

FIVE-POINT CALVINISM'S "TOTAL DEPRAVITY" IN THE LIGHT OF
FREE GRACE THEOLOGY

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“The marks of the divine image have been so obscured by sin that they are not easy to identify, but is it not reasonable to believe that one mark may be man’s insatiable craving for immortality... The ancient image of God whispers within every man of everlasting hope; somewhere he will continue to exist. Still he cannot rejoice, for the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world troubles his conscience, frightening him with proofs of guilt and evidences of coming death. So is he ground between the upper millstone of hope and the nether stone of fear.”¹

-A.W. Tozer

INTRODUCTION

The Word of God is absolutely true, inerrant in the autographa and inspired by God Himself (Psalm 19:7-9; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21). Thus, it would stand to reason that every theological perspective must be measured against the Word of God, resonating perfectly in its internal consistency and its correspondence to reality. Varying theologies within Christendom are products of interpretation and have hermeneutical differences and consequences that make them unique among their peers. Where a system is found to be inconsistent with the Scriptures, it should be readily abandoned in favor of where the text leads.² Too often the opinions of men,

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco, Harper & Row Publishers, 1961), 46.

² This is precisely the issue that led to action in the Protestant Reformation. “As Rome denies the doctrine of salvation ‘by grace alone,’ so also it denies the doctrine of ‘free grace for all sinners,’ since it substitutes for the gospel doctrine of salvation through faith in Christ, salvation through the church (Rome demands as its first and foremost doctrine submission to the authority of the pope, and not to that of Christ. Its application of the ancient maxim: *Nulla salus extra ecclesiam*, to the Roman Catholic Church is seriously meant, and only by way of a quasi forced concession does it teach the salvation of persons outside the Roman Church, namely, through the power of baptism, by which they are, if not *de facto*, at least *de iure* members of the Roman Catholic Church). Luther taught the doctrine of universal grace not only directly, but also indirectly by pointing every troubled sinner to Christ as the Savior who died for him and who invites him to come to Him and freely by faith to receive the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation secured for all men by His vicarious atonement.” - John Theodore Mueller, “A Survey of Luther’s Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113 (1956): 154.

whether codified or not, have turned a shortcut into an expressway simply because a temporary obstruction on the main road did not fit their schema.

Unfortunately, those who advocate Five-Point Calvinism have held fast to a system of theology that has been proven to be logically consistent, yet biblically inconsistent. This is a serious error that demands for its replacement in favor of a faithful representation of that which is revealed in God's Word.

Free Grace Theology exposes the scriptural inadequacies of Five-Point Calvinism, providing a theologically consistent and coherent understanding of soteriology that is exegetically-deduced. Addressing the first point of Calvinism will be the focus of this study, for its importance cannot be overstated. Sproul affirms this: "If one embraces this aspect of the T in TULIP, the rest of the acrostic follows by *a resistless logic*. One cannot embrace the T and reject any of the other four letters with any *degree of consistency*" (*emphasis added*).³ By their own admission, the Calvinistic view of Total Depravity is the foundational point for their entire system of *logical* soteriological thinking. But is the Five-Point perspective on Total Depravity biblical?

The basic tenets of Free Grace find internal consistency within the Scriptures while remaining true to life in the scope of eternity, as well as coherence in the here and now. These convictions yield practical implications that foster a greater spiritual satisfaction while bringing unparalleled cohesion to the text of Scripture. Therefore, the convictions and interpretations of Five-Point Calvinism's view of Total Depravity will be considered against the Absolutes of Free Grace Theology (which will be addressed), with the latter showing superiority in representing the God's Word as the original Author/authors intended. With this in mind, those holding to Free

³ R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 128.

Grace Theology will be designated as Free Grace while those who affirm Five-Point Calvinism will be referred to as Five-Point Calvinist, Reformed, Calvinist, or simply Five-Point.

WHAT IS MEANT BY “FREE GRACE THEOLOGY?”

For many, a common misconception has been perpetuated throughout theological circles that Free Grace Theology is a recent formulation and should, therefore, be discredited and discarded.⁴ This view is short-sighted, dismissing the exegetical issues at hand and settling for an inconsistent theological outlook that ultimately espouses a “works-righteousness” regardless of where one falls on the spectrum of evangelical thought. With the release of Grudem’s book⁵ came a definitive pronouncement of the disagreements that many evangelical scholars hold against the teachings of Free Grace.⁶ Many within the Free Grace Community issued cogent responses that sought to answer these mischaracterizations while providing the exegetical backing that has served as the credibility for the movement.⁷ Each of these works has yet to receive a rebuttal from the Reformed/Calvinist or Arminian camps and the silence is deafening.

Though there are varying nuances among the proponents within Free Grace circles, Wilson has summarized the basic tenets of Free Grace Theology’s convictions in a clear and succinct manner. Those Free Grace Absolutes are as follows:

⁴ See Ken Wilson, *The Foundation of Augustinian-Calvinism*. Regula Fidei Press, 2019.

⁵ See Wayne Grudem “*Free Grace*” *Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 21-22, and Thomas G. Lewellen, “Has Lordship Salvation Been Taught throughout Church History?,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 147 (1990): 54–68.

⁶ This can be clearly seen by the endorsements that accompany the back panel of the book.

⁷ *A Defense of Free Grace Theology: with Respect to Saving Faith, Perseverance, and Assurance*, ed. Fred Chay (Grace Theology Press, 2017); Anthony B. Badger, *Free Grace Theology on Trial: A Refutation of “Historical Protestant” Soteriology* (n.p., n.d., 2017); *Free Grace Theology: 5 Ways it Magnifies the Gospel*, ed. Grant Hawley (Allen, TX: Bold Grace Ministries, 2016); Robert N. Wilkin, *Grudem Against Grace: A Defense of Free Grace Theology*, (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2018).

1. No good works are required to spend eternity with God – faith alone
2. Faith alone provides both eternal security and the assurance of it
3. Human free will remains despite the fall (God does not give us the gift of faith)
4. God loves every human equally and Christ died as the propitiation for every human⁸

The ultimate goal within Free Grace Theology is to derive its convictions on every issue from consistent biblical exegesis.

One of the greatest struggles between Free Grace adherents and their opponents is the conviction that the faith that one exercises in response to hearing the gospel message (Rom 10:17) is a faith that is sufficient by itself without any necessary works to either gain or prove the authenticity of redemption.⁹ Thus, faith is a response to hearing the truth of God’s Word which demands no merit (Gen 15:6; John 5:24; Acts 16:30-31; Rom 3:21-22; Gal 3:21-22; Eph 2:8-9). For the Free Grace believer, faith is solitary trust in Jesus Christ (Absolute #1).

This response to God’s Word immediately holds weight due to the quality of Christ’s sacrifice and the unparalleled value of His promise of eternal/everlasting life for the one who believes in Him (John 3:15, 16, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 10:28; Acts 13:48). This person is eternally secure at the moment of faith (John 10:27-28; Rom 8:38-39). However, the believer’s assurance of salvation may be something that carries, coming at a later time due to further study and growth (Absolute #2). Free Grace proponents see eternal security as God’s side, while personal

⁸ Ken Wilson, “Basis of Free Grace Theology,” DM-903: Issues in Grace Theology and Praxis, Module 1, Lecture 1, 41:03-43:43.
<https://bluejeans.com/playback/s/ZEJnG6pzNhoJJgMJbwROJSW9qocNPvZnsYU94OLr7KH3ympycIeb2RI2zFV6Ygi5>.

⁹ See Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Monument, CO: Panym Group, 2011), 10–13; Paul Schaefer, “An American Tale,” in *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, ed. Michael S. Horton (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 151.

assurance is on the side of man, though some within Free Grace would consider this separation unacceptable.¹⁰

The notion of free will has been a contentious debate for centuries, but it is the Free Grace perspective that man cannot contribute in any way to his redemption, and though the Fall of Man (Gen 3:6-7) was a cataclysmic event of staggering proportions that introduced the abnormality of death into God's perfect creation (Gen 2:17; 3:3), man retains his capacity to respond to his Creator (Gen 3:10-13; 4:1-7). The varying views of man's capacity and depravity have been well-documented and the majority of the perspectives involved have done great violence to the text of Scripture, creating doctrines that either paint man as an automaton that receives the full measure of God's wrath despite his inability, or seeing him as a created being whose destitution has been over-exaggerated. Outside of these extremes, Free Grace Theology seeks to establish an exegetical balance (Absolute #3).

Finally, the sovereignty of God is often ill-defined by Five-Point Calvinism, depicting the Creator as a meticulous, strong-armed controller over the minutia of history.¹¹ With vehemence, Calvinism has made this distortion of God's sovereignty the dominant attribute that eclipses all others. Free Grace sees God's attributes as equal, for there is perfect equity in God. In the exercise of His love, He has chosen to love the human race (John 3:16; Rev 1:5) and in so doing, He has provided the sacrifice of His Son for the total payment of the sin debt incurred by the human race without any discrimination (Absolute #4 - Rom 5:8; Heb 2:9; 1 John 2:2).

¹⁰ See Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 54–59; David R. Anderson, “Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Justification?,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal*, Vol. 13, no. 1 (2008): 47-59.

¹¹ See Jeremy D. Edmondson, “The Sovereignty of God: Contemporary Evangelical Attestation versus Biblical Attestation,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Vol. 31 no. 61 (2018): 41-56.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

“The view one takes concerning salvation will be determined, to a large extent, by the view one takes concerning sin and its effects on human nature.”¹² Hence, the doctrine of Total Depravity summarizes the condition and capacity of man in responding to his Creator now that sin is present.

For both sides to find accord and discord, terms must be defined.

[Total Depravity] means that all the parts of our nature have been affected by sin. It does not mean that men are as bad as they can be, nor that all men are equally bad. It does not mean that human nature is destitute of all good impulses in the moral sense. It means rather that human nature, as such, and in all its parts in its unregenerate state, is under the dominion of sin.¹³

Barrett explains total depravity as “the corruption inherited from Adam [that] extends to every aspect of the sinner’s nature (i.e., it is total in extensiveness)... the internal corruption of the whole human being...” and “that man cannot do anything spiritually good toward God but is rather a slave to sin.”¹⁴ Barrett’s explanation is largely derived from Berkhof, who states that Total Depravity is “the inherent corruption [that] extends to every part of man’s nature, to all the faculties and powers of both soul and body; and... that there is no spiritual good, that is, good in relation to God, in the sinner at all, but only perversion.”¹⁵ Packer concurs, writing:

The phrase *total depravity* is commonly used to make explicit the implications of original sin. It signifies a corruption of our moral and spiritual nature that is total not in degree (for no one is as bad as he or she might be) but in extent. It declares that no part of us is untouched by sin, and therefore no action of ours is as good as it should be, and

¹² David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and Roger Nicole, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended and Documented* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 24.

¹³ Edgar Young Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia; Boston; St. Louis; Los Angeles; Chicago; New York; Toronto: Roger Williams Press, 1917), 294.

¹⁴ Matthew Barrett, *Salvation by Grace: The Case for Effectual Calling and Regeneration*, 1st ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 40-41.

¹⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938), 247.

consequently nothing in us or about us ever appears meritorious in God's eyes. We cannot earn God's favor, no matter what we do; unless grace saves us, we are lost.¹⁶

Each of these statements show a common denominator in recognizing that nothing of "spiritual good" can be done in relation to God. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23)¹⁷ concludes that man is without any grounds for unaided acceptance by a holy God. Adam's disobedience has brought an inherent corruption upon his offspring.

Those who advocate the Free Grace position will find little friction with these conclusions. As Anderson explains:

When Adam sinned, all aspects of his humanity were corrupted. His body became mortal. His spirit was separated from God (spiritual death) as fellowship was broken for the first time since his creation. And every part of his *psychē* was corrupted: his mind was darkened, his emotions were degraded, and his will was defective. He became thoroughly depraved. This does not mean any particular man is as bad as he can be, but it does mean he is as bad *off* as he can be. What we mean by this is that there is nothing he can do on his own to restore immortality to his body, fellowship with his Creator, or nobility to his "soul."¹⁸

Dillow is in agreement, writing:

Man's depravity means that even in the best of men, a person's altruism always contains an element of improper motive. No one performs good acts entirely or even primarily out of perfect love for others or for God. There are always other motivations lurking in the background: the preference of one's own self-interest or of some other object less than God. Thus, even the good is tainted.¹⁹

¹⁶ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 83–84.

¹⁷ All Scripture quotes will be taken from the *New American Standard Bible:1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995) unless otherwise noted.

¹⁸ David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, 3rd Edition. (Grace Theology Press, 2018), 34.

¹⁹ Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*, 4th Edition (Houston, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017), 984.

With the Free Grace view of total depravity, man's meritless and extensive corruption is affirmed. Should these tenets be the sole understanding and extent of total depravity among Five-Point Calvinism, collective agreement could be reached. However, such is not the case.

Total Inability

These dual factors of a meritless means of acceptance and an extensive corruption in the whole of man serve only as the tip of the Five-Point iceberg, giving way to a much greater concern underneath. Packer explains this logical continuance:

Total depravity entails total inability, that is, the state of not having it in oneself to respond to God and his Word in a sincere and wholehearted way (John 6:44; Rom. 8:7–8). Paul calls this unresponsiveness of the fallen heart a state of death (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13), and the Westminster Confession says: “Man by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto” (IX. 3).²⁰

Beyond the “corruption of our moral and spiritual nature” that extends to every part of man, Packer has rendered all human faculties as defunct in the realm of spiritual things. Mind, will, emotions, perception, and capacity are deemed “unresponsive.”²¹ Additionally, his appeal to the Westminster Confession is conveyed as a seal of inarguable ecclesiastical orthodoxy. Were this perspective an anomaly among Five-Point Calvinism, one's concerns would be limited.

Instead, “total inability” is the standard pervasive doctrine throughout the Five-Point constituency. “Unbelieving humanity,” writes MacArthur, “has no capacity to desire, understand,

²⁰ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 84.

