

Newsletter June 2014

Preordination and divine election were previously introduced in our October 2013 newsletter, but beginning with this newsletter, we shall take a detailed approach toward the study of soteriology (the study of salvation as an effect of divine agency) by examining five essential doctrines that confirm God's sovereignty over every aspect of mankind's present and eternal existence. In our May 2014 newsletter in which we discussed the delusive doctrine of Arminianism in some detail, we mentioned an important reformer named John Calvin (cf. Book III, page 235) whom God rose up in defense of crucial biblical truths. In this newsletter we shall begin an in-depth study of five essential points that were formulated by Calvin's followers in response to the insidious threat of Arminianism. In doing so, we shall utilize edited text taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book I, Chapter 3.5. Below is the first portion of a chart, taken from that chapter, comparing the basic doctrines of Arminianism with that of biblical reformed Calvinism in five brief statements or points. In this first newsletter we shall limit ourselves to a discussion of the first two points, which convey the state of mankind's utter depravity and God's unconditional election of his own, thus leaving the remaining three points for later discussion in upcoming newsletters. These first two points demonstrate the unmerited mercy revealed in God's grace as it is unconditionally applied through sovereign election to those individuals who have been preordained from eternity to receive it – thus fully redeeming Adam's fallen race through them.

ARMINIANISM	CALVINISM
1. Mans depravity is not total – man has free will – there is some good in man which he can exercise to turn to God and accept Christ	1. Total depravity – man is morally powerless to make any effort to save himself and does not even have the desire to seek God
2. Election conditional upon faith – faith as an effort of man comes before election	2. Unconditional election – God supplies the faith to believe to whomever He will

The word “depravity,” found in the first point of this chart, means corrupt, wicked, or perverted in thought and action. This correctly describes fallen man's dreadful mental state from the fall of Adam on. If a man is depraved, he is completely ruined in character and is therefore incapable of reaching out to a holy God; indeed, he does not even have any desire to be reconciled to God but deliberately suppresses all knowledge of Him (cf. Ro.1:19-22). Therefore, it follows that if salvation were dependent upon an initiative arising from a man's depraved mind, no one could ever be saved because man is morally unwilling and incapable of the undertaking due to his spiritual blindness. Indeed, the bound will (cf. Newsletter September 2013) of a depraved man can be seen to generate nothing but sinful thoughts so that his freedom to act upon such a will can result in nothing but evil works. When we think of evil, we most often think of sinister acts such as murder. While murderous acts cannot be excluded, the use of the word “evil” here denotes all of the self-centered thoughts and actions that exclude the interests of our fellow men and still more significantly exclude the will of God. The doctrine of total depravity does not mean that a man deliberately sets out to do evil things, but that because of his fallen nature, he is morally incapable of doing only that which is good. Therefore, he cannot appropriate salvation through any of his own efforts to attain a level of self-righteousness acceptable to God.

We all know of “good men” (after our own human judgment) that have nevertheless rejected Christ. Many of these men and women would seem to be far better than most of us both in intellect and compassion. The Arminian says that such men have within them the “inherent goodness” to turn to Christ and be saved. Nevertheless, that does not happen; instead, they continue to rely upon their own efforts to gain a pretext of righteousness apart from Jesus' atoning sacrifice until death finally overtakes them. All of their best efforts were tainted with evil because they did not seek the perfect righteousness of Christ as a gift from God (cf. Ro.9:31,32). The implication of Arminianism is that every man has an innate capacity for both good and evil, and given favorable conditions he will not only choose to do good, but perform it as well. But Paul said of this conjecture, “I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but

how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do” (Ro.7:18,19). All such evil acts, regardless of degree, are self-centered violations of God’s divine Law that spring forth from a fully depraved human nature that is waging war with our minds, through our fleshly members, such that we are held fully captive to its sinful dictates (cf. Ro.7:23). Therefore, while men and women are free to act in accordance with their own will, they cannot from that volition choose to do that which is truly good, nor do they even have the moral capacity to seek after God to learn of Him and plead for much-needed mercy. The Apostle Paul has said, “they are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Ro.3:12). Moreover, it follows that if the capacity for attaining true righteousness is actually within man, none have achieved it for Paul emphatically stated, “it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one” (Ro.3:10).

The Arminian would say that we come to believe in Christ because of a small residual “desire for God” that is inherent within every man sufficient for him to reach out in faith and trust in Christ. But as Paul went on to say, “There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God” (Ro.3:11). Therefore, all men must be drawn to Christ by God the Father through the working of the Holy Spirit so that they may come to believe that which their depraved human nature previously prevented them from accepting (cf. Jn.6:44). We must reiterate here that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Ro.3:23); all are equally depraved and every bit as guilty before God. God has not searched to elect the best He could find out of the mutually depraved multitude of mankind, but often chooses those we would judge to be the worse, such that we should recognize that only God can accomplish this great feat; God’s mercy is greatly magnified in that choice. Salvation is not about us at all, though we greatly benefit from it; salvation is altogether about God and his amazing grace exercised in the election of his own such that God must receive all the Glory.

