

Feature Article: DD802-2

## THE DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY/HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY DEBATE: Part Two

by James R. White and George Bryson

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### “Doomed from the Womb”? Calvinist vs. Biblical Views of Election, Regeneration, and Faith

by George Bryson

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

#### “MAN’S DEADNESS IN SIN”

According to the doctrine of unconditional election and other matters related to the Calvinist doctrine of salvation, many, if not most, preregenerate men not only are spiritually dead but must also remain so for all eternity with no remedy for their spiritual deadness. God never has, nor ever will have, any redemptive interest in them. That is why they say Christ did not die for much, if not most, of the world. Calvin believed God “arranges all things by his sovereign counsel, in such a way that individuals are born, who are doomed from the womb to certain death.”<sup>1</sup>

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

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

#### “THE NATURE OF FAITH”

What about the Calvinist doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone in Christ alone)? In Calvinism, faith is not a factor in the salvation of the saved and unbelief is not a factor in the damnation of the damned. Calvin

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

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

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

Allow me to explain: If I were to ask you for some red, you would be justified by responding some red what? Red, of course, could be descriptive of many things (apples, cars, tomatoes etc.), but it always has to be descriptive of something. So it is with election. You cannot simply be elect. You must be elect to something. Since it is to salvation that the Calvinist says a person is elected, whatever is required for election is required for salvation. If a person is required to believe to be saved, therefore, the election to that salvation cannot be unconditional.

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

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

"Not all that loving" is an attempt to sugar-coat a very bitter pill that the Calvinist is asking people to

swallow. Calvin evidently saw no need to help this awful “truth” go down easier. He simply said:

I again ask how it is that the fall of Adam involves so many nations with their infant children in eternal death without remedy unless that it so seemed meet to God?...The decree, I admit, is dreadful; and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before He made him, and foreknew, because He had so ordained by His decree....God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also at His own pleasure arranged it.<sup>7</sup>

### THE RELATIONSHIP OF FAITH TO REGENERATION

Unlike Mr. White and all Calvinists, I believe the spiritual life offered in a proclamation of the gospel to all spiritually dead people is available to, and provided for, all people on the condition of faith alone in Christ alone (John 3:16–17). Although Mr. White (and most Calvinists) give lip service to the biblical truth that the offer of eternal life is a bona fide, valid (i.e., sincere, meaningful, and legitimate) offer requiring nothing more than faith in Christ on the part of the receiver, the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election and other related Calvinist doctrines say otherwise. The Apostle John said the signs (miracles) performed by Jesus were recorded “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31, NASB). John also tells us that “as many as received [Jesus], to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13, NASB).

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

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

### NOTES

“Doomed from the Womb”? Calvinist vs. Biblical Views of Election, Regeneration, and Faith

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

## What It Means to be Spiritually Dead

by James R. White

Today the gospel is not politically correct. We are told that if we wish to “convince” people of our views, we must address them in such a way as to promote a “positive image” and “positive energy.” Seemingly, the Holy Spirit of God was utterly unaware of these necessities, for one thing is certain: the picture

painted of man outside of Christ is anything but positive. Instead, it is downright depressing, and necessarily so. Without the “bad news” of man’s sinfulness, there is no need for the “good news” of what God has done in Christ. Until man closes his mouth and stops making excuses (Rom. 3:19) and instead stands in silent admission of his guilt and need, there is no place for the glorious gospel in his heart.

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

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

### DEAD IN SIN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### FAITH IS A GIFT

God grants the ability to believe in Christ to the elect so that their salvation is both certain and solely for His own glory. The biblical witness to this truth is wide indeed, but for our purposes I shall look only at a few representative examples and simply list some of the other verses testifying to this position. One of the most striking comes from Paul: "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake..." (Phil. 1:29, NASB).

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

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

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

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

### A COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING

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

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

## GLORY TO GOD ALONE

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

### NOTES

What It Means to Be Spiritually Dead

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

## George Bryson's Rebuttal

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

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

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

Calvinists are right to affirm the inabilities of man. They are also right to recognize the spiritual deadness of unregenerate man. Nevertheless, they are wrong to place (in their thinking and theology) unnecessary and unscriptural restrictions on God and His sovereignty. God, who can and does save by grace can and does save through faith. This is to say God can and does raise the spiritually dead by grace and through faith (Eph. 2:8–10). By unscripturally placing faith after regeneration and before justification, the Calvinist makes it appear that a person can believe election is unconditional and that a person must be saved to believe (Acts 16:30–31). The Calvinist must manufacture this truncated doctrine of salvation in order to reconcile the biblical doctrine of salvation, which is conditioned on faith in Christ (John 3:16–19), with an election to salvation, which is unconditional. This attempt fails, however for the logical and scriptural reasons discussed in my first article. In his letter to the church in Rome, the apostle Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...” (Rom. 1:16; NASB).

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

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

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

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

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

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

How it is that the fall of Adam involves so many nations with their infant children in eternal death without remedy unless that it so seemed meet to God?

The decree, I admit, is, dreadful; and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before he made him, and foreknew, because He had so ordained by his decree...God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also at his own pleasure arranged it.<sup>2</sup>

Calvin also said:

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

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

Calvin explained:

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

Calvin further reasoned:

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

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

## NOTES

George Bryson's Rebuttal

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

## James White's Rebuttal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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