²¹ Sproul reveals a limitation in the Reformed understanding by differentiating between total depravity and utter depravity. He writes, “Utter depravity would mean that we are all as sinful as we possibly could be. We know that is not the case. No matter how much each of us has sinned, we are able to think of worse sins that we could have committed.” - R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 104. This leads to a concerning conclusion. Can man be said to be unresponsively “dead in your trespasses and sins” as the Five-Point Calvinist believes if he has the ability to think of “worse sins” that he could have committed? How would an unregenerate man know how to classify “worse sins” if he did not have some sense of goodness, righteousness, and justice with which to compare it? How can man be alive to sin and unresponsively dead to God and still refrain from greater degrees of manifest corruption? Yet, Sproul affirms that the unregenerate man can abstain from doing worse.

believe, or apply spiritual truth.”²² Similarly, Crenshaw states, “God specifically denies that the lost can believe or do anything pleasing to Him.”²³ Ware agrees, writing:

Those who... accept the classic Reformation notion of total depravity... would be quick to assert that no people, in their deadened sinful state, are able on their own to believe in Christ. Anyone who comes must be drawn previously by the Father. All who come must have God’s grace administered to their hearts, giving them *the ability* they otherwise would have lacked of believing in Christ.²⁴ (*emphasis mine*)

Labeling this condition as “spiritual inability” Barrett writes:

The will of man is so impacted by pollution that he is unable to turn toward God in faith and repentance (Titus 1:16). Spiritual inability can be defined in several ways. First, it means that the sinner can in no way do anything that meets the perfect demands of the holy law of God. The unregenerate man cannot please God nor can he meet the consent or approval of God. Second, the sinner is unable to change his inclinations, preferences, and desires for sin so that he may turn to love God instead. In short, the sinner is not able to do anything spiritually good due to the fact that he is born with an evil prejudice, inevitably predisposed to sin. Therefore, while man’s rational faculties do remain intact (his ability to acquire knowledge, to reason, to form a conscience, etc.), man did lose his “material freedom,” as Berkhof calls it.²⁵

While agreement is found in that man is not as sinful as he could be, the redefinition of Total Depravity by the Five-Point Calvinist redefines the extent of this malady as Total Inability.

However, the Calvinist would still strongly affirm that man is still fully culpable for his actions and unbelief. The question that naturally arises is: How is it possible for a holy and just God to hold man responsible for something that is beyond his capability?

Seeking to answer such an objection, Frame attempts an explanation, writing “Total inability is not physical or psychological. We are physically and mentally able to believe in

²² John MacArthur F., Jr., *The Vanishing Conscience*, Electronic ed. (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1994), 88.

²³ Curtis I. Crenshaw, *Lordship Salvation: The Only Kind There Is* (Memphis, TN: Footstool, 1994), 14.

²⁴ Bruce A. Ware, “Effectual Calling and Grace,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 215.

²⁵ Barrett, *Salvation by Grace*, 53.

Christ. The inability is moral, an inability to do the right thing. That is an inability for which we are responsible.”²⁶ How can an “inability” be something for which an unregenerate person is responsible? And if the “inability” of which an unregenerate person is responsible is something that is “moral” in nature, and is clarified as being a “right thing,” does this not ultimately make one’s acceptance before God an issue of works rather than faith alone? The contradiction before us is plain.

Dabney seeks to make sense of this in asking:

Unbeliever, you may at times desire even earnestly the impunity, the safety from hell, and the other selfish advantages of the Christian life; but did you ever prefer and desire that life for its own sake? Did you ever see the moment when you really wished God to subjugate all your self-will to his holy will? No! That is the very thing which the secret disposition of your soul utterly resents and rejects. The retention of that self-will is the very thing which you so obstinately prefer, that as long as you dare you mean to retain it and cherish it, even at the known risk of an unprepared death and a horrible perdition.²⁷

Dabney’s initial question to the unregenerate is concerning, especially when considering his belief regarding the inability of man. Dabney pushes the issue of acceptance by God as the subjugation of “your self-will to his holy will.” Is this a biblical definition of faith (Heb 11:1)?

Troublesome matters aside, Dabney shows his hand in revealing the real issue:

All natural men, the decent and genteel just as much as the vile, show this absolute opposition of heart to God’s will, and preference for self-will in some sinful acts and by rejecting the gospel. This they do invariably, knowingly, wilfully [*sic*], and with utter obstinacy, *until they are made willing in the day of God’s power.*²⁸ (*emphasis mine*)

This conclusion affirms the inconsistent thinking regarding man’s inability and his full culpability; Dabney is speaking out of both sides of his mouth.

²⁶ John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 112.

²⁷ Robert L. Dabney, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1992), 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

Clearly, the Calvinist holds that the corruption inherited from Adam is not just extensive, and it does not simply render mankind as having no merit in thought or action before the Creator of all things, but the doctrine of Total Inability sees man as devoid of capacity and unresponsive to the things of God. Gospel reception for the unregenerate now becomes a one-sided playing field mandating that God act effectually upon the person in order to make redemption certain.

The outworking of this doctrine places two questions before us: First, what is meant by “dead,” both by the Five-Point Calvinist and the Scriptures? Second, since man is “dead,” how can he be made alive? The answers to each of these questions must be answered by Scripture and the two theological convictions proposed must be disregarded where friction is found with the written Authority. Contradictions provide no credible contribution to sound biblical thinking.

Spiritual “Deadness”

At the center of the issue of total depravity is Ephesians 2:1, which reads, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.” How should “dead” be understood? For the Five-Point Calvinist, the idea of spiritual deadness speaks to “alienation from God, the destruction of the positive, active desire to do what is right in God’s sight, and most importantly, *the ability to do what is good and holy.*”²⁹ (*emphasis original*) A common illustration of the Calvinist view is that of a corpse. “This means that we are no more able to help ourselves spiritually than a corpse is able to improve its condition,” Boice writes. “Even when the gospel is preached we are no more able to respond to it than a corpse can respond to a command to get up—unless God speaks the

²⁹ James R. White, *The Potter’s Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal to Norman Geisler’s Chosen But Free* (Calvary Press Publishing, 2009), 83.

command.”³⁰ With Wiersbe referring to Ephesians 2:1, the assumption of spiritual deadness and inability becomes clearer:

Of course, this means spiritually dead; that is, he is unable to understand and appreciate spiritual things. He possesses no spiritual life, and he can do nothing of himself to please God. Just as a person physically dead does not respond to physical stimuli, so a person spiritually dead is unable to respond to spiritual things.³¹

For the Five-Point Calvinist, spiritual deadness is much in the likeness of physical deadness, being unresponsive and lacking any spiritual ability.

Is this how “dead” should be understood in the Bible? “Dead” in Ephesians 2:1 is the *nekros*, a noun meaning “dead person, corpse,” and as an adjective, “dead.” The verb *nekroō* is used actively as “kill, put to death,” or passively as “die.” In the LXX, *nekros* occurs 60 times speaking of one who has died, a corpse, or one who is in a state of death (Gen 23:3-15),³² or as an act of commemoration among pagans for those who had passed away (Deut 14:1 and Lev 21:5).³³ From this investigation, Verbrugge writes, “Numbers 19 draws a boundary between the sphere of death and that of life. Those who come directly or indirectly in contact with the dead are unclean, i.e., separated from Yahweh.”³⁴

³⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 53; see also James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 510–512; John F. MacArthur Jr., *Romans*, Vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 417; R. C. Sproul, *What Is Reformed Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 184.

³¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 17.

³² Verlyn D. Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Abridged Edition* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2000), 384.

³³ *Nekroō* is excluded from the NASB, NKJV, ESV, HCSB English texts. See Lev. 21:5 in the Apostolic Bible Polyglot (ABP). Also see International Greek New Testament Project (IGNTP), *Codex Sinaiticus: Septuagint and New Testament* (Cambridge, UK: The Codex Sinaiticus Project Board, 2012), Lev. 21:5.

³⁴ Verbrugge, *NIDNTT*, 384.

The New Testament finds 129 uses of nekros being in either the adjective or noun form and three instances of the verb nekroō (Rom 4:19; Col 3:5; Heb 11:12). To use some New Testament examples, the previous chapter in Ephesians states that God “raised Him from the dead” (Eph 1:20), speaking of Christ, who was separated from His fleshly body but did not cease to exist. Jesus is also declared to be “the firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:18) which assumes that there are more to be “born from the dead” (speaking of resurrection for those in Christ). This also holds weight when Paul declares those believers who had already physically died as “fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4:14, c.f. 4:16), and when Jesus declares “she is not dead, but sleeping” (Luke 8:52).³⁵

The context of Ephesians 2 also grants some immediate answers. Anderson draws attention to Paul’s emphasis on his readers’ previous location writing “Chapter two begins with our **Position before** we were baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ. We were dead in sin. This kind of death is not talking about a spiritual corpse but rather a spiritual separation. Our human spirits were separated from God.”³⁶ (*emphasis original*) Undoubtedly, it is God who makes the unregenerate person “alive” (2:5), but it is equally as clear that “faith” is the discriminating factor. With 2:2, the “dead” are walking “according to the course of this world,” speaking to an ability. Meisinger notes that, “dead” is later explained “as being ‘alienated from God’ (2:12), i.e.,

³⁵ The use of “dead” can be understood figuratively in speaking of “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” in James 2:17. Seeing that this is written to believers (1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 12, 19), it is absurd to reject the context and original intent of the Author/author in favor of considering a “dead faith” as a “non-saving” or insufficient faith. The Scriptures know nothing of this idea in James (or anywhere else for that matter). What we do see is that when a believer’s faith is by itself (“separated” from good works) it is unprofitable to those within the Body. Faith by itself is a dead faith that has no benefit for others and is not “being completed” by his works (2:22). However, when faith is “active along with his works” (2:22), we see that it leads to a “justification by works” among men. It is clear that “dead” in this context means “separated from works.”

³⁶ David R. Anderson, “The Nature of Death—Ephesians 2:1,” in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology: With Respect to Saving Faith, Perseverance, and Assurance*, ed. Fred Chay (Houston, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017), 568; see also Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1994), 56

separated from the Source of spiritual life.” This causes him to conclude that “unbelievers are spiritually dead, though physically alive—but spiritual death or alienation does not necessitate Total Inability.”³⁷

A primary example of this would be Cornelius who was listed as “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayer to God continually” (Acts 10:2). It was not until Peter said that “everyone who believes in Him [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43) that “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message” (Acts 10:44). What had triggered this change among these “dead” Gentiles? Their hearing of the Gospel and their subsequent response by believing in Jesus Christ.

Despite the Fall and the unregenerate condition of man as being “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1), human free choice remains intact (Absolute #3a). Too often the elementary principles of Christianity are forsaken. It is man who is lost, not God. God is actively seeking mankind and in doing so, this predicates the ability for an unregenerate man to respond to Him.

Romans 3:10-18 is commonly touted as a pivotal passage in the Total Inability debate. Here we find the Apostle Paul examining the lowest abscesses of mankind’s condition, showing him as “unrighteous,” with no understanding, and not seeking God (v.10b-11). Mankind has “turned aside,” “become useless,” and does no good (v.12). Their speech is vile (v.13-14), they are reckless and violent, destroying everything before them, forsaking all peace, and living without a fear of God (v.15-18). As if this were not exhaustive in its analysis, Paul moves on to declare that everyone is guilty before God’s righteous Law and cannot even speak because they have no credible defense (3:19-20). To this, Free Grace Theology agrees without a defense as well; and if Paul would have stopped and mailed the letter, total inability would have sway.

³⁷ George E. Meisinger, “The Issue of One’s Ability to Believe: Total Depravity/ Inability,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal Volume*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (2005): 91.

Thankfully, the Author/author continued in giving the present revealing of the righteousness of God apart from the Law: the Lord Jesus Christ (3:21), and the only condition that is placed upon anyone in any dispensation is again clearly spelled out for the reader:

Believe! Niemelä observes:

Many appeal to this verse to prove man's total inability and then label as semi-Pelagian anyone who speaks of man having an active role in receiving everlasting life. The difference between *seeking* and *responding* is huge. Paul categorically states that unbelievers do not seek God. They are not *the initiators* of reconciliation toward God. *God seeks and God initiates*. The fact that man does not initiate seeking toward God does not negate the idea of unbelievers *responding* to God's seeking of them.³⁸

Now, the "righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" has been revealed and applied to "all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (which is precisely Paul's point in 3:10-20 stated in summary fashion), but those who have believed are "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:22-24). With faith alone being the only condition put forth, the capacity for man to believe is still intact; not in taking the initiative to seek God (as is made clear in Rom 3:11b), but in response to God's active approach in seeking all men.

No doubt, man is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1), but we must conclude that the use of "dead" in a spiritual connotation never refers to the idea of "cessation," but "separation," with some instances meaning "inactivity" (Jas 2:17, 26). Being as such, the question now becomes "How does a person who is 'dead in trespasses and sins' become alive?"

Regeneration Cannot Precede Faith

The Five-Point explanation of God's work in bringing those who are dead in their sins to life eternal is by means of God regenerating those people in order to give them *the gift of faith* so

³⁸ John H. Niemelä in Zane C. Hodges, *Romans: Deliverance from Wrath*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2013), 90, fn 4.

that they will necessarily believe. “Regeneration” is defined in common terms as “born again/from above,” as understood from John 3:3, 7 in Jesus’ exchange with Nicodemus. While the meaning of the word holds little debate, its place in the *ordo salutis* is what draws great concern from Free Grace proponents. Sproul gives the Calvinist explanation:

Spiritually dead people do not suddenly develop faith, causing God to regenerate them. Rather, faith is the fruit of the regeneration God performs in our hearts: “Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:4b) [*sic*].³⁹ We are born again (regenerated), then we come to faith, then we are justified, and then we begin to undergo the lifelong sanctification process (Rom. 8:30). All these events comprise the whole complex of the Christian life.⁴⁰

The idea of regeneration preceding faith is a logical necessity for the Five-Point Calvinist, for it must harmonize with their equation of spiritual deadness being like that of physical deadness. Any possibility of man moving a spiritual muscle is exempt from the conversation. The unregenerate man is paralyzed, without whim or want of a Savior. Thus, says the Calvinist, God must act in making man alive so that he can believe.

Reformed writings are replete with this notion and consider it to be a crux issue. Strong, in commenting on John 1:12-13, states that this passage:

Seems at first sight to imply that faith is the condition of regeneration, and therefore prior to it. But if ἐξουσίαν here signifies the ‘right’ or ‘privilege’ of sonship, it is a right which may presuppose faith as the work of the Spirit in regeneration—a work apart from which no genuine faith exists in the soul. But it is possible that John means to say that, in the case of all who received Christ, their power to believe was *given* to them by him.⁴¹

“It is a right which *may* presuppose faith as the work of the Spirit in regeneration,” or it *may* not.

Strong’s first observation was his best: that it seems that this verse tells us that faith is the condition of regeneration. John is clear in stating that those who “believe in His name” are those

³⁹ This reference should be Eph 2:5b.

⁴⁰ R. C. Sproul, *What Does It Mean to Be Born Again*, Vol. 6, The Crucial Questions Series (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2010), 37–38.

