notes (Part Two) George Bryson’s Rebuttal

- 1 C. H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 27.
- 2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 reprint), 232.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 reprint), 175, 179.
- 5 Calvin, vol. 2, 231.