Consequently, we find that the doctrine of Total Depravity and the doctrine of Free Will are mutually exclusive. The Arminian must forthwith reject the doctrine of Total Depravity and in doing so reject the entire biblically reformed doctrine of salvation that must logically follow, as we shall discover when we discuss points 2-5. Although many who embrace the Arminian doctrine would deny it, they essentially believe that man can save himself through the exercise of his human mind to create a saving faith within himself before redemption can take place. But, according to Scripture saving faith is a gift of God, not something that is generated within the human mind by the prowess of fallen man (cf. Ep.2:8). The real issue, then, is not depravity versus free will, but grace versus works (cf. Ro.3:20–22). If man can exercise a “free will” to grasp salvation for himself – even if we only refer to that of initial belief – then salvation strongly hinges upon human works. Conversely, if a man is so depraved and corrupt that he is completely helpless even to believe, then his salvation is totally dependent upon the merciful grace of God alone made possible through the atoning work of Christ (cf. Ro.3:24). The Apostle Paul makes it very clear that we can not mix works and grace in the matter of salvation when he said, “if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work” (Ro.11:6). God greatly glorifies Himself when He furnishes all of man’s redemption; to boast of our own works as having had any part in our redemption, even its acceptance, is but a sinful attempt to steal some of God’s glory for ourselves.

The human mind automatically rejects the possibility of total depravity out of hand because it cannot bear to consider that we have all fallen so desperately low that only God can save us through an extreme act of totally undeserved mercy that defies all human reasoning and understanding. Yet, that is painfully true (cf. Ro.3:12–18)! In fact, that is the full thrust of the Gospel message: the “good news” is not that we should try to work harder to achieve an acceptable level of righteousness or even to fabricate a saving faith out of our disbelieving minds. Rather, the Gospel, the “Good News,” is that God has done it all for his elect through a spiritual rebirth, and He has freely given us who have come to believe in Jesus Christ everything we need to be saved – including faith itself. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ep.2:8,9).

This leads us directly into the second point of the chart above, which is unconditional election. One could ask why God chooses one man over the other to receive salvation. Perhaps one could merely assume that

one man or woman is just a little more deserving than is another of God's grace. Yet, that is clearly impossible since all men and women are so tainted by evil that they all fall far short of the divine righteousness required of God without exception (cf. Ro.3:23). The Arminian reasons that God knows in advance which one will come to believe of his own volition, and that He selects that one because of his foreknowledge of a particular service that a certain man or woman will render for Him over another. Such contorted thinking requires some intrinsic worth within a man or woman that drives God to choose one over another when there is actually no real worth there at all. It is very important for us to understand that no man or woman ever deserves to be saved – absolutely none of us. Salvation is received only by the grace of God who chooses to extend mercy as He sees fit to those who are totally unworthy of receiving it.

We are often amazed that God has chosen certain men or women whom we would never have thought “capable” of accepting salvation in Christ. Those are often men and women who, in our opinion, have lived terrible lives and have committed egregious sins. Conversely, we are often amazed that God has not chosen certain other men and women who through their “good works” have diligently strived to attain their own righteousness. Nevertheless, neither person was capable of living up to God's high standards; both are desperately in need of redemption by an act of God's unmerited mercy. Election is therefore not based upon some positive condition that God has found within individual men or women since none has any redeemable qualities. We need but look at the Law of Moses and at the nation of Israel to see the inability of man to measure up to God's righteous requirements even through the force of divine Law established within an ideal theocracy. Therefore, God's election must be unconditional – without qualification – because none of us can meet any of God's conditions for a self-righteousness that must be on a par with God's own righteousness (cf. Mt.5:48). The source of salvation is not found in us, but in the heart of God. He has not revealed to us his reason for choosing one and not another, and we must therefore trust that his choices are right and good because of who He is. If our Creator would save many from the horrors of Hell by pulling them out of the fire with out specifying any condition for his doing so, He is not doing something unfairly evil, as some would dare suggest, but something amazingly wonderful, great, and very good indeed. In the process of divine election God's glory is openly revealed in all of its magnificent splendor.

Since we must by careful examination accept the doctrine of divine sovereign election as being fully biblical, we must then ask ourselves if it is also true that God chooses some to eternal ruin. This is often referred to as the “doctrine of reprobation.” It is apparent that if God does not elect a certain person to receive salvation, He does by default abandon them to future judgment and to be the recipient of his divine wrath. How, some may foolishly ask, can God condemn those that are only acting out their evil desires in accordance with God's own decision in not redeeming them from their sinful state (cf. Ro.9:19)? This question would dangerously suggest that God could be somehow complicit in man's continuing sinful condition. Accordingly, the primary objection most have to the doctrine of divine election is that it characterizes God as being unfair to the reprobate (those whom God has abandoned as unredeemable through sovereign choice). But man is not equal with God such that God should be bound by what we rightly judge to be fair dealings between mortal men who are his equally mutual creations. As we previously discussed in our October 2013 newsletter, the Creator has no restraint placed on Him regarding that which He has created. Who are we to argue with God's sovereign choice, since God is God and we are but his creation to do with as He wills? He is the potter and we are but the clay to be formed into any kind of vessel that He so chooses (cf. Ro.9:21). While God does abandon many to eternal damnation by default, He performs no express action in doing so, but merely gives them over to their own natural desires to sin as they will without divine intervention of any kind (cf. Ro.1:28). Therefore, the future punishment of the reprobate remains fully justified, because their unredeemed state fully stems from their own sinful thoughts, actions, and nature, not God's supposed neglect. God has no obligation to save his enemies (cf. Ro.5:10), which we all once were in our rebellious Adamic state. Nevertheless, God has chosen to save many out of an abundance of his great love, mercy, and grace, not out of any obligation due us, thus exalting the greatness of his glory in doing so. Praise God for his amazing grace and the unfathomable depths of his mercy!

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