⁴¹ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 825.

who “receive Him” (John 1:12). By faith, a person is made a child of God. One being “born of God” (John 1:13b) should not seem to be different than that which Jesus mentions in John 3:3, 7. No conservative believer would disagree with the fact that it is God the Holy Spirit who brings someone from spiritual deadness to spiritual life. Strong’s theological convictions about the inability of man refashions this passage to advocate for regeneration prior to faith. A plain reading of the text, as Strong acknowledges but then rejects, would provide a biblical *ordo salutis*.

Boice does not disappoint in his Reformed perspective, writing:

Though Jonah’s call was to a particular ministry and not to salvation, the principle is the same. For nothing can take place spiritually in a person’s life until God on the basis of his own determination calls that person to him. It would be foolish for a preacher to enter a funeral home to encourage the corpses to lead an upright life. The corpses are dead. If the words are to have any purpose, the corpses must first be made alive. After that they can respond. In the same way, the call to discipleship must begin with the act of God in making a spiritually dead person alive. The choice to do that is not with the one who is spiritually dead but with God who alone is able to give life.⁴²

By his own admission, Boice’s argument is dealing in two separate sectors of a believer’s life. The principle is not the same, for he equates the call to service (ministry) with that of salvation (justification), while also equating salvation with discipleship (sanctification). This failure to distinguish between justification and sanctification has led some to deduce a works-salvation from various passages that are concerned with cultivating a greater intimacy with those who are already in relationship with Christ (e.g. Mark 8:34-38). While his illustration is true, the lack of scripture citations utilized to prove his point is telling.

Sproul, Strong, Boice, and the whole host of Five-Point advocates believe that regeneration is a precursor to faith, which means that they are convinced that one is “born again/from above” before they have trusted in Christ. This view seeks to uphold God’s initiatory

⁴² James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 510.

role in the salvation process, but who is to say that God's initial role has been infringed upon? Has He not sent a Savior for the purpose of redeeming man? A better question to ask of the Calvinist is "How can one possibly be 'made alive' apart from having believed in Christ?" or to put it more bluntly, "How can you have eternal life without having Christ?" Would this not draw concerns about the one who dies in an "intermediary" state? Where would they spend eternity? This conclusion is utterly untenable for Free Grace Theology.

Depravity, being total in the sense of its extensiveness in leaving man without any merit before God, does not negate the ability of man to respond when he hears the gospel. "The circumstances in which the will functions bear on whether the person can choose this or that alternative," notes Picirilli, "and that is where depravity gets involved."⁴³ He then illustrates: "A person in prison, for example, has not lost the capacity to walk the streets unchained, but his circumstances curtail his ability to exercise that capacity at the time. Just so, depravity limits our choices without losing the constitutional capacity to choose."⁴⁴ Does the unregenerate man not retain the "constitutional capacity" to choose?

This is plainly answered in Romans 10:17 which states, "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." In Romans 10, nothing is mentioned about the need for God to regenerate the lost man so that they will now have the ability to believe. In fact, Paul states that the step prior to one "hearing" so that one can have faith in Christ is that of having a "preacher" to tell them the good news (Rom 10:14b). This preacher must be "sent" (Rom 10:15a). At no point does Paul speak of the necessity for God's "making alive" of the unregenerate man so as to

⁴³ Robert E. Picirilli, *Free Will Revisited: A Respectful Response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2017), 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

have the ability to believe. As with this example, the Scriptural evidence for faith preceding regeneration is abundant.

- “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 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” (John 3:14-15).

In Jesus’ example, the children of Israel had no need to be “made alive” in order to look to the serpent and be healed. The Son of Man being “lifted up” speaks to His crucifixion, as it does throughout the remainder of John’s Gospel (John 8:28; 12:32-33), also being a possible conclusion in John 6:40 when the text says “that everyone who *beholds* the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life.” The reason given in relation to His “lifting up” is that “whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” (John 3:15). This is restated unto the same end in 3:16. At no time is the necessity of a prior regeneration presented.

- “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24).

Jesus provides a simple *ordo salutis*: The one who hears His word and believes has eternal life. This life exempts him from judgment because the one who believes what he hears “has passed” into eternal life and out of eternal death. Is this death not what is meant when we speak of those who are unregenerate?

The sequence that Jesus gives is: hear My word, believe, eternal life. Again, at no time is regeneration given as a precursor to faith. Instead, the sequence shows that “faith” in “My word” is the turning moment that brings one from unregenerate to regenerate. This is not to deny the work of the Spirit in causing one to be “born again/from above” (John 3:3, 5, 8), but it is to say that “faith” is the channel by which this new life is appropriated.

- Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26).

Jesus tells Martha that “he who believes in Me will live even if he dies.” Why does Jesus not say, “he who lives will believe in Me even if he dies?”⁴⁵ An obvious procession is present, noting two separate points in these two verses. The first speaks of physical resurrection: “he who believes in Me will live even if he dies” (11:25b). This is consistent

⁴⁵ Lemke provides a similar argument, stating “If Jesus thought that regeneration preceded conversion, He would have said that he who is spiritually alive will believe: but what Jesus said is that he who believes will live.” Steve W. Lemke, “A Biblical and Theological Critique of Irresistible Grace.” In *Whosoever Will: A Biblical and Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, edited by David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010), 136.

with Jesus' words in John 6:40, 44, 54 and coincides with Jesus' first declaration in 11:25a that He is "the resurrection."

The second speaks of one's physical life, noting that the one who is physically alive and responds in faith to Jesus Christ is one who will live spiritually, and also never die spiritually. The Five-Point Calvinist could easily claim that the use of "lives" first and "believes" second would serve to strengthen their "spiritual birth first" viewpoint. Lenski disagrees, writing "By using two participles in the second clause... living and believing are so joined that neither is without the other: to live is to believe; to believe is to live."⁴⁶ Both "living" and "believing" are simultaneous, which for the Free Grace proponent, yields a plausible conclusion: being "spiritually alive" is a simultaneous event occurring at the moment that a physically-living person responds in faith to Christ.

This coincides with Jesus' second declaration in 11:25a that He is "the life."

- "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph 1:13).

This verse may be the clearest *ordo salutis* in the entire Bible. Hearing the "gospel of your salvation" comes first, followed by believing, and it is upon believing that the Holy Spirit seals the believer in Christ (John 3:8). Lenski affirms that "hearing and believing belong together as correlatives; together they lead to the sealing."⁴⁷ At no time in this entire passage do we find Paul promoting regeneration as a prior necessity for one to exercise their personal faith in Christ. Instead, Ephesians 1:13 shows quite the opposite.

- "For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet 2:23).

Being consistent with what has been presented thus far, one is born again when they receive the word of God. This is in concert with James' assertion that "He brought us forth by the word of truth" (Jas 1:18b). It is the imperishable seed that imparts new life at the moment of faith. When understood within the context, we see that believers were redeemed with the "unblemished and spotless" blood of Christ (1:18-19), that it is only through Christ that we are "believers in God" (1:21a), and that our faith and hope are "in God" (1:21b). Again, the silence of regeneration preceding faith is deafening.

⁴⁶ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 802.

⁴⁷ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 382.

Some have ridiculed this ability to respond to the Gospel as “decisional regeneration”⁴⁸ despite the Scriptural evidence provided, but the verses above in no way infringe upon the initiative of God in taking the first step in the salvation process. This is seen clearly by His giving of the gospel message coupled with the command to go and preach to all the world (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). While it is true that a decision is made to trust Christ, this is not an initial step, nor is it a meritorious act, but rather a response to the information supplied.

If the idea that regeneration precedes faith is not what the Scriptures teach, where did it come from? Lawson reveals that “In the fifth century, Augustine connected the cause-and-effect relationships between human inability and divine sovereignty in salvation, specifically in terms of regeneration.”⁴⁹ This means that the patristics wrote and ministered for 300 years without the notion that men are “unable to believe” and that God had to regenerate them in order to overcome their “deadness” so that they could believe. Wilson writes of the patristics’ ministry, stating that “Christians refuted pagan determinism... in Stoic Providence and Gnosticism, while offering scriptural evidence and logical arguments for their Judaeo-Christian doctrine of free choice with election according to foreknowledge.”⁵⁰ As Wilson documents, their ministries had no need for regeneration to precede faith because the patristics understood that men were fully culpable for their actions and were responsible to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation from the penalty of sin by their own free choice.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Kim Riddlebarger, “What Is Faith?,” in *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, ed. Michael S. Horton (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 88.

⁴⁹ Steven J. Lawson, *Pillars of Grace (AD 100–1564)*, Vol. 2, A Long Line of Godly Men (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2011), 21.

⁵⁰ Kenneth M. Wilson, *Augustine’s Conversion from Traditional Free Choice to “Non-free Free Will,”* (Germany: Mohr Siebeck Tübingen, 2018), 62.

⁵¹ See also Wilson, *Foundation of Augustinian-Calvinism*, 20-35.

The Gift of Faith?

The Five-Point logic understands that man is unable to respond to God in the deadness of his sin and that God must actively intervene in regenerating the dead man in order to give him the gift of faith that he will necessarily exercise.⁵² But if faith is a gift that God only gives to a select few, can mankind bear the responsibility to believe in the gospel message? The Calvinist would maintain that unregenerate men, despite the Lord passing them over for regeneration and the gift of faith, are fully culpable for their failure to respond. Such conclusions forsake the *logical* and twist the biblical for the purpose of keeping with *accepted* orthodoxy. Despite the gymnastics, the sober-minded saint will ask, “How could man be responsible for any wrongdoing when God alone is the ‘internal Initiator’ who may not give me the gift of faith?” As will be shown, this “gift of faith” conviction is a theologically derived necessity that has created contradictions and lacks an exegetically-sound conclusion. The following examples provide adequate proof.

Commenting on Romans 8:29, Boa and Kruidenier supply their readers with Reformed Theology’s standard *ordo salutis*. They write, “Since the Reformation, the following list has generally represented the agreement of the majority on the way God has provided Christ with **many brothers** (taken from Boice, 2:916):

1. *Foreknowledge*: God’s setting his love upon (choosing) those who would be conformed to his Son’s image (Amos 3:2 [cf. KJV “known” with NIV “chosen”]; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9).
2. *Predestination*: God’s determining the destiny of those upon whom he has set his love.
3. *Calling*: God’s effectual call from death to life those upon whom he has set his love (cf. the calling forth of Lazarus in John 11).

⁵² See *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, XIV, 1.

4. *Regeneration*: God’s quickening, making alive, the spirit of those who are called so that they can believe.
5. *Faith*: God’s gift of faith (Eph. 2:8–9) exercised by the regenerate.
6. *Repentance*: The turning from sin of those who have believed (this step is often combined with faith into a step of faith-repentance, or repentance and faith).
7. *Justification*: God’s declaring as righteous those who have repented and believed.
8. *Adoption*: God’s inclusion of the justified in the family of God.
9. *Sanctification*: God’s work through the Holy Spirit to conform those in the family of God into the image of his Son.
10. *Perseverance*: God’s insuring that those who are effectively called complete their pilgrimage of faith.
11. *Glorification*: God’s fulfillment of his purposes—the making of fallen sinners into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ, for eternity.”⁵³

It is difficult to get beyond the distortion found in the explanation of “foreknowledge,”⁵⁴ much less the notion of “love” being portrayed by a God who is unwilling to save all people.

⁵³ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: The Reign of Grace, Romans 5:1–8:39*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 916, cited in Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, *Romans*, Vol. 6, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 260–261.

⁵⁴ The Calvinistic bias involved in the word “foreknowledge” is seen in Strong’s Concordance. Greek- *prognosis*-noun- “forethought” or “foreknowledge” –Strong’s G4268. *Proginosko*- verb “to know beforehand, foresee, foreknow (ordain) –Strong’s G4267. It is interesting that Strong’s has chosen as a possible definition of the word *proginosko* to attribute the idea of “foreordination” with the word “foreknowledge.” This is only found in the KJV and NKJV in 1 Peter 1:20 (the NIV uses the word “chosen”). Both words are derived from “*pro*” meaning “fore, in front of, before” –Strong’s G4253, and “*ginosko*” meaning “to know” –Strong’s G1097. Thus, we get “to know before” or “foreknow.” It seems obvious from the make-up of the word that *proginosko* has nothing to do with “foreordination” in any way. – James Strong, *The New Strong’s Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996).

Johnson understands the word correctly defining it as, “To know beforehand. The verb (Gk. *proginosko*) and the noun (Gk. *prognosis*) are composites formed from the prefix, *pro* (before) and the verb, *ginosko* (know, understand, perceive, be acquainted with). Scripture uses these terms to signify knowledge of events before they occur or knowledge of things before they exist.” - Walter Johnson, “Foreknow, Foreknowledge” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England et al. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 593.

Elwell and Beitzel make an important observation regarding the “logical conclusions” that stem from an omniscient God and His “knowing beforehand” of all things, writing, “It is sometimes argued that if God knows infallibly what will happen in the future then it must happen. Therefore it makes no difference at all what choice a person makes since it could not have been otherwise. The theologians of the early church emphatically denied that foreknowledge implies any predetermination of events. Justin Martyr, for example, said, ‘What we say about future events being foretold, we do not say it as though they come about by fatal necessity.’” - Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel,

Regardless, this step-by-step listing finds “faith” as a gift that God gives to the newly-regenerated person, using Ephesians 2:8-9 as the reference to validate this conclusion. It is this citation of Ephesians 2:8-9 that stands as the common denominator in the “gift of faith” conviction.

Schreiner explains his Calvinistic view while making use of the same reference, writing:

Indeed, the notion that God chooses who will be saved stands as a stark reminder that individual human choices are not ultimate in the universe. I am also convinced, of course, that individuals must believe to be saved. All people everywhere are to repent and put their trust in Jesus Christ to be spared from God’s wrath on the last day. But the Scriptures also teach that God grants faith as a gift (Eph 2:8–9), and that those who are chosen by God will surely believe (e.g. John 6:35, 37, 44, 64–65; 10:26; Acts 13:48; Rom 8:29–30).⁵⁵

For Schreiner, all of the responsibility is on God. His view of election is isolated to soteriology and he fails to consider that no passage in the whole of Scripture concludes that justification is due to God’s sovereign choice of who will be activated and redeemed, and who will remain unregenerate and damned.⁵⁶ He also holds that “individuals must believe to be saved.” When

Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 808. Any furtherance of this word beyond its basic meaning has a systematized, theological bias in mind.

⁵⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9: A Response to Brian Abasciano,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 49, no. 2 (2006): 384.

⁵⁶ This author’s view of “election” is that God’s choosing is seen as being unto a task, ministry, service, or duty to perform, or has been understood as guaranteeing the ultimate conforming of every believer “to the image of His Son” at their glorification (Rom 8:29-30). Such instances as the latter view would be seen in the fact that Judas is understood by Jesus to have been chosen by Him (John 6:70-71). In John 6:70b, Jesus declares that Judas is “a devil,” yet he is still chosen by the Lord. Should we conclude that Judas was “saved,” meaning that he was ultimately justified because this “choosing” was unto salvation? Should we conclude that Judas was chosen unto salvation, but the Lord’s choosing of him “didn’t take,” and he ultimately lost his salvation, rendering his election null and void? Both options are ludicrous conclusions when considering the Scriptures. However, one does read that Judas, along with the other disciples (Matt 10:1-2), had the power to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” (Matt 10:8a). If Judas, an unregenerate man (Compare Jesus’ words in John 13:10-11, 27-30, and 15:3), was granted the power to raise the dead by Jesus Himself, would we not conclude that Jesus’ choice of him was one of ministry and service and not unto eternal salvation?

This argument should also be considered regarding the Lord Jesus Himself. In Luke 9:35, we read, “And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is my Son, *my Chosen One*; listen to him!’” (*emphasis added*). The idea of being “chosen” of God can also be understood as being God’s “choice one,” meaning “the best of its kind or class, excellent, preeminent,…” (Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

“faith” is the requirement for salvation, and only God can give this “gift of faith” to an individual, you have no other option but to conclude such. Though he recognizes the universal mandate that “all people everywhere are to repent and put their trust in Jesus Christ to be spared from God’s wrath on the last day,” he quickly reverts to the gift of faith idea making his previous affirmation an impossibility. He notes that “only those chosen will believe,” again serving his theological constrictions. The notion that “all people everywhere are to repent and put their trust in Jesus Christ” seems insincere. Schreiner believes that “all people everywhere” cannot believe, even though he has stated that this is something that they are expected to do. His quotation shows the *logical* conclusion of the gift of faith view to be illogical when paired with a universal mandate for all people to believe.

In handling the text of Jeremiah 31 involving the New Covenant, Johnson affirms this notion as well, writing:

The reiteration of the divine determination in Jeremiah 31:31–34 is impressive: verse 31—“I will make”; verse 33—“I will make,” “I will put,” “I will write,” “I will be”; verse 34—“I will forgive,” “I will remember their sin no more.” There is no abandonment of the responsibility of belief on the part of the recipients of the covenantal blessing, but there is the comforting assurance that the promises include the gift of faith with them (cf. Rom. 3:1–8; Eph. 2:8–9; Phil. 1:29, etc.).⁵⁷

These observations are a bleeding predicament. At no time in this passage does God ever state that He will give them “the gift of faith,” nor does He state that He will “make them believe.”

Second, it can be agreed upon that “there is no abandonment of the responsibility of belief on the

[Marshallton, Delaware: The National Foundation for Christian Education], 197). We can see plainly that this is not speaking of Jesus being selected to “go to heaven when He dies,” but has to do with being God’s “beloved Son,” God’s “choice One.” He is special unto God. Dr. Anthony Badger writes, “Christ cannot be understood to be a person chosen from among many of similar qualities either for eternal salvation or for performance of the Messiah’s duty as Redeemer. He is the only one so qualified. The idea of *Choice One*, *Select One*, or *Special One* easily comes through. He is the *Choice One* in a qualitative sense, the Name above all names, if you will.” (Anthony B. Badger, *Confronting Calvinism: A Free Grace Refutation and Biblical Resolution of Radical Reformed Soteriology* [Anthony Badger, 2013], 176). The doctrine of “election” is never found to be unto eternal/everlasting life.

⁵⁷ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. “The Last Passover, the First Lord’s Supper, and the New Covenant,” *Reformation and Revival*, Vol. 6, no. 3 (1997): 129.

part of the recipients” because nothing to the contrary has been stated in Jeremiah 31. All men are responsible to believe in the Lord Jesus and those who do not are “judged already” (John 3:18). Third, the recipients of this covenantal promise are glossed over. Johnson has grouped together the “house of Israel” and the “house of Judah” (Jer 31:31, 33) with those believers of the Church Age, showing the listing of his New Testament quotations to be hermeneutically deficient as he seeks to strengthen his Calvinistic argument. Such conclusions fail to prove the validity of the gift of faith while simultaneously failing in their exegetical credibility.

Jim Elliff drives the same line of reasoning but begins his argument with the doctrine of the believer’s perseverance:

By calling our doctrine “Once saved, always saved,” we have lulled many damned souls into a state of deception. The phrase is absolutely true but comes across to the average person like this: “Once saved, you can live as unholy a life as you please and still go to heaven.” That notion is untrue. We would do well to return to the better appellation for this truth from our forefathers: “The preservation and perseverance of the saints.” Then we may say, “Once saved, always persevering.” Our preservation by God is directly related to a living faith He puts within us. The kind of faith we are given is not human faith in the right object, but an entirely new species of faith as a gift of God (Eph. 2:8–9). This gift-of-God faith withstands the trials of life (1 Peter 1:3–9). It is therefore correct to say that the gospel is that “by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you unless you believed in vain” (1 Cor. 15:2). A “faith” that does not persevere is a faith that is not saving. It is merely a faith that is vain or empty of meaning, futile. It never was the right kind of faith at all. But our churches teach that a person may in fact not persevere and still go to heaven because he was sincere when he “prayed the prayer.” Good doctrine would change these perceptions which have led many to hell.⁵⁸

Elliff’s understanding of “faith” involves more than belief. Railing against a pure Christocentric doctrine of eternal security, Elliff looks to qualify the authenticity of one’s faith by comparing it to the various trials that one may endure in life. Such theology runs amuck when Paul’s words are considered: “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim

⁵⁸ Jim Elliff, “Revival and the Unregenerate Church Member,” *Reformation and Revival*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (1999): 55.

2:13). Elliff’s view of the “gift of faith” has actually served to compromise the Gospel, for works have been an inclusion (or better an “intrusion”) into the saving message.

Exegetically speaking, how should one understand the “gift of faith” as repeatedly asserted by Five-Point proponents? An examination of the grammar involved in Ephesians 2:8-9 will suffice. Here we read:

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 may boast.

τῇ γὰρ χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι διὰ πίστεως· καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν, θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον· οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων, ἵνα μή τις καυχῆσθῃται.⁵⁹

In the passage quoted above, emphasis has been drawn to the subjects of “grace” (χάριτί), “faith” (πίστεως), and “that” (τοῦτο) with the latter serving as the demonstrative pronoun in verse 8. The demonstrative pronoun “that” (τοῦτο) is neuter in gender while both “grace” (χάριτί) and “faith” (πίστεως) are feminine.⁶⁰ Robertson shows this relationship:

And that (καὶ τοῦτο [*kai touto*]). Neuter, not feminine ταυτη [*tautē*], and so refers not to πιστις [*pistis*] (feminine) or to χάρις [*charis*] (feminine also), but to the act of being saved by grace conditioned on faith on our part. Paul shows that salvation does not have its source (ἐξ ὑμῶν [*ex humōn*], out of you) in men, but from God. Besides, it is God’s gift (δῶρον [*dōron*]) and not the result of our work.⁶¹

Robertson’s conclusion shows that the demonstrative pronoun is referring “to the act of being saved by grace conditioned on faith on our part.” Faith is our response (Absolute #3).

⁵⁹ Eberhard Nestle et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), Eph 2:8–9.

⁶⁰ The debate surrounding this issue is not new, as Wallace describes, noting that “some have argued that the gender shift causes no problem because A) there are other examples in Greek literature in which a neuter demonstrative refers back to the noun of a different gender, and B) the τοῦτο has been attracted to the gender of δῶρον, the predicate nominative.” -Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 334.

⁶¹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Eph 2:8. See also Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 342-347.

This demonstrates the exegetically-derived Free Grace viewpoint that salvation is by personal faith alone, without any need for works from the believer himself, or from within the believer as wrought by God such as the “gift of faith” (Absolute #1). Since the only condition put forward is “faith” on the believer’s part in responding to the gospel, this would mean that once trust is exercised, security is reached; nothing more is required than believing in the gospel (Absolute #2). Since *faith* is a condition on the part of the believer, the believer is vindicated in having a free will that has the capacity to respond to the Gospel despite the event of the Fall and the moral corruption and certainty of physical death (Absolute #3). Finally, this grammatical conclusion shows that every person is a candidate for salvation, meaning that Jesus Christ died for every person to make redemption possible, which draws the natural conclusion that God’s love is, in fact, for everyone (John 3:16- Absolute #4).

Grammatically speaking for the Calvinist, what else could “that” (τοῦτο) refer to in Ephesians 2:8-9 but to the “concept of salvation by grace through faith?”⁶² Calvin himself affirmed this understanding.⁶³ It is the fact that salvation has even been made available to the human race at all that is the gift of God to mankind. It is not earned; it is by His glorious grace. But this conclusion has been recently met with opposition on a popular level.

In his book *The Gospel According to Paul*, MacArthur has tackled this issue head on. Before considering the grammatical explanation of this passage as mentioned above he writes, “Paul not only contrasts faith with works; he is also emphatically denying that faith is generated

⁶² Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 343.

⁶³ John Calvin writes, “Here we must advert to a very common error in the interpretation of this passage. Many persons restrict the word *gift* to faith alone. But Paul is only repeating in other words the former sentiment. His meaning is, not that faith is the gift of God, but that salvation is given to us by God, or, that we obtain it by the gift of God.” - John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 228–229.

by sinners themselves out of their own free will.”⁶⁴ The notion that faith is “generated” seeks to imply that such faith is meritorious, but this is an objectionable claim when it is understood that faith is a response, not an action. MacArthur acknowledges the gender differences between the neuter demonstrative pronoun and the feminine nouns in question and provides two arguments against the previously established claim that God does not give the gift of faith to *eventual believers*. Each one must be considered.

First, MacArthur notes that “in Greek grammar (and throughout Paul’s epistles) neuter demonstrative pronouns do sometimes refer to feminine nouns. That is precisely the case in Philippians 1:28, for example, where Paul speaks of ‘salvation, and that from God.’ The grammar in that text is precisely the same as Ephesians 2:8.”⁶⁵ Looking at Philippians 1:27-28, we read:

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents—which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God.⁶⁶

It is obvious from this text that Paul is writing to believers and that his desire is to hear of their unity in the faith while not being “alarmed” by their opponents, speaking of their persecutors.

Such standing firm is “a sign of destruction for them,” to which Paul then offers a contrast to his

⁶⁴ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Paul: Embracing the Good News at the Heart of Paul’s Teachings* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2017), 107.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶⁶ It is interesting that MacArthur would choose this verse to reinforce his point for no other verse in Scripture can be used to do so. According to Wallace’s comments, Philippians 1:28 is an anomaly in the matter: “For what it is worth, an examination of all 22 instances of καὶ τοῦτο in the NT (not including Eph 2:8) yielded the following results: 14 or 15 had a conceptual referent (e.g., Luke 3:20; 5:6; John 11:28; 18:38; John 20:20; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor 7:37; Phil 1:9; Heb 6:3 [Phil 1:28 was probable]); four were adverbial (Rom 13:11; 1 Cor 6:6, 8; 3 John 5 [Heb 11:12 is listed by BAGD as adverbial, but the plural is used (καὶ ταῦτα), following more closely the Attic idiom]); three involved the same gender (Luke 2:12; 13:8; 1 John 4:3); no clear examples involved different genders (though Phil 1:28 was possible)” (*emphasis added*) -Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 334, fn 56.

readers regarding “salvation for you, and that too, from God.” While the grammatical construction of v. 28 may be the same as Ephesians 2:8-9, the “salvation” in mind is not.

By the Philippians believers remaining unified and steadfast, they were testifying to a truth that was greater than their current circumstance. *Salvation* for these believers was a certainty that upheld them in the midst of suffering. This is why Paul follows this thought in 1:29-30 stating:

For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

The word “granted” in v.29 is *carivzomai* being understood as “to give freely as a favor,”⁶⁷ not just pertaining to salvation being made available to them but suffering that would precede the glory that would come at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10). Govett writes:

They were not to be terrified by opponents who threatened them. Such were themselves manifestly on the way to damnation, in striking at those who were members of Christ. Saints were persecuted, not because of their evil doing; but for their obedience to God.

To themselves it was a token, that they were on the right road to the First Resurrection, and its millennial glory.

And they were to regard even suffering for Christ’s sake as a gift from God; which, rightly met, would redound to their everlasting glory. To some it is given to believe only. But to suffering with Christ belongs present consolation; as well as millennial reward.⁶⁸

In stating that Philippians 1:28 holds the Calvinistic gift of faith that pertains to justification, MacArthur has taken a common Lordship approach in seeing “salvation” as referring to solely justification. This perspective fails to see *salvation* from the aspects of justification, sanctification, and glorification, all of which are spiritual modes that could be the

⁶⁷ BDAG, 1078.

⁶⁸ Robert Govett, *Govett on Philippians* (Miami Spings, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., Inc., 1985), 21-22.

possibility of “salvation” as used by Paul; not to mention the physical modes of “rescue, deliverance, safety, wholeness, healing, and soundness.”⁶⁹ Since MacArthur has opted for the Calvinistic interpretation while the context has clearly shown otherwise, one must conclude that the means by which this understanding was reached is theological, not exegetical.

MacArthur’s second argument also stems from the grammar of the verse. He writes:

There is no neuter noun preceding *touto* in Ephesians 2:8 or any of the verses immediately before it. If the pronoun doesn’t refer specifically to “faith,” the only other option would be to interpret the word *that* as a reference to the entire preceding clause. Hence Paul’s meaning would be that salvation – every aspect of it - is a gift from God to the sinner. Thus each phrase of the sinner’s transformation that is named or implied in verses 1-8 (including regeneration, justification, grace, faith, and our ultimate glorification) – all of it combined – constitutes “the gift of God.” Indeed, that interpretation would be perfectly consistent with the point of the whole passage.⁷⁰

It would be foolish to argue that people are saved by a means other than God’s grace. Both v. 5 and v. 8 affirm this. But *the gift of faith* should not be automatically lumped into a general category of *the gift of God* just because of its inclusion here.⁷¹ This argument would be the equivalent of providing a Christmas meal for an underprivileged family where you would bring in the turkey, dessert, and all the trimmings and then sit down to force-feed each member of the household. Complicating matters for MacArthur’s understanding, Wallace notes that “*τὸῦτο* regularly takes a conceptual antecedent. Whether faith is seen as a gift here or anywhere else in the NT is not addressed by this.”⁷² Essentially, MacArthur is promoting a “faith” that is coercive.

⁶⁹ BDAG, 982-983.

⁷⁰ MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Paul*, 108.

⁷¹ For a scholarly treatment of the grammatical compatibility of the “faith-is-a-gift” position, see John F. Hart, “Is Faith a Gift from God according to Ephesians 2:8? A Grammatical Analysis,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal*, Vol 12, no. 2 (2006): 44–57.

⁷² Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 335. Wallace goes on to address the idea of “faith” being a gift: “On an exegetical level, I am inclined to agree with Lincoln that ‘in Paul’s thinking faith can never be viewed as a meritorious work because in connection with justification he always contrasts faith with works of the law (cf. Gal 2:16; 3:2-5, 9, 10;

Such an understanding is not “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Faith that is coerced is unbiblical.

To restate, the Free Grace understanding of Ephesians 2:8-9 is that the sheer fact that a “by-grace-through-faith” salvation has even been made available to the human race is the gift of God. Grammatically, the Free Grace camp would stand with Robertson: “there is no reference to πίστεως in τοῦτο, but rather to the idea of salvation in the clause before.”⁷³ The notion of a man exercising his free will in response to the Gospel message is a deep threat to the Five Point camp, showing that man has the capacity to respond to the saving message as sent out and authored by his Creator. Just because free will is involved does not make faith meritorious as it is sometimes accused. Faith is a response, having become convinced that something is true. Lincoln understands this point, writing:

God’s act of grace is the ground of salvation and faith is the means by which it becomes effective in a person’s life. In Paul’s thinking faith can never be viewed as a meritorious work because in connection with justification he always contrasts faith with works of the law (cf. Gal 2:16; 3:2–5, 9, 10; Rom 3:27, 28). Faith involves the abandonment of any attempt to justify oneself and an openness to God which is willing to accept what he has done in Christ. The same applies here in regard to salvation. Faith is a human activity but a specific kind of activity, a response which allows salvation to become operative, which receives what has already been accomplished by God in Christ.⁷⁴

With this comment, Free Grace could not agree more.

From a contextual standpoint, the Five-Point position on this passage is found wanting as well, with the apostle clearly showing that one is “made... alive” (2:5b) by God only by the belief of those who were formerly “dead” (2:1). Verses 8 and 9 is Paul’s explanation of how God

Rom 3:27, 28)’ (A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* [WBC] 111). If faith is not meritorious, but instead the *reception* of the gift of salvation, then it is not a gift per se. Such a view does not preclude the notion that for faith to save, the Spirit of God must initiate the conversion process.” - Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 335, fn 53.

⁷³ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Logos Bible Software, 2006), 704.

⁷⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Vol. 42, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990), 111.

“made us alive” in verse 5. After documenting Paul’s logic in Ephesians 2:1-9, Nichols concludes, “Defining spiritual death in terms of inability to believe falls utterly flat in this passage. Sadly, the vast majority of Reformed commentators *agree with the data at issue*...yet fail to draw the correct conclusion. This passage removes Total Inability from consideration, because it says plainly that dead men must believe in order to be made alive.”⁷⁵ (*emphasis original*).

It is understandable that MacArthur would write against the notion that personal faith is not a gift from God, seeing that his entire theological house of cards would come tumbling down. However, his conclusion creates robots who are simply executing their programming, rather than saints who have responded to the wonderful news of their deliverance from the penalty of sin because their complete and total forgiveness of any wrongdoing against a holy and awesome Creator has been secured sufficiently by the death of Jesus Christ.

Before proceeding, it must be made clear that the Bible does teach about a “gift of faith,” but never in the sense of how Five-Point Calvinism understands it. The Apostle Paul speaks of the “gift of faith” as one of the varied gifts that have been distributed to the local church (1 Cor 12:9). This is a gift that is to be utilized for “the common good” (1 Cor 12:7), meaning for their mutual building up and edification. As McRae explains, “The gift of faith is the faith which manifests itself in unusual deeds of trust... This person has the capacity to see something that needs to be done and to believe God will do it through him even though it looks impossible. He is a man of vision with firm conviction that God will bring it to pass.”⁷⁶ The only “gift of faith”

⁷⁵ Timothy R. Nichols, “A Free Grace Critique of Irresistible Grace,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal*, Vol. 11, no. 2 (2005): 55.

⁷⁶ William McRae, *Dynamics of Spiritual Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 66.

in Scripture is the spiritual serving gift granted to certain members of the Body of Christ. This concerns itself with sanctification salvation and not justification salvation.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ MacArthur understands Romans 12:3 as a verse that emboldens his understanding of saving faith being a gift from God. Making his argument on Ephesians 2:8-9, he explains, “It would appear [that] the antecedent of the demonstrative pronoun *that* is the immediately preceding noun. Hence it would mean ‘that [*faith* is] not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.’ That’s true enough, because as we have already seen, Romans 12:3 makes it absolutely clear that God is indeed the gracious source of every believer’s faith: ‘God has dealt to each one a measure of faith’” (MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Paul*, 107).

MacArthur’s conclusion deserves a reply. Looking to Romans 12:3 we read: “For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.” Is the “faith” that Paul is speaking of “saving faith?” The context tells us “no.” Chapter 12 is the turning point of the book of Romans where in verse 1, Paul is “urging” (parakalevw) the “brethren” that he is addressing to offer up their bodies as living sacrifices unto the Lord as a means of “spiritual” service (λογικὸνV- “reasonable, agreeable”- Thayer, 379).

Elsewhere, MacArthur notes that the Apostle Paul is saying, “In light of ‘the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God’ and of His ‘unsearchable ... judgments and unfathomable ... ways’; and because ‘from Him and through Him and to Him are all things’ (Rom. 11:33, 36), including His immeasurable ‘mercies’ that we already have received (12:1a), our only *reasonable*—and by implication, spiritual—service of worship is to present God with all that we are and all that we have” (John F. MacArthur Jr., *Romans*, Vol. 2, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody Press, 1991], 148).

By the use of his personal pronouns in this quote, it is clear that MacArthur understands that Paul is writing to those who are already saved, and that he is writing to them about how to worship God properly in light of all that He has done for them in His grace. Radmacher agrees with this, writing, “The word for service (*latreian*) is also a word from the figure of the priesthood; it speaks of the service or ministry of the priests in the Temple. Thus, it can be seen that the priesthood metaphor forms the background for this great passage. As believer-priests, then, the first item of priestly service is to make a voluntary presentation of oneself to God” (Earl D. Radmacher, *What the Church is All About: A Biblical and Historical Study* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1978], 295-296). The idea is service, not standing.

With verse 2, Paul calls his readers to abstain from worldly conformity and instead “be transformed” by the renewing of their minds so that they will be wise as to the will of God. Paul is offering the believers a better option so that they can present a mind of wisdom to the Lord that seeks to serve Him as part of their “reasonable” offering of themselves.

This brings the reader to verse 3 in which Paul warns against pride. The goal is “sound judgment” (“sober thinking”)—Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996], 760) and this judgment is to be in viewing oneself correctly as “God has allotted to each a measure of faith.” Having left the “justification” section of Romans behind in chapters 3 and 4, why would Paul be asserting the “gift of faith” in Romans 12 when application is his goal and the immediate context is a prescription for how to offer acceptable worship God in response to His grace? If we were to allow for the context to direct our thinking, we would see that the Author/author has propelled His/his readers into right thinking about the composition of the local church.

In verses 4 and 5, Paul begins describing the Body, much as is seen in 1 Corinthians 12. In verse 6, we read, “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith...” Comparing verse 6 with verse 3, one quickly comes to the conclusion that the “faith” of verse 3 is speaking of the “gifts” in verse 6 which are given by God’s grace for the edification of the Body of Christ. This awesome diversity functioning as a loving unity known as the Church is to think soberly about themselves according to the “gifts/faith” that has been allotted to each one by the Lord (contra Moo, 761). In verses 6b-8, Paul unfolds some of the differing gifts that would be present within the Body of Christ as examples of the “measure of faith” that has been given to each believer. Paul is careful to begin by supplying to categories for these gifts, being “prophecy” (“speaking” -v.6b) and “service” (v. 7a), and then proceeds to elaborate on “teaching” (v.7b) and “exhortation” (v.8a) as fulfilling the “speaking” category, and “giving,” “leading,” and “mercy” (v. 8b) as rounding out the “serving” category.

The listing of “prophecy” and “service” as categories of spiritual gifts are consistent with Peter’s comments on the

“Dragging” Sinners into Saints?

An argument that often serves as the “main defense” for the Calvinist view that man is totally unable to respond to God is John 6:44. Reading this verse, the word *draw* is quickly singled out, with the Calvinist concluding that this word would be better understood as “drag.” Elliff asks a pivotal question, “Has any one of you come without God’s intervention?”, to which the Free Grace and Five-Point crowds would give a resounding “No!” Our disagreement is on the way in which God has intervened, but Elliff’s argument is not done. He writes, “The word *draw* in John 6:44 is, in fact, the word ‘drag.’ The dragging could be likened to that of Lot who was dragged away with ‘cords of love’ from Sodom. No one will come to Christ without the Father dragging him.”⁷⁸ Though the Gospel of John mentions nothing of Lot or his removal from Sodom, Elliff’s point still stands.

To place this argument in a more sophisticated setting, Sproul demonstrates that he understands the basic argument of the Free Grace position involving John 6:44.

What does it mean for the Father to draw people to Christ? I have often heard this text explained to mean that the Father must woo or entice men to Christ. Unless this wooing takes place, no man will come to Christ. However, man has the ability to resist this wooing and to refuse the enticement. The wooing, though it is necessary, is not compelling. In philosophical language that would mean that the drawing of God is a necessary condition but not a sufficient condition to bring men to Christ. In simpler language it means that we cannot come to Christ without the wooing, but the wooing

subject in 1 Pet 4:10-11 and should be understood as such in Romans 12:6b-7a. “The absence of a Greek article before ‘prophecy’ and before ‘ministry’ distinguishes them as categories in contrast to the following five specific examples (each with a Greek article) of these two categories. This is also seen in 1 Corinthians 14:3, in which ‘exhortation’ is subsumed under ‘prophecy’ as a specific example. In other verses prophecy is used in the sense of preaching (for example, 12:10)” (Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000], 267). Clearly the context of Romans 12:1-8 shows the reader that Paul does not have a “gift of faith” in mind as MacArthur has concluded, but rather cogent instructions on how to worship God acceptably in light of His profound grace. Seeing that “God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (Rom 12:3b), we can conclude that the “measure of faith” is that of spiritual gifts whereby the Assembly is to cultivate and exercise them for the building up of the one another (Eph 4:12-16), and though differing, are to operate as a unified whole, demonstrating an attitude of love that carries no hypocrisy (Rom 12:9a).

⁷⁸ Jim Elliff, “The Starving of the Church—V,” *Reformation and Revival*, Vol. 2, no. 1 (1993): 95.

does not guarantee that we will, in fact, come to Christ.⁷⁹

As with MacArthur, Sproul concludes that God's "wooing" is not "compelling," and that God's drawing is not a "sufficient condition" to bring someone to Christ are nothing more than assumptions made in fear that "faith" may be seen as meritorious. Sproul's sentiment are genuine, but his conclusions are erroneous.

Jesus Christ *is* wooing, "drawing" all men unto Himself (John 12:32). But Sproul's position is one and the same as that of Elliff. He explains his reasoning that the above understanding "does violence to the text of Scripture, particularly to the biblical meaning of the word *draw*."⁸⁰ From this, Sproul entertains the word's usage by Luke in Acts along with its use in the epistle of James. In each of these passages, Sproul observes, and rightly so, that the use of *elkuvw* means "drag." This can be affirmed if the context of the passage is allowed to determine the meaning of the word.

But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and *dragged* them into the market place before the authorities... (Acts 16:19- *emphasis added*)⁸¹

But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally *drag* you into court?" (Jas 2:6-*emphasis added*)

We would not conclude that the "seizing" of Paul and Silas would give way to their "wooing" into the market place before the authorities, nor would we consider that anyone would ever seek to "woo" us into court. Where context determines the meaning of a word, one should follow where the Word of God leads in its natural, plain reading of the text. In the examples that are provided, "drag" is the preferred use of *elkuvw*.

⁷⁹ Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 69.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ See also Acts 21:30.

However, two problems quickly arise when thinking about this use of $\epsilon\lambda\kappa\upsilon\omega\omega$ in John 6:44. First, why is a point being proven outside of John's Gospel when there are five total occurrences of this word within John's Gospel? The standard Reformed interpretation would fare well in an isolated analysis of this verse, but with consideration of the synthesis of John's Gospel, the Five-Point interpretation comes undone. Anderson notes Sproul's "illegitimate totality transfer" of *draw* noting that "Just because the word means 'drag against one's will' in James and Acts does not necessitate the same meaning in another context such as John 6:44. In Biblical Theology we seek to find John's meaning for the word in the context where he uses it."⁸² One need not venture outside of the Gospel of John to see how John uses this word.

In John 18:10, 21:6, and 21:11, each of these instances calls for a fair consideration of the context. With John 18:10, we read:

Simon Peter then, having a sword, *drew* it and struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear; and the slave's name was Malchus (*emphasis added*).

Should we conclude that Peter "drug" his sword out of its sheath, or would we better understand that the Author/author is trying to convey that $\epsilon\lambda\kappa\upsilon\omega\omega$ speaks to "unsheathing" or "drawing" a sword?

The same consideration should be made for John 21:6, 11.

And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch." So they cast, and then they were not able to *haul* it in because of the great number of fish (*emphasis added*).

So Simon Peter got up and *hauled* the net ashore, full of large fish—153 of them. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn (*emphasis added*).

Is *drag* an acceptable word for these situations, or does *haul* capture the Author/author's meaning? Would not *draw* be sufficient in communicating the same point being made (as found

⁸² David R. Anderson, "Regeneration: A Crux Interpretum," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Vol. 13, no. 25 (2000): 62.

in the KJV, NKJV [opting for “drag” in 21:11], Darby, Young’s Literal)? Apart from being taught the tenets of Five-Point Calvinism, it would be difficult to read John 6:44, whether English or Greek, as *drag*.

Second, *elkuvw* can be translated as *drag* should the context call for it, but it can also be translated as *draw* by the same means. Looking through the lexicons, one finds *elkuvw* to mean, “to move an object from one area to another in a pulling motion, to draw a person in the direction of values for inner life (to which the understanding of *attract* is conveyed), to appear to be pulled in a certain direction.”⁸³ Thayer records his findings on this word as, “unsheathe (as in Peter’s case),” while following closely with “a person forcibly and against his will (our *drag*, *drag off*)” while noting Acts 16:19 and 21:30, along with James 2:6 as the passages where this understanding could be possible. Thayer then adds, “to draw by inward power, lead, impel”⁸⁴ listing John 6:44 as the verse that conveys this meaning. Thayer connects this second meaning to John 12:32 and gives a rendering of Jesus’ words: “I by my moral, my spiritual, influence will win over to myself the hearts of all.”⁸⁵ Thayer’s choice is “win over,” not “drag.”

Moulton and Milligan note the literal sense of *elkw* as “draw,” citing the Paris Papyri’s use as “compel,” and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri as “impelled.” “Towing” as pertaining to a ship is also cited from the Papyrus de Magdola, but no mention of “drag” can be found.⁸⁶ Vincent who observes that a major distinction in the use of *elkuvw* and its comparison with *suvrw* is that the

⁸³ BDAG, 318.

⁸⁴ Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 204.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁸⁶ J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 204.

latter “is never used of Christ’s attraction of men,”⁸⁷ to which he references John 6:44 and 12:32, choosing to use the word “attraction” and not “drag.” Though the evidence provided is by no means exhaustive, it is credible and leaves the thought of the insistence of *drag* in John 6:44 by Elliff and Sproul as an intrusion when the context is considered.

Anderson provides the conclusive determination, stating “We conclude that ‘divine persuasion’ is exactly what the Bible depicts as the divine enablement necessary for a totally fallen being to believe in Christ for salvation. This is not *synergism*. God initiates the relationship, and God is the Persuader, the Wooer. Man is the responder. His ultimate faith is passive. He is a receptor, a receiver (John 1:12) of a divine gift.”⁸⁸

Other Reformed opinions on John 6:44 give us more of the same. Morris draws the argument to total inability, writing “Men like to feel independent. They think that they come or that they *can* come to Jesus of their own volition. Jesus assures us that this is an utter impossibility. No man, no man at all can come unless the Father draw him.”⁸⁹ Pink pushes for regeneration preceding faith in stating, “No man with an *unchanged* heart and mind will ever embrace God’s salvation. The inability here, then, is a moral one.”⁹⁰ Carson rejects the notion that John 6:44 evidences “prevenient grace” as being “dispensed to every individual” declaring that the “‘drawing’ is selective, or else the negative note in v.44 is meaningless.”⁹¹ Johannine

⁸⁷ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 151.

⁸⁸ Anderson, “Regeneration,” 63.

⁸⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 372.

⁹⁰ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 337.

⁹¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 293. Carson dismisses the idea that John 12:32 should be considered when understanding John 6:44, opting for the typical Reformed escape hatch that this refers to “all men

scholar Andreas Köstenberger falls into the same line when he promotes the understanding that “Jesus proceeds to underscore the human inability to gain salvation apart from divine enablement.” He goes on to note that “People can come to him only if the Father who sent Jesus draws them. Ultimately, therefore, salvation depends not on human believing, but on the ‘drawing’ action of the Father (presumably by the Holy Spirit) by which God moves a person to faith in Christ.”⁹²

Agreement between Free Grace and Reformed Theology can be seen in that God initiates the relationship with man. Differences emerge when the Calvinist states that this is only initiated with “some,” while Free Grace would state that God’s initiation is for “all without exception” (Absolute #4). There is no doubt in the text: God does the drawing, but who is drawn and how God draws are matters of disagreement. The Five-Point approach has read their construct into John 6:44, pushing for total inability, regeneration preceding faith, and God’s isolated drawing of only the elect. Free Grace Theology sees God’s drawing in considering the immediate context, as well as John’s Gospel as a whole.⁹³

Though it has been discouraged by the Five-Point comments listed above, the connection between John 6:44 and John 12:32 is undeniable. Does the Reformed position work when considering the use of ἐλκινῶν in John 12:32? Hendricksen seems to think so, stating:

Here the emphasis is on the divine decree of predestination carried out in history. When Jesus refers to the divine *drawing* activity, he employs the term which clearly indicates that more than *moral influence* is indicated. The Father does not merely beckon or advise,

without distinction,” and not “all men without exception.” However, nothing in the text, nor the context, warrants this conclusion.

⁹² Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* in The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 213.

⁹³ These are Lenski’s sentiments: “No man can possibly draw himself to Jesus. The Father, God himself, must come with his divine power and must do this drawing; else it will never be effected.” -Lenski, *Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 475.

he *draws*! The same verb (e1kw, e1kuw) occurs also in 12:32, where the drawing activity is ascribed to the Son; and further, in 18:10; 21:6, 11; Acts 16:19; 21:30; and Jas. 2:6.

The *drawing* of which these passages speak indicates a very powerful – we may even say, an *irresistible* – activity. To be sure, man resists, but his resistance is ineffective. It is in that sense that we speak of God’s grace as being irresistible.⁹⁴

Let’s not miss the implications of what was just stated. Though it was lumped into (or more accurately “glossed over”) the sum total of John’s use of e1kw and e1kuw, Hendricksen has concluded that John 12:32 should be understood in the sense of an irresistible drawing activity.

This conclusion misses an important detail in the verse. John 12:32 states:

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

One cannot afford to discount the point of “all men” being drawn by Christ when He is lifted up (i.e. crucified- John 12:33). This is not a special segment of people, nor the undeserving recipients of a still-to-take-place culmination or a pre-history election of God, but everyone who would ever live (1 John 2:2), for nothing in the surrounding context directs the reader otherwise.⁹⁵

When placing John 12:32 against Elliff and Sproul’s previous argument for the word *drag*, one must be consistent and ask if this understanding would suffice.

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will *drag* all men to Myself.”

⁹⁴ William Hendricksen, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* in New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 238.

⁹⁵ Some would conclude that John 6:37 would contextually point the reader to a select group of people, but this demonstrates the failures of an analytical approach to the text that gives little attention to the synthesis of the book. Compare John 12:32 with 6:37, 39; 17:2, 6, 9, 24; & 18:9 showing that those who have been “given” to Jesus from the Father are the Eleven and not “the elect” nor the “future elect” as is often understood by the Five-Point Calvinist. While John 17:24 may cause some to think that Jesus is speaking of the “future elect,” the request that is made of the Father is that “I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.” Are we to conclude that redeemed individuals were not guaranteed glorification, or is Jesus speaking of the Eleven and their experience of fellowship with Him so that they may see His glory, as given to Him by the Father, to which He equates with the “love” that the Father had for Jesus before the foundation of the world? This speaks to their experience of fellowship with Christ on Earth and not a Divinely-submitted request because their glorification is uncertain.

If God's *dragging* is irresistible as Elliff and Sproul have claimed, and if everyone is being *dragged* to Christ since the moment of His crucifixion, then by conclusion, would not the Five-Point Calvinist be advocating for universalism? This ramification of their eisegesis of *elkuvw* has caused a "glossing over" when considering John's use of the word.⁹⁶ Again, the logical system of Five-Point Calvinism is the culprit that hinders the text from speaking for itself.⁹⁷

Looking across John's Gospel, Tony Evans succinctly observes that "Jesus is 'the true light that give light to everyone' (1:9)." He then explains, "It's what a person does with that light, then, that determines whether or not he will come to Jesus, who is the only one who has seen the Father (6:46). This drawing is universal (12:32; 16:7-11) and can be rejected (Acts 7:51)."⁹⁸

Again, Five-Point Calvinism is advocating for the same essential principle of man being unable to come to God without His prior initiation of the relationship. The discord between the two schools of thought lies in what this initiation of the relationship by God looks like. Is it regeneration preceding faith followed by the "gift of faith," or is it something else?

⁹⁶ This fact causes Carson to admit "Yet despite the strong predestinarian strain, it must be insisted with no less vigour that John emphasizes the responsibility of people to come to Jesus, and can excoriate them for refusing to do so (*e.g.* 5:40)." -Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 293.

⁹⁷ Even Alford and Lenski cannot shake the Calvinist system's influence. Alford affirms that Christ drawing all men is happening now, and "is being exerted on all the world – in accordance with the Lord's prophecy in ch. xii. 32." Yet he succumbs, writing that the "individual will must be turned to Christ by the Father, Whose covenanted promise is, that He will so turn it in answer to prayer." -Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 764. Lenski connects John 6:44 and 12:32 stating that they are the same, but leaves the reader in obscurity and mystery as to why some are saved and others are not -See Lenski, *Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, 876.

⁹⁸ Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 1032.

How Does God Seek After Man?

The “Scriptures teach that it is God who takes the initiative. He is the one who seeks us; not the other way around,”⁹⁹ and while the Five-Point Calvinist would begin introducing a salvific predestination and foreordination into the argument, the Free Grace approach would survey the biblical evidence put forth, finding no less than four ways that demonstrate God’s fervent pursuit (His “wooing”) of His fallen creatures.

First (as briefly noted earlier), the Scriptures tell of God’s initiative in reaching fallen man in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. John records Jesus saying, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John 12:32).¹⁰⁰ The apostle then provides a commentary for his readers so that confusion will be dispersed stating, “But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die” (John 12:33). The event of the crucifixion brought about an altered approach in the missional pursuit of God. This fact shows God to be an “external Initiator” in His desire to reach fallen man.

Before the cross, Israel’s responsibility was to uphold the Law of God as His witnesses (Isa 43:10) which would serve as a beacon with which to draw the nations/Gentiles (pagans) to her, observing her righteous statutes and the profound intimacy that she enjoyed with YHWH

⁹⁹ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, Vol. 27, in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 109.

¹⁰⁰ Well-intentioned rebuttals are made about the interpretation of the word “all” in 12:32 noting that John is referring to only a subset of people, whom the Five-Point Calvinist quickly labels as “the elect,” but the context of John 12:31 brings clarity in speaking of the judgment that is upon the “world,” and that the ruler of this “world” will be cast out. This “ruler” is clearly Satan (John 14:30; 16:11), a point that proves vital when the Five-Point Calvinist wants to argue about the interpretation of the word “world,” often redefining it to mean “the world of the elect.” Contextually, we cannot afford to make such an error, for we would have to concede that the judgment of 12:31 would be upon the “elect” and the ruler (Satan) would be ruling over the “elect.” Inconsistencies aside, the death of Jesus Christ initiated a drawing effect on the totality of the human race. For such a rebuttal, see Steven J. Lawson, *Pillars of Grace (AD 100–1564)*, Vol. 2, *A Long Line of Godly Men* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2011), 13.

Elohim (Deut 4:6-8). In commanding this approach, the love of God for the world is promoted (Absolute #4a).

Israel was elected, empowered, qualified, and given the opportunity in centrally located Canaan to mediate between God and the nations. This mediatorial work was to be carried out through living according to the word God had given so that nations would take note of and desire to join in the blessing, wonder, and glory of life with and under his beneficent [*sic*] reign.¹⁰¹

Israel was to be a holy nation (Exod 19:5-6) that faithfully represented a holy God. Though in large part Israel failed, there are moments of glory found in the obedience of Israel that accomplished this exact purpose. For instance, “When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with difficult questions” (1 Kgs 10:1). The queen’s interactions with Solomon and her observation of the blessings of God over Israel caused her to exclaim:

“It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom. Nevertheless I did not believe the reports, until I came and my eyes had seen it. And behold, the half was not told me. You exceed in wisdom and prosperity the report which I heard. How blessed are your men, how blessed are these your servants who stand before you continually and hear your wisdom. Blessed be the Lord your God who delighted in you to set you on the throne of Israel; because the Lord loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness” (1 Kgs 10:6b-9).

Exodus 9:18-20 and Joshua 2:8-14 also serve as fleeting instances where YHWH’s missional desires are seen, but never to the fruition that was obviously expected.

With the death of the Messiah on the cross, we are told by His own prediction that He will “draw all men” unto Himself. What is it that draws all men? Kerrey replies, “The biblical connection between the cross and love is undeniable, and the love of Jesus is the most plausible

¹⁰¹ Gerard Van Groningen, “Israel,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed., Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 380.

attractational force. What other aspect of such a gruesome death would be attractive?”¹⁰² With His death, all men are now being drawn by God’s love to Jesus Christ.

Second is the fact of conscience which rests upon every person. In that pivotal moment when Adam and Eve had the choice to either sin or abstain, their choice brought about the introduction of conscience into the human race. Yes, the sin nature has now been passed on to Adam’s progeny and physical death was now a certain end, but so has the ability to discern between right and wrong as understood by the conscience. This is a basic tenet of Bible interpretation for the Dispensationalist. Anderson shows this progression when he writes, “The first dispensation or administration in God’s dealing with man is often called *Innocence*. But after they sinned, they did have some knowledge of good and evil. God incorporated this knowledge into a new feature of man’s spirit to help them distinguish between good and evil. We call this new feature man’s conscience and the second dispensation *Conscience*.”¹⁰³

Despite one’s affirmation or rejection of the dispensational distinctions, it is undeniable that the Fall produced a profound awareness of right and wrong through man, ultimately leading to YHWH’s judgment of the world because “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Gen 6:5-6). Culpability was an understood conclusion. For the Lord to be sorry that He had made man, and for their to be grief in His heart shows us that man’s ability to act otherwise and to respond favorably to his surroundings and the stewarding of his life were a possibility. As an aside, the grief of God is expressed due to the heinous rebellion of the entire world, not just a chosen few.

¹⁰² Robert J. Kerrey, *How Does God Draw People to Believe in Jesus? A Biblical Analysis of Alternative Answers and Why It Matters* (Grace Theology Press, 2019), 147.

¹⁰³ David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: 1 John—Relationship or Fellowship?* (Grace Theology Press, 2013), 178.

If they were *chosen*, why should God be excessively sorrowful? Their destination is certain and sure. If they were part of the *non-elect*, why grieve at all? For the Five-Point Calvinist, the eternal decrees of God cannot be thwarted. Their damnation was already predetermined.

Man's capacity to respond to God is perfectly intact, though admittedly skewed by the Fall. If this were not the case, the Flood should be deemed an unjust judgment. However, this is not what the Scriptures reveal. The Lord tells Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth" (Gen 6:13). The Lord understood mankind to be perfectly accountable for their actions. With no documentation of YHWH's expectations (and from Genesis 4-6 the Scriptures reveal no stipulations), the only revealed asset that would be available to man, and was thus used by God to distinguish good from evil while also being found as sufficient to hold man accountable, is man's conscience.

The fact of man's conscience leads naturally into the third way that God has taken the initiative in seeking sinful man. In Romans 2:14-16 we read:

"For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus."

The Apostle Paul is clear that the Law of God has been "written in their hearts," speaking of unregenerate Gentiles. Thus, Gentiles are doing works that agree with God's holy Law in their unregenerate state, yet they are not knowledgeable of the commandments because they are not the people who had previously received the Law (that being Israel; Exod 20:1-18; Deut 5:6-21).

Commenting on this verse, Flowers writes, "All people, everywhere and in all times, since the fall, have an innate knowledge of both good and evil. In other words, all people

naturally understand the difference between what is morally right and wrong.”¹⁰⁴ This is precisely what Paul understands in using the word *φύσις* which has been translated as “by nature” in the ESV, NKJV, NIV, CSB, and AV. This word has been defined as a “condition or circumstance as determined by birth,” “the natural character of an entity,” “the regular or established order of things,” and “an entity as a product of nature.”¹⁰⁵ Out of the 14 uses of *φύσις* in the New Testament, 11 of those uses are by Paul and 7 instances are found within the book of Romans (1:26; 2:14, 27; 11:21, 24 [x3]). Moule understands this as “when they act on the principles of it [the Law], observing in any measure the eternal difference of right and wrong,”¹⁰⁶ with Thayer showing it to mean “guided by their natural sense of what is right and proper,”¹⁰⁷ all while clearly in an unregenerate state. For them to be something other than unregenerate would make the apostle’s argument pointless.

To further complications for the Calvinist a mention must be made about Paul’s comments involving “their conscience” and “their thoughts” (Rom 2:15b). Both of these entities “bear witness” regarding each person’s actions and will actually serve in the capacity of “witnesses” when it comes time for the judgment of God (Rom 2:16b). Each one’s conscience and each person’s thoughts will either bring charges against them or defend their actions.¹⁰⁸

If unregenerate Gentiles are *dead* in the Calvinist sense, how can this be? If only those who are elect are those whom God will *make alive*, how can the unregenerate ones be doing

¹⁰⁴ Leighton Flowers, *God’s Provision for All: A Defense of God’s Goodness* (Trinity Academic Press, 2019), 7.

¹⁰⁵ BDAG, 1069-1070.

¹⁰⁶ Handley Moule, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1975), 64.

¹⁰⁷ Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 660.

¹⁰⁸ The use of two witnesses should not surprise us in keeping with Deut 17:6-7 and 19:15, being a common, called-upon expression throughout the OT and NT stating the credibility and accountability expected in any given matter. See Deut 4:26; 30:19; Matt 18:16; John 5:31-39; Acts 10:43; Rev 11:3.

works that are in agreement with God’s holy Law? How can the internal witnesses of the thoughts and consciences of people testify to what that person has done “instinctively” when they have not been chosen? Obviously, God has taken the initiative to write His Law on the hearts (minds) of every person showing an innate understanding of right and wrong. Such awareness stands as a clear indicator of the Creator’s love for His creation (Absolute #4a).

Fourth is the present work of the Holy Spirit. In John 16:7, Jesus reveals that it is to the “advantage” of the eleven that He leaves them and the Helper comes. Verse 8 then begins with Jesus stating “and when He comes...” giving His audience a clear “time indicator” as to when the Holy Spirit’s unique ministry will begin. This obviously speaks of the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4), being the birth of the Church, the Body of Christ. This is the time that the Spirit will begin this special ministry. The activity of the Spirit will be that of “conviction.” This word is *elevgcw*, meaning “to convict, refute, confute, generally with a suggestion of the shame of the person convicted.”¹⁰⁹

The audience that will receive this convicting work of the Holy Spirit is identified as “the world.” This word (*kosmoV*) has a wide array of meanings, but due to the surrounding context, we can understand this as the Spirit’s work of conviction in relation to unbelievers. This is a sound conclusion when noting that the areas of conviction are going to be in regards to sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8b) with each area being expounded upon by Jesus in John 16:9-11. The Calvinist must answer as to why the Spirit would waste His time convicting the world of such matters when they are largely unable to respond. Some have advocated for such a

¹⁰⁹ Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 202. This understanding does not permit the idea of spiritual conversion from unregenerate to regenerate as assumed by The Gospel Coalition’s Foundation Documents when it reads, “The good news of the Bible is not only individual forgiveness but the renewal of the whole creation. God put humanity in the garden to cultivate the material world for his own glory and for the flourishing of nature and the human community. *The Spirit of God not only converts individuals* (e.g., John 16:8) but also renews and cultivates the face of the earth (e.g., Gen 1:2; Psalm 104:30)” [*emphasis added*]. -The Gospel Coalition, “What is Gospel-Centered Ministry,” *Foundation Documents* (The Gospel Coalition, 2008), V., 4. Conviction is not the equivalent of conversion.

work to be the “effectual calling” of the Spirit to the elect,¹¹⁰ though nothing in the text warrants the concept of an “effectual calling.” If the Spirit’s convicting work is not in alignment with activating God’s “elect,” in what way does this supernatural ministry come about?

When the Spirit comes, He will indwell the believer in Jesus Christ from that moment forward as foretold by Christ (John 14:16b). Therefore, these three areas of conviction will be addressed through the believer, making every believer in Christ indispensable to the administration of the Spirit’s work. The Holy Spirit is a light through the believer, and when the believer is walking in the Spirit, this light pierces the darkness of this present age, holding it accountable for its unbelief, and projecting a beacon of hope that is answered only in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first area of the Spirit’s convicting work through the Christian is “sin.” Sin is the main issue, for it is what has separated everyone from God. This conviction exuding from the believer in Christ is for the purpose of convincing the unregenerate world of its need for a Savior. Whether it be a holy lifestyle of obedience (John 14:21), or a clear presentation of the Gospel message, “sin” is the primary issue that must be addressed seeing that Jesus has paid the price in full to reconcile the world unto God (2 Cor 5:19). Regardless of the avenue taken, the vehicle for the convicting work of the Holy Spirit will be that of the believer. Reverend George C. Grubb writes:

The most awful thing that a man can do is to have a doubt about the credibility of Jesus, to wander on in the darkness of his own delusions. How the world needs that conviction today; and the world can only get it through seeing Christ shining out of you. The Holy Spirit does not act immediately on the world; He always acts mediately through the members of the Body of Christ. Why is the world not convicted of sin? Because the Spirit of God has come in such little power to us. Do not be blaming the world; do not be

¹¹⁰ See John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, Vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 139; and Alfred Junior Martin, “The Sovereignty of Grace as Seen in Romans 8:28–30,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 99 (1942): 465–466.

finding fault with the world always. “People are so Gospel-hardened,” you say; they are not Gospel-hardened: they have not seen the shining Jesus in you.¹¹¹

The second area in the Spirit’s present work is “righteousness.” This issue is listed with the explanation that Jesus will “go to the Father and you no longer see Me” (John 16:10b). The idea of Jesus going to the Father is something referred throughout this discourse (John 13:36; 14:1-6, 19, 28; 16:5), so the theme is not unusual. At the time of this teaching, Jesus will soon be crucified, buried, resurrected, and then ascend (Acts 1:9). Such a time will be Jesus’ “going away” as spoken of in John 16:7b. Having “gone away,” the Spirit of truth will then “come,” and His coming will be advantageous because of the convicting ministry that He will give the disciples in the world upon His indwelling of them. This display of righteousness may be something as simple as civic obedience, which is said to be “the will of God” and that of “doing right” by the believer (1 Pet 2:15). Such righteousness can also be seen in the love that is experienced between believers when they are loving one another as Christ has loved them (John 13:34-35), for there is no other love like it in the world. This “love” is only possible when walking in the Spirit. Thus, we see that Jesus’ comments about going “to the Father and you no longer see Me” (John 16:10b) speaks to the time of His absence and the Spirit’s presence.

The third area of conviction in the Spirit’s present ministry is “judgment.” The reason provided is that the “ruler of this world has been judged” (John 16:11b). The words used for “judgment” and “judged” are *krivsiV* and *krivnw* respectively. Each holds the understanding of ‘a separating, sundering, separation; a trial, contest, judgment; i.e. opinion or decision given

¹¹¹ George C. Grubb, “Four Ministries of the Holy Spirit,” in *Keswick’s Triumphant Voice*, ed. Herbert F. Stevenson (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Ltd./Zondervan Publishing House, 1963), 376-377.

concerning anything, especially concerning justice and injustice, right and wrong.”¹¹² Judgment results in a separation that takes place based on a standard that has been set, but not met.

The judgment that will come upon this world is a legitimate promise with the condemnation of Satan serving as evidence. “That great enemy of truth is now living on borrowed time. Judgment will come, but the focus here is on an awareness that the prince of this world now stands condemned.”¹¹³ Just as he is already judged by God, being an invisible, celestial being, so will the world be judged who has had the greater opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as carried out by His Church. The already-judgment of the greater being guarantees the certain judgment of the lesser beings.

Jesus’ words foretelling the present-day ministry of the Holy Spirit are full of purpose, with each area being specific and intentional. Reading them through gives the reader no sense of a special class of people who have the only hope of being saved. Jesus’ words have the “world” as the recipients of the Spirit’s ministry through the believer. There is no evidence for a segmented class, nor is there any indication that they are unable to respond.

Five-Point Calvinist D.A. Carson comments on the convicting work of the Spirit and does so in such a way that the Free Grace proponent could easily agree with. He writes:

These verses, however they are interpreted, suggest (although they do not explicitly state) that, apart from this work of the Counselor, fallen human beings cannot truly come to grips with sin and righteousness and judgment. Earlier we wondered just how a person who belongs to the “world,” the world which can neither perceive Jesus by the eye of faith nor obey him, could ever cease belonging to the world and become a follower of Jesus. A partial answer is advanced in these verses. Even though the world cannot accept the Spirit of truth (14:17), nevertheless the Spirit of truth comes to convict the world. This could well serve as a steppingstone to conversion.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 361.

¹¹³ Kenneth O. Gangel, *John*, Vol. 4, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 300.

¹¹⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 138.

For the Calvinist, this comes through the means of God choosing whom He will redeem without any regard for their person. For the Free Grace camp, this is the present work of the indwelling Holy Spirit in and through each individual Christian as harmoniously coupled with the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) and the command for worldwide evangelism (Acts 1:8).

One final point of evidence, though it would not be classified as how God is seeking the unregenerate, is the activity of the Adversary. In opposition to the present work of God in drawing all men, we are told that Satan has “blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor 4:4b). With the Five-Point Calvinist’s view of only certain individuals having been chosen by God, there must be a question as to Satan’s waste of time and energy in blinding a people who may or may not be elect. If they are one of the chosen, Satan’s blinding is a fruitless effort, for their justification is only a matter of time and cannot be thwarted. If they are part of the non-elect, Satan’s blinding efforts only double-over on that which God has already ensured, showing that God and Satan are working together toward the common goal of ensuring the damnation of the non-elect. Such a disturbing conclusion cannot possibly represent the Calvinist in a faithful manner, can it?

Asking this question of Calvin, he reasons, “Satan is also said to blind the minds of those who believe not (2 Cor. 4:4). But how so, unless that a spirit of error is sent from God himself, making those who refuse to obey the truth to believe a lie?”¹¹⁵ Calvin’s answer is to reprove Paul as not probing deep enough into the mysteries of God to see that it is ultimately YHWH who has decreed a “spirit of error” and not Satan. Calvin then provides a summary statement for his section entitled, “Instrumentality of the Wicked Employed by God, While He Stays Pure” in stating, “Since the will of God is said to be the cause of all things, all the counsels and actions of

¹¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997) xviii, 2.

men must be held to be governed by his providence; so that he not only exerts his power in the elect, who are guided by the Holy Spirit, but also forces the reprobate to do him service.”¹¹⁶ It is Calvin’s *elect/non-elect* mentality that has forced his thinking about God’s attributes into a contradiction of unrecognizable conclusions, making Him the Supreme Instigator of celestial evil, actively damning certain men through a scapegoat agency. The notion of total inability seems senseless when the divine decrees of the Creator are working irrefutable evil against you.

Standing apart from these conclusions is the Free Grace viewpoint which understands God’s love for the entire world (Absolute #4a) and that human free will remains despite the Fall of Man (Absolute #3a). Thus, 2 Corinthians 4:4 should be understood for the plain, normal meaning that one understands when they read the passage. Satan has blinded men from “seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ,” for if they were to see it, they would respond in faith and be regenerated. This shows the dichotomy of *elect* and *non-elect* to be understood in the Scriptures as something other than a salvific designation determined by a prior, arbitrary choice made by a God who works both good and evil without contradiction, but also without explanation. While not denying the use of “elect” in the Scriptures, the Free Grace believer would advocate for the context of the passage to aid greatly in determining the meaning of the word(s) in question rather than subscribing a preconceived meaning to every usage.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

Evangelism

The greatest concern for the pastor of the local church is the effect that such theology has upon evangelism. Despite the fervency of the Five-Point Calvinist for missions,¹¹⁷ the astute and insightful treatise of the prominent Calvinist scholar,¹¹⁸ or the rationalizations and theological gymnastics that come with trying to mold YHWH Elohim in the Calvinistic system,¹¹⁹ genuine pleas for evangelism are nothing more than mystical search parties for some and not all. If God must flip a switch and give the gift of faith so that one has the ability to believe in the Gospel, especially in light of His (supposedly) predestining decree of only some who will be redeemed, what would it ultimately matter if the believer shares the Gospel or not? Will not the sovereign God do all things according to His will? Closely connected in doctrinal proximity when following the Calvinistic view of total inability to its logical conclusion is that of fatalism. It is not hard to see that the thinking Christian will be discouraged to share his or her faith with others, should they hold fast to this teaching.

Coekin tries to bring an inviting light to this perspective, stating that “Since he [God] has chosen many, our evangelism is the joyful privilege of finding his elect with his gospel, like miners digging for gold in a pit.”¹²⁰ One can hardly fathom such thoughtlessness that accompanies such words, showing that the Calvinist trappings have a tendency to result in a cold heart, as well as a base theological outlook. While the gold is esteemed as precious and

¹¹⁷ See David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2010).

¹¹⁸ See J.I. Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

¹¹⁹ See John Piper, *Does God Desire All to be Saved?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

¹²⁰ Richard Coekin, *Ephesians for You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 15.

indispensable, the dirt is cast aside, trampled upon, and considered to be only in the way of those that the Lord truly values. All of life and existence is reduced to nothing more than a game of hide and seek, orchestrated by the only Power who can affect change in bringing one from hidden to found, but not from dirt to gold.

Again, the basic elementary principles of the Word of God are forgotten in that Jesus died for the dirt of the world. While a common verse, the sound theology of John 3:16 and His love for the world can no longer afford to be overlooked by the Five-Point Calvinist. Free Grace Theology values this truth, being plainly stated, without need of verification or clarification that “God loves every human equally and Christ died as the propitiation for every human” (Absolute #4- John 1:29; 3:16; Heb 2:9; 1 Tim 2:4-6; 1 John 2:2).

Oh, that contemporary Christendom had more Calvinists like C.H. Spurgeon who would go beyond the logical limitations of their theological system for the sake of demonstrating an impassioned obedience to sharing the Gospel of God’s grace in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ because his obedience matters! Harmon has excelled in detailing Spurgeon’s thoughts, especially in response to the Hyper-Calvinism of his day. He records that:

Spurgeon believed that gospel invitations were to be universal. The Hyper-Calvinists of his day believed the gospel was a means for the ingathering of God’s elect. Nothing should be said by way of encouraging individuals to believe that the promises of God are to them particularly. Spurgeon rejected such restrictions quoting Rev 22:17, “Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.” He would preach and give gospel appeals like a fervent Arminian Methodist. Frequently, Spurgeon was heard to say, “I fear I am not a very good Calvinist because I pray that the Lord will save all of the elect and then elect some more.”¹²¹ He proclaimed in a sermon:

“I have preached here, you know it, invitations as free as those which proceeded from the lips of Master John Wesley. Van Armin himself, the founder of the Arminian school, could not more honestly have pleaded with the very vilest of the

¹²¹ William R. Estep, “The Making of a Prophet: An Introduction to Charles Haddon Spurgeon,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, Vol. 4 (October 1984): 6; quoted in Jerry Harmon, “The Soteriology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon and How It Impacted His Evangelism,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Vol. 19, no. 36 (2006): 58.

vile to come to Jesus than I have done. Have I therefore felt in my mind that there was a contradiction here? No, nothing of the kind.”¹²²

Clearly, Spurgeon understood the limitations of Calvinism and their stifling implications on the watering-down, if not the total dismissal, of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. What other conclusion could he have reached that would make him violate his theological convictions for the sake of knowing that he was being more obedient to the pure teachings of the Word of God?

Sanctification

Another issue of concern becomes that of the sanctification of the believer. How does one know that they have been “made alive” and given the gift of faith? In this situation, one’s works become the thermometer by which to measure one’s standing with God. Schreiner encourages this, writing, “Believers are justified by grace alone through faith alone, but faith always produces good works, and such good works *are necessary* for eternal life. They function as the necessary evidence that one has new life in Christ.”¹²³ (*emphasis added*) Should works be present in the believer? Yes, but all works are not readily evident, and they are never to be considered as the basis for verifying one’s justification. Only personal faith does that.

The Calvinist view reconfigures the sights of the Christian Life, turning the focal point of one’s salvation on themselves and their performance rather than the Lord Jesus Christ and His provision for living.¹²⁴ Such introspection can make for the conclusion of not having experienced “true salvation,” which thrusts one into the Lordship trap. Yet, this is not Paul’s perspective of

¹²² Charles Spurgeon, *Election* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1978), 80; quoted in Harmon, “The Soteriology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon and How It Impacted His Evangelism,” *JOTGES*, 59.

¹²³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010), 146.

¹²⁴ See John R. Van Gelderen, *Experiencing Jesus: Personal Revival Through the Spirit-Filled Life* (Ann Arbor, MI: Revival Focus, 2017), 43-118.

sanctification. Instead, he writes, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). In short, the believer is progressing toward that which he or she esteems. If it is a constant reassessment of the reality of one’s justification based on their current performance and choices, the results are sure to be pride (if they believe that they are doing well) or doubt (due to disobedience). However, if one looks to Christ, and Christ alone, He does the work in the believer and lives His life through the believer. This is biblical sanctification.

The sanctification of the believer in Christ is also understood to be a cooperative process, with God and the believer in synergism. Evidence has been found that this is affirmed by Reformed and Free Grace proponents alike,¹²⁵ but true agreement from the Reformed position is wholly impossible. Boice quotes from Calvin’s *Institutes* on this matter:

Why, then, are we justified by faith? Because by faith we grasp Christ’s righteousness, by which alone we are reconciled to God. *Yet you could not grasp this without at the same time grasping sanctification also.* For he “is given unto us for righteousness, wisdom, sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). Therefore *Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify.* These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems; those whom he redeems, he justifies; those whom he justifies, he sanctifies.... *Thus it is clear how true it is that we are justified not without works yet not through works,* since in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, *sanctification is just as much included as righteousness.*¹²⁶ (*emphasis added*)

The sanctification of which Calvin speaks is not positional, but practical, calling for works as an indispensable evidence that redemption has taken place. This stance advances the conversation into the Lordship Salvation debate, which espouses works as a necessary evidence that conversion has occurred. The Free Grace perspective will not allow for such an intrusion on the

¹²⁵ Joseph Dillow, “The Role of Works in Justification,” in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology: With Respect to Saving Faith, Perseverance, and Assurance*, ed. Fred Chay (Houston, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017), 130–134.

¹²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 798, quoted in Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 425.

Gospel that would yield to the uncertainty of salvation due to a fluctuating measurement like man's works (Absolute #2). No, Free Grace holds that no good works are required either before or after one has trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation (Absolute #1). Free Grace holds that "faith alone" is faith *by itself*.

This Calvinistic view of sanctification also has the potential to create superiority among the brethren. With total inability being overcome only by the active work of God on a person's life, it would be only natural to understand that some are saved, and some are not. Within Reformed Theology, this becomes a means of entitlement, conjuring conversations regarding the Perseverance of the Believer and common quotations of John 8:31 and Matthew 10:22 and 24:13 without regard to context, audience, speaker, or recipients being considered. Packer shows the Reformed reasoning regarding this matter:

If "good works" (activities of serving God and others) do not follow from our profession of faith, we are as yet believing only from the head, not from the heart: in other words, justifying faith (*fiducia*) is not yet ours. The truth is that, though we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone. It produces moral fruit; it expresses itself "through love" (Gal. 5:6); it transforms one's way of living; it begets virtue. This is not only because holiness is commanded, but also because the regenerate heart, of which *fiducia* is the expression, desires holiness and can find full contentment only in seeking it.¹²⁷

But what happens when the believer does not desire holiness? Such an expectation removes Christ as the center of salvation, demanding more than Him alone, and seemingly grants omniscience to those in judgment over the validity of one's conversion. Better that we listen to the apostle Paul in this matter as he warns the Corinthian Church writing, "Do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God" (1 Cor 4:5). No one but the Lord Jesus is all-knowing regarding

¹²⁷ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 160.

someone's salvation. The responsibility of the local church is to evangelize and disciple, not to sort through the lot determining which ones are the "keepers." The pride that would fuel this thinking of superiority is of the world and not the Lord (1 John 2:16).

Church History's Bias in Sanctification

It would only be natural for the believer in Christ to read books about the Christian Life for a greater understanding. Such works that would be recommended could contain dangerous and erroneous precepts. This concern is found in the movement of the Puritans. Lovelace identifies this perspective, writing "Assurance of salvation was a crucial focus for Puritans and pietists, a precious gift that *could not easily be attained and could easily be lost*. Not that salvation itself could be lost, as in the Roman Catholic approach. But Protestants persisting in serious sin were virtually required to lose their assurance."¹²⁸ (*emphasis added*) This is a tragic assessment in two ways.

First, if active service and ministry for the Lord is not done from an understanding of God's full acceptance of the believer in the Beloved, it can and will only be done with a view that seeks to gain that Divine acceptance by ardent effort. Such an approach makes works the means of acceptance and not the result. Second, the statement "Protestants persisting in serious sin were virtually required to lose their assurance" shows that the persistently erring Protestant had, at least in their view, lost their salvation, should they arrive again at sober thinking. Having come to their senses, they would conclude that they were "never truly saved" to begin with. Their Christian stewardship on Earth would be wasted in re-verifying their justification rather than resting in the promise of Christ in giving them "eternal life" (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47).

¹²⁸ Richard F. Lovelace, "Evangelical Spirituality: A Church Historian's Perspective," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (1988): 30.

This emphasis on works as a validation of one's election in Puritan thought is summarized eloquently by Yarhouse:

Puritan writing emphasized the assurance of God's covenant of grace, in contrast to the covenant of works where rewards were given to those who fulfilled God's law. Puritan theology affords us two elements of assurance: understanding of God's covenant of grace and encouragement to those in anguish over their participation in the covenant. Because of who God is, Christians can have confidence that he will fulfill his promises. But what of one's standing in the covenant? Puritans tended to focus on evidences of such standing, most typically recognized via experience.¹²⁹

Evidence was needed to verify one's standing with Christ. And not only that, but such evidence was to be known through "experience." Such trappings risk the assumption that Christ and His promise of eternal life are simply not enough. One can see how the Puritan approach to sanctification would actually produce a deficiency in assurance, making one manic while they obsessively evaluate and re-evaluate their every move. This is not a sure foundation for Christian growth.¹³⁰

Regrettably, much of the fine work that has been done in the area of the believer's sanctification through the Keswick Movement in the mid-1800s through the early 1900s has been largely dismissed in favor of the Puritans. Yet, it is the Keswick Movement that was a better and more biblical outgrowth from the Protestant Reformation. Hume notes this, writing:

The cardinal doctrine of the Christian Faith, "the just shall live by faith," not only set off the Protestant Reformation in 1517 but also inaugurated the Keswick Movement in 1875. The former emphasized the justification of the sinner on the basis of faith alone. The latter emphasized the daily sanctification of the saint on the basis of faith alone. The need in the church for the reemphasis of this neglected truth gave birth to this modern holiness movement.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Mark A. Yarhouse, "Applied Integration of a Sibbesian View of Assurance," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 7, no. 4 (2003): 46.

¹³⁰ See also Fred Chay, "Justified by the Law, Known by Your Works—Romans 2," in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology: With Respect to Saving Faith, Perseverance, and Assurance*, ed. Fred Chay (Houston, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017), 487–496.

¹³¹ Paul Eugene Hume, "The Doctrinal Contribution of the Keswick Movement," (Th.M. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1955), 1.

The significance of the Keswick view of sanctification is found in its theological understanding of salvation. Hume records that, “Keswick, especially in its earlier days tended to separate justification and sanctification as being two separate acts to be claimed by faith.”¹³² This proved to be a more superior way when considering that the leaders of the early Keswick Movement were all Calvinists. Despite their theological position, they understood the necessity for justification to be by itself, while being kept uninfected by the “works” that characterized sanctification.¹³³ This should be the desired foundation for the local church pastor, setting the stage for building solid walls for every believer in evangelism (justification) and discipleship (sanctification) upon the unshakable foundation of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11).

The Believer’s Perspective on God

All truth, being measured by both internal consistency as well as its correspondence to reality, is shown to be God’s truth. It is the study of His attributes that define truth for the human mind and heart and serve in “renewing the mind” (Rom 12:2b). The attributes of God are the mile-markers that accompany the progressive revelation of Scripture. They are the soil on which the foundation of Jesus Christ is laid (1 Cor 3:11). How troubling is it to view God as an ungracious executioner, damning millions due to their failure to respond to Him when the ability was not in them?

¹³² Ibid., 76.

¹³³ Snoeberger writes, “During the nineteenth century a practical theology that emphasized the human role in the salvation process yet retained Calvinistic nomenclature emerged. Retaining the priority of divine activity in the salvation process yet also wishing to accommodate the human response-centered evangelistic practices of the day, this new soteriology synthesized elements of Taylorite Holiness and Calvinist Keswick soteriology, thus creating a ‘moderate Calvinism’ that would allow the two traditions to merge.” - Mark A. Snoeberger, “The Logical Priority of Regeneration to Saving Faith in a Theological *Ordo Salutis*,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, Vol. 7 (2002): 50. What is most admirable about this situation is the struggle of believing men and women as they read the Scriptures and sought to reconcile them with the Five Points of Calvinism. Such discernment led many to resort to two, three, and four Point Calvinism.

A Sovereign who responds as such has shown moral inconsistency. “Most cultures do not punish a person for something they *cannot* do. Certainly Christians, who have gotten their moral standards from the God of the Bible, would not punish people who are incapable of knowing right from wrong, such as those who are severely mentally disabled. If nearly all Christians, who have adopted their moral standards from the God of the Bible, would not punish people for something they *cannot* do, why would the God of our Bible punish people when they are *incapable* of believing the gospel?”¹³⁴ Should we conclude that the creation holds a greater compassion and logical outlook on the human race than its Creator?

Considering unjust punishment as the best means of handling people also reveals a tyrannical insecurity. Situations involving unqualified extermination have come about usually on the fears of a future potential threat. But is YHWH Elohim threatened by anyone? Is He not omniscient? Furthermore, we must ask “what pleasure does God have in death (Ezek 18:32a) even if such a one has been declared “wicked” by the Most High (Ezek 18:23a)?” This doctrine of total inability erodes the character of God for the Christian, and such erosion will no doubt lead to stifled Christian growth and even rejection.

CONCLUSION

Total depravity understands man without merit before a holy God, being sinful in thought and deed, having a self-centered mentality, with no initiative in seeking God. With this point, the Five-Point Calvinist and the Free Grace believer have accord. Discord ensues with the Calvinist claim that man is without ability, meaning that any response toward God does not only require His initiation but also His enabling, which is designated as “regeneration.” Free Grace sees that

¹³⁴ John F. Hart, personal correspondence, 01.19.2020.

God is already at work in reaching out to the world, not only through the preaching of the Word (Rom 10:14-17), but through His prior work of the conscience, writing His Law upon every human heart, the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit through the believer in Christ, as well as the event of the crucifixion itself. Free Grace understands the unregenerate man as being a responsible agent, having the ability to respond to the Word of God when presented, thus showing that man has the capacity for free will (Absolute #3a) being culpable for his rejection of Christ should he choose to do so. As Badger observes:

To argue 1) that unregenerate man lacks the ability to meaningfully hear the propositions of the gospel message and 2) to insist that he cannot understand the implications and consequences of unbelief, is to render useless any and every gospel message to the sinner. To say that the sinner, even though he hears the message of eternal life is innately unable or unwilling to believe in Christ is to deny that unregenerate man has a sense of self-preservation.”¹³⁵

For the Calvinist, such pleading for sinners to believe (John 19:35; Acts 2:40; 16:30-31) should be deemed as a vain pursuit. For the Free Grace camp, such calls are understood to be in alignment with the Scriptural teaching that faith and regeneration are a simultaneous occurrence that result from hearing the Word (Rom 10:17). While the Reformed interpretation of pivotal passages has shown inconsistencies based upon their theological grid, Free Grace interpretations have demonstrated coherence and consistency with the revelation of God in His Word.

By conclusion, Free Grace Theology stands as a superior understanding of the Scriptures, showing the Five Points of Calvinism to be inadequate in rightly dividing the Word of Truth regarding man’s capacity to respond to a loving God.

¹³⁵ Anthony B. Badger, “TULIP: A Free Grace Perspective: Total Depravity,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Vol 16, no. 30 (2003): 55